

VIRGIL'S LAPITHS

Few details in Virgil's description of the underworld have elicited more comment than his treatment of the sinners Ixion and Pirithous:¹

quid memorem Lapithas, Ixiona Pirithoumque?
quos super atra silex iam iam lapsura cadentique
imminet adsimilis; lucent genialibus altis
aurea fulcra toris; epulaeque ante ora paratae
regifico luxu; Furiarum maxima iuxta
accubat et manibus prohibet contingere mensas,
exurgitque facem attollens atque intonat ore.

Virgil's bold allotment to the Lapith father and son of tortures by tradition ordinarily assigned to Tantalus – the ever-looming rock, the ever-approachable, never touchable feast – has caused his commentators more to propose alterations to a puzzling text than to search out, as does this note, reasons for the poet's originality.² Without doubt Virgil's mutations of his inheritance are striking. They are all the more so because Homer, in terms of genre the most canonical of his predecessors, in the survey of those eternally penalized in Hades which he puts into the mouth of Odysseus, places Tantalus, whom Virgil does not mention, immediately after Tityus.³ Twice over, then, in replacing Tantalus with the Lapith pair and in granting to them the former's punishments, Virgil surprises his readers.

But, to those schooled in Virgil's earlier writing, the shock from his novelty here has been carefully calculated and will soon be reinforced. The calculation comes because Virgil himself has previously sponsored the Homeric tradition on two occasions in the *Georgics*, each with its own emphases. At *Geo.* 3.38–9 we find, among those before whom Envy cowers in hell, *tortos... Ixionis anguis / immanemque rotam et non exsuperabile saxum*,⁴ and at 4.484 we watch how, under the spell of Orpheus' song, *Ixonii vento rota constitit orbis*. The first mention of Ixion is striking because he is the only sinner actually named (the punishment of Sisyphus is recalled only by allusion to the *non exsuperabile saxum*). The second catches attention because Ixion's is the only torture mentioned.

The reinforcement stems from the fact that, within a few lines, as the catalogue in *Aeneid* 6 continues, the punishments usually prescribed for the two Lapiths, constant suspension from a turning wheel and perpetual enchainment, are in turn either listed without allocation to a particular sinner (616–17) or, in the case of Pirithous, given specifically to Theseus (617–18). Moreover the tortures of Pirithous and Theseus are kept carefully separate, though the same exploit brought them to the underworld and the same punishment, in other sources, often keeps them together.⁵

Now Tantalus was guilty of breaching the hospitality which the gods offered him by

¹ *Aeneid* 6.601–7.

² The most recent effort to explain away Virgil's innovations by altering the received text is by J. Perret who would exchange lines 616–20 with 602–7 ('L'ordre de succession des vers dans L'Énéide, 6, 602–620', *RPh* 58 [1984], 19–33, building on a suggestion of L. Havet, 'Le supplice de Phlégyas', *RPh* 12 [1888], 145–72). But the comment of R. G. Austin (*P. Vergilii Maronis Aeneidos: Liber Sextus* [Oxford, 1977]) on line 601 is particularly salutary. After listing earlier attempts at emendation, each as futile as the other, he observes: 'The necessary inference is that Virgil has chosen to be original, regarding this Underworld Rogues' Gallery as providing a common stock of punishments, without a particular torment being the exclusive copyright of one particular villain.'

³ Tityos (*Od.* 11.576–81); Tantalus (582–92).

⁴ I should add, however, that nowhere else do we find snakes as part of Ixion's torment.

⁵ Citations in J. E. Fontenrose, *RE* 19.1.138–9 (1937), s.v. 'Peirithoos'.

stealing nectar and ambrosia, and at least one of his punishments, the proximity but unavailability of sumptuous food and drink, appears thoroughly appropriate. Even potential crushing by an overhanging boulder has its suitability by exaggerating the idea of touch and turning grasping Tantalus from the sense's abuser to someone menaced by touch in a hyperbolic manifestation. Why, then, does Virgil redistribute the tortures of Tantalus to the Lapiths?

We may begin by seeking reasons for the new juxtaposition of Tityus with Ixion and Pirithous. Tityus, we recall, was a giant who had assaulted Leto and whom Epicurean Lucretius sees as a denizen of our world who is prey to *amor*, *angor*, *cupido* and *curae*.⁶ For Virgil, who allows us to imagine a continued existence after death, it would seem that someone who had yielded to the lacerations of passion in life is suitably punished in the underworld by having a bird constantly banquet (*rimatur epulis*) on his ever-renewed liver, the seat of desire.⁷ He is fittingly followed by the two Lapiths, the first of whom, Ixion, had attempted to rape Juno, the second, Pirithous, to abduct Proserpina from her marriage chamber with Dis. In giving them the tortures of Tantalus Virgil offers his readers an instance of allegory, anticipating Dante's brilliant *contrapassi*, where recompense for the energies of attempted rape lies in the continuing threat of nature's violence – the boulder that is always almost falling, always almost ready to crush – and where the yearnings of illegitimate sexual passion are repaid by the unrelieved unfulfilment of gustatorial desire, the constant inability to eat in the constant presence of the deliciously edible (*epulae ante ora paratae*). The common emphasis on food, where one creature is always being eaten and the others always almost eat, links both allegories.

But there are details within Virgil's presentation of the two punishments which point to more specific reasons for Virgil to coopt Tantalus' tortures for the Lapiths. A clue to understanding his association of them to the ever-falling rock is generated by the alliterative connection between *Lapithas* and *lapsura*. The median term which allows the figure of sound to work its full magic is *atra silex*, the rock whose potential fall ever threatens to crush those beneath. This in turn serves as a double complement to both noun and participle through *figura etymologica*. We hear and understand the noun *lapis*, for which *silex* is a metonymy, at work in different ways in both *Lapithas* and *lapsura*. Because *lapis* is readily connected with either λέπας or λᾱς/λᾱας or both, Virgil is suggesting that these 'dwellers on a craggy mountain' bring upon themselves part of their own being as instrument of everlasting torture.⁸ *Nomen omen*: what now threatens, nearly, to destroy them is the essence in the name that qualifies the named, their original selves sharing in dark *silex*. The source of the Lapiths' being is in black rock, and their ever-potential end lies appropriately in a return to what this source connotes, a primitive savagery that was at their hearts' core, certainly, combined perhaps with a deliberate lovelessness which the Latin poets associated closely with *silex* as symbol and which Virgil here adroitly links to a punishment for amatory violence.⁹

⁶ DRN 3.984–94.

⁷ Aen. 6.599.

⁸ 'Bewohner der felsigen Berg' (M. Schmidt, RE 12.1.786 [1924], s.v. 'Lapithai', who points out the etymological connection). Re. also C. Robert *Die Griechische Heldensage* in L. Preller *Griechische Mythologie* (Berlin, 1920), 2.7 and n. 7; H. Ebeling, *Lexicon Homericum* (Leipzig, 1885), s.v. Λαπιθαί. For a recent summary treatment of Virgilian etymologizing with examples, see the article on *etimologia e paretimologia* by G. Scarpato in *Enciclopedia Vergiliana* (Roma, 1985), ii. 402–4.

⁹ See OLD, s.v. 3. Shortly before (Aen. 6.471) Virgil compared Dido, reacting to Aeneas' pleas, to *dura silex aut... Marpesia cautes*, a comparison that itself is meant to recall her

The first and second punishments are closely joined to each other as much by contrast as by similarity. Blackness is replaced by gold, the dark by the brightly luminous, an object most incapable of mastication (Catullus amusingly refers to a family whose teeth could eat flint)¹⁰ by the most provocatively edible. A world of mountain origins yields to civilization in the form of the inner richness of a sophisticated festivity. As the Lapiths change from passive to active, from objects to subjects of desire, the terror of being touched, the threat of a 'touch' that almost always crushes, gives place to an unending desire to obtain that which one cannot. To summarize the differences, that which mortally menaces the Lapiths is innate bestiality, that which ever appeals to them, arousing a yearning that can never be gratified, is the feast's ceremonial elegance, approach to which is for eternity prevented by Fury.

But Virgil has a more special purpose for imputing the second torture to the Lapiths instead of to Tanalus, one which is adumbrated by his use of the epithet *genialis* for the high couches on which the guests recline. 'Strictly, *genialis* is used for the bridal bed, but here it has the wider sense of "festal",' comments Austin.¹¹ Both the broader and the narrower meanings of the word ring true here, but it is in the more restricted sense that Virgil's particular forcefulness in fact lies.¹² Before his attempted rape of Proserpina caused his imprisonment in Hades, the signal event in the career of Pirithous was the wedding feast accompanying his marriage to Hippodamia. During its course there ensued the famous brawl between the Lapiths and the Centaurs, the latter, as tradition generally has it, spurred on by Bacchus through overindulgence in wine to behave with such roughness as to become symbols of brute force by contradistinction to the more restrained, and therefore presumably more rational, Lapiths.¹³

That Virgil would have us think specifically of a wedding feast is suggested by the several parallels between lines 603–6 and Catullus 64.43–7, where we are introduced to the setting for the marriage solemnity of Peleus with its gleaming accoutrements and marriage couch:

ipsius at sedes, quacumque opulenta recessit
regia, fulgenti splendent auro atque argento.
candet ebur soliis, collucent pocula mensae,
tota domus gaudet regali splendida gaza.
pulvinar vero divae geniale locatur ...

characterization of Aeneas at 4.366. The epithet *dura*, by merely reinforcing inherent texture, serves further to underscore the power of *atra* at 602, whether it provokes a contrast to *lucent* and *aurea* or stands as a more general reminder of death's blackness, as at Tibullus 1.3.4–5. One might add that rocks are by tradition major implements in the Centaurs' arsenal of violence. Compare, for instance, the ship Centaurus that carries the Ligurian Cupavo to Latium (*Aen.* 10.195–7): '... ille | instat aquae saxumque undis immane minatur | arduus, ...' Propertius may be thinking of this same passage when he has Apollo ascribe to the ships of Antony and Cleopatra *prorae Centaurica saxa minantis* (4.6.49). (Cf. also the *crater* with which the Centaur Hylaeus threatens the Lapiths at *Geo.* 2.457.) Virgil thus again alters tradition by allotting to the Lapiths the prime ingredient traditionally associated with the weaponry of the bestial Centaurs.

¹⁰ Cat. 23.3–4.

¹¹ Op. cit. (*supra* n. 1), on 6.603. In his comment on 604 he refers to Cat. 64.45, but the broader parallels between the two passages in Catullus and Virgil seem not to have been noted by commentators.

¹² We might note also Servius' definition in his gloss on line 603: '... geniales proprie sunt qui sternuntur puellis nubentibus, dicti a generandis liberis.'

¹³ The original texts are Hom. *Il.* 1.263–5 and 2.742–4; *Od.* 21.295–304 and [Hes.] *Scu.* 178–90. For Bacchus as the cause of strife, see Vir. *Geo.* 2.454–7 and Hor. *C.* 1.18.7–11. The tale elicits from Ovid one of his more expansive feats of grandiloquence (*M.* 12.210–458).

Because madness interrupted the actual Lapith wedding repast in its sublunar setting, the underworld finds Ixion and Pirithous constantly paying the penalty for this uncivilized behaviour by having the feast's formality and grace both proximate and inaccessible. The Fury, roused from her couch, raising the torch which is one of her attributes, and thundering her menace performs a macabre parody of the married couple and their guests reclining at the banquet after torches and shouting have accompanied them to the groom's domain.¹⁴

Several sources document this diminution of the status of the Lapiths, from epitome of civility to eternal emblem of rudeness from whose eager grasp culture is forever kept teasingly at bay. In *Odes* 2.12 Horace links the Lapiths with drunken Hylaeus and the sons of Earth, overwhelmed by Hercules, and it is to them, not to the centaur or to the giants, that he allots the epithet *saevus*.¹⁵ He also ends his longest and in many ways most powerful lyric poem, the fourth of the so-called Roman odes, with a list of those punished for challenging the order of the Olympians. The conclusion is conspicuous not only for the prominence it grants the enchainment of Pirithous but also for the juxtaposition with Tityus where Horace joins Virgil in altering our expectations from Homer:¹⁶

... incontinentis nec Tityi iecur
reliquit ales, nequitiae additus
custos; amatorem trecentae
Pirithoum cohibent catenae.

Ovid, too, following what may have now seemed, after the passage of thirty years, an equally authorized version of Pirithous' tale, speaks of the son of Ixion as *deorum spreter ... mentisque ferox*.¹⁷

But it is Virgil himself who presents, in one brief phrase, the chief evidence for the specificity of the wedding feast as torture. In the seventh book of the *Aeneid*, Juno claims as analogies for her own vendetta against the Trojans the vindictiveness of two other gods, that of Diana against ancient Calydon and of Mars against the Lapiths:¹⁸

Mars perdere gentem
immanem Lapithum valuit, ...

Virgil himself, through the mouth of the goddess, offers no reason for Mars' anger, nor does his text elsewhere aid us in clarifying his dramatic alterations to the myth of the Lapiths as we know it otherwise: that they were destroyed instead of, or along with, the Centaurs, and that Mars, not Bacchus, was the responsible agent. But Servius' gloss is enlightening:¹⁹

Pirithous, Lapitharum rex, cum uxorem duceret, vicinos populos Centauros, etiam sibi cognatos, et deos omnes excepto Marte, ad convivium convocavit: unde iratum numen inmisit furorem, quo Centaurs et Lapithae in bella venerunt.

¹⁴ We need compare only Catullus' first *epithalamium* (61) for parallels, e.g. the command to the slaves to raise their torches (*tollite ... faces*, 114) or the depiction of the husband, lying expectantly on his Tyrian couch (*accubans / vir tuus Tyrio in toro*, 165), not to speak of the reiterated invocation to Hymen and the *Fescennina iocatio*.

¹⁵ R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard (*A Commentary on Horace: Odes: Book II* [Oxford, 1978], p. 187, on C. 2.12.5) comment valuably on this other way of viewing the Lapiths, especially *vis-à-vis* their regular treatment in fifth-century Greek art.

¹⁶ C. 3.4.77–80. Note also the final stanza of C. 4.7 where *Pirithoo* is the last word (28).

¹⁷ *M.* 8.612–13.

¹⁸ *Aen.* 7.304–5.

¹⁹ On *Aen.* 7.304.

It is usually understood that the reason Pirithous is designated *deorum spreter* and (ordinarily) enchained as punishment in the underworld is because of the ill-conceived abduction of Proserpina, and this assumption is supported, in the Latin poets, by Horace's designation of the culprit as *amator*.²⁰ But Juno's words and Servius' explanation suggest another reason as well for Pirithous' doom, a reason particularly à propos for explicating the suitability of the untouchable wedding banquet as torment for the Lapiths.

One Virgilian novelty elucidates a tight complex of others.²¹ If Servius is correct that the Lapiths were destroyed because of Mars' anger at their failure to invite him to the wedding of Hippodamia and Pirithous, then, in this respect, too, the *contrapasso* is brilliantly arranged by Virgil. War's god, prone to rage and madness, is represented by a fury who, in warding the Lapiths away from the marriage board, serves as eternal reminder of how an act of impiety, the scorning of a major divinity by the protagonists of a nuptial rite, brings disorder instead of rationality.²² Mars' vengeance is fittingly wrought through the sempiternal temptations of the same enchanting ceremony, ever watched but never shared.*

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²⁰ The reason usually given for Ovid's designation is the attempted rape of Proserpina. See A. S. Hollis (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*: Book VIII [Oxford, 1970]) and F. Bömer (P. Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphosen*: Buch VIII–IX [Heidelberg, 1977], *ad loc.*

²¹ Another famous Virgilian invention, devoted to the Lapiths and still deserving of full analysis, is the double transfiguration of the Lapith Caenis whose metamorphosis into a man, Caeneus, and death by crushing are told by Ovid in the lines which follow his treatment of the battle of Lapiths and Centaurs (*M.* 12.459–535). Only Virgil has a second metamorphosis, with Caeneus in the underworld become female again (*Aen.* 6.448–9).

²² It is worthy of note that Virgil has the same attribute of the Fury here, *Furiarum maxima*, allotted in 3.252 by Celaeno to herself (*vobis Furiarum ego maxima pando*). The situations are parallel enough to warrant fuller discussion because in book 3 the Fury also curses someone, this time Aeneas and his followers, with the impossibility of eating. The reason for the curse is the impious grasping of another's property as booty, in this case cattle who were actually eaten only in part (*semesam praedam*, 244). The curse remains but a modified, momentary version of the eternal torture of book 6, namely that in the future their hunger will force the Trojans to devour their own tables (*ambesas mensas*, 257). The curse is fulfilled at 7.107–34.

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A NOTE ON HORACE, *EPISTLES* 1.2.26 AND 2.2.75

Sirenum voces et Circae pocula nosti;
quae si cum sociis stultus cupidusque bibisset,
sub domina meretrice fuisset turpis et excors,
vixisset canis immundus vel amica luto sus.

(*Ep.* 1.2.23–6)

Scholars have long seen that Horace's treatment of Homer in this Epistle demands to be read in the tradition of moral allegory in which Ulysses becomes the type of the 'man of virtue' ('*rursus quid virtus et quid sapientia possit / utile proposuit nobis exemplar Ulixen*', 17–18): on such a reading, Circe becomes an allegory of foolish passion 'to which Ulysses' companions give in through their *stultitia*, and because of which they lose their reason and become no better than animals. Antisthenes, from whose writings such an allegorising approach probably developed, was regarded as an

¹ Xen. *Mem.* 1.3.7; Schol. *Od.* 10.239.