

LOST VOICES: VERGIL, *AENEID* 12.718–19*

pavidi cessere magistri,
stat pecus omne metu mutum, mussantque iuvencae
quis nemori imperitet, quem tota armenta sequantur;

Vergil, *Aen.* 12.717–19

Here, in the middle of the well-known simile that depicts Aeneas and Turnus as bulls fighting for territory and a herd (12.715–22), Vergil registers the reactions of the onlookers. Commentators and lexicographers disagree about what the heifers are doing, interpreting ‘mussant’ in different ways. Servius (followed by Conington–Nettleship) glosses the verb as ‘dubitant’. By contrast, Heyne offers the paraphrase ‘anxii expectant’, responding to the theme of fear in the two preceding cola: cf. ‘pavidi’ and ‘metu’. Forbiger’s explanatory ‘tacite expectant’ stresses rather the note of silence introduced by ‘stat pecus omne metu mutum’. Lewis and Short (s.v., II) and Georges (s.v., II2) concur with Forbiger when they translate ‘mussant’ ‘expect in silence’ and ‘stumm harren’. Other authorities, however, underscore the verb’s onomatopoeic sense. Julius Caesar Scaliger, for example, observes of Vergil’s usage: ‘sane verbum factitium, neque absonum a boum voce’.¹ Accordingly, some older commentators interpret ‘mussant’ as a restrained form of ‘mugiant’.² More recently, the *OLD* (s.v., 3a) and *TLL* (s.v., II2b [8.2.1709.26–32]) cite *Aen.* 12.718 under the definitions ‘mutter in indecision’ and ‘mussantem (i.e. murmurantem) dubitare’. Although there is general agreement that ‘mussant’ (followed by indirect deliberative questions) connotes uncertainty, there still remains the problem of whether it indicates silence, faint lowing, or muttering. The purpose of this note is to call attention to an unrecognized etymological wordplay in line 718 (‘stat pecus omne metu *mutum*, *mussantque* iuvencae’) which helps explain what the heifers are doing and why there are varying interpretations of ‘mussant’.

In line 718 the soundplay of ‘metu mutum, mussantque iuvencae’ has received notice, but the etymological connection between the similar sounding ‘mutum’ and ‘mussant’ has not. While caution is advised against reading too much into simple paronomasia, there are other reasons to believe that Vergil is etymologizing. First, the parallelism of ‘stat pecus omne metu mutum’ and ‘mussantque iuvencae’ (identified by Henry as theme and variation) encourages the reader to see an etymological link between ‘mutum’ and ‘mussant’.³ Second, the juxtaposition of similar sounding

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¹ Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Poetices Libri Septem*, facs. repr. of 1561 Lyon ed. (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt, 1964), p. 192.

² T. Farnebus, *P. Virgilii Maronis Opera* (Amsterdam, 1650), ad loc.: ‘tacite et intra se mugiunt’; C. Ruæus, *P. Virgilii Maronis Opera*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1682), ad loc.: ‘timide et quasi tacite mugiunt; videturque ipso vocabulo vox iuvenearum expressa’; T. Cooke, *Publii Virgilii Bucolica Georgica et Aeneis* (London and Dublin, 1742), ad loc.: ‘iuvencae mugientes expectant’.

³ Cf. Verg. *Aen.* 3.540: ‘bello *armantur* equi, bellum haec *armenta* minantur’. For parallelism as an environment for etymologizing in Vergil, see G. J. M. Bartelink, *Etymologiseren bij Vergilius*, Mededelingen der Kon. Neder. Akad. van Wetenschappen 28.3 (Amsterdam, 1965), pp. 94–5.

words is a typical feature of *figura etymologica* and etymologizing in Roman poetry.⁴ Finally, confirmation of the etymological intent of Vergil's wordplay may be found in Varro's *De Lingua Latina*:

apud Ennium (fr. *trag.* 393 R) 'vocibus concide † facimus et obrutus.' mussare dictum quod muti non amplius quam MU dicunt; a quo idem (sc. Ennius) dicit id quod minimum est (*inc.* 10 V): 'neque, ut aiunt, μῦ' facere audent.' (Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 7.101 G-S)

Here Varro clarifies the meaning of an Ennian example of *musso*, unfortunately lost to textual corruption.⁵ He does so by relating *musso* to the adjective *mutus* and deriving both onomatopoeically from *mu*, the sound of muttering in both Greek and Latin (*OLD* s.v.; *LSJ* s.v. 'μῦ'). Given the influence of Varro's etymologies on Roman poets, it is likely that Vergil's aim in the wordplay between 'mutum' and 'mussant' is to advertise the origin and meaning of the rare Ennian verb, for which he shows a special liking (cf. *Geo.* 4.188; *Aen.* 11.345; 11.454; 12.657).⁶

The question remains whether Vergil points to the derivation of *mutus* and *musso* from the sound *mu* or simply suggests that *musso* comes from *mutus*.⁷ The subject of the simile itself furnishes evidence that the etymological wordplay brings out the onomatopoeic origin of both words. Although there is little explicit evidence that Latin speakers regarded the interjection *mu* as proper to bulls and cows,⁸ Vergil's usage of *mugio* and *mugitus* indicates that he considers the syllable *mu* to be signally bovine. This is particularly the case when he describes the sound of a herd stung by the *asilus* ('gadfly') at *Geo.* 3.150: 'furit mugitibus aether'. Ross argues that here Vergil 'recognizes' the etymology of μύωψ ('gadfly') from μύκημα ('mooing') which Apollonius suggests when comparing Heracles to a bull pricked by a gadfly (*Arg.* 1.1265–9).⁹ Furthermore, the two (related) bull-similes of *Aeneid* 12 begin and

⁴ Cf. e.g. Verg. *Aen.* 6.160: 'multa inter sese vario sermone serebat'. For remarks on Vergil's etymologizing of words in 'each other's vicinity', see Bartelink, op. cit. (n. 3), p. 92; on the 'direct collocation' of etymologically related words in Lucretius, see J. M. Snyder, *Puns and Poetry in Lucretius' 'De Rerum Natura'* (Amsterdam, 1980), pp. 76–84 and 90; discussion of presenting evidence for an etymology by 'close proximity' can be found in F. Cairns, *Tibullus: A Hellenistic Poet in Rome* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 92–3.

⁵ It is unclear which sense of *musso* (*taceo* or *murmuro*) Ennius uses and Varro clarifies. In their apparatus, Goetz–Schoell print L. Müller's emendation 'faci<to> musset obrutus' for the corrupt text, taking the Ennian example to mean *taceo*. Alternatively, in the Loeb edition, Kent accepts L. Spengler's emendation 'fac <si> mus<s>et obrutum', and translates *musso* as 'make a sound'. Both meanings of the verb are attested in Ennius by Festus ex Paul. p. 131.9–11 L: 'mussare murmurare. Ennius (*Ann.* 168 Sk): "in occulto mussabat". vulgo vero pro tacere dicitur, ut idem Ennius (*Ann.* 435 Sk): "non decet mussare bonos". For a discussion of Ennian usage, see Skutsch on *Ann.* 168, 327, and 435.

⁶ On the influence of Varro on Vergil's etymologizing, see Bartelink, op. cit. (n. 3), pp. 21–5 and 111–12; O. S. Due, 'Zur Etymologisierung in der Aeneis', in O. S. Due, et al. (edd.), *Classica et Medaevialia Francisco Blatt Septuagenario Dedicata* (Copenhagen, 1973), p. 276; N. Horsfall, 'Varrone', in *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* (Rome, 1985) p. 448. Notably, Vergil does not derive *musso* from a Greek source as does the Augustan grammarian Clodius Tuscus: 'mussare est ex Graeco, conprimere oculos: Graeci μύσαι dicunt' (*ap.* Servius Auctus *ad Aen.* 12.657). Ancient etymologies of *musso* are conveniently found in R. Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* (Leeds, 1991), p. 400; cf. also Ernout-Meillet, s.v.

⁷ Cf. Donatus on Ter. *Ad.* 207: 'mussitare...proprie dissimulandi tacere est, vel a muto vel ab M, quae <est> littera nimium pressae vocis ac paene nullius adeo, ut sola omnium, cum inter vocales inciderit, atteratur atque subsidat. hinc Vergilius (*Aen.* 12.657) "mussat rex ipse Latinus".'

⁸ Cf. *CGL* 5.33.22 + 23 (= 5.86.2 and 5.119.5): 'mu adhuc in consuetudine est: unde mugire dicimus'.

⁹ D. O. Ross, Jr. *Virgil's Elements: Physics and Poetry in the 'Georgics'* (Princeton, 1987), pp. 158–63.

end respectively with emphasis upon the sound of mooing: ‘*mugitus veluti cum prima in proelia taurus / terrificos ciet*’ (103–4); ‘*gemitu nemus omne remugit*’ (722). Therefore, the assonance and alliteration of ‘*stat pecus omne metu mutum, mussantque iuvencae*’ could both be imitative of the sound that cattle make and call attention to the syllable *mu* from which ‘*mutum*’ and ‘*mussant*’ are to be derived.

If Vergil alludes to the Varronian etymology of *musso*, what bearing does it have on the meaning of ‘*mussant iuvencae*’? Without considering the onomatopoeic origins of ‘*mutum*’ and ‘*mussant*’, one may interpret ‘*metu mutum*’ as ‘silent with fear’ and hence ‘*mussant*’ as ‘expect silently’. For, were the *whole* herd silent, how could the heifers ‘moo quietly’ or ‘mutter’? However, if ‘*metu mutum*’ refers to speechlessness (thus *OLD* s.v. ‘*mutus*’, 4), then it is conceivable for ‘*mussant*’ to denote the minimal, inarticulate sound that results from, or betrays, the suppression of utterance. While this sense of *musso* is not indistinguishable from being *mutus*, the two are semantically close, as Servius observes *ad Aen.* 11.345: ‘*et proprie mussare est obmurmurare et muto esse vicinum*’. Vergil’s etymologizing in line 718 calls attention to a semantic overlap between *musso* and *mutus*: i.e. ‘saying no more than *mu*’. This loss of voice may in turn be interpreted either as silence or as some form of murmured sound. The critical disagreement about the precise meaning of ‘*mussant*’ (‘expect silently’, ‘faintly low’, or ‘mutter’) therefore represents different, though not necessarily incompatible, aspects of the same phenomenon.¹⁰ Vergil’s etymological wordplay helps the reader to understand not only the source for these various possible meanings of ‘*mussant*’ but also the point of the theme and variation in line 718.

One further issue needs to be addressed. Varro shows that *mutus* and *musso* are derived from *mu*—the minimal sound that humans make.¹¹ Vergil innovates upon Varro by recasting the etymology of *mutus* and *musso* within a bovine context. To be sure, animals are *mutus* because they cannot speak (*OLD* s.v., 1a), but the phrase ‘*metu mutum*’ implies a temporary loss of speech and thus a personification of the herd.¹² This personification continues in the phrase ‘*mussantque iuvencae*’ which manifestly echoes 12.657: ‘*mussat rex ipse Latinus*’. Ross observes that when the ‘mumbings of the consternated cows’ are compared with Latinus ‘the comic is dangerously close to the surface’.¹³ Yet Vergil does not descend into the mock-heroic. The appropriateness of his use of *musso* in the animal sphere deserves special attention.

As Varro demonstrates, *musso* is an onomatopoeic verb. Such verbs fall into three categories depending upon whether they represent sounds made by men, animals, or things.¹⁴ Poets have a fondness for transferring verbs reflective of animal sound to humans. Varro deals specifically with this category of ‘*verba ab animalium vocibus tralata in homines*’ in *De Lingua Latina* (7.103–4).¹⁵ No doubt aware of such grammatical discussion, Vergil reverses the ‘regular’ transference of animal sounds to

¹⁰ On ambiguity of meaning in Vergil’s use of language, see W. F. Jackson Knight, *Roman Virgil* (London, 1944) pp. 203–4.

¹¹ For examples of *mu* in colloquial speech, see Otto, *Sprichwörter*, s.v. ‘*mu. mut. muttire*’.

¹² Cf. Lucr. 1.92: ‘*muta metu terram genibus summissa* (sc. Iphianassa) *petebat*’. The personification of the herd in line 718 may be explained as a ‘trespass’ of the narrative context upon the simile, since the herd corresponds to the armies watching Aeneas and Turnus. For the phenomenon of ‘trespass’, see R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Words and the Poet* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 92–8.

¹³ Ross, *op. cit.* (n. 9), p. 158.

¹⁴ E. Wölfflin, ‘Die Etymologien der lateinischen Grammatiker’, *ALL* 8 (1892), 432.

¹⁵ R. Schröter, *Studien zur varronischen Etymologie*, Akad. der Wiss. und der Lit. 12 (Mainz, 1959), pp. 852–3, argues that Varro relies on an already established grammatical inquiry into this type of transference of onomatopoeic words by poets. This would support the idea that Vergil was playing with established grammatical categories.

humans when he applies *musso* to heifers. In the *Georgics*, he performs the same reversal with reference to the humming of bees (4.188): 'fit sonitus, mussantque oras et limina circum'. The 'murmuring' of the bees provides a precedent for the voices of the heifers. But, in the case of the heifers, there is an additional twist. Vergil shows that the phrase 'mussant iuvencae' is uncannily appropriate because the onomatopoeic origin of the verb is a sound both human and bovine. Vergil's etymologizing thus intimates a common ground between man and animal. This association suits well the context of the simile in which Vergil humanizes the rival bulls to bring out the animal nature of Turnus and Aeneas.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Cf. Verg. *Geo.* 3.219–40. On the much discussed parallelism between animals and humans in the *Georgics* and similar passages in the *Aeneid*, see W. Liebeschuetz, 'Beast and Man in the Third Book of Virgil's *Georgics*', *G&R* 12 (1965), 64–72; M. C. J. Putnam, *Virgil's Poem of the Earth: Studies in the 'Georgics'* (Princeton, 1979), pp. 192–4; W. W. Briggs, Jr. *Narrative and Simile from the 'Georgics' in the 'Aeneid'* (Leiden, 1980), pp. 31–2, and 92–6; Ross, op. cit. (n. 9), pp. 149 and 159–63.