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Ritual Closure in Vergil's *Aeneid*

Closure in ancient texts is often achieved through the representation of a ritual ceremony settling on a cosmic level the problems, tensions, and ambiguities that take place in the course of an epic narrative or during the action of a tragic play. An examination of the much discussed ending of the *Aeneid* from such a perspective may prove fruitful for the interpretation of the final scene and of the poem as a whole. In this paper, I argue that, although the poem does not satisfy readerly expectations for a closing ritual ceremony (Hardie, *Classical Closure* 1997), the use of vocabulary associated with sacrifice in the description of the killing of Turnus warrants a reconsideration of the poem's close in view of the ritual symbolism at work in the epic. While on the plot level Aeneas' killing of his opponent is motivated by his sense of duty toward Pallas, on the level of ritual, Aeneas' action constitutes human sacrifice, and as such, an act of ritual perversion. Similar instances of perverted ritual occur repeatedly in the narrative of Book 12 (the ratification of the treaty, the employment of sacrificial imagery in scenes of killing in battle). Moreover, Turnus himself is cast as a sacrificial victim in terms of the Roman ritual practice of *devotio*. Ritual perversion therefore, thwarts closure in the poem by defying the restoration of the disrupted cosmic order in the course of the narrative.

More specifically, scholars have long observed that Turnus is portrayed as a *devotus* in Book 11 of the *Aeneid*: in offering his kinsmen assurances of his desire to end the war, he pronounces the ritual term *devovi* (11.442). Details of this ritual practice are provided by Livy's narrative of the first *devotio* of P. Decius Mus and that of his son in *Ab urbe condita* Books 8 and 10 respectively. The vocabulary of expiation Turnus employs as well as the vocabulary Aeneas uses to demand the life of Turnus evoke the ritual. Turnus' victimization is furthered in the description of the ratification of the treaty, where the hero is shown as a double of the animals prepared for ritual slaughter (Hardie, *Epic Successors* 1993).

The reader has also witnessed the inefficacy of the ritual process in the failure of the ratification of the treaty followed by the representation of killing in battle in terms of human sacrifice (12.293-96): contrary to ritual practice, where the animal takes the place of human offering, in this instance a human victim replaces the animal, in a complete reversal of sacrificial norms. The narrative once again, however, by portraying Turnus as a *devotus*, prepares the reader for ritual closure that would restore within the prescribed framework of Roman religious custom the cosmic imbalance created by the failed treaty. Yet readerly expectations for such a ritual close are permanently thwarted when in the face of certain death Turnus has a change of heart and chooses to adhere no longer to the ritual process that demands his life. His refusal to submit to the prescribed terms of the ritual of *devotio* is evident in his address to Aeneas: he employs vocabulary from another ritual context, that of supplication (a context that also points to the ritual closure of the *Iliad*). When Aeneas goes on to kill his opponent, he 'sacrifices' (*immolat* 12.949) an unwilling victim. The choice of the verb *immolare* points to the corruption of proper ritual procedure in this instance, thus defying resolution on a ritual level. The closing ritual ceremony familiar from other epics (e.g. the *Iliad*) is replaced by the jarring

presence of symbolism of sacrificial perversion. The incongruity between the restoration that has occurred on the divine (the reconciliation of Jupiter and Juno) and human plane (Aeneas' just retribution) and the absence of such restoration on the ritual level defies closure. More importantly, it suggests that cosmic imbalance persists. Ritual perversion thus indicates that the new order that Aeneas' victory represents is ultimately unable to control violence.