

Genius of Things

[SLIDE] In his *Poetics*, Aristotle describes the best kind of plot as one that causes fear and pity, and sees such emotional responses linked to what he describes as amazement. As it turns out, the best way to cause amazement is through occurrences that are at the same time unexpected (παρὰ τὴν δόξαν) but still part of a clear causal sequence (δι' ἄλληλα). As an example of such a plot, he refers to the story of a how at Argos the statue of a man named Mityls “killed the man who caused Mityls’ death by falling on him at a festival.”^{vi} As D.H. Roberts puts it (“Outside the Drama”), this kind of story is praiseworthy in part because “it follows in likely sequence (or at least in the semblance of likely sequence) even though it cannot be explained in purely human terms” (134); as De Frede puts it, “there is at least the *semblance* here that it did not happen by mere chance” (“Necessity, Chance, and ‘What Happens for the Most Part’”, 218 n. 27).ⁱⁱ Thus, Aristotle concludes that “Such events do not seem to be mere accidents. So such plots as these must necessarily be the best” (εἵκοιτο γὰρ τὰ τοιαῦτα οὐκ εἰκῇ γίνεσθαι: ὥστε ἀνάγκη τοὺς τοιοῦτους εἶναι καλλίους μύθους).ⁱⁱⁱ

My goal in this paper will be to examine to what extent the structure of Virgil’s *Aeneid* might be said to exemplify this “best” kind of plot, and the possible role of vengeful objects within it. More precisely, I present here a new interpretation of the structure of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, from book 1 to 12, as the story of things and, ultimately, their inner lives. My endpoint will be an analysis of how the baldric of the dead youth Pallas provokes Aeneas’ rage and the poem’s conclusion.^{iv} What is the status, what is the role, of this baldric? Is it only, in Virgil’s words, a “memorial of terrible pain” (*saevi monimenta doloris*)? Or does it play some more active part in the poem’s denouement, or, rather, surprise peroration?^v [SLIDE] The longer version of this paper approaches this question in three parts, beginning with an investigation into the development of the idea of the *genius rei* in Servius Danielis’ adaptation of Varro, Verrius Flaccus, and Aufustius to a reading of Virgil’s *Georgics*. The end result of this investigation of Servius Danielis’ articulation of the *genius rei* is thus that, while Virgil clearly had the cult of the *genius* as part of his poetic thesaurus, it is not at all clear that the formal term itself is most apposite to the study of his poetry. Instead, as I suggest, we need to obey the dictum of Charles Brink, that « The prudent and highly institutional approach to matters of cult and appellation on the part of Augustus and his advisers is scarcely on a par with the poetic expressions of volitions, emotions and hopes » (Brink 1982: 51). Thus, to understand this question of the life of objects in Virgil’s poetry, parts two and three of this paper, which you will hear today, turn from explicit to implicit theology, to the adaptation, that is, of the rhythms of cult to poetic form.^{vi} First, I show how two overlapping and interconnected series of object-exchanges help structure the *Aeneid* as a whole, from Aeneas’ gifts to Dido in book 1 to Aeneas’ burial of Pallas in book 11, then from Pallas’ death at the end of book 10 to Turnus’ death in the last lines of the poem. In today’s second part (part three of the full paper), I look at how these object-exchanges describe a trajectory from inert objects to objects full of feeling and agency, or, we might say, *genius*, with the special case of Pallas’ baldric prepared both by the apparitions of the *Penates* in book 3 and of the Idaean nymphs in book 9, as well as by the progression of apparently ingenious objects in book 12.^{vii} [SLIDE]

Arma and the Plot of the Poem

The story of the *Aeneid* is the story of the life of objects. The poem famously breaks with tradition by opening with a word for objects: *arma*.^{viii} Had we time, we might follow the fate of these *arma*, along with the phrase *arma virumque* itself, which, as Fiachra MacGorain has recently shown, becomes in Virgil’s hands a kind of potent travelling object that has a life of its own throughout the poem. For us, it is only important now to note that the poem’s opening interest in objects, and in the entanglement of objects with humans, becomes part and parcel of the structure of the poem as a whole through a series of object-exchanges that begin in the poem’s first book, and through an evolution, culminating in book 12, from *objects subject to exchange* to *objects effecting change*.

In comparative contexts, object-exchange has proved a fruitful tool for the study of epic, most especially in studies of the *Beowulf* poem. But we need not go so far as that: Homer’s *Iliad* is fundamentally an exploration of a crisis in the heroic economy described by two consecutive story-

arcs: in the first arc, Agamemnon loses Chryseis, steals Briseis from Achilles to make good his loss, Achilles rejects compensation offered through the embassy in book 9, only to accept such compensation following Patroclus' death and his decision to return to combat to kill Hector. Achilles does kill Hector, who is, incidentally, wearing the armour of Achilles that Patroclus had worn to battle, with this armour thus restored to Achilles. The death of Hector initiates the epic's second object-loop, this time focused on the corpse of Hector: Achilles' eventual yielding of the body to Priam represents a successful model of supplication, and thus symbolizes the restoration of a normal heroic economy to the world of the poem.

Objects do not abound in Virgil's poem in the same way as in these other epics, nor do they return as repetitiously; but, as Richard Heinze long-ago pointed out, brevity is one of Virgil's most important tools. As we shall see, Virgil adapts Homer's consecutive and interlinked plots of object-exchange to the special needs of his own poem.

Like Homer, this takes the form of two interlinked plots. [SLIDE]

The first of these plots begins in Carthage: having met Aeneas and welcomed him to her kingdom, Dido sends to the Trojan ships a consignment of livestock, comprised of twenty bulls, one hundred of her largest pigs, one hundred fat lambs and an equal number of ewes, as well as wine. In exchange, Aeneas tasks Achates with bringing Ascanius to Dido's palace, along with gifts for Dido, the first of which are as follows (1, 647–652):

Il ordonne en outre d'apporter des présents arrachés aux ruines d'Ilion : un manteau lourd de broderies d'or, et un voile bordé de feuilles d'acanthé couleur de safran, parures qu'Hélène l'Argienne emporta jadis de Mycènes lorsqu'elle partit pour Pergame et ses noces interdites : c'étaient de somptueux présents de sa mère Leda.	Munera praeterea, Iliacis erepta ruinis, ferre iubet, pallam signis auroque rigentem, et circumtextum croceo velamen acantho, ornatus Argivae Helenae, quos illa Mycenis, Pergama cum peteret inconcessosque hymenaeos, extulerat, matris Leda mirabile donum:
---	--

A *translatio imperii* is enacted here: gifts from Leda, mortal consort of Zeus, mother to Helen, Clytemnestra, and the Dioscuri, made their way to Troy, only to be saved from the fall of Troy by Aeneas and given to Dido. The first of these gifts is the *palla*, a mantle, the other, the *velamen*, a veil. In the end, it is not Ascanius but Cupid—Aeneas' brother, so Ascanius' ever-young uncle—who comes in the guise of Ascanius to bring these gifts to Dido's court (1, 695–6 *dona Cupido / regia portabat Tyriis, duce laetus Achate*). In this, Cupid follows the instructions of his mother, Venus, who had pointed precisely to these gifts (1, 697 *dona ferens pelago et flammis restantia Troiae*). In the end, it is both (divine) boy and objects that enflame Dido in equal parts (1, 714 *et pariter puero donisque movetur*), with Cupid's divine power now entangled with the gifts themselves. Unless the line is to be removed, as some have argued, the *palla* and *velamen* make another summary appearance here (1, 709–714):

ils admirent les présents d'Énée, ils admirent Iule, et les regards ardents du dieu, et ses paroles feintes, et la robe et le voile orné de feuilles d'acanthé couleur de safran. Et il y a surtout, infortunée, tout entière livrée au mal qui l'attend, ne pouvant se rassasier l'esprit et toute à sa contemplation, la Phénicienne qui s'embrase, aussi émue par l'enfant que par les présents.	Mirantur dona Aeneae, mirantur Iulum flagrantisque dei voltus simulataque verba, [pallamque et pictum croceo velamen acantho.] Praecipue infelix, pesti devota futurae, expleri mentem nequit ardescitque tuendo Phoenissa, et pariter puero donisque movetur.
---	--

Aeneas has thus given two articles of clothing to Dido—the *palla* with its gold, the *velamen* with its yellow dye—and he will, in turn, receive gifts of clothing in return. [SLIDE]