AN UNCONVINCING ETYMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT ABOUT AENEAS AND THE GATES OF SLEEP

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> *sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur*
> *cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris,*
> *altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,*
> *sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia Manes.*
> *his ibi tum natum Anchises unaque Sibyllam*
> *prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna....*   Aeneid 6.893–898

In "Aeneas and the Gates of Sleep: An Etymological Approach" (*Phoenix* 46 [1992] 362–365) Gordon T. Cockburn offers a solution to the "problem" of Aeneas' departure from the underworld through the gate of false dreams. He argues that an early alteration of Vergil's text changed several of Vergil's words, so as to make his picture of the gates consistent with that found in Homer. Thus in order to restore Vergil's original wording, *veris* in 894 should be changed to *falsis, falsa* in 896 changed to *vera*, and *sed* in 896 changed either to *hac* or *qua*, thus allowing our hero to leave the underworld not through the problematic gate of false dreams, but "by the shining-white gate of true dreams" (363). Such extensive emendation of this controversial passage is unlikely, I suppose, to win general assent, but as the author of a recent monograph on etymological wordplay in Vergil,[1] perhaps I might helpfully comment on Cockburn's claim that his rewriting of the text represents "an etymological approach."

Cockburn's argument is that etymology supports the change, since *cornu,* the material from which the gate of false dreams (in Cockburn's new text) is made, is linked in the ancient mind to falsehood, and in addition the new (or newly recovered) collocation *falsis facilis* in 894 "forms a paronomasia, with the suggestion of an etymology, with *facilis.*" Some features of this argument are attractive. The observation about paranomasia is sound, even though some may hesitate to see such simple wordplay also suggesting etymology, in particular an etymology otherwise unattested.[2] And if *cornea* in 894 were to suggest falsehood to an ancient reader, this would make "Vergil's picture," like that of his

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[1] O'Hara 1996.

[2] Maltby 1991: *s.vv. "facilis," "fallacia," "fallax"*; there is no entry for *falsus.* In Homer *Od.* 19.562–567 the connection between horn (κέρας) and "accomplish the truth" (ἔτυμα κραίνουσι) is no closer, but Homer begins with the more striking resemblance between ivory (ἐλέφας) and the verb "deceive" (ἐλεφαίρονται), after which the reader or audience is somewhat better prepared to see the corresponding connection between κέρας and κραίνουσι.

Homeric model, "etymological," as Cockburn notes, even though the two texts would present antithetical information about which gate is the route for which dreams. *Odyssey* 19.562–567 features Penelope's etymological interpretation of the names of the gates of ivory (ἐλέφας), through which come dreams that deceive (ἐλεφαίρονται), and of horn (κέρας), through which come those that "accomplish the truth" (ἔτυμα κραίνουσι; cf. κερ- and κρα-). But the problem is Cockburn's claim that etymological thinking would make an ancient reader associate *cornu* with falsehood. This claim is unwarranted, and follows from a fallacious line of argumentation, with a kind of fuzzy thinking about ancient etymologizing to which I have sometimes found myself drawn, but which I think we should all strive to resist.

Here is how Cockburn makes this connection: "*cornu* is derived (wrongly, of course) by Varro (*Ling.* 7.25) from *curvus*, which in turn regularly implies wickedness or falsehood (*curvo dinoscere rectum atque . . . quaerere verum*: Hor. *Epist.* 2.2.44–45), so that the gate of horn is for Vergil a natural exit for false dreams." As the central premise of an argument in favor of a radical set of textual emendations of a passage that has been subject to heated ideological debate, this step of the argument should be rock-solid, but is not. Two subtle but illegitimate logical leaps are marked in this sentence by the words "in turn" and "or." First, "in turn": Varro's derivation does not mention falsehood, only the literal curvedness of most animals' horns: *dicere apparet cornutum a cornibus; cornua a curvore dicta, quod pleraque curva*. With the phrase "in turn," Cockburn smuggles in, alongside the literal meaning of *curvus*, its figurative association with "wickedness or falsehood." Varro might have made such a connection, but did not, and so we have no evidence that any ancient person ever connected the word *cornu* to figurative meanings of the word *curvus*. Consider that Isidore *Origines* 20.9.10 also connects the word *corbis* or *corvis* to the word *curvus*. It would clearly be unwarranted to suggest that an ancient reader would be ready at any moment to connect "baskets" with "wickedness or falsehood."[3]

Next, we turn to Cockburn's "or," in his phrase "wickedness or falsehood": it turns out that the normal secondary meaning of *curvus*, "(morally) wrong," will not help us get Aeneas through the gate of true dreams, so we must appeal to an alleged secondary meaning of the the secondary meaning of *curvus*, "false." As far as I know there is simply no evidence suggesting that *curvus* ever means "false." Certainly Horace's autobiographical discussion of his education, which Cockburn cites, does not establish this:

> adiecere bonae paulo plus artis Athenae,
> scilicet ut vellem curvo dinoscere rectum,
> atque inter silvas Academi quaerere verum.
>
>   Horace *Epistles* 2.2.44–45

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[3] Cited by Maltby 1991: *s.v. "corbis": corves dicti, quia curvatis virgis contexuntur.*

The study of ethics (*curvo dinoscere rectum*), and the more general philosophical search for truth (*quaerere verum*), are not unrelated, but they are also not precisely interchangeable equivalents, as Cockburn's citation implies. The distance from the word *cornu* to the notion of falsehood grows greater still, and the path between more crooked. For *cornu* to suggest falsehood, we must rely on an unattested secondary meaning of the secondary, figurative meaning of a word Varro connects to *cornu* only in its most obvious, literal sense.

Cockburn's etymological argument about *cornu* fails to convince. We are left with his dissatisfaction with Aeneas' exit through the gate of false dreams, and the attractiveness of the paronomasia *falsis facilis* he would introduce in 894. This is clearly not enough to justify such a radical change in the text of the *Aeneid*. This is especially true when one considers evidence Cockburn has omitted to discuss. He suggests that "there is no difficulty in Vergil's reversing a Homeric picture," by having false dreams go through the gates of horn and true through the gates of ivory. But this is not simply a "Homeric picture," but as Austin (*ad Aeneid* 6.893–901) notes, this information about the gates "became proverbial." Among the parallels listed by Austin, the following make clear which dreams go through which gate: *Anth. Pal.* 7.42.1–2 (Ἀ μέγα Βαττιάδαο σοφοῦ περίπυστον ὄνειαρ, / ἦ ῥ' ἐτεὸν κεράων, οὐδ' ἐλέφαντος ἔης), Hor. *Odes* 3.27.39–42 (*an vitiis carentem / ludit imago / vana, quae porta fugiens eburna / somnium ducit?*), and Stat. *Silvae* 5.3.288–289 (*inde tamen venias melior qua porta malignum / cornea vincit ebur*). Clearly the received text of *Aeneid* 6.893–898, with Aeneas leaving through the gate of false dreams, should not be changed. The suggested emendation is mainly valuable as an illustration of the lengths to which we will sometimes go to avoid confronting the words Vergil actually wrote. If one's view of the *Aeneid* is incompatible with the transmitted text, it is clear that one of the two must be changed. Careful thought should be given to the question of which one that should be.[4]

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[4] For two recent attempts to read the text see O'Hara 1990: 170–172, where I argue that for Vergil to suggest that something about the parade of heroes is deceptive would not be problematic, since many prophecies in the *Aeneid* deceive, and Goold 1992: 122–123, who argues that *falsa* means not "false" but "delusive," and that "the spectacle which Aeneas has witnessed is in no sense false" but "is a spectacle which Virgil is at pains to represent Aeneas as not understanding and to that extent a delusion."

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