

CONTACTS BETWEEN GODS AND MORTALS IN VIRGIL

by J.H. Mozley, M.A.

Virgil, in taking over the Homeric mythology for the purpose of his own epic, takes over also the ways in which gods communicate with mortals. Nobody who has read the Iliad will forget the sudden appearance of Athene to the angry Achilles, how with stern speech and a glance of her flaming eyes she checks his murderous impulse, nor the shout with which Apollo tries to restrain the impetuous Patroclus (Iliad I.194; 16.707); nor, again, in the Odyssey the charming episode in which Athene in the semblance of a young man of good family greets the unknowing Odysseus, once more upon his native island (Od. 13.221). It may be of interest, without attempting detailed comparisons, to see how Virgil has made use of these and other instances of divine contacts with mortals.

In the fourth book of the Aeneid a crisis has been reached. Aeneas, whether tired of being put off from one resting-place to another, and getting perhaps to hate the very name of that Italy which so often eludes him (*Italiam non sponte sequor*), or having fallen in love with the brilliant young queen of the country whither the storms have driven him, is ready to settle there and help Dido in the task of building her city. At this juncture Jupiter sees that the glories of the Roman State which Destiny has in store if Aeneas plays his part are hanging on a thread, that the momentum of historical evolution, all the accumulated weight of impending events and personalities is checked like a river dammed by some obstacle of rock or piled tree-trunks. Jupiter acts; he sends Mercury to recall Aeneas to his duty. Mercury on his flight sees Aeneas as, busy on the new project, with Dido by his side, he directs operations; a jewelled sword flashes in the sun, a purple cloak, Dido's gift, hangs from his shoulders. Suddenly a voice sounds in his ears, a few pungent sentences, broken off in mid-speech; he has a glimpse of the god, who is already disappearing into the empty air, but the shock is overwhelming, and he knows what it means for himself - and for Dido. Again, in the ninth book, (1.2.), Turnus, having roused the Rutulians to war, is reclining in the sacred grove of Pylum; Juno sends Iris to tell him that he has an opportunity to strike in the absence of Aeneas. The words sound in his ear, he looks up and sees the bow in the sky, the outward sign of the messenger, whose supernatural coming is enhanced by abnormal phenomena, an unusual brilliance of light, flashing points of fire, which, not knowing what he says he calls stars wandering in the heavens. Realising the divine visitation he turns to prayers and ceremonial ablutions. Later on (110) another prodigy occurs; the threatened ships are transformed into nymphs of the sea. Here too strange things happen, a huge storm-cloud, and a voice out of the cloud, terrifying alike to friend and foe, though also reassuring to the Trojans.

The third of the Homeric passages mentioned here, the appearance of Athene to Odysseus, is of course imitated by Virgil in the first book of the Aeneid, where Aeneas is accosted and given useful information by an attractive young huntress, who turns out to be his own mother Venus. In such incidents the disguise is at first successful, but the divine personality is in the end revealed, usually in the moment of departure;

Aeneas, though he suspects that she is something more than human, only, it seems, fully recognises his mother when she has given him a generous revelation of her real nature:

dixit, et avertens rosea cervice refulsit,  
ambrosiaequae comae divinum vertice odorem  
spiravere; pedes vestis defluxit ad imos,  
et vera incessu patuit dea. (1.402)

It may be remarked, however, that in Virgil the disguise does not always obtain its object, with results that even show some degree of humour. In the fifth book (606) Iris is bidden by Juno to stir up discontent among the Trojan women on the island of Sicily. She takes the form of Beroe, but soon another woman says scornfully that she has just left Beroe sick at home, and that this is no mortal. The women are left in doubt, until Iris resumes her real nature and disappears into the air. So again in the beautiful episode at the end of the **same book**. Somnus, determined to make Palinurus fall asleep at his post, takes the form of Phorbas to persuade him to let the ships be borne on by wind and wave, but when Palinurus refuses to comply reverts to his own shape and sprinkles him with the dew of Lethe, from which the sleepless Staius prayed in vain for a drop to bring him slumber (Silv.5.4.18); the helmsman, overcome, falls into the sea, carrying the helm and rudder with him.

In Book 7 (303) Juno commissions Allecto, the Fury, to inspire Latins and Rutulians with frenzied hatred against the invaders. She at once engages in a threefold activity. First, unseen herself, she places one of her own serpents, unfelt, in the bosom of Amata, the Latin Queen, with the result that, to adopt Virgil's powerful simile, she goes spinning and reeling like a top about the city's streets, rousing the women to a like madness. Next, she attacks Turnus in his sleep, here taking the form of Calybe, priestess of Juno: but Turnus derides her for an unsightly hag, and bids her mind her proper business. This drives the Fury to drop the disguise and use all the terrors of fiery torch and hissing snakes. This time she is successful, and Turnus wakes in a cold sweat and a mad lust for war. Her third attempt also succeeds; she has the ingenious idea of setting Ascanius' hounds against Silvia's pet stag, which by a lucky stroke (lucky for her!) Ascanius himself kills. Since the girl's father is the keeper of the royal herds, this is almost in itself a casus belli.

We see then that emissaries of the gods are better advised to remain invisible or appear in their own form than to impersonate mortals. This applies also in the case of Juturna, Turnus' sister, to whom Jupiter had granted divinity. Anxious to save her brother from the terrible Aeneas, she upsets Metiscus, his charioteer, and takes his shape; very much as Athene in Iliad 5.835 does to Sthenelus, the charioteer of Diomedes.<sup>1</sup> She proceeds to drive the car at a furious speed, turning and swooping here and there like a swallow (Mackail prefers to call it a swift), flying in search of food for its young about the mansion of a wealthy lord. 'Long since', says Turnus some time later, 'have I recognised you, my sister; in vain do you dissemble your godhead (nequiquam fallis dea).' She is more successful in resuming the disguise, when it is necessary to restore to her brother a sword he has lost.

In Virgil it is the major deities, Jupiter and Juno, who deal with mortals through emissaries in this way. Venus, it is true, appears herself twice to her son, once after impersonating the huntress and again to bring him his new armour,<sup>2</sup> and Juno throws open the Gates of War, but no mortal is present. Minor deities can act in this way; the Trojan Penates appear to

Aeneas in his sleep (3.147), father Tiber likewise shortly after the landing (8.31), and the spirits of the dead are seen by mortals, Creusa in the second book (772) and Anchises in the fifth (722). Otherwise there seems to be no direct confrontation.

NOTES

1. Cp. also Iliad x.450 where Apollo takes the shape of Butes.
2. Cp. also Aen. 12.411 where Venus brings him a healing herb.