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The Oleaster at the End of the *Aeneid*

The *Aeneid's* penultimate episode in the human sphere (12.766-90) has puzzled readers ancient and modern. While he is chasing Turnus, who is compared to a hunted deer, Aeneas' spear gets stuck in the stump of Faunus' sacred tree, a wild olive (*oleaster*) on which sailors "saved from the waves" had hung votive offerings before the Trojans cut it down. This paper argues that the episode is vital to Virgil's program of allusions to Roman cult, especially those of the deified Aeneas and of the Rex Nemorensis.

The paper first addresses the question that puzzled Servius Auctus (*ad* 12.768): Why are rescued sailors making offerings to a rural land divinity? L. A. Holland suggests, plausibly, that Virgil is alluding to Faunus' shrine on the island in the middle of the Tiber (*Janus and the Bridge* [Rome, 1961] p. 168). But this does not explain why Virgil chooses to recall that shrine here, in the middle of a land battle. The incongruous mention of shipwrecked sailors may in fact be intended to remind the reader of the tradition surrounding Aeneas' own death. It was well known to Virgil's ancient readers that Aeneas was worshipped at a shrine by the Numicus river, into which (by most accounts) he fell, and his body was never found. Allusions to this tradition are as important to the *Aeneid* as the death of Achilles is to the *Iliad*; as the death of Hector predicts and prefigures that of Achilles, so the sacrificial death of Turnus points to that of Aeneas.

Additional motivation for Virgil's juxtaposition of drowning, a deer hunt (in the preceding simile), and a wild olive tree arises from the cluster of myths surrounding Hippolytus. In Hippolytus' sacred precinct at Troezen (according to Pausanias, 2.32.10) stands the wild olive tree in which his chariot reins became tangled, causing his death. Near this sanctuary is the temple of Saronian Artemis, named for the legendary king Saron who (remarkably) drowned while hunting a deer that enticed him into deep water (Pausanias 2.30.7). That Virgil would have known these myths is probable, since an *action* of Callimachus treated the story of Hippolytus' death (Servius *ad Aen.* 7.778). The unusual combination of the three disparate elements is unlikely to be coincidental.

One reason for the *Aeneid's* allusions to the myth and cult of Hippolytus lies in that hero's role as a legendary founder of the priesthood of the Rex Nemorensis. Hippolytus' one overt appearance in the *Aeneid* is as the lone inhabitant of the sacred Grove where the priest-king of Diana Nemorensis resided in historical times. In his comment on the Golden Bough (*ad Aen.* 6.136), Servius tells us about a cult in which the breaking of a branch from the sacred tree in this Grove preceded a ritual combat between Rex and Challenger culminating in the sacrifice of the loser. A forthcoming book (J. Dyson, *King of the Wood: The Sacrificial Victor in Virgil's Aeneid*) argues that a sustained allusion to this cult is a structuring principle of the *Aeneid*, and that in particular the combat between Aeneas and Turnus is partly modeled the cult's ritual combat for kingship. The poem's final instance of "tree violation" thus points to the sacrifice of Turnus--and, ultimately, of Aeneas.

The oleaster at the end of the *Aeneid*, then, belongs to the poem's thematic core. As the site for sailors' offerings it reminds us of Aeneas' death in a river; as a victim of tree violation it recapitulates the Challenger's aggression in the cult of the Rex Nemorensis; and as a wild olive it alludes to the death of Hippolytus, one of the cult's mythical founders. It reminds us, as Virgil has been reminding us throughout, that the sacrifice of Turnus is not an end but a beginning, the first in a series of reciprocal sacrifices that will recur throughout Roman history.