TRANSFORMATION AND ABANDONMENT:
DEFINING THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE
IN TWO VERGILIAN METAMORPHOSES

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Abstract. The transformation of Aeneas’ ships into nympha (Aen. 9.77-122), and the change of Diomedes’ companions into birds (Aen. 11.271-78) underline the parallel course in the post-Homeric adventures of the two heroes. For both Aeneas and Diomedes, these metamorphoses result in an abrupt severance of all past ties, and they communicate in a spectacular way that both warriors have reached the end of their wanderings, while declaring that Italy is destined to be their new, common patria.

For almost two generations before its celebration in Ovid’s Metamorphoses and Fasti, the metamorphosis theme claims a distinct, consistent presence in Roman poetry. A reflection, among other things, of the anxiety felt by Roman intellectuals in view of the political changes and the ensuing instability of the civil wars and the fall of the Republic in favour of Augustus’ new Rome, transformations mark the work of the Republican poet Lucretius and feature in Propertius 4 and the early poetry of Vergil. It is in the Aeneid, however, the poetic redefinition of traditional epic from the Roman point of view, that metamorphosis is elevated from an isolated poetic technique to an elaborate structural narrative pattern. Transformations dominate the later books of the epic, since they run parallel to Aeneas’ change into Roman leader, and Latinus’ Latium into Augustus’ Rome. The centrality of the metamorphosis theme in book 7, the book recording Aeneas’ arrival in Italy, has been

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1 Cf. P. Hardie, Cosmos and Imperium (Oxford 1986) 52f.
2 On change in De Rerum Natura, and on the association of Lucretian change to Ovid’s treatment of the topic in the Metamorphoses, see L. C. Curran, ‘Transformation and Anti-Augustanism in Ovid’s Metamorphoses’, Arethusa 5 (1972) 71-91.
4 Metamorphoses appear consistently throughout Vergil’s work. In his earlier poetry, Silenus’ song in the sixth Eclogue contains transformation tales, while the shape-shifter Proteus features in the fourth Georgic (388-414).
discussed by Putnam. Segal analysed the significance of the presence of Circe and her island at the very beginning of book 7, the first in the transformation sequence that so successfully describes the only ostensibly peaceful and humane civilisation in Italy before the arrival of the Trojans. Finally, Hardie establishes a pattern of parallelism between the Circe motif that permeates book 7 in its relations with the rest of the epic, and especially books 6 and 8, which focus particularly on the history of Rome down to the time of Augustus.

The presence of metamorphosis episodes in the course of a traditional heroic epic is well-attested, since it appears to be an especially powerful literary technique that promotes allusion and flexibility. In addition to being an impressive description of extraordinary events, a metamorphosis has also a cause and an effect, and often a hidden symbolism that expands beyond the restriction of the particular passage. It is only to be expected, then, that the insertion of two metamorphoses in the latter third of the Aeneid, namely the transformation of Aeneas' ships into sea-nymphs early in book 9 (9.77-122) and the change of Diomedes' comrades into birds two books later (11.271-78), calls for an interpretation somewhat more elaborate than the too-readily asserted 'dramatic effect'.

The episode of the miraculous transformation of Aeneas' fleet into sea-nymphs, one of the many Vergilian inventions in the Aeneid, has generally attracted the reproach of scholars for being an awkward and unfortunate

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6 C. P. Segal, 'Circean Temptations: Homer, Vergil, Ovid', TAPA 99 (1968) 419-42.
8 Metamorphosis is present both in the Iliad (Calchas' recollection, at 2.317-20, of the transformation into stone of the snake that ate the sparrow and her nestlings in Aulis, and Achilles' narrative of Niobe's transformation, at 24.602-17) and the Odyssey (the transformation of Odysseus' comrades into pigs by Circe, the shape-shifter Proteus, the change of Odysseus' physical appearance upon his return to Ithaca, the rejuvenation of Laertes at the end of the epic, and the metamorphosis of the Phaeacian ship into a sea-rock). On various intertextual approaches of Homer's Niobe story, see J. T. Kakrides, 'Die Niobesage bei Homer', RhM 79 (1930) 113-22, and M. M. Willecock, 'Mythological Paradigms in the Iliad', CQ 14 (1964) 141-54; also, P. M. C. Forbes Irving, Metamorphoses in Greek Myths (Oxford 1990) 9-11; on metamorphosis in Homer, with special emphasis on the petrification of the Phaeacian ship in Od. 13.163ff., see W. Fauth, 'Zur Typologie mythischer Metamorphosen in der homerischen Dichtung', Poetica 7 (1975) 235-68.
interruption of the epic action. According to E. L. Harrison, the metamorphosis of the ships into sea-nymphs is only a sideshow to the dialogue between Cybele and Jupiter which Vergil makes the central focus in his attempt to stress Jupiter’s omnipotence over the other gods. A few years earlier, Fantham saw the same episode as a Vergilian attempt to ‘mediate the transition from the marvelous Odyssean or Apollonian world into the more realistic Iliadic narrative’. In her view, the actual episode of the metamorphosis at 9.77-122 and the scene at 10.215-59—when the newly transformed nymphs hasten to greet Aeneas’ return from Pallanteum to the battlefield of Latium, and alert him to Ascanius’ danger—are integral parts of the same narrative unit, complementing Aeneas’ introduction to native culture in the Evander episode and the portrait of the new Italian world from which Rome will emerge.

Philip Hardie alone discerned the intratextual as well as intertextual significance of the transformation of the ships episode. He pointed out that the disappearance of the ships marks the end of his journey and the predestined arrival in the new country for Aeneas, just as the petrification of the Phaeacian ship in Odyssey 13 does for Odysseus. A part of a series of significant ship episodes throughout the Aeneid, such as the ship contest in book 5, the sea-battle of Actium described on Aeneas’ shield in book 8, and Turnus’ salvation and the catalogue of ships in book 10, Aeneas’ ships are ‘paradoxical and anything but conventional’.

The metamorphosis of Diomedes’ comrades into birds has received even less attention. If not labelled as a loan from earlier (second and first century BC) poets of metamorphoses or as an allusion to some traditional Italian material, it was merely cast as one among the ‘lesser transformations’

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10 For example, J. W. Mackail, The Aeneid (Oxford 1930) 335: ‘many readers are inclined to wish [Vergil] had discarded the incident’, also R. D. Williams, The Aeneid of Vergil: Books 7-12 (London 1973) 283: ‘the most incongruous episode in the whole Aeneid’.  
14 A. Russi (ed.), Enciclopedia Virgiliana 1 (Rome 1985) 81, s.v. Diomede, dates the borrowing to the third century BC. F. Della Corte, La mappa dell’ Eneide (Firenze 1972) 220, moves the date down to the second and first centuries, and argues for the presence of strong Italian tradition behind the portrayal of Vergil’s Diomedes (p. 219f.). Traditional Italian background behind the story has been discerned also by J. Gagé, ‘Les Traditions “dionisiennes” dans l’Italie ancienne, de l’Apulie a l’Étrurie méridionale’, MEFRA 84 (1972) 763-66.
included in the *Aeneid*. Thus, it was quietly dismissed as not deserving further critical consideration. Yet a detailed comparison of the episode to the miraculous change of Aeneas’ fleet will prove that the two metamorphoses strengthen the pattern of similarities that distinguish the fates of Aeneas and Diomedes in the *Aeneid*.

This paper argues that these two metamorphoses have an essential function in the structure and interpretation of the *Aeneid*, because they emphasise a parallel course in the lives and destinies of Aeneas and Diomedes. The transformation of Aeneas’ ships into sea-nymphs signifies the end of Aeneas’ wanderings and the beginning of the *labor* for the conquest of Latium and establishment of the Roman nation. Likewise, the transformation of Diomedes’ comrades into birds marks the hero’s irrevocable interruption of all ties with the past and the end of his wanderings, and bolsters the similarities between his fate and that of Aeneas.

A fair number of critics have outlined the many parallels between the characters of Diomedes and Aeneas and have underlined the appearance of both heroes in Vergil’s epic as successors of Achilles: Diomedes as the legitimate one, Aeneas as the one appointed to this role by fate. As Vergil’s epic approaches its conclusion, dominated by the single combat between Aeneas and Turnus (12.896-914), the two transformations bring together Aeneas and Diomedes. This final episode replicates the fight between Aeneas and Diomedes in *Iliad* 6, yet it is Aeneas now acting as Diomedes and therefore as ‘*alis Achilles*’. Diomedes and Aeneas flesh out, each in a different way, a

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17 The impending emergence of an ‘*alis Achilles*’ in Italy is first spelled out in the Sibyl’s prophesy in *Aeneid* 6: *alis Latio iam partus Achilles; natus et ipse dea* (“Another Achilles, born of a goddess, is brought forth now in Latium”, 89f.). This cannot be other than Aeneas, although the role is contended by Turnus until the end of the epic; cf. W. S. Anderson, “Virgil’s Second *Iliad*”, *TAPA* 88 (1957) 26-30; Knauer [16] 317-20; L. A. McKay, “Achilles as Model for Aeneas”, *TAPA* 88 (1957) 11-16.

The identification of Diomedes with Achilles is captured in Diomedes’ encounter with Venulus’ embassy. The ambassadors, under the impression that they speak with the Homeric hero, approach and touch his hand ‘under which the land of Ilium collapsed’ (*contigimusque manum qua concidit Iliam tellus*, 11.245). The phrase, Homeric in style, recalls Priamus’ supplication to Achilles in *Iliad* 24.478f. (χερσιν Ἀχιλλῆος λάβε γούνατα καὶ κώσε χείρος / δεινὸς Ἀνδρόνον, αὐτὶ ὁ πολέμας κτανὸν νίκα, “with his hand he caught Achilles’ knees, and kissed the hero’s dire, murderous hands, that had killed so many of his sons”).

reborn version of Achilles.\textsuperscript{19} Aeneas’ additional portrayal as Homeric Diomedes at the epic’s closure causes the two parallel heroic figures to converge in his redefined character as uncontested leader of both Trojans and Greeks.

The similar experience shared by Aeneas and Diomedes, both involuntary exiles in Italy, is a theme that builds up steadily and gradually through the course of the entire \textit{Aeneid}. The parallel course in the life and adventures of the two heroes, after the end of the Trojan War, had already been developed by popular tradition preceding Vergil. The king of Argos was one of the few Greek survivors of the Trojan War fortunate to return home. Yet, shortly afterwards, he discovered that during his absence his wife Aigialeia had been unfaithful to him.\textsuperscript{20} Aigialeia and her adulterer(s) forced the hero to embark on an involuntary exile and to wander for years. In the course of his new adventures, Diomedes, like Aeneas, landed in North Africa and aroused the anger of a local king. This king, like the Numidian Iarbas, Dido’s suitor, was of divine descent, and he fell in love with the local princess, who killed herself after he left. According to this source Diomedes never made it to Argos from Troy because Aphrodite caused a sea-storm that blew the hero off course, to Libya, where Diomedes was arrested by the local king Lycos, who advertised himself as Ares’ son. But the king’s daughter fell in love with the Greek hero and helped him to escape in the hope that Diomedes would stay with her. Nevertheless, Diomedes fled Libya and the princess committed suicide upon his departure from Africa.\textsuperscript{21} Finally he landed in Italy and, exactly as Aeneas did, founded a city and joined the local king Daunus in a war that Diomedes himself did not want to fight. His contribution secured a victory for Daunus. Notably Diomedes is addressed as \textit{victor} by Venulus’ embassy, which places emphasis on the hero’s conquest of Apulia (11.246f.). Diomedes’ reward included marriage to the king’s daughter and the offer of a part of the Messapian land for the establishment of a new kingdom.\textsuperscript{22} The Italian tradition


\textsuperscript{20} Aphrodite, on account of her wounding in \textit{Iliad} 5, caused his wife to commit adultery with several suitors (Diety Cretensis 6.2, Lycophron 592-632, Diod. Sic. 7.2); for a complete list of the sources, see L. von Sybel, \textit{Roscher’s Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie} 1.1 (Leipzig 1884-86) 1024.


seals the similarities between the biographies of Aeneas and Diomedes in the recording of nearly identical supernatural deaths: like Aeneas, Diomedes does not die, but vanishes in a miraculous way. In several accounts, that go back as early as the early fifth century BC, Diomedes is transformed soon after his death into an immortal by Athena, and he is worshipped thereafter as a god. The strange metamorphosis of the hero’s companions into birds deprives the hero of the last link with the past, and as a result it appears to have functioned as the turning-point in the transformation of the former Greek hero into an immigrant in Italy.

nunc etiam horribili visu portenta sequuntur  
et socii amissi petierunt aethera pennis  
fluminibusque vagantur aves (heu, dira meorum  
supplicial!) et scopulos lacrimosis vocibus impleunt.  

\[\text{(Aen. 11.271-74)}\]

Portents, also, terrible to see, were now following, and my friends, lost, sought the sky with their wings, and as birds they wander above the waters ( alas, what a harsh punishment for my men!) and fill the cliffs with their mournful cries.

Scholars have noticed here Vergil’s digression from the traditional account of the story, in which the men change after Diomedes’ death. The metamorphosis of Diomedes’ companions is a replication of the miraculous transformation of Aeneas’ ships into sea-nymphs two books earlier.

Book 9 opens with the Rutulians marching against the Trojan camp. Turnus takes advantage of Aeneas’ absence at Pallanteum to command an attack. In the course of the action, his eyes fall upon the Trojan fleet which

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25 The only earlier extant source on the episode of the transformation is Lycophron 594-609. The metamorphosis is also treated by Ovid, Met. 14.483-511, where Diomedes once again explains the portent as a punishment for his impious wounding of Venus.

happens to be anchored at the river-bank next to the Trojan camp. Immediately, he urges his warriors to burn it (9.70-76). The scene is an adaptation of a well-known part of the *Iliad*, the Trojan counterattack and arson of the Greek fleet by Hector in *Iliad* 15 and 16.\(^{27}\) The miracle following the attempted burning of the Trojan fleet (9.69-122), however, like the transformation of Diomedes’ comrades upon the hero’s arrival in Italy rather than after his death, is nowhere to be found in earlier tradition.

The vessels were constructed from wood from the sacred grove of Cybele on the Trojan mount Ida, which Cybele herself had gladly (*laeta*, 9.89) offered to Aeneas to construct a fleet (9.85-89). At the same time, the Great Mother of the Gods had requested from Jupiter the guarantee that the fleet would complete their journey unscathed (*ne cursu quassatae ullo neu turbine venti vincantur*, ‘so that they may not be conquered by any wreckage or windy storm’, 9.91f.). Jupiter, initially surprised at the request of a favour that should not be granted to mortals (*certusque incerta pericula lustret / Aeneas? ‘is Aeneas to cross risk-free through risky dangers’, 9.96f.),\(^{28}\) eventually consents to the wish of Cybele:

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\begin{align*}
\text{immo, ubi defunctae finem portusque tenebunt} \\
\text{Ausonios olim, quaecumque evaserit undis} \\
\text{Dardanianumque ducent Laurentia vexerit arva,} \\
\text{mortalem eripiam formam magnique iubebo} \\
\text{aequoris esse deas . . .} \\
\text{(Aen. 9.98-102)}
\end{align*}
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Anyway, when they will eventually reach the Ausonian harbours, having done their duty, I shall take the mortal body from those that will have escaped the waves and transported the Dardanian leader to the fields of Laurentium, and I shall bid them be goddesses of the great ocean . . .

The two most important points in Jupiter’s promise are, first, his guarantee that Aeneas will arrive safely at the end of his journey (*certus, 9.96*), and, secondly, the fact that the end of that journey will be signalled by the transformation of the ships into divinities of the sea. Vergil emphasises that the nymphs will resume divine appearances only after the Trojan has reached his final destination.

Indeed, seconds after Turnus and his men hurl the first torches against the divine ships, they witness a miraculous transformation of the vessels into


\(^{28}\) Harrison [11] 148-50 misses the point here when he expresses surprise at Jupiter’s reluctance to satisfy Cybele’s wish and tries to attribute it to the god’s playful mood and his desire to see Cybele humiliated before him.
sea-nymphs (9.107-22), while Vergil asserts: ‘the promised day had arrived and the fates had granted the completion of the due time’ (ergo aderat promissa dies et tempora Parcae / debita comple rant, 9.107f.). The Rutulian soldiers remain astounded (9.123), but Turnus tries to dismiss their fear, and offers his own interpretation of the portent: the miracle is a divine indication that the Trojans will not be able to leave the Ausonian land (nec spes u lla fugae, 9.131). Turnus is confident that the ultimate victory belongs to the Rutulians. The siege he draws around the Trojan camp is so tight that his enemies could escape only through flight by sea. The burning of the fleet deprives them of the only means of escape and allows the Rutulian chief to dream of a complete triumph.

Yet, despite the obvious bias that leads him to incorrect conclusions, Turnus’ interpretation of the miracle is correct. The supernatural disappearance of the ships validates one more prophecy about the Trojan future. There is no way, indeed, for the Trojans to leave the land of Italy, not because they will be eliminated under Turnus’ sword, but because Italy is meant to be their ultimate destination. The ships will no longer be needed, and they naturally vanish. Turnus’ decision to attack and burn the Trojan fleet became the catalyst for the fulfillment of the divine promise at that particular moment. Given these considerations, then, the Rutulian leader not only did not deprive the Trojans of their last hope of salvation, but he even guaranteed that destiny’s decrees would be accomplished.

The elimination of the fleet, apart from marking the end of the Trojan journey, also symbolizes the ultimate rupture of all ties of Aeneas’ people with their Trojan past. Significantly the fleet functions primarily as a factor essential for the preservation of the unity of the Trojan exiles as a nation seeking a new country, rather than as a group of individual refugees. The burning of the ships

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29 For Turnus the Tiber (or the water in general) is connected not simply with flight but with escape from death. Twice following the burning of the Trojan fleet, Turnus will evade death by throwing himself into the waters of the Tiber. The first time, at the end of book 9, when trapped inside the Trojan camp (789-818), he plunges into the water of the Tiber that conveniently aligns with one side of the camp (9.815-18). On the second occasion, in book 10 (633-88), Juno seduces the Rutulian away from the battlefield and onto a ship anchored at the Tiber’s bank which transports him safely back to his home at Ardea.

30 An important element in Turnus’ behaviour is the frequency with which the hero copes with ambiguity. Strikingly enough, his explanations are rational and correct, but they turn out to be misinterpretations. Soon after his interpretation of the ships’ metamorphosis, the Rutulian leader, in an attempt to encourage his comrades, will utter the strange phrase suni et mea contra / mala mihi (136f.), an unclear phrase that may mean ‘I, from my part, have my fates too’ (cf. as Aeneas has the guidance of his mother, likewise I have my personal guide, too) as well as ‘the fates are against me’: on Turnus and the fates, see C. Mackie, *Quisquis in arma vocas: Turnus and Jupiter in the Aeneid*, Antichthon 24 (1990) 75-85.
in book 9 replicates an occasion that first occurred in the later part of book 5 (5.604-99), when an arson orchestrated by Juno initially threatened to destroy the Trojan fleet. The event takes place in Sicily, while the Trojans and the people of Acestes commemorate with games and sacrifices the first anniversary of Anchises’ death. In her indignation Juno dispatches Iris to the island to arouse the already weary Trojan women to burn their fleet and thereby force Aeneas to give up the quest for Italy. Having initially failed to dupe the Trojan women into action, Iris, finally, inspires the minds of her victims with frenzy. Anticipating Turnus, himself also a victim of divine fury necessitated by Juno and inflicted by one of her orderlies (Allecto), the infuriated Trojan women hasten to set the anchored fleet on fire and to destroy the last symbolic material representation of Troy that they carry with them. Five ships are lost in that incident, and a number of Trojans equal to the crew of the lost vessels end their journey there (5.750f.).

The fleet actually constitutes a symbol of Troy herself, since it not only carried the Trojan Penates to Italy, but was also constructed of Trojan wood. The symbolic presentation of the ship as city-in-movement is reaffirmed by the almost identical description of Augustus’ ship at Actium, which sails forth cum patribus populoque, penatibus et magnis dis (‘along with our fathers and the people, and also the images of our ancestors and the great gods’, 8.679), a line which echoes Aeneas’ initial description of his fleet as soon as they leave Troy behind: feror exsil in altum / cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis (‘an exile, I am carried across the ocean along with my comrades, my son, the images of our ancestors and the great gods’, 3.11f.). What is more, Juno herself identifies Aeneas’ fleet with the city of Ilium, when at the beginning of book 1 she complains that, despite her efforts, Ilium has survived: Ilium in Italiam portans victosque penatis (‘carrying Ilium and his defeated gods over to Italy’, 1.58). We can claim, accordingly, that the ships’ spectacular disappearance


32 Fantham [12] 111, also, sees the women’s attack on the ships as anticipatory to Turnus’ attack in book 9; she further suggests that the rescue of Aeneas’ ships in books 1, 5, and 9 should be viewed along the same line. Yet the absence of Aeneas from the arson scene of book 9, contrary to the other two episodes in which he is the protagonist—he invites the gods to intervene and rescue his fleet—is a detail much too important to be disregarded.

33 Cf. Hardie [13] 167, who claims ‘that floating cities and floating mountains are alike unnatural’ and discusses the comparison of Vergil’s ships to the moving islands of the Cyclades, to mountains suggesting gigantomachy, and, most important, to the image of the city, both Rome and Troy.
destroys this last reminiscence of the old country, this image of *parva Troia* (little Troy), and points to a definite end of Aeneas’ journey and a completely new future that does not look toward reviving a past lost for ever.

The comparative examination of the two arson episodes elucidates one additional detail that appears in both scenes: both Turnus and the Trojan women in Sicily become infuriated by Iris who executes Juno’s orders. The significant and decisive difference is that, although in the case of book 5 Juno specifically expresses her desire to burn the Trojan fleet, in Turnus’ case her plan involves only the arousing of the Rutulian leader’s frenzy for fighting. Once the Trojans reach Italy, the fleet loses its importance in the goddess’ anti-Trojan machinations.34

In *Aeneid* 9.96-122 the Trojan ships miraculously disappear as a transformed Aeneas is returning from Pallanteum to assume with renewed determination his leadership-role, not as Trojan exile, but as leader of Italy. Two books later, as the war enters its conclusive phase, Aeneas’ duplicate, Diomedes, relates another strange transformation that caused him to review his life in new perspective. Vergil’s readers may detect the significance of the portent of Diomedes’ comrades’ metamorphoses in association with the earlier transformation recorded in the *Aeneid*, that of Aeneas’ ships into nymphs. In Aeneas’ case, the Fates had predetermined the disappearance of the ships, which represented a continuation of the land of Ilium for the Trojans, once Aeneas and his people had reached their final destination. From that point on, all the ties with the past should be undesirable, as they may be distracting rather than beneficial; therefore, they had to be forgotten. Diomedes fulfils a similar destiny. The loss of his fellow warriors broke the last bonds tying him to his former life as a Greek king and leader. From that point onwards the hero is alone, escorted by nothing that might remind him of his past. Just like Aeneas, he is to view Italy as his final destination, and the loss of his companions as the starting-point towards a new identity.

34 Hardie [13] 168 argues that the transformation of the Trojan ships into nymphs should be understood as symbolising the freedom of the sea and, quite contrary to Turnus’ assumptions that the sea is denied to the Trojans (9.130f.), as a ‘stage in the process whereby the natural world is progressively taken into a Roman sphere of influence’.