

Virgil's *Equus Graecus* and the Monstrosity of a Literature in Latin

*Apologies: Bernard Knox, "Serpent and the Flame," 1950 (AJPh) not on handout

Introduction

To answer this conference's title-question, yes, there is a post-human in ancient Greek literature, and it's called Latin literature. Since its beginnings, there has always been something monstrous about the idea of a literature in Latin. Maurizio Bettini (2013), in a celebrated essay, has used the legend of the Sphynx to show how ancient culture associated monstrosity with hybridity and the *ainigma*, "the riddle," as defined by Aristotle as "an impossible combination," or, as we would say, a hybridization of words, ideas, animals, and people that have not yet, that are not *supposed to*, go together.ⁱ Latin literature is such a hybrid enigma. For us, or at least for the O.E.D's first definition of the word, the "monstrous" is that which "deviates from the natural or conventional order," and in that sense too, Rome's "translation project", as Denis Feeney (2016) has called the origins of literature at Rome, is monstrous indeed, for never before, and never after, has there been a comparable case of one nation taking another, socio-economically dependent, language's literature up wholesale in order to make it their own, and in their own language. "Being Roman over Greeks," to pervert a clever phrase, was an ongoing cultural project, and not an easy one; for if, since the late 3rd century BCE on, Romans were able, in the words of Paul Zanker (1995:204), to assume "a secondary identity as Greeks, much as they might build a large Greek peristyle onto their Roman atrium-style houses," their Greco-Latin literature was also a way by which Romans, at least the writers we have access to, tended to find themselves "more truly and more strange," or, as Socrates (*Phaedrus*) would put it, "a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typho".ⁱⁱ This paper argues that the Greek Horse under whose shadow Troy falls and the second *Aeneid* unfolds was, for Virgil, a way to explore the monstrosity of, firstly, his own epic project, and, secondly, of two related birth-scences of a literature in Latin: Livius Andronicus' hymn in 207 BCE, and the re-performance of the *Equus Troianus* of Livius (or perhaps Naevius) at the celebration dedication of the Theater of Pompey and the adjoining Temple of Venux Victrix.

The horse first makes its appearance 15 lines into the book, in the first sentence of Aeneas' untellable tale of Rome's fall: *instar montis equum divina Palladis arte / aedificant*, "the Greek leaders, with the divine art of Pallas, construct a mountain-like horse." That the horse is *instar montis* already points to its mimetic

affiliations: *instar*, as Greek analogs like στήλη and ἵστημι suggest, is something stood up on behalf of something else, with Servius explaining ‘instar’ as “a similitude: whence buildings are called, not *restaurata*, but *instaurata*, when they are made in the likeness of an ancient model.” Here, the horse “stands in” for mountains, and stands opposed to a particular set of mountains: those towards which Aeneas flies at the book’s end (and they are *real* mountains), themselves suggestive of the mountains that cast an exilic shadow over Meliboeus’ *Eclogues*. Taken as a whole, Virgil’s horse is an edifice made by art, in this case “Pelasgian art,” which is to say, the art of the Greeks and their patron goddess, Pallas-Athena/Minerva, which helps the Greeks to “simulate” an offering.ⁱⁱⁱ Hence, it right for Laocoon to call the Horse a *fabricata...machina* (2.46), for Priam to wonder if it is a *machina belli* (2.151), and for Aeneas, in the last and fateful instance, to adjudge the Horse, with hindsight, a *fatalis machina* (2.237) “that climbs our walls, pregnant with arms.”

But this monster, even though fabricated as an *instauration*, a similitude, takes on, like Galatea, Frankenstein, or Hoffman’s Olympia, a life of its own: it “stands” on its own four feet (*staret*), an apparition that comes into vision, rather than into being, not so much a found object, as a found subject, and one with the active, destructive, tendencies, described in the night-slaughter’s taut opening: “Standing high (*arduus...astans*), the horse pours forth (*fundit*) armed men into the middle of the city.”^{iv} When we recall that these arms and men are hidden in the *alvum*, the “womb,” of this male horse, the verb *fundit* floods forth with all of its miasmic, liquid, and feminine force. The Trojans did not understand this, and even Aeneas cannot wrap his language wholly around it: he, too, speaks as though it was the Trojans who “stood up” the horse in the *arx*, when it was the Horse who, simultaneously, climbed the walls itself.^v There is a paradoxical double-vision at work here, just as there is with the horse’s pregnancy: how can a horse that is pregnant with Greeks be called a *monstrum infelix*, which means, both an “unlucky monster,” but also, a monster that is barren, infertile, unfruitful?^{vi} And how is it that this male horse—this *equus*—has a womb in the first place? Furthermore, in what sense does a wooden horse have a womb at all?

The word “womb” (*alvus*) is already a gender-enigma, for it represents one of only a few feminine second-declension nouns, and hence goes well with our Horse, to whose legend gender confusion seems to have adhered at least as far back as an Ennian tragedy that seems to have influenced Virgil’s own horse: *nam maximo saltu*