



## **Fulgentius the Mythoclast: Cooling Pagan Passions in Christian Late Antiquity**

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Imagine the daunting challenge faced by architects of late antique cultural climate change.<sup>1</sup> By the sixth century of its own era, Christianity had long since muscled out Greco-Roman paganism as the dominant religion around the Mediterranean. But pagan practices had not entirely disappeared. And pagan culture remained deeply embedded in the ancient lands where it had developed and flourished, intimately interwoven into the fabric of human thought and existence. This traditional culture “was the only culture there was” – in the words of Alan Cameron.<sup>2</sup> Christians needed to hijack that powerful heritage and turn it to their own ends. Writing in North Africa, most likely in the mid-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper continues the argument begun in my “Disarming Aeneas: Fulgentius on *Arms and the Man*” (Albu 2009). I am grateful to Rosemarie Deist for nudging me to return to Fulgentius and for organizing such a stimulating gathering, and I thank the colloquium participants – especially David Konstan – for their valuable suggestions. The bibliography of Gregory Hays (<http://people.virginia.edu/~bgh2n/fulgbib.html>) greatly facilitates any research on the mythographer. I also benefited from generous research assistance by Andrea Wheeler.

<sup>2</sup> As reported by Scourfield 2007: 3.

to late-sixth century (Hays 2003), Fulgentius joined the ranks of Christian mythographers working to undo the web of ancient tales about gods and heroes and nurture a fundamentally different way of thinking and being. His *Mitologiae* (*Mythologies*) took aim at the foundational stories of paganism, ridiculing their gods and heroes consumed by shameful lust. In a companion piece, the *Expositio Virgilianae Continentiae* (*Explanation of Virgilian Content / Continenence*), he reinterpreted the most influential text from the Roman past, Virgil's *Aeneid*, as a guide to attaining virtue by subduing the passions.<sup>3</sup>

In his *Mitologiae*, then, Fulgentius rewrote Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, forcing his readers to view the pagan gods through the prism of Christian sensibilities. Here of course he ignored the solemnity of Roman cult practice, which – as pagans persuasively argued – had earned the divine benevolence that protected Rome for a thousand years. Other Christian writers, most notably Augustine, had already made the case against Roman *religio* by demeaning earthly splendor and elevating the expectation of a glorious eternal existence. Fulgentius took a lower road, seeking out and exploiting the vulnerabilities that left the old gods ripe for his peculiar brand of Swift-boating. So, for instance, Fulgentius did not challenge the majestic Capitoline Jupiter. He tackled instead the randy Zeus already skewered by ancient Romans like Plautus in his comedy *Amphitryo*.

Where Plautus's benevolent tone had tweaked the god's seduction of a dutiful wife, Fulgentius blasted away at the evil lust that he saw lurking in virtually all the shameful deeds of the old gods. Perhaps in part because he ultimately could not erase those repugnant tales from the cultural memory, he also found ways to redeem them, often by making them metaphors for the struggle against the passions, especially lust.<sup>4</sup> Venus is lust, of course (*Mit.2.1*), but so, improbably, is Antaeus, the giant crushed by Hercules (*Mit.2.4*), whose love for Omphale likewise symbolizes the battle against lust (*Mit.2.2*). And when Fulgentius

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<sup>3</sup> All references to the texts are to Fulgentius, *Opera*, ed. Helm: book and chapter for the body of the *Mitologiae* (cited as *Mit.*); page and line for *Continentia* (cited as *Cont.*) and for the prologue to the *Mitologiae*. Gregory Hays is completing a new edition for Oxford University Press. Hays has argued for an “easy coexistence of Christian faith and pagan culture” in Fulgentius' day (Hays 2004: 127-31).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the examples given here, and others, see Albu 2009.

interprets Scylla as “disorder” (*confusio*; *Mit.*2.9), he asks, “*Et quid confusio nisi libido est?*” (“And what is disorder if not lust?”).<sup>5</sup>

If the *Mitologiae* dismissed pagan tales as lust-driven obscenities, the *Expositio Virgilianae Continentiae* showed how correct interpretation of one ancient text could reveal the path to virtue, that is, restraint. The punning title makes Fulgentius’ point.<sup>6</sup> This *Explanation of Virgilian Contents* – as it is usually translated – also offers an *Explanation of Virgilian Contenance*. Fulgentius wanted his reader to approach the *Aeneid* as a moral corrective to pagan lust.

To insert this perspective, Fulgentius used all the ample rhetorical tools at his disposal, from raw humor and sarcasm to mesmerizing allegory and literary allusions, first to make the old stories pathetic and utterly unpalatable so that no Christian could hear them again without recoiling in disgust, and second to reorganize the Christian mind so that Christians could simultaneously find an altogether different way of understanding the old stories. For his remarkable success with these tasks, we should call him, not mythographer but mythoclast, myth-buster. His disorienting imagery did scramble the brains of his readers, who absorbed his techniques and learned to think like him by dismantling heroic characters and action and then picking through the wreckage to find moral truths that lay within the rubble.

Fulgentius’ favorite tool in his toolbox was allegory. Here he followed a long classical tradition of allegorizing myths. As early as the sixth century B.C.E., some Greek writers were interpreting the ancient tales allegorically.<sup>7</sup> Especially they worked to free Homer from accusations of ignorance and naiveté or from charges of obscenity and impiety. Like some of those earliest Greek allegorizers, Fulgentius was fond of using etymologies to uncover ethical or psychological revelations, disclosing the secret nature or meaning of some entity. So, he reasoned, the giant Antaeus got his name from the Greek *antion* (“contrary”), making him a kind of lust, contrary to chastity or virtue

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<sup>5</sup> Translations from the *Mitologiae* are my own adaptations of the sometimes misleading translation by Whitbread 1971. Except where otherwise indicated, translations of the *Expositio* are by Hays 2008.

<sup>6</sup> If Fulgentius himself did not create this title, an early copyist with a sure sense of the author’s wit and intent aptly named the work. For more on this pun, see Albu 2009: 25.

<sup>7</sup> This summary draws on the introduction to ancient Greek allegorizers in Russell and Konstan 2005: xiii-xxvii.

(*Mit.* 2.4), just as another foe of Hercules, the cattle thief Cacus, represented evil (in Greek, *kakon*; *Mit.* 2.3).

The names of Antaeus and Cacus lie at the simplest end of the Fulgentian spectrum that reached to the supremely inventive in the *Continentia* with characters like Palinurus and Misenus. So the Greek *mîsos* (“hatred”) and *ainos* (“praise”) combined to name Misenus, the Trojan whose boasting cost him his death (*Cont.* 95.17-18; 96.3-4). The name of Palinurus, Aeneas’ helmsman who fell asleep and slipped overboard on the escape from Troy, Fulgentius connected with Greek words for “wandering vision” (*planê* and *horaô*). We might expect that etymology to explain the helmsman’s fatal loss of concentration as he drifted off to sleep. But Fulgentius had his narrator, Virgil, tie it to the wandering eye of lust, referring readers to other examples in his corpus: Dido’s frenetic exploration of Aeneas’ body with impassioned eye (*Aen.* 4.362-4) and the “wandering tracks of a bull” (*Ecl.* 6.58). Lust, it seems, was relentlessly on Fulgentius’ mind, and he saw it lurking in passages whose signification was sometimes overt (Dido’s gaze) yet frequently obscure (Palinurus’s destiny). Late antique and medieval mythographers had a penchant for combining such moralizing and allegory to achieve their aims, and arguably none used these more ingeniously than Fulgentius.<sup>8</sup>

It was one thing for Fulgentius to allegorize and otherwise dispose of the **Greek** myths in his *Mythologiae*. He found it easy to skewer the Greek gods, whose exploits often seemed salacious by Christian standards. But what of the **Roman** myths as brilliantly reworked in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, by far the most prestigious and influential masterpiece of Latin pagan literature? In Fulgentius’ day, the Virgilian corpus was still enormously popular. Fulgentius could by no means remove the *Aeneid* from the cultural memory of his contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> But he could do something even better – replace the old reading with an altogether new interpretation of the text. He could use the *Aeneid*’s prestige to build a tale of Everyman’s ideal moral progress from bawling infant to wise adult. This virtuoso performance, twisting the epic into a completely different story with its own distinctive ideology, also let him turn his

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<sup>8</sup> On the mythographers’ predilection for moralizing and allegory, see Chance 1990: 1.

<sup>9</sup> On Virgil’s importance in the literary culture of late antiquity, see Scourfield 2007: vii, 8-16; and the magisterial collection of texts and discussion in Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008.

own potentially tedious narrative on the virtues into something weirdly compelling.

Readers in our own age can rarely resist mocking a treatise that seems to us so absurdly disconnected from its alleged textual source. Although allegorical interpretation enjoyed a long run as a favored method of literary criticism that unlocked the deep meanings of puzzling texts, it strikes most readers today as outrageously contrived and often downright silly. When extended allegories themselves fell from favor in the sixteenth century, changing tastes also soon removed the allegorical method from common and accepted use. W.H. Auden called the demise of allegory one of the rare “revolutionary changes in sensibility or style.”<sup>10</sup> This shift signaled a profound transformation in readers’ habits of mind. When Fulgentius was writing, however, the allegorical method was deeply admired as an invaluable means to understanding old tales and texts in a culture that was itself undergoing radical transformation. Indeed, this late antique deconstructionist was writing on the cutting edge of scholarship, “the first surviving author to give a global allegorization of the *Aeneid*” (Ziolkowski and Putnam, edd. 2004: 660).

The *Continentia* flaunts, if somewhat playfully, Fulgentius’ formidable erudition. It begins with a bravura summation of the true sense buried in each of the *Eclogues* and in the books of the *Georgics*, “so interspersed with mystic matters that in those books Virgil has included the very core of almost every art” (*Cont.* 83.10-12). But the *Aeneid* is his chief concern here, and so the *Continentia*’s primary narrator summons Virgil himself to serve as the perfect guide to its real intent. Fulgentius’ narrator requests a simple explanation suitable for school children, but he wants the pagan poet to know that he himself is the poet’s intellectual equal as well as his cultural superior, as a Christian:

“Most famed of Italian bards,” he begins, “please remove your wrinkled frowns and sweeten the sour temper of your lofty mind with a taste of delightful honey. For I do not seek in your texts what Pythagoras busies himself with in his harmonic numbers, or Heraclitus with his fires, or Plato with his ideals, or Hermes with his stars, or Chrysippus with his numbers, or Aristotle with his perfect forms; nor am I concerned with what Dardanus sang of powers, or Battiades of demons, or

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<sup>10</sup> Auden 1915: 15; as cited by Russell and Konstan 2005: xxiv.

Campester of ghosts and spirits of the lower world. I am looking only for those trifles that schoolmasters (*grammatici*) expound, for monthly fees, to little schoolboys" (*Cont.* 85.17-86.6).

By this ingenuous disclaimer, as scholarly as it is ostentatious, Fulgentius displays his own pretensions to learning and suggests the erudition and wit that he will muster to deconstruct the *Aeneid*.

In the *Mitologiae* he had used a technique found in other mythographers of late antiquity, cutting apart the old stories and shattering their poetic coherence, as Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski has explained, making the individual pieces ripe for clever interpretive ridicule (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1997: 7).<sup>11</sup> In the *Continentia*, Fulgentius applied a variation on this segmentation, analyzing individual episodes and characters but sewing the pieces back together to make a fresh garment. He kept a coherent narrative, if an altogether different one.

Late antique writers frequently practiced this technique simultaneously to use and abuse the pagan classics, stealing ancient material and ridiculing it at the same time. The most radical form of this segmentation, of course, is the cento, constructed entirely of lines lifted from the works of ancient authors and reassembled in a new order.<sup>12</sup> Fulgentius himself played with the genre, borrowing lines from earlier writers and, in at least one case, fashioning "a kind of miniature cento" from Virgilian and Terentian sources (*Mit.* 9.24 – 10.5; cited in Hays 2004: 115). Two longer patchworks from the Virgilian corpus survive from the fourth century C.E.: the *Cento Probae*, or *De Laudibus Christi*, probably by Faltonia Betitia Proba, and the *Cento Nuptialis* by Ausonius. From the same material, Proba and Ausonius wove wildly dissimilar narratives, one pious and quite serious, and the other jocular and risqué (Scourfield 2007: 11-13; and McGill 2007: 173-93).

The *Cento Probae* aims to "show that Virgil sang of the holy gifts of Christ" (*Vergilium cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi*, line 23). Appended to this cento in several manuscripts is a brief letter inviting the Emperor Arcadius (383-408) to see "Virgil changed for the better"

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<sup>11</sup> See also Hexter 1989.

<sup>12</sup> See Malamud 1989: 37, on the ways that the cento changed readers' understanding of the *Aeneid*. Also consider the *sortes Virgilianae*, the habit of seeking prophecy by opening the *Aeneid* and blindly pointing to a passage.

(*Maronem mutatum in melius*) in this edifying text. The marriage cento by Ausonius, for its part, arguably changed Virgil for the worse. Its final section reuses Virgilian lines to create a graphic description of sex in the bridal bed. Here are passions unintended by Virgil but evoked from his verse to arouse or amuse another emperor, Valentinian I (364-75).<sup>13</sup>

I have written elsewhere of the ways that Fulgentius used the technique of segmentation to disentangle Aeneas from his heroic context and create a new reading for the *Aeneid* (Albu 2009). As a guide to the *Aeneid*'s true meaning, Fulgentius produced the author himself to expound the *virtus* his work embodied. Did any reader imagine that Virgil wrote a national epic of warfare and civic responsibility and the cost of Roman imperial destiny? Under Fulgentius' peculiar questioning, his cranky Virgil strips away that apparent plot as mere dross, coded allegory for the true story within. The epic's famous beginning – *arma virumque cano* – it turns out, actually promises a discourse on the acquisition of virtue, since *arma* stands for *virtus*, and *vir* means *sapientia*. “For complete perfection consists in bodily strength and intellectual wisdom” (*Cont.* 87.5-6).

This introductory passage shows that Fulgentius also knew about the wrath of Achilles. Here he has Virgil recite the opening line of the *Iliad* in Greek to explain that he put *arma* (manliness) before the individual man (*virum*) just as Homer put “wrath” before “Achilles,” “indicating the man's anger before the particular man”:

Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος. . .

The wrath, do sing, o goddess, of Peleus's son Achilles. . .

Fulgentius recalls this famous line, however, merely to explain why he violated standard rhetorical practice by placing the attribute, wrath, before the person being described. He does not pause to consider the prominent role of anger in the *Iliad* or to compare the passions in Greek and Roman epics. His brief citation of *Iliad* 1.1 offers a reminder, perhaps unintended, that the *Aeneid* continues an ancient epic tradition similarly vulnerable and subjected to mythographic analysis. But

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<sup>13</sup> For the reactions of modern critics, who found the poem “obscene,” “shambling,” and “crude,” see Malamud 1989: 37. For text, translation, and brief commentary on selected lines, see Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008: 472-5. The following pages in this volume (475-80) contain selections from Proba's quite different Virgilian cento.

Fulgentius' task here lies with the Roman epic, to which he returns after a brief interjection from the narrator on Biblical precedent for a similar rhetorical device.

Fulgentius' bag of rhetorical tricks lets him burrow beneath the *Aeneid's* surface narrative of the hero's adventures, baring the correct message of man's ideal life journey. His protagonist is a generic Everyman, whose moral development Fulgentius identifies through milestones in Aeneas' wanderings and battles – from birth (the shipwreck in book one; *Cont.* 91.9-11) to the purging of childish tantrums and adolescent passions that allows a mature understanding of virtue (the underworld encounters of book six; *Cont.* 98.1 - 102.18) and finally the continuing struggles and victories over passion, ultimately represented by Turnus, who is (in Greek) *thouros nous*, the enraged mind (*Cont.* 105.13-14).

Fulgentius has no difficulty making the Dido episode of *Aeneid*, book 4 fit within his pattern. Here he can take up his favorite theme from the *Mitologiae*, the passion of lust that Everyman must outgrow. As his Virgil explains:

“Released from his father's control, then, in the fourth book he goes a-hunting and feels the burning of lust and while driven by a storm and clouds – as it were, in confusion of mind – commits adultery. And after dallying there for a long while, at Mercury's instigation he abandons the lustfulness which he wrongfully embraced. For Mercury represents the god of intelligence. Thus at the instigation of intelligence the youth deserts the bounds of lust. And once it has been rejected, desire perishes and, having burned itself out, is turned to ash. For when [lust] is expelled from the youth's heart at the bidding of intelligence, it gutters in the ashes of oblivion.” (*Cont.* 94.16 - 95.1; trans. Hays 2008: 668).

Likewise, episodes in the following book five can support Fulgentius' argument. Here Aeneas, having forsaken Dido's embrace, honors the memory of his father with funeral games. For Fulgentius these exemplify the proper and virtuous exercise of the body. The destruction of the ships illustrates the progress toward maturity as flames recall the fire imagery of the *Aeneid's* fourth book: “Then too they burn the ships, that is, the dangerous instruments in which youth was blown by the tempestuous surges of billows and shaken daily, as it were, by perilous



storms. All of these are consumed by the overpowering fire of intellect, and as knowledge increases they pass quietly into the ashes of oblivion” (*Cont.* 95.8-13; trans. Hays 2008: 668).

The most attention, though, goes to the more edifying book six, with Aeneas’ journey to the underworld, now that “the shipwrecks of youthful instability have been put behind him.” Virgil continues (*Cont.* 98.1-3; trans. Hays 2008: 669):

And so [having obtained] the golden bough, that is, learning,  
he visits the underworld and examines closely the mysteries  
of knowledge.

These mysteries include the deepest agonies of the human condition: grief and sickness, hunger and wars; the passion of avarice and the apathy of sloth; and ultimately old age and death.

Then, initiated into deeper wisdom, he sees the shades of great men, that is, he contemplates the glories and triumphs of virtue (*Cont.* 99.6-8; trans. Hays 2008: 669-70).

This seems to be the culmination of the journey to virtue, ending with two more reminders of the passions subdued. First the pious man views the punishment of Deiphobus, whose name Fulgentius translates as either “fearful terror” or “public terror,” destroyed by Menelaus, “public virtue” (*Cont.* 99.8-11). Next he sees Dido, “symbolizing the shade of lust and the desire of old, now powerless. For when wisdom is meditated upon, the lust that had perished from disdain is grievously recalled to mind through repentance” (*Cont.* 99.18-21; trans. Hays 2008: 670). The remaining encounters in the underworld reinforce the lessons the good man has learned. He turns away from the wicked who are enduring eternal torments (*Cont.* 101.5-15) and enters Elysium, where at last he meets his father Anchises, who “stands for the Greek *ano is scenon*, that is, ‘one dwelling [on high]’; for there is one God, the father, the king of all, dwelling alone on high, who in fact is seen when revealed by the gift of knowledge” (*Cont.* 102.4-13; trans. Hays 2008: 670-1).

This analysis of book six would be the perfect place for Fulgentius to conclude, with his virtuous man receiving from the father the “hidden mysteries of nature . . . and things yet to come.” But with, alas, six more books to go (superficially on the wars in Italy), Fulgentius speeds through them (*Cont.* 103.13-197.4), with just a single sentence serving

all of book eleven. He seems to have read carefully only the opening lines (*Aen.* 11.1-11), skimming over the celebrated passages that frame this book, the lament for Pallas (*Aen.* 11.24-98) and the death of Camilla (*Aen.* 11.497-835), episodes especially evoking the sense of pathos that permeates Virgil's epic. Touches of Virgilian pathos – as we shall see – only rarely fell within Fulgentius' limited range of emotions. Yet the omission of these and other critical scenes might merely mean that Fulgentius, like so many readers of his age and our own, read closely just the *Aeneid*'s first six books. Then again, he may simply have found the epic's last half difficult to squeeze into his narrative. There he has identified isolated characters and episodes that he could interpret as challenges to Everyman's final triumphs, but he seems also to have lost interest in his commentary and to be racing toward the conclusion.

As David Konstan reminds us, Virgil's epic ends as it began, with anger.<sup>14</sup> Though Fulgentius may seem capable of assigning any meaning to any text he set his mind on, the *Aeneid*'s famous conclusion posed a problem even for this mythoclast. Aeneas' killing of the suppliant Turnus has troubled many a reader. Here is Stanley Lombardo's translation of the passage that follows Aeneas' wounding of his enemy in single combat (Lombardo 2005: 339-40):

Huge Turnus

Sank down on one knee. The Rutulians  
Leapt up with a shout, and the woods and hills  
Echoed their groans. Humbled, Turnus  
Lifted his eyes to Aeneas  
And stretched forth his hand in supplication:

“Go ahead, use your chance. I deserve it.  
I will not ask anything for myself,  
But if a parent's grief can still touch you,  
Remember your own father, Anchises,  
And take pity on Daunus' old age,  
I beg you. Give me or if you prefer,  
Give my dead body back to my people.  
You've beaten me, and the Ausonians  
Have seen me, beaten, stretch out my hand to you.

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<sup>14</sup> In the introduction to his paper in this collection, “The Passions of Achilles and Aeneas: Translating Greece into Rome.”

Lavinia is yours. Let your hatred stop here.”

Aeneas hesitates, ready to spare his rival, when he sees:

The belt of young Pallas, whom Turnus had killed  
And whose insignia he now wore as a trophy.  
Aeneas’ eyes drank in this memorial  
Of his own savage grief, and then, burning  
With fury and terrible in his wrath, he said:  
“Do you think you can get away from me  
While wearing the spoils of one of my men?  
Pallas  
Sacrifices you with this stroke – Pallas –  
And makes you pay with your guilty blood.”

Saying this, and seething with rage, Aeneas  
Buried his sword in Turnus’ chest. The man’s limbs  
Went limp and cold, and with a moan  
His soul fled resentfully down to the shades.

How to decipher this disquieting violence, this apparent act of passion, if you are determined to read it as the final deed of a man elevated by his intellect to perfect wisdom? Fulgentius simply omits the episode. He has already defined Turnus as *thouros nous*, an allegorical representation of the enraged mind – so Aeneas’ rage against Turnus would seem to disrupt that argument. Casting around for an episode in book twelve that he **can** shoehorn into his moral interpretation, Fulgentius’ Virgil seizes upon the moment when the nymph Juturna, Turnus’s sister, takes the place of Metiscus, the driver of Turnus’s chariot. “Juturna,” this Virgil explains,

symbolizes destruction, which remains *diuturne* [for a long time]. Thus destruction is the sister of a raging mind. But the fact that she drives his chariot and speeds him away from death – this is clearly because destruction can prolong furor so that there is no end to it. . . . This is why she is called immortal, while Turnus is called mortal; for the mind’s rage is quickly finished, but the damage it does remains and is long-lasting” (*Cont.* 106.10 - 107.1; trans. Hays 2008: 672).

This assumption, that momentary rage brings lingering harm, cannot allow Fulgentius to interpret the *Aeneid's* final episode, an act of violence that seems to reveal a serious lapse in the pilgrim's progress. Fulgentius concludes, instead, with a little discourse on the passions, as exemplified by the drivers of Turnus's chariot: Metiscus (here from Greek *methuskô*, "intoxicate") and Juturna (from *diuturne*, destruction which is "everlasting"). In seizing the reins from the temporary rage of drunkenness, she delays her brother's fate but cannot forever postpone the vagaries of Fortune. For Fulgentius the spinning wheels of her chariot symbolize this volatility of Fortune's wheel. And as the wheel of Fortune whirls, Fulgentius abruptly ends with "the swift revolution of time" . . . *temporis uolubilitatem. Finit.* "The end." In the single line that forms his coda (*Cont.* 107.5), Fulgentius bids farewell to an unnamed *dominus* and, with this valediction, simply stops.

Where does that leave the Virgilian passions, then, in a work posing as a guide for the path to a manliness controlled by enlightened self-restraint (*Cont.* 89.14-15)? This process of maturation, Fulgentius has Virgil explain, leads the young man to abandon the passions, burying lust (called variously *amor* and *libido*) "in the ashes of oblivion" (*Cont.* 94.20 – 95.1). Yet the *Continentia's* tone throughout undermines this professed goal. The work is emotional and frequently attuned to the pain of human existence – even displaying some of the *Aeneid's* sense of *lacrimae rerum*. Occasionally Fulgentius grazes the surface of Virgilian pathos as, for instance, when his Virgil interprets the name of Achates, Aeneas' companion, as derived from "*acon etos*, that is, the 'habit of sadness'" (*Cont.* 92.15-21). He moves here to a lofty note, quoting Electra's opening lines in the *Orestes*: "for human beings are joined to sorrows from infancy," as Euripides writes:

There is nothing terrible one can describe  
no suffering or event brought on by god  
whose burden humanity may not have to bear.

Fulgentius translates the Greek and then comments: "There are no weapons against grief except the tears with which an infant asserts and consoles itself, for not until the fifth month do we just barely get to laugh, whereas tears may flow at the very threshold of life" (*Cont.* 93.2-5). In this portion of the *Continentia*, as elsewhere in this text, the tone of the tract works against its message that the wise man attains "wisdom of

temperament,” in a blessed state of tranquility. For the narrator of this work, life is too wretched to admit serenity.

Virgil’s humanity and depth of emotion have shifted here to a fundamental distaste for the human condition, a sentiment unredeemed by the majestic calm at the core of the *Aeneid*. The *Continentia* is fraught with emotion. Its conclusion reinforces this pervasive sense of disquiet. Does this agitation principally exhibit Fulgentius’ rhetorical skills? Or does it communicate his frame of mind? Perhaps the tone of this work reflects the turbulence at the core of its author’s time and place. Since we cannot precisely identify Fulgentius’ North African milieu, we can only guess at likely circumstances. If Fulgentius was writing shortly after 550 as Gregory Hays has suggested (Hays 2004: 102), for instance, he may have witnessed the Byzantine conquest over Vandal occupiers in the 530s or its aftermath, the consequent administrative and religious upheavals. Plague and famine reached Africa in the early 540s. Berber raids sometimes disrupted daily life. And the varieties of religious experience – “the heresies, schisms, paganisms, debates, persecutions and vitality of African religion in the Roman, Vandal and Byzantine periods” (Handley 2004) – might have conspired to unsettle a dogmatic mind. In such a precarious environment, Fulgentius has perhaps not attained the sanctuary, the serene wisdom that his work proclaims. In the contentious pages of his interpretive text, the wrath of Achilles and the rage of Aeneas surrender to the righteous anxiety of the Christian mythographer.

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