

Rebirth in Dreams: The Concealed Metaphor of the Golden Bough in Virgil's "Aeneid"

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Abstract: The imagery of the golden bough in Book Six of Virgil's "Aeneid" has always been a topic of great interest among scholars. Understanding the significance of the golden bough is essential for unraveling the meaning of Book Six and comprehending the entire epic. This paper first reviews all the scenarios involving the golden bough and employs methods such as close textual reading and textual verification. It argues that, in Virgil's depiction, the golden bough has three main metaphors: firstly, it serves as the initiation ritual for Aeneas to enter the underworld in the flesh; secondly, it symbolizes the imperial scepter, pointing to the "life-in-death" for both individuals and the state; and finally, it metaphorically represents a "rebirth in dreams," marking a crack in the Roman foundation myth.

Keywords: Virgil, "Aeneid", Golden Bough

1. Introduction

Virgil's "Aeneid" is a monumental epic that, in its form, mimics the structure of Homer's epics. The first six books constitute the "Odyssey"-style first half, narrating the hero's wanderings, while the last six books transition into the "Iliad"-style second half, depicting national warfare. However, a structural pause and rupture exist in Book Six. Robert A. Brooks argues that Book Six is the center of the entire work, capturing a moment of stillness between Aeneas's personal experiences and the major societal experiences of ancient Rome. [1] James E.G. Zetzel also pointed out that Book Six is a narrative pause in the epic, situated between Aeneas's arrival in Italy and his reaching the Latin city of Lavinium, with its themes having less direct impact on the latter part of the epic. [2] However, in a sense, Book Six serves as the author's commentary on the overall significance of the "Aeneid." Understanding these "meaningful ruptures" is crucial for unraveling the meaning of Book Six and, consequently, the entire epic. The author believes that among all the ambiguous images in Book Four, the "golden bough" serves as indirect confirmation for understanding the epic. Therefore, this paper will attempt to explore Virgil's metaphor of the golden bough, examining its implications and functions in Book Six and the entire work.

2. Entrance Ritual: The Credential and Privilege of Flesh Entering the Underworld

Before delving into the discussion, it is necessary to first review all the occurrences of the golden bough in the epic. In fact, Virgil concentrates his description of the golden bough in lines 136-148

and 203-211 of Book Six. If we expand the scope of the golden bough, the following pattern emerges: Sibyl's prophecy and encouragement to Aeneas about his future (lines 77-97); Aeneas's request to enter the Underworld to meet his deceased father (lines 98-124); Sibyl's description of death and the Underworld (lines 125-135); Sibyl pointing out that one must pluck the golden bough to enter the Underworld (lines 136-148); Sibyl mentioning the death of Misenus (lines 149-155); the reasons for and preparations for Misenus's burial (lines 156-182); Aeneas obtaining the golden bough guided by two doves (lines 183-211); the funeral rites for Misenus (lines 212-235). So, why does Virgil repeatedly mention the death of Misenus before and after describing the golden bough? Is the golden bough related to life and death?

At first glance, the most apparent function of the golden bough is to aid Aeneas in entering the Underworld in the flesh, serving as the entrance ritual from the mortal world to Avernus. The prophetess Sibyl explicitly points out that if Aeneas wishes to descend to the Underworld, he must first do the following:

"In a dense grove, there is hidden a golden bough, said to be the sacred offering of Proserpina. The entire forest guards it, and the shadows of the deep valley shroud it. Anyone who wishes to descend to the depths of the underworld must first pluck this golden branch from the tree. Beautiful Proserpina demands this golden branch as a gift for herself. After the golden branch is plucked, a second one will grow, and the new leaves on the branch are also golden. Therefore, you must lift your eyes to search for it. When you find it as instructed, pluck it; if fate allows you to pick it, the golden bough will willingly and easily let you pick it. Otherwise, no matter how much effort you exert, you cannot conquer it. Even with a steel knife, you cannot cut it down." [3]

As a living being, Aeneas entering the Underworld is bound to incur the curse of death, but the golden bough enables Aeneas to successfully traverse between the mortal realm and the Underworld, lingering between existence and death. Therefore, the golden bough is, first and foremost, the credential for Aeneas to enter the Underworld in the flesh.

Additionally, this credential is also a symbol of privileged status. When Charon, the ferryman of the Styx, sees the living Aeneas, he becomes furious. Despite Sibyl's promise that Aeneas possesses unparalleled virtue and reverence, and will not engage in misconduct like Hercules, Theseus, and Pirithous, Charon insists that this is the "realm of sleep and the dark land of eternal night," and "no living person can cross the Styx" [3]. However, when Sibyl presents the golden bough, "the anger that had welled up in Charon's heart instantly disappeared, and neither side spoke another word. He looked at the treasure with a reverent gaze, this golden bough blessed by the goddess of fate, a sight he had not seen for a long time. So, he turned his dark blue boat toward the shore". [3] Charon's awe of the golden bough highlights its supreme status, and Aeneas, who successfully plucks the golden bough, transforms into an esteemed guest of the Underworld. Thus, the golden bough becomes a symbol of Aeneas' privileged status.

It is worth noting that before pointing out that one must pluck the golden bough to enter the Underworld, Sibyl said the following: "For a descendant of heavenly blood, a son of Anchises, it is easy to descend to Avernus, as the dark gates of the Underworld are open day and night. But returning, escaping back to the world of the living, that is difficult". [3] However, after reading Book Six, it becomes apparent that Aeneas's return journey is remarkably smooth, with Virgil using only a few lines to describe Aeneas and Sibyl returning to the mortal world from the ivory gate. This contradiction has always been a topic of interest for scholars. Chinese scholar Wang Chengjiao believes that Aeneas's return journey is not linked to the "Gate of Horn" but originates from the castle of Pluto, specifically dividing the outbound and inbound journeys at the point of sacrificing the golden bough. However, his ultimate conclusion leans towards the admonition of Aeneas' accomplishments upon returning to the mortal world. [4] Following this line of thought, the author believes that if we define the return journey as occurring after Aeneas sacrifices the golden bough, then the presence or

absence of the golden bough implies the ease or difficulty of the round trip—when entering the Underworld, the golden bough is present, and Aeneas’s journey is relatively smooth; after sacrificing the golden bough, its absence makes Aeneas’s journey challenging. This conclusion reaffirms that the golden bough is both the credential and privilege for Aeneas to enter the Underworld in the flesh, making his journey relatively smooth.

3. Imperial Scepter: “Life within Death” and the Founding Myth

Virgil describes the appearance of the golden bough as follows: “Here, amid the foliage, there is one branch that glows with golden light, a color distinct from the other branches”. [3] After careful examination, Brooks concludes that the golden bough is composed of gold rather than lead or stone. [1] Charles Paul, citing Norden, points out that in ancient times, gold was often associated with death and the underworld, especially with figures like Demeter and Persephone. A notable passage from Artemidorus links gold and death, as gold possesses pale, heavy, and cold qualities. (“Gold is pale, heavy, and cold, thus it is likened to death,” Artemidorus). [5] The death and burial of Misenus mentioned at the beginning of this paper may also provide evidence of the connection between the golden bough and death: Misenus’s death and the redemption sacrifice for his burial enable Aeneas to find the golden bough, successfully entering the Underworld. Norton associates Misenus’s sacrifice with the Eleusinian Mysteries, and though somewhat strained, Virgil’s carefully designed funeral at least implies that Aeneas’s success requires the sacrifice of a hero. Misenus’s death bears a resemblance to the sacrifice of Palinurus. In Book Five, the sea god Neptune informs Venus that only one person’s death can ensure the safety of the entire group crossing the sea. Palinurus’s sacrifice guarantees the safety of the entire group.

However, in Aeneas’s journey to the Underworld, life and death are not strictly opposed. Virgil here appears to draw on Plato’s doctrine of the transmigration of souls. Zetzel explicitly points out that in Book Six, “the introduction to the Pythagorean doctrine leads to the geographical description of the Pythagorean cosmos, and the orientation of the Porchon school leads to the Platonic doctrine of the transmigration of souls.” [2] Anchises explains to Aeneas the dichotomy between soul and body, presenting a system of soul purification and the process of soul reincarnation after the death of the body. This eschatology clearly points to Orphism and the Pythagorean school, both of which are important premises of Plato’s doctrine of soul reincarnation. [6] In Plato’s concept of soul reincarnation, “life” and “death” are not only in opposition but also in constant contradictory struggle. Death is born out of life; it is not the end of life but another beginning. “Rebirth” is the emergence of life from death. Therefore, Plato believes that due to the inseparable relationship and contradictory identity between life and death, when a person dies, their soul arrives at a certain place, and it is in this place that the soul once again obtains the opportunity to combine with a body and form a new life [7].

If the legends behind the Eleusinian Mysteries mentioned by Norton are linked to Plato’s doctrine of soul reincarnation, it seems to lead to a conclusion: the golden bough not only implies death but also metaphorically signifies rebirth. Just as Eliot describes the “death in the water” of the Phoenician sailor Phlebas in “The Waste Land,” which precisely corresponds to the ritual of death and resurrection recorded in Fraser’s “The Golden Bough”. [8] Similarly, Brooks, in interpreting Virgil’s golden bough, also associates it with “life-in-death.” He believes that Aeneas’s journey to the Underworld requires undergoing a perilous, almost real ultimate death, namely, achieving life within death. This paradox is realized through the golden bough as “death-in-life.” They constitute a magical harmony—life-in-death and death-in-life complement each other, forming an unbreakable cycle to transcend nature. [1] Aeneas, by plucking the golden bough, transcends the opposition between life and death, achieving a rebirth of the self.

However, the golden bough not only metaphorically signifies the rebirth of individual life. In Book

Six, Virgil dedicates a substantial portion to depicting Rome's founding myth through the mouth of Anchises, concluding with an admonition: "Roman, remember that you should rule the nations with your authority, this will be your specialty. You should establish a peaceful order, be generous to the submissive, and conquer the arrogant through war". [3] Charles, in analyzing the golden bough, mentions that gold, in addition to its association with death, is also related to immortality and rewards for the gods and heroes of the Olympian era. [5] Misenus's sacrifice represents the glorious sacrifice for the founding of Rome, and the death of the hero leads to the rebirth of the Roman Empire on the map of Italy. In this light, the golden bough metaphorically signifies the scepter of the empire—one end pointing to the sacrifice of the hero and the other pointing to the birth of the great city of Rome.

4. Dreams: Fissures in Mythology

So, is Virgil truly using the golden bough as a metaphor to extol the myth of Rome's founding? If we consider Aeneas ultimately returning from the "ivory gate" (the gate of dreams), everything seems to become enigmatic. Otis believes that the gate of dreams indicates that we should perceive the entire Underworld as a dream, and Scevius also suggests that it implies everything Aeneas saw is false. [2] Kirsopp Michels creatively links the golden bough with the gate of dreams. [9] The author believes that this connection suggests the third metaphor of Virgil's golden bough and points to the true purpose of Virgil's writing.

Michels, through research, concludes that Virgil's description of the golden bough originates from a passage praising Plato by Meleager of Gadara in the now-lost "The Garland", which states, "a and also the ever golden bough of divine Plato shining all round with virtue". This is in some intertextual relationship with Virgil's line, "In this place, amid the foliage, there was a bough shining with golden light, its color different from the other branches." Following this line of thought, Virgil's golden bough is veiled in a layer of Platonic philosophy. Michels also connects Virgil's journey to the Underworld with Plato's Republic and the Er Myth: "It is through the golden bough that Aeneas has Charon carry him across the Styx, enabling him to see the afterlife, just as Socrates, through myth, showed Glaucōn the fate of the soul". [9] The unreality of the Er Myth implies the unreality of the journey to the Underworld, and what Aeneas sees in the Underworld is nothing more than the false dream of the ivory gate. The fate of the soul is uncertain, and the future of Rome is equally ambiguous. In this light, the golden bough actually metaphorically signifies a dream of the founding of Rome. Virgil uses it to create a fissure in the founding myth, subtly reshaping the reader's memory.

The Harvard school of thought asserts that, "On the surface, the epic describes the glory of Aeneas and Rome, but it is actually a long story of defeat. It encompasses two voices, one openly describing victory, while the other privately tells of regrets and remorse. They claim that the dark side of political success and the heavy cost of the empire are the themes that "The Aeneid" seeks to convey. Moreover, the characters in the epic, whether successful or unsuccessful, all empathize with this heavy cost." [10] "The Aeneid" continually depicts sacrifice and death. The defeated Turnus naturally mourns, while Aeneas, as the victor, also feels the heavy cost of "one man winning glory, a myriad bones withering." Aeneas, in the Elysian Fields of the underworld, once exclaimed, "So, father, do you mean some souls will ascend to the upper world, see the light again, and return to the toils of mortal flesh? Why do these shades pursue the light so ardently? How foolish!" [3] Rather than experiencing the hardships of war in the earthly realm, it is better to have eternal life in the underworld. This is essentially Virgil's discreet depiction of the cost of success.

"Importantly, it is the age of telling myths, not the age myths tell." In Virgil's era, war never ceased. The late Roman Republic and the early Empire were also filled with numerous conflicts. Externally, Rome began to expand aggressively into surrounding regions, while internally, armed struggles between different factions of landowners and between slaves and masters were frequent. The poet contemplates war from the very beginning of the epic: "What I wish to tell is the story of war and one

man.” [3] Virgil lived in an era of turmoil, and with the golden bough, he points towards the gate of dreams, metaphorically representing the illusion of Rome’s founding. Behind this illusion, the poet also subtly speaks of the dark side of political success. Aeneas plucking the golden bough constructs the myth of Rome’s foundation but simultaneously tears apart this myth.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Virgil’s metaphor of the golden bough has planted the “Sphinx’s riddle” for readers and critics alike. Simultaneously, the golden bough is also the key to understanding the entire Aeneid. Although it appears only in Book VI, it constitutes an essential part of the “meaningful rupture” and, to some extent, hints at Virgil’s literary inclination. This study suggests, after examination, that the most apparent metaphor of the golden bough is Aeneas’s passport for his bodily descent into the Underworld, representing identity and privilege. Furthermore, the golden bough serves as the scepter of the Roman Empire. Its metaphor of “life in death” implies the birth of the great city of Rome, forming a certain parallel with Anchises’ narration of the myth of Rome’s foundation. On the other hand, when the golden bough is connected with the gate of dreams and Plato’s “Er Myth,” it metaphorically implies a false dream of the founding myth. The Aeneid is not merely a straightforward national epic; behind the poetry, Virgil subtly conveys anti-war sentiments and the desire for peace, constructing an ideal peaceful empire.

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