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## Allusions, Delusions and Confusions: A Reply

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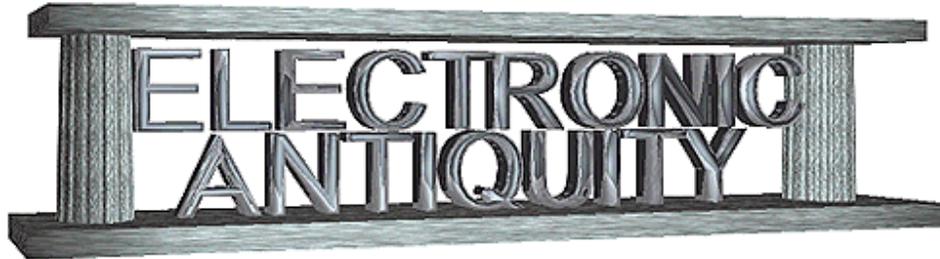
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## Allusions, Delusions and Confusions: A Reply

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**ALLUSIONS, DELUSIONS AND CONFUSIONS: A REPLY**

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Neil O'Sullivan's paper ('[Allusions of Grandeur? Thoughts on Allusion-Hunting in Latin Poetry](#)', *EA* Volume 1 Issue 5, October 1993) raises a number of interesting points, many of them confronted, though obviously not finally solved, by students of allusion far better than myself. (I await eagerly the book on this topic that Stephen Hinds is preparing.) But let me try to speak to some of the specific points he raises.

It seems worthwhile to begin with the limit case that O'Sullivan proposes, *Aen.* 6.460: Catullus 66.39. This is of course an infamous *zetema* that many have tried to solve - without much success, so far as I can tell (although I have heard Oliver Lyne make some intelligent observations about it, and hope that he will publish them soon). From my own perspective, the following points seem apposite:

1. Unlike the allusions I studied in my *Georgics* book, the one in *Aen.* 6.460 stands in more or less complete isolation. It does not appear to be part of a system of reference, such as we find in the case of Homer, Apollonius, Ennius, and others in the *Aeneid*; Hesiod, Lucretius, and Homer in the *Georgics*; and Theocritus (and perhaps Gallus) in the *Bucolics*. I regard this as an extremely important distinction. Knauer almost thirty years pointed the way towards an understanding of the systematic character of most Vergilian allusion. Whether Vergil is typical of ancient poets in this respect I do not know; but I am convinced that when one finds two possible allusions linked by proximity either in the source text or in the imitative text, the probability that they are both 'real' allusions and not just random echoes rises geometrically and not just arithmetically. I also find that allusion is easier to understand or interpret as a systemic phenomenon, whereas the meaning or import of any single allusion isolated from an allusive context is often anybody's guess. This is part of the trouble with *Aen.* 4.460: the *Coma Berenices* is not a notable source text for the *Aeneid*, so that allusion to it in this case comes upon the reader like a bolt from the blue. Such an allusion is difficult to deal with because the interpreter lacks a reliable allusive context in which to place it.

2. But for O'Sullivan the challenge that this allusion poses consists in the fact that it is so clear. If we cannot explain such an obvious echo, how can we hope to understand more slippery examples? There are many answers to this. In the first place, the clarity that enables us to recognise an allusion does not necessarily translate into interpretive clarity. The famous makarismos at the end of *Georgics* 2, *felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas* (490), is difficult not to take as an allusion to Lucretius - not necessarily to any particular line in Lucretius, but to his project of writing philosophical poetry. On the other hand, it is not so easy to sum up Vergil's feelings towards his great predecessor in a few words (*experto credite*). I happen to think that the line and Vergil's entire program of allusion to the *De rerum natura* amounts to an impressive tribute to a poetic father; others have seen the relationship as downright polemical (in various ways, Benjamin Farrington and Philip Hardie). Others regard it as essentially unimportant (e.g. David Ross). So, what seems obvious to one may seem the opposite to another; and even when both agree that an allusion is obviously there, they may hold opposite views on what it means.

The converse is also true. There are in Vergil many allusions that have been uncovered only by diligent research and a certain amount of inspiration. My favorite example remains the one discovered by Ruth Scodel and Richard Thomas at the end of *Georgics* 1 and 4 and *Aeneid* 8, the only places that Vergil mentions the river Euphrates, six lines from the end of each book, in reference to Callimachus' well known use of the Euphrates, six lines from the end of the *Hymn to Apollo*, as a symbol of the kind of poetry that he eschews. This reference is so subtle that its discovery remains a kind of miracle; but once it is pointed out, its meaning is basically quite clear (and has been discussed with great acumen by James Clauss).

On the other hand, the poet may design ambiguity into an allusion. Aeneas' landing on the Libyan coast in *Aeneid* 1 is rife with allusions to Odysseus' landings in various places - Aeaea, Scheria, Ithaca, etc. - in the *Odyssey*. Recognising these allusions is not at all difficult; they are what Knauer has called *Leitzitate*, 'citations' of specific Homeric passages intended to orient the reader on the map of Homeric narrative and thus to guide his or her interpretation of the *Aeneid*. But these *Leitzitate* are combined in such a way as to make any simple interpretation of what they mean, separately or in combination, impossible. It is only by working out an interpretation of the poem as a whole and of its program of Homeric allusion in particular that one can arrive at an understanding of what these 'individual' allusions mean, and even then there is plenty of room for debate. So the issue of clarity does not appear to me in the same light as it does to Professor O'Sullivan. To argue that the single case involving Catullus 66.39, which is as clear and obvious as any *Leitzitat*, calls Knauer's many examples of the phenomenon into question strikes me as extremely unconvincing.

3. The Vergilian passage in question alludes to a poem of Catullus; but the Catullan poem is a translation of Callimachus. Professor O'Sullivan does not address this issue, but rather assumes that the two 'originals' are essentially the same thing. We have here a special case of the general phenomenon that Richard Thomas has usefully labeled 'window reference' or allusion through an intermediary to a more distant common source. Catullus' *Coma* and Callimachus' *Plokamos* are not the same poem: each has its own context, literary pedigree, and so forth. One of the reasons that a poet like Vergil alluded was apparently because this particular type of composition allowed full scope for the display of his virtuosity both as a scholar and as a composer as he discovered and created connections amongst his literary predecessors. I do not think that this is the main reason behind most Vergilian allusions, but in some cases it may be the only reason.

4. The real nub of the issue of course is propriety. There is probably no modern reader who does not find this allusion inappropriate (just as few seem comfortable with the idea that Vergil would have employed allusion in order to display his erudition). But Professor O'Sullivan's hypothetical comparison of Vergil to Wagner is intriguing and invites a reply. He maintains that we cannot be meant to think of *Aen.* 6.460 as an allusion intended to recall its source text, Catullus 66.39, because the original is so grossly inappropriate: 'to bear in mind the original ludic context of the line . . . could only spoil the pathos and seriousness of Aeneas' last words to Dido. (One searches for a parallel to this in another art form - imagine perhaps Wotan's farewell in Wagner's *Die Walkure* containing a motif supposed to remind the audience of one of Offenbach's trivialities)'. I will return to this comparison in a moment. Conceding the point for the time being *argumenti causa*, I would also note that what we assume could not happen in Wagner happens with great regularity in other musical idioms, so often in fact that in some circumstances allusions just as baffling as our example from *Aeneid* 6 appear to be much more the rule than the exception.

In Europe from the 15th to the 17th centuries the most important and august musical form was the polyphonic setting of the Roman Catholic Mass. The musical material that a composer used for a Mass setting might come from any one of a number of sources, but it was usually borrowed rather than invented (in contrast to later practice in the case of the symphony). The source might be liturgical plainsong or polyphony, the type of sources that I expect would strike most modern listeners as entirely appropriate. More often, however, the source might be a popular song with no liturgical purpose or religious content. By far the most popular of these secular songs was *L'homme arme*, which became the basis for at least thirty-one Masses composed between about 1450 and 1600. It is (to my ear, anyway) a pretty unprepossessing tune, but it gave rise to some beautiful Masses. Nor is it easy to see anything in the lyric that might have moved so many composers of Masses to allude to the song. A translation of the text would go like this:

'The man, the man, the armed man, the armed man - one must  
beware the armed man, one must beware.

Word has gone out all over that everyone must arm himself with an  
iron chain-mail vest.

The man, the man, the armed man, the armed man - one must  
beware the armed man, one must beware'.

*L'homme arme* is a song of unknown provenance - its popularity during the period in question is still a subject of research - and is thus somewhat unusual. More common is the practice of (apparently) paying homage to a more established composer by turning one of his shorter pieces into a Mass. An excellent example of this is the *Missa Berzerette Savoyenne* of Antoine Brumel (c. 1460-c. 1515). This Mass is based on a song by his elder contemporary Josquin Desprez (c. 1440-1521) that would seem to offer the parodist even less likely material for a Mass than does *L'homme arme*. Here is the first verse in translation: 'Shepherdess of Savoy who watch the sheep in the meadows, tell me that you will be mine! I will give you comfort and a little cape. Tell me that you will love me - either by mealtime or not'. There is nothing very alarming in this, especially by 15th century standards. Still, it is a song of seduction, and as such is probably not the type of thing one was encouraged to think about during Mass. But there is no doubt about what Brumel is doing: the melody of Josquin's song is not at all disguised, but is sung in its entirety by the top voice during the *Kyrie* and then prominently incorporated along with Josquin's harmony in part into every subsequent movement. How could the listener help but think about the original song?

What is interesting about this particular Mass is the way in which the text of the original song itself seems to comment on the situation that arises from the allusion not just to its music but to its text. Here is the second verse: 'I live very near Monsieur the curate, but no matter what he tells me my desire will not change for anyone, by God, either Frenchman or Burgundian, either by mealtime or not!'

Just to be clear, let me spell it out. In verse 1, the speaker tries to seduce the shepherdess. This is, as I have said, an inappropriate thing for the devout to be thinking about in Mass, but the music of this particular Mass ensures that they will indeed be thinking of nothing else. In verse 2, the speaker informs the shepherdess that the local priest has advised him to turn his attention away from the ways of the flesh - just as someone hearing Brumel's setting sung at an actual Mass might imagine the celebrant speaking to him!

It is hard to suppose that these 'inappropriate' considerations did not influence Brumel's decision to make this music the basis of his Mass. One might, of course, argue that the allusion embodied in the phenomenon of the parody Mass involves music, not text: the lyrics of the original disappear in all cases and are occluded by the unvarying text of the ordinary of the Mass. But apart from the fact that the title of the original song customarily becomes the title of the Mass as well, it is striking that so many Masses parody profane and even bawdy songs, as if this were to some extent the entire point of the exercise, rather than drawing deeper upon the abundance of sacred music that might have 'more appropriately' been turned to this purpose. So it seems that the 'inappropriate' lyrics of these songs are not only not irrelevant to the allusion, but instead that they may be taken almost as qualifying a song as good parody Mass material.

Why this should have been so is, of course, quite unclear. One can invent explanations. The martial theme of *L'homme arme* might be thought to be Christianised via the concept of the Church militant; the low characters and profane love that form the basis of *Berzerette Savoyenne* might e contrario put us in mind of the Good Shepherd or of divine love. Similar arguments have been advanced in the case of *Aeneid* 6, where the allusion to Catullus' *Coma Berenices* has been said to predict the catastrophe of Aeneas; and to return to the *Aeneid*, let us note that Vergil's allusion to the *Coma* contains a textual signpost 'commenting' on the allusion in a manner similar to what we see in Brumel's handling of the Josquin text. Callimachus' poem and Catullus' translation are indeed about catastrophe; and in both poems it is the catastrophised lock that speaks throughout. Maddeningly, of course, line 39 of the *Plokamos*, the immediate source of Catullus 66.39 and the ultimate sources of *Aen.* 6.460, the line in which the lock presumably expressed its unwillingness to leave Berenice's head, has been lost; but most of line 40 survives: SHN TE KARHN WMOSA SON TE BION. The lock swears by the Berenice's head - its former home - and by her life. Catullus has *adiuro teque tuumque caput*. Vergil alludes to the oath as well: Aeneas says *per SIDERA iuro/per superos et si qua fides tellure sub ima est . . .* (*Aen.* 6. 458-59). That is to say, he not only takes an oath, but in doing so inverts the oath as we find it in both of our source passages: not by the head that the lock left, but by its heavenly destination does he swear. This is the type of variation that guarantees, if guarantee were needed, that Vergil has crafted this allusion deliberately and with care.

Have we, then, found the answer? Is Vergil's allusion justified by the critic's appeal to the catastrophe motif? Is the armed man really a soldier of Christ in disguise? Is the shepherdess in fact an allegory of the Church? Obviously none of these explanations really carries conviction. The truth of the matter, I think, is that we are dealing in the case of this troublesome Vergilian reference with an aesthetic of propriety that we do not understand - one that is, perhaps, closer to that embodied in the Renaissance parody Mass than to the one embodied in Wagner's music dramas. This is the main

point I wanted to make. We are in the habit of reading ancient literature through nineteenth-century lenses. Whether this is so because our profession coalesced in that century or because all of us, classicist or not, are still, nearly a hundred years later, caught in the grip of its chief intellectual and spiritual categories, I will not attempt to say. For whatever reason, it troubles us when we cannot make our ancient texts speak to us in a voice that would have been intelligible to Arnold, Carlyle, or Mommsen. But it seems to me that we should actually strive to find passages such as these and to cherish them. What we understand in Vergil, or think we understand, in a certain sense cannot tell us very much. Whatever is strange or uncanny probably affords the most direct access to his most characteristically 'ancient' way of understanding the world. We, of course, will probably never succeed in thinking ourselves into this understanding, but we should contemplate it and savor it, rather than ignoring it or simply trying to explain it away. For in a very real sense, it is not what is familiar in whole or in part, but what is most radically strange, that is all we have left of antiquity.

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