

Vulcan's Maternal Disposition (and Sex)

Midway through Book 8 of the *Aeneid*, an intriguing scene unfolds, involving Venus and Vulcan. As a whole, Book 8 is a turning point for Aeneas, because of his acquisition of the support of King Evander and the Etruscans as well as the backing of divinities who formerly opposed him, such as Juno (Anderson, 1969). Similarly, the scene between Venus and Vulcan can be seen as a turning point in their relationship, both literally and figuratively. This is a transformation of the relationship because also in the eighth book but of the *Odyssey*, Aphrodite was trapped in a net cast by Hephaistos on account of the adultery of Venus; yet now, in her Roman, specifically Virgilian manifestation, Venus dares to approach the husband whom she in another epic context insulted. Furthermore, she requests a favor from him (Gransden, 1976). Here Virgil uses sharp image reversal in an 8-line depiction of Vulcan as a woman. This paper will address amidst the reversal of the roles in the relationship of Venus and Vulcan why it is especially surprising that the metaphorical description of a devoted wife parallels Vulcan's dutifulness. In the end, however, for all his dutifulness, Vulcan succumbs to Venus' seductive wiles (Gransden, 1991).

This is not the only instance in which Virgil uses image reversal. To take a well-known example, in Book 1 Virgil does something similar when, surprisingly, he describes Venus as huntress (1.318)—something one might expect of a description of Diana. In contrast to this depiction, the comparison of Vulcan to a dutiful woman is different because it crosses genders. Even though it is odd that this metal-working deity is being compared to a spouse of great feminine virtue, the correlation of the characteristics is fitting. Through the use of a reversed metaphor, Virgil contrasts the relationship between Vulcan and Venus with that of proper husband and wife. Most poignantly, the actions of the faithful wife, which describe Vulcan,

ought to be exhibited by Venus as an exemplary consort. Instead, Vulcan fills the role that his wife fails to fulfill.

The selection of Vulcan as the basis on which to construct this elaborate metaphor immediately draws attention to the peculiarity of the relationship between Vulcan and Venus. Vulcan is one of the most paradoxical gods with his less than physically appealing form and unfortunate physical impairment. In light of his physical disability, he is often a source of ridicule amongst the Olympians (in Hesiod and Homer, for example). Yet, for all of these impairments, he is married to the goddess who is the least like him, being physically stunning and seductive. This is the basis on which the reader glimpse anomalies between their marriage and the marriage of other deities.

Vulcan and Venus thus differ substantially from Jove and Juno. Petulant and perpetually scheming, Juno is ever skeptical and cautious in maintaining her marriage bed with Jove, a justifiable precaution since Jove often indulges in extramarital affairs (Anderson, 1969). With Vulcan and Venus, the situation is reversed. Venus is the adulteress; Vulcan the faithful forge. To highlight the character of both Venus and Vulcan, Virgil casts the latter as a wife who has charge of her family: *noctem addens operi... / ...castum ut servare cubile / coniugis et possit parvos educere natos* (8.411-13). In the abnormal relationship of Vulcan and Venus, it is the husband who must attempt to defend the marriage, as the wife spends time fretting over a son, Aeneas, fathered by another man, the mortal Anchises (Spence, 2001).

The sharp contrast between Venus and a proper wife and mother is highlighted by the mention of the raising of sons. Venus works tirelessly to defend and protect Aeneas. Such behavior seems to be an example of Venus acting as a dutiful wife (8. 413). Yet, here the comparison shows how misaligned the relationship between the smithy and his wife are, because

Venus supplicates her husband to acquire aid for Aeneas. Instead of resisting the pleas of his unfaithful partner, as Jove many times refuses the appeals of Juno, Vulcan ultimately complies with the request of his seductive wife. The curious nature of the relationship and powerful impact of sexual seduction are aspects of this union that Virgil highlights via the inverted metaphor (Smith, 2011). Rather than describing the shield of Aeneas as simply having arisen from the forge of Vulcan, Virgil creates what could have been a brief and uninteresting encounter to comment on the extreme power of sexual seduction (Grandsen, 1976).

Bibliography

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