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Article

A further look at Virgil's Ganymede: Ancient readings of Homer and genealogy in the *Aeneid**

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ABSTRACT

While the abduction of Ganymede was traditionally associated with Zeus' erotic desire and with the boy's subsequent role as cupbearer to the gods, Virgil's treatment of the episode in the *Aeneid* leaves these elements unstated. This article argues that such silence might respond to a set of pressures already present in ancient engagements with this myth. By situating Virgil's account against its Homeric background, post-Homeric literary developments, philosophical critiques in authors such as Plato, Xenophon, and Cicero, and ancient philological debates on the text of the *Iliad*, the study reconstructs the range of meanings that may have been available to Virgil and his contemporary readers. His approach thus emerges as a strategic response to the theological and genealogical stakes involved in this myth, particularly their implications for Aeneas and Roman origins.

KEYWORDS: Homeric scholia, Ganymede, Virgil, Aeneid

1. INTRODUCTION

The abduction of Ganymede is one of the most compressed yet potentially significant mythological references in Virgil's *Aeneid*. It appears as part of the ekphrasis on the cloak awarded by Aeneas to Cloanthus during the funeral games:

> ipsis praecipuos ductoribus addit honores:
> uictori chlamydem auratam, quam plurima circum
> purpura maeandro duplici Meliboea cucurrit,
> intextusque puer frondosa regius Ida
> uelocis iaculo ceruos cursuque fatigat
> acer, anhelanti similis, quem praepes ab Ida
> sublimem pedibus rapuit Iouis armiger uncis;
> longaeui palmas nequiquam ad sidera tendunt
> custodes, saeuitque canum latratus in auras.

> For the captains themselves he adds special honours; to the winner, a cloak wrought with gold, about which ran deep Meliboean purple in double waving line, and, woven in, the royal boy,

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> with javelin and speedy foot, on leafy Ida tires fleet stags, eager and seemingly breathless; him Jove's swift armour bearer has caught up aloft from Ida in his talons; his aged guardians in vain stretch their hands to the stars, and the savage barking of dogs rises skyward. (Virg. *Aen* 5.249-57)[1]

Virgil's treatment of Ganymede has received some scholarly attention, particularly in relation to the ekphrastic nature of the passage.[2] As is well known, ekphraseis often do more than decorate the narrative and this one is no exception: they offer a lens through which to explore themes that resonate throughout the broader structure of the poem, as well as shaping perception and driving action within the narrative.[3] The Trojan War scenes on Juno's temple in book 1, for instance, may be seen as foreshadowing the war in Latium that starts in book 7. Conceived in these terms, the cloak awarded to Cloanthus does not lend itself to a univocal reading.[4] Putnam, for his part, reads the passage as portending the tragic deaths of young men in the second half of the narrative,[5] while Hardie interprets the boy's ascent to Olympus as symbolic of the transition from Trojan past to Roman future.[6] Hardie further argues that the episode evokes the apotheosis of Romulus in Ennius' *Annales* and that it resonates with Jupiter's hint to Venus (*Aen*. 1.259-60) at Aeneas' eventual deification.

Even the only other appearance of the myth of Ganymede in the poem has yielded divergent readings: at *Aeneid* 1.28, Juno's wrath against the Trojans is said to be inflamed by the 'honours' given to the boy (*rapti Ganymedis honores,* 'the honours bestowed upon abducted Ganymede'.)[7] Some view this passing reference to the boy's abduction as an allusion to Jupiter's erotic desire for him and Juno's resulting jealousy,[8] while others suggest that the 'honours' refer instead to Ganymede's replacement of Hebe, Juno's daughter, as cupbearer to the gods.[9] That Virgil's compressed phrasing can support such contrasting interpretations is itself significant: the line invites speculation without confirming any one version of the myth.

In the present article, I will address the space opened up by this allusive economy, arguing that greater critical attention to the difference between what Virgil *does* say and what he *does not* say about Ganymede allows us to explore the poet's treatment of this figure. More specifically, I will focus on why Virgil's presentation of the myth avoids any direct mention of its more erotic aspects. In so doing, I will explore the range of meaning available to readers of the *Aeneid* familiar with the *Iliad* by reconstructing modes of reading Homer that may have been accessible to Virgil and his contemporaries.[10] Situating this ekphrasis within the evolving trajectory of the Ganymede myth between the *Iliad* and the Augustan age, a tradition shaped by reinterpretations attested in texts such as Plato's *Laws*, Xenophon's *Symposium,* and Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, as well as philological debates on the text of Homer, provides a foundation for the reconstruction, insofar as the evidence allows, of the conceptual frameworks that may have informed Virgil, without assuming a single, stable 'context' from which textual meaning can be derived.[11]

[1] Quotations and translations of Virgil are, respectively, from Mynors 1969 and Fairclough-Goold 1999, with adjustments. All other translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[2] It is irrelevant to the argument presented in this article whether the ekphrasis describes one, two or three separate pictures. On this question, see Pinkster 1999: 708–09.

[3] Ekphrasis in the *Aeneid* has generated an extensive body of scholarship; for recent overviews, see Barchiesi 2019 and Xinyue 2022: 155–86. Bartsch 1998 has compellingly illustrated how the poem as a whole may be read as a counterpart to the many works of art it depicts.

[4] An approach that can be applied not only to Virgilian ekphraseis, as in Kirichenko 2013, or to the Virglian corpus, but to Augustan cultural constructs in general, as in Pandey 2018.

[5] Putnam 1995 and 1998. Fratantuono-Smith 2015: 314 pinpointed ominous associations between this garment and others, such as Aeneas' cloak made by Dido at *Aen*. 4.136-39.

[6] Hardie 2002. For a similar hypothesis, see also Ripoll 2000: 493–95.

[7] Nelis 2025 has argued that the nod to the other cause of Juno's hatred for the Trojans at the beginning of the poem, the judgment of Paris, may allude to a prologue preserved in some manuscripts of the *Rhesus* attributed to Euripides, where Paris' decision similarly provokes the goddess' enmity towards Troy and its people. Building on Nelis' suggestion, one might raise the attractive, if ultimately speculative, question of whether the mention of Ganymede's *honores* as a cause of Juno's wrath also draws on a specific source or tradition. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is Eur. *Or.* 1390-92, where Ganymede is named as one of the causes of Troy's destruction.

[8] Already in antiquity (e.g. Servius *ad loc.*), and in modern scholarship (e.g. McCallum 2023: 21). Hejduk 2020: 87 argues that the Ganymede story is here focalized through Juno and her jealousy of Jupiter's sexual exploits.

[9] E.g. Farrell 2021: 122. Servius D. *ad loc*. interprets *raptus* as 'carried up to the sky'. On the ambiguous meaning of *rapio*, especially in *Aen*. 1.38, see Reineke 2012: 94.

[10] The main contributions in this strand of scholarship are Schlunk 1974; Barchiesi 1984/2015; Hardie 1986; Schmit-Neuerburg 1999.

[11] On the unhistorical and reductive nature of treating 'context' as a single, unitary system, see Feeney 2004.

This article, thus, offers a new perspective by shifting attention from the symbolic interpretations often proposed for the passage to the ancient debates about divine passion that shaped the myth's reception. In examining what Virgil leaves unstated in the light of these ancient discussions, I aim to show how the poet's selective handling of the myth responds to pressures largely overlooked in previous scholarship. His suppression of the erotic dimension of the Ganymede myth may be the result of the influence that exegetical traditions of Homer could exert on the composition of the *Aeneid*.

The argument proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates Virgil's ekphrasis of Ganymede against its Homeric background, focusing on *Iliad* 20 and the genealogical connection between Ganymede and Aeneas, and showing how Virgil's selective retelling appropriates the Homeric episode. Section 3 then traces key post-Homeric developments of the Ganymede myth in Greek literature and visual culture, highlighting how later authors and artists increasingly foreground elements, namely Zeus' erotic desire and Ganymede's role as cupbearer, that Virgil does not articulate explicitly. Section 4 turns to philosophical engagements with the myth in Plato, Xenophon, and Cicero, tracing how Ganymede became a focal point for broader ethical and theological anxieties about divine passion. Section 5 situates these concerns alongside ancient philological debates on Homer's text, showing that the abduction of Ganymede also constituted a recognized *quaestio* within Alexandrian scholarship, where issues of narrative consistency, silence, and plausibility were actively contested. Read together, these traditions illuminate the pressures under which Virgil reshapes the episode. A brief receptional coda explores later engagements with the myth as indications of how these tensions continued to shape its afterlife.

2. HOMERIC GENEALOGY AND VIRGILIAN APPROPRIATION

Let us start by looking at the Homeric account of Ganymede. Here, Aeneas himself recounts the abduction of the boy as part of his own genealogy:

> Τρωὸς δ᾽ αὖ τρεῖς παῖδες ἀμύμονες ἐξεγένοντο,
> Ἶλός τ᾽ Ἀσσάρακός τε καὶ ἀντίθεος Γανυμήδης,
> ὃς δὴ κάλλιστος γένετο θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων·
> τὸν καὶ ἀνηρείψαντο θεοὶ Διὶ οἰνοχοεύειν
> κάλλεος εἵνεκα οἷο, ἵν᾽ ἀθανάτοισι μετείη. 235
>
> From Tros again three incomparable sons were born, Ilus, and Assaracus, and godlike Ganymede, who was born the fairest of mortal men; and the gods caught him up on high to be cupbearer to Zeus because of his beauty, so that he might dwell with the immortals. (Hom. *Il.* 20.231-35)[12]

In this Homeric passage, it is the gods who abduct the boy because of his beauty, but their purpose is clearly stated: Ganymede will be the cupbearer of Zeus. No specific reference is made to any sexual element. This absence might be convenient for Virgil, given the genealogical connection between Ganymede and Aeneas and the stigma attached to passive sexual roles in ancient Rome.[13] In the *Aeneid*, genealogy is not a neutral detail but a structuring principle of the poem's teleology. It is therefore worth considering Bellandi's suggestion that Virgil's depiction of Ganymede as a *puer regius* (*Aen.* 5.252) engaged in the eminently masculine activity of hunting, together with the absence of any explicit references to his role as catamite of Jupiter, serves to avoid potential embarrassment for the Romans.[14] Although Virgil was not in principle reluctant to represent intense same-sex attachment (e.g., Corydon in *Eclogue* 2 and Nisus and Euryalus in the *Aeneid*), he deploys accusations of *mollitia*: Iarbas derides Aeneas' 'eastern' softness (*Aen.* 4.215-17) and Numanus Remulus mocks the Trojans as an effeminate people (*Aen.* 9.598-20), before being killed by Ascanius, the central

[12] Quotations and translations of the *Iliad* are, respectively, from West 2000 and Murray-Watt 1925.
[13] On this stigma, see Edwards 2025: 68–73.
[14] Bellandi 1991: 923–28.

figure for the survival of the Trojan stock, elsewhere portrayed, like Ganymede, as a *puer regius* (*Aen.* 1.677-78) frequently associated with hunting (e.g., *Aen.* 4.140-41; 7.477-78).[15] Given the potential passive role of Ganymede in his relationship with the god, it is conceivable that some readers could have construed that myth, especially in eroticised versions, as reflecting poorly on Trojan (and thus Roman) ancestry.

The genealogical importance of the abducted boy for the figure of Aeneas emerges not only from the Homeric passage mentioned above. Just a few lines earlier, Aeneas' interlocutor, Achilles, reminds him of their previous encounter, one in which the Trojan hero narrowly escaped death at the hands of the Greek warrior (*Il.* 20.187-96). Achilles taunts Aeneas by reminding him that the gods rescued him (*Il.* 20.196: ἀτὰρ σὲ Ζεὺς ἐρρύσατο καὶ θεοὶ ἄλλοι, 'you yourself were saved by Zeus and the other gods'). That episode took place on Mount Ida (*Il.* 20.189: κατ᾽ Ἰδαίων ὀρέων 'down quickly from Ida's hills'), the very setting of Ganymede's abduction in Virgil's ekphrasis.

Virgil was attuned to this Iliadic episode, which situates his hero within the Trojan lineage and underscores the divine interest in his survival.[16] Immediately after recalling their previous encounter, Achilles alludes to Aeneas' desire to rule over the Trojans (*Il.* 20.178-83), a desire that Virgil fully realizes by portraying the hero as the forefather of Rome. At *Il.* 20.293-308, Poseidon, addressing the other gods, declares that Aeneas is fated to survive the war and lead the remaining Trojans. The god states that Zeus has already turned against Priam's lineage and that Aeneas' strength is destined to reign over his people and their descendants (*Il.* 20.307-08: νῦν δὲ δὴ Αἰνείαο βίη Τρώεσσιν ἀνάξει / καὶ παίδων παῖδες, τοί κεν μετόπισθε γένωνται, 'and now surely will the mighty Aeneas be king among the Trojans, and his sons' sons who will be born in days to come'). Scholars have long recognized that Virgil's imitation of these Homeric lines appears to reflect a later textual variant recorded by Strabo (*Geogr.* 13.1), which sought to align this prophecy more explicitly with Rome by altering βίη and Τρώεσσιν to γένος and πάντεσσιν respectively ('and now surely will the stock of Aeneas be king among everyone'), in Apollo's prophecy to the Trojans at Delos (*Aen.* 3.97-98: *hic domus Aeneae cunctis dominabitur oris / et nati natorum et qui nascentur ab illis*, 'There the house of Aeneas shall lord it over all lands, even his children's children and their race that shall be born of them').[17]

This Homeric episode reinforces the genealogical importance of Ganymede by situating Aeneas' survival and future rule within a broader divine framework. Virgil's adaptation of these lines, especially in light of Strabo's variant, underscores how the Trojan hero's destiny was reinterpreted to align with Rome's imperial genealogy.

Although the poem does not attribute the manufacture of the cloak to Aeneas, the fact that he awards it and thereby endorses its imagery invites the possibility that the representation of Ganymede bears not only the narrator's imprint but also the focalization of a character. Ekphraseis in Greco-Roman epic can carry ideologically tendentious messages shaped by the figures who display or commission them, as seen in the contrasting tapestries of Minerva and Arachne in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 6. By retelling an event first narrated by Aeneas in the *Iliad*, this passage of the *Aeneid* reappropriates it, selecting certain details while passing over others in silence.[18] In this setting, the absence of the erotic tradition becomes not merely a poetic omission but a meaningful silence within the poem's presentation of Trojan genealogy and divine favour.

Whether or not we read the cloak's imagery as focalized through Aeneas, another dimension emerges when we consider the theological pressures surrounding Jupiter. As we shall see, some ancient readers found the notion that the god could be moved by erotic desire troubling. This is the focus of Plato's, Xenophon's and Cicero's critiques of the myth. In the context of the *Aeneid*, where Jupiter's authority underwrites Aeneas' destiny, such theological pressures become all the sharper. It

[15] *Ibidem.*
[16] *Ibidem.*
[17] E.g., Heyworth-Morwood 2017 *ad loc.*
[18] If Aeneas is the beholder, his Virgilian incarnation is comparable to a reader acquainted with the *Iliad,* though one that could be misguided; see Farrell 2021: 90 and 290. It could also be argued that the emotional impact of that past event shapes his memory of it, in line with the perspective outlined by Schiesaro 2015.

is therefore historically plausible that Virgil's restraint responds to the philosophical unease surrounding Jupiter's representation.

The god is portrayed as a sexual predator elsewhere in the poem: Juturna is made immortal after being raped by him, and her final lament (*Aen.* 12.861-86) underscores the cost of this divine 'favour': eternal life severed from her mortal brother Turnus.[19] Similarly, the mother of Iarbas is immortalized by Jupiter after a relationship that appears to involve coercion (*Aen.* 4.198-203). A brief reference to the myth of Io (*Aen.* 7.790) implies the violence she suffered at the hands of the god, without dwelling on it. These cases show that Virgil does not systematically suppress Jupiter's erotic aggression. What distinguishes the Ganymede episode is its genealogical and teleological function. The boy is not merely another victim of Jupiter but an ancestor of Aeneas, and his elevation provides a paradigm of divine selection that resonates with the mission the Fates have in store for Aeneas. Because of this genealogical proximity, any implication that Jupiter's choice was motivated by erotic passion would carry an ideological weight absent from those other myths. In this context, the suppression of the erotic tradition could be understood as a management of Jupiter's representation at a moment that bears directly on Trojan and Roman identity.

3. POST-HOMERIC DEVELOPMENTS OF THE GANYMEDE MYTH

Over time, the Homeric account of Ganymede's abduction provoked philological and philosophical discussions that sought to justify or critique different aspects of the story. This broader tradition provides a crucial backdrop for understanding Virgil's approach. In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 202-17, Zeus seizes the boy and makes him an immortal cupbearer of the gods, all of whom look upon him with admiration.[20] Pindar (*Ol.* 1.44-45; 10.104-06), whose presence in Virgil has been debated since antiquity (e.g., Aul. Gel. 17.10) and hypothesized especially for the Virgilian treatment of myths,[21] attributes to lust and the goddess Aphrodite the reason for Ganymede's deification.[22] Apollonius of Rhodes, a crucial model for the *Aeneid*, openly claims that Zeus fell in love with Ganymede:

> Γανυμήδεα, τόν ῥά ποτε Ζεὺς 115
> οὐρανῷ ἐγκατένασσεν ἐφέστιον ἀθανάτοισιν,
> κάλλεος ἱμερθείς.
>
> Ganymede, whom Zeus had once settled in heaven to live with the immortals, smitten with longing for his beauty. (A.R. 3.115-17)[23]

At least another text that has been proposed as an intertextual source for the *Aeneid*, Euripides' *Trojan Women*,[24] had already linked the boy's fate to that of Troy. It had also emphasized certain aspects of the myth while omitting others. The chorus of Trojan women complain that Ganymede's privileged position as cupbearer of the gods should have benefited the Trojans during the war against the Achaeans (820-39). No explicit mention is made of Zeus' love for him,[25] only of his services, his beauty, and, in a tradition comparable to that found in the Virgilian passage, the act of

[19] Juturna's immortality has sparked debate. Some of the most relevant aspects here are Barchiesi's 1984/2015: 93–115 argument that it resists the epic's teleological resolution and Wigodsky's 2004 reading of the episode as a polemical allusion to Epicurean notions of divine *apatheia*.

[20] On the *Hymn to Aphrodite* as an intertext in the *Aeneid* see Casali 2008 and Gladhill 2012 with bibliography.

[21] Thomas 1998: 110 stressed this specific point and, more broadly, the likelihood that Callimachus mediated Virgil's access to Pindar.

[22] Thus also Ibycus fr. 289 *PMG*, Theognis (1.1345-50) and Soph. *TrGF* 4, fr. 345. By the end of the fifth century BC, the erotic motif was widespread on Greek vases. See Mayo 1967: 9–10.

[23] Quotations and translations of the *Argonautica* are, respectively, from Fränkel 1961 and Race 2009. The difference between this version and the Homeric account did not escape the attention of ancient commentators, e.g., *schol. ad Apoll.* 3.114-17 published in Wendel 1935: 220.

[24] E.g., Fernandelli 1996.

[25] A version of the myth familiar to Euripides, as can be inferred, for instance, from his *Cyclops* (582-86), a satyr play Virgil might have engaged with according to Robertson 2024.

running at the moment of his capture. Even if Virgil did not engage with this passage directly, it remains valuable for understanding how a playwright influential for him shaped this character. If, instead, Virgil had this Euripidean passage in mind, it could have provided a precedent for his careful selection of what details to include and what to eschew.

These literary sources make no mention of the eagle carrying the boy away, but its appearance in visual depictions dates back at least to the fourth century BC.[26] A bronze mirror from this period already shows the eagle in flight with Ganymede, its talons sparing the boy's flesh, a detail that some have interpreted erotically.[27] Another famous early example is the lost statue by Leochares, described by Pliny the Elder as showing an eagle aware of whom it carries and careful not to injure the boy (*NH* 34.79). It remains uncertain if that work depicted Ganymede as an object of divine desire. Such representations raised the broader question about the artist's stance towards the myth: whether the goal was to render it in a factual manner, to present it as an openly erotic subject, or to use it as a vehicle for deeper philosophical meaning such as a metaphysical vision of the soul's ascent.[28]

4. MORAL ISSUES CONCERNING THE MYTH OF GANYMEDE

A point that has not been adequately recognized is that Virgil may well have been aware of the criticism that the myth of Ganymede provoked in antiquity and may have consequently avoided explicit mention of the very details that sparked such critiques.[29] Philosophical treatments of Ganymede sought to confront or contain the problem of Zeus' desire. The need to grapple with the god's physical attraction to the boy can be found in fourth-century BC authors such as Plato and Xenophon. Plato's *Laws* (636 c-d), within a wider programme concerned with regulating various aspects of life, including erotic pleasure, under a rigorously ordered moral and institutional system, offers a particularly pointed questioning of the myth. The critique is voiced by the Athenian Stranger in a discussion of Cretan sexual customs, where he claims that the Cretans fabricated the story of Ganymede's abduction in order to legitimise their own practices (τοῦτον τὸν μῦθον προστεθηκέναι κατὰ τοῦ Διός, ἵνα ἑπόμενοι δὴ τῷ θεῷ καρπῶνται καὶ ταύτην τὴν ἡδονήν 'they added on this story about Zeus in order that they might be following his example in enjoying this pleasure as well').[30] Plato's emphasis on ἡδονή suggests that the version of the myth he has in mind explicitly involved Zeus' sexual passion for the young man.

Xenophon, by contrast, seeks to rehabilitate the myth through a moralizing filter. He reframes Zeus' choice as a reward not for beauty but for virtue, arguing that Ganymede was taken to Olympus for the excellence of his soul. In this version, Zeus' love for the boy is spiritual, not carnal, and the latter's immortalization is due to the beauty of his soul, not of his body. Xenophon's rehabilitation occurs within a broader ethical argument that consistently opposes erotic attachment to the body with a valorization of friendship, virtue, and the education of the soul; it is against this sustained contrast that the character Socrates reinterprets Zeus' relationship with Ganymede:[31]

> I also want to invoke the myths, Callias, in order to show you that not only humankind but also gods and heroes set higher value on the friendship of the soul than on the enjoyment of the body. For in all cases where Zeus was enamoured of mortal women for their beauty, after sex he allowed

[26] Olson 2012: 239.

[27] *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae s.v.* 'Ganymede' no. 195.

[28] Mayo 1967: 20. On depictions of Ganymede's abduction on fourth-century BC South Italian vases and Late Antique sarcophagi as potential symbols of the soul's transcendence, see Turnheim 2004. While these examples fall outside the cultural context of Virgil, they underscore the myth's adaptability to moral or metaphysical readings.

[29] Feeney 1991: 153 noted briefly that the allusion to Jupiter's rape of Ganymede at *Aen.* 1.28 challenges the notion that Virgil's god is free from moral flaws, such as those highlighted by Xenophanes. As far as I know, this is the only observation in previous scholarship that considers the poet's treatment of the boy in light of ancient criticism of the story, though it is made tangentially, as Feeney's primary focus lies elsewhere.

[30] Quotations and translations of Plato are, respectively, from Burnet 1907 and Bury 1926. Zeus' love is also incidentally referenced in Pl. *Phaedr.* 255c.

[31] While many Homeric references in Xenophon's *Symposium* have a playful tone, this passage is one of those in which Homer is pressed into the service of a serious ethical argument; see Yamagata 2012: 143.

> them to remain mortal, but all those whom he delighted in for their souls' sake he made immortal (ὅσων δὲ ψυχαῖς ἀγασθείη, ἀθανάτους τούτους ἐποίει). Among the latter are Heracles and the Dioscuri, and tradition includes others also. And I declare that Ganymede too was brought up to Olympus by Zeus not for his body but for his soul (καὶ ἐγὼ δέ φημι καὶ Γανυμήδην οὐ σώματος ἀλλὰ ψυχῆς ἕνεκα ὑπὸ Διὸς εἰς Ὄλυμπον ἀνενεχθῆναι). This is confirmed by his very name: Homer, you remember, has the words, 'he joys to hear' (γάνυται δέ τ᾽ ἀκούων) that is to say, 'he enjoys hearing;' and in another place, 'harbouring dense thoughts in his heart' (πυκινὰ φρεσὶ μήδεα εἰδώς).[32] This, again, means 'harbouring wise counsels in his heart.' So the name given Ganymede, compounded of the two foregoing elements, signifies not physically but mentally attractive; hence his honour among the gods (ἀλλ᾽ ἠδυγνώμων ἐν θεοῖς τετίμηται.). (Xen. *Symp.* 8.28-31)[33]

This move marks an important shift in the literary tradition: by the 380s BC, the groundwork had been laid for understanding the myth of Ganymede as a site of tension between a purely erotic and a metaphysical interpretation. Virgil's own reticence towards the amorous and servile elements of the myth acquires a deeper resonance against this backdrop of philosophical controversy. An interesting parallel emerges between Xenophon's use of τετίμηται to describe Ganymede's elevation and Virgil's use of *honores* in *Aeneid* 1.28.[34] Similar terminology denotes the elevation of humans in relation to the gods (e.g., τιμῶμαι in Diod. Sic. 6.25; *honor* in Cic. *Cat.* 3.2.1 and *Pro Mil.* 80). This linguistic overlap may hint at a shared understanding of the myth.

Even though we cannot know if Virgil engages directly with Xenophon's account,[35] this passage offers a crucial precedent for understanding Ganymede's transformation into a god. Xenophon's version shifts the story from a narrative rooted in eroticism to one centred on virtue, presenting the boy's immortalization as a reward for the excellence of his soul. By taming the erotic element, Xenophon cleanses the myth, promoting spiritual allure as its defining feature. This conceptualization of the youngster's immortality, framed in a philosophical context, serves as an important model for how later interpretations, including Virgil's, could present the boy's celestial assumption as part of a broader narrative that emphasizes Zeus' favour for virtues over any carnal desire.

Building on this growing moralization, scrutiny of Ganymede's story continued well into the Late Republic at Rome, where it must have been known for some time.[36] This is evident in Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*,[37] written just a few decades before the composition of the *Aeneid*, at a time when Virgil was in his twenties. Here Cicero, as a character, takes the leading role in articulating the dialogue's philosophical positions; his treatment of the myth is illuminating for two reasons. First, it reflects the outlook of a Roman aristocrat of the time, a mature, male, free citizen from the ruling class, more specifically one of the most important intellectuals of his time. Secondly, some of the details of the myth that Cicero criticizes are precisely those that are not mentioned in Virgil. Book 1 is structured around the central claim that death is not an evil, and in this context, Cicero praises the soul's rational faculties, such as memory, as divine in nature. These powers, he argues, are so great that nothing greater can be conceived even in a god. It is at this moment

[32] The two Homeric quotations adduced here do not correspond verbatim to the Homeric text as we have it. The first has no clear parallel, while the second appears to conflate well-attested Homeric expressions (*Il.* 7.278; 24.282; 24.674; *Od.* 2.38; 19.353); see Bowen 1998: 122.

[33] Quotations and translations of Xenophon are, respectively, from Marchant 1921 and Marchant-Todd-Henderson 2013.

[34] Even the cloak awarded to Cloanthus is introduced as the foremost of the *honores* granted to the victors of the regatta (*Aen.* 5.249). Barkan 1991: 19–20 argues that the repetition of this term across the two contexts subtly links the cloak's decoration with the apotheosis of the Trojan boy.

[35] On the presence of Xenophon's works in Republican and Augustan Rome, see Rood 2018.

[36] See the fragment attributed to Accius by *Schol. Bern. Ad Verg. G.* 1.502 and the mention of wall paintings depicting Ganymede's abduction by the eagle in Plaut. *Menaec.* 142-43. As Dufallo 2018: 17 notes, such imagery may have been familiar to Roman audiences. Gratwick 1993: 152 has observed that the form *Catamitus*, used of Ganymede in that Plautine passage, likely derives from Etruscan, aligning with the Hellenized mythological repertoire of much Etruscan art. Visual evidence for such iconography survives, for instance, in a mirror-case from the third-second century BC now in the British Museum, inv. no. 1884.0614.54, on which see Jenkins-Turner 2009: 71.

[37] Cicero makes another brief reference to Ganymede as a cupbearer at *De Natura Deorum* 1.112.

that he rejects the Homeric account of Ganymede as an anthropomorphic fiction, calling the abduction cruel and the gods' need for wine absurd:

> *Non enim ambrosia deos aut nectare aut Iuventate pocula ministrante laetari arbitror, nec Homerum audio, qui Ganymeden ab dis raptum ait propter formam, ut Iovi bibere ministraret: non iusta causa cur Laomedonti tanta fieret iniuria. Fingebat haec Homerus et humana ad deos transferebat: divina mallem ad nos.*
>
> I do not think the gods delight in ambrosia or nectar or Hebe filling the cups, and I do not listen to Homer who says that Ganymede was carried off by the gods for his beauty to serve as cup-bearer to Zeus: there was no just reason why such cruel wrong should be inflicted on Laomedon. Homer imagined these things and attributed human feelings to the gods: I had rather he had attributed divine feelings to us. (Cic. *TD* 1.65)[38]

Cicero's disapproval reappears later in the dialogue, where the myth is again used as a negative example of how poetry misrepresents the gods. In Book 4, during a discussion of passions such as romantic love and their effects on human judgment, he singles out the idea of Jupiter falling in love with Ganymede as particularly objectionable:

> *Atque, ut muliebres amores omittam, quibus maiorem licentiam natura concessit, quis aut de Ganymedi raptu dubitat quid poetae velint aut non intelligit quid apud Euripidem et loquatur et cupiat Laius?*[39]
>
> Again, not to speak of the love of women, to which nature has granted wider tolerance, who has either any doubt of the meaning of the poets in the tale of the rape of Ganymede, or fails to understand the purport of Laius' language and his desire in Euripides' play? (Cic. *TD* 4.71).

The tone here is openly incredulous. Cicero's objection is not only theological but also ethical: the gods, he insists, should not be imagined as subject to irrational desires. While there is no need to assume in Virgil direct engagement with Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*,[40] the discomfort the latter articulates with the Ganymede myth illustrates the kinds of pressures such material might exert on a Roman poet writing a few years later, at a moment when conceptions of divine status and divine behaviour, already in flux for several decades, remained particularly unsettled amid broader political and religious transformation.[41] It is against this background that Virgil's version of the myth can be understood as a deliberately shaped scene, one that stages the abduction but withholds precisely the details Cicero found objectionable.

Roman responses to the Ganymede myth articulated in Cicero's philosophical works need not be taken as evidence for a precise attitude toward the myth during the late Republic. What matters is rather that such critiques demonstrate the availability, within elite Roman discourse, of conceptual frameworks capable of problematizing divine erotic desire and its moral implications. Cicero drew on a range of philosophical traditions such as Stoicism and Academic Scepticism which continued to circulate in Rome and to inform discussions of divinity, moral exemplarity, and the legitimacy of myth. Virgil himself in the *Aeneid* displays a philosophical eclecticism that precludes a straightforward and exclusively allegiance to a single school of thought.[42]

By including the eagle, Virgil's phrase *armiger Iouis* ('Jupiter's armour-bearer') might be invoking the more theologically loaded version of the myth,[43] while deliberately avoiding any explicit

[38] Quotations and translations from the *Tusculan Disputations* are from King 1927.

[39] Cicero's discussion of Ganymede in Homer is accompanied by a reference to Euripides' *Chrysippus*, a tragedy that dramatized the abduction of Chrysippus, the son of Pelops, by a pederastic Laius.

[40] There is reason to believe that the Ciceronian dialogue circulated in Rome in the Augustan age, as suggested by alleged echoes in authors of the time like Horace; see, for instance, Zago 2015.

[41] See Cole 2013 in particular on the evolving status of deification in the last years of the Republic.

[42] Farrell 2014: 63 and Casali 2024, who is critical of attempts such as Zanker 2023 to read the *Aeneid* through a Stoic lens.

[43] The eagle could be identified either with Jupiter's messenger (e.g., Theocr. 15.124; Ps-Apoll. *Bibl.* 3.12.2) or with the god himself disguised (e.g., Ov. *Met.* 10.155-60).

mention of Jupiter's erotic desire. Although the poet does not shy away from depicting the abduction itself, he conspicuously omits any reference to Ganymede's role as cupbearer or to Jupiter's love for him. This deliberate shaping of the scene points to a potential awareness of the myth's place in earlier Greek and Roman thought.

5. HOMER'S GANYMEDE AS PHILOLOGICAL *QUAESTIO*

Beyond these explicitly philosophical critiques, ancient scholarly discussions on Homer's text also engaged with the portrayal of Ganymede's abduction. While it is impossible to tell what Homeric editions, commentaries and monographs were available to Virgil, evidence suggests that Alexandrian scholarship such as that of the second-century BC scholar Aristarchus, was known in Rome at the time (e.g., Cic. *Fam.* 3.11; 9.10; *Att.* 1.14; Varr. *Ling.* 8.38; Hor. *Ars P.* 445; Vitr. *De arch.* 1.1), and that at least some of his works were circulating there. For instance, the grammarian Aristonicus, who probably lived in Rome during the Augustan age, had likely access to a set of commentaries and a Homeric monograph by Aristarchus; likewise, other Alexandrian scholars active in Rome during this period such as Philoxenus and Seleucus also worked with Aristarchean material.[44] As Barchiesi has noted, however, tracing correspondences between Virgil's Homeric intertexts and Alexandrian scholarship is productive not insofar as it proves direct access to specific scholia, but in helping us reconstruct the mental habit of the Augustan poet.[45] The aim is not to demonstrate that Virgil read a particular commentary, an undertaking likely bound to fail, but to approach the intellectual environments within which he operated, including those shaped by contemporary philological discussions. Indeed, in the Alexandrian tradition inherited by Virgil, there was no rigid boundary between poet and critic:[46] poets engaged deeply with traditions of textual exegesis, and Homeric controversies could shape not only scholarly debates but also poetic choices.

The Alexandrian tradition, particularly as transmitted through Aristarchus and his followers, was often concerned with questions of narrative consistency, textual authenticity, and divine representation. In the case of Ganymede, the surviving scholia indicate that scholarly attention focused less on the myth's theological or moral dimensions and more on the internal coherence of Homer's narrative. Aristarchus, as reported by a scholion attributed to Aristonicus, noted that in *Iliad* 20.234, which belongs to the passage devoted to the duel between Achilles and Aeneas that we have discussed in section 2, the gods collectively took Ganymede for his beauty and service as cupbearer, countering poets who depicted Zeus as personally motivated by desire:[47]

> διπλῆ, ὅτι ἐναντιούται τοῖς νεωτέροις· οὐ γὰρ δι' ἔρωτα τὸν Γανυμήδην ὑπὸ Διὸς ἀνηρπάσθαι, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ τῶν θεῶν, ἵνα οἰνοχοῇ τῷ Διὶ διὰ τὸ κάλλος, καὶ ὅτι ὁ καὶ περισσός.
>
> The diple,[48] because it (*scil.* the line/account) contradicts later poets: for Ganymede was not snatched away by Zeus for love, but by the gods, so that he might be Zeus' cupbearer for his beauty; and because καὶ is superfluous (*schol. A Il.* 20.234).

Although Aristarchus' primary aim was to distinguish what was genuinely Homeric on the basis of internal consistency from later poetic traditions, one might wonder whether his distinction also carried an implicit moral dimension, positioning the Homeric version as free from the more erotic elements introduced in subsequent retellings.[49] Other scholia on the same line attest to the extent of

[44] West 2001: 46-8 and Schironi 2015: 625.
[45] Barchiesi 1984/2015: 127.
[46] Hardie 1993: xii; Zetzel 2018: 60.
[47] As Schironi 2018: 10–8 observes, although Aristonicus rarely names Aristarchus directly and effectively 'disappears behind' him, the scholia labelled 'Ariston'. in Erbse's edition (1969-88), from which the Homeric scholia quoted here come, are often accepted as transmitting Aristarchus' views.
[48] The *diplē* (>) is a marginal sign used in Alexandrian scholarship to mark verses singled out for comment or critical attention.
[49] Schironi 2018: 688.

scholarly debate surrounding the passage.[50] A scholion attributed to the second-century AD grammarian Herodian reports that Apollonius son of Theon, possibly a disciple of Aristarchus,[51] and others, such as a certain Ascalonite, a figure perhaps to be identified with Ptolemy of Ascalon,[52] another pupil of Aristarchus,[53] discussed the passage from a textual standpoint:

> Ἀρίσταρχος μὲν ἓν ποιεί τὸ 'ἀνηρείψαντο', τουτέστι τὸ ἀνήρπασαν. εἰσι μέντοι, οἱ τὸν ἄν σύνδεσμον παρέλαβον, ὧν ἐστι καὶ Ἀπολλώνιος ὁ τοῦ Θέωνος, τοιοῦτόν τι ἐκδεχόμενος· 'ἀνήρπασαν ἀν αὐτὸν οἱ θεοί τῷ Διὶ χάριν τοῦ κάλλους, εἰ ἔζη'. τοῦτο δέ φησιν, ἐπεὶ οὐδαμοῦ παρεισάγει αὐτὸν ὁ ποιητής τῷ Διὶ διακονούμενον· ἡ γὰρ Ἥβη βλέπεται[54] καὶ ὁ Ἥφαιστος.[55] πρὸς δὲ ταῦτα ὑγιῶς ἀπεφήναντο τίνες καὶ Ἀσκαλωνίτης ὡς ὅτι ὁ ποιητής τῷ ἠρείψαντο οὐδέποτε ἐχρήσατο ἄνευ τῆς προθέσεως. δεύτερον ὡς, εἰ ἦν ὁ ἄν σύνδεσμος, ἐχρῆν τίνα αἰτίαν ἐπενεχθῆναι, ὥσπερ {ὡς} ἐπὶ τοῦ 'οὐδ' ἄν πω χάζοντο κελεύθου δῖοι Ἀχαιοί,/εἰ μὴ Ἀλέξανδρος, Ἑλένης πόσις ἠυκόμοιο,/παῦσεν ἀριστεύοντα Μαχάονα, ποιμένα λαῶν'.[56] πῶς δὲ ἐν ἑτέροις περί τῆς ἁρπαγής τοῦ Γανυμήδου<ς> ὑπόμνησιν ποιείται, ὁπότε ὁ Διομήδης λέγει 'τῆς γάρ τοι γενεῆς, ἧς Τρωί περ εὐρύοπα Ζεὺς/δῶχ' υἱος ποινὴν Γανυμήδεος';[57] ἀλλά, φησίν, οὐ διακονείται. ευλόγως· πρώτον μέν, ὅτι τὰ πάντα συμπόσια δύο ἐστίν, ἓν μὲν ἐν τῇ Α, ἐν ᾧ ὁ Ἥφαιστος παρεισάγεται διακονούμενος ἕνεκα γέλωτος,[58] ἄλλο δὲ ἐν τῇ Δ, ὅπου ἡ Ἥβη κοινῶς οἰνοχεῖ πᾶσι θεοῖς.[59] ἔχομεν δὲ ἡμεῖς προσθεῖναι τὸ κυριώτατον, φημὶ δὲ τό τῆς συντάξεως· ὁ γὰρ καὶ σύνδεσμος ἐναντίος ἐστι τῷ ἄν· ὁ μὲν γὰρ τίθησι, μᾶλλον δὲ συμπλέκει, ὥσπερ ἐπιζητῶν καὶ ἕτερα συμπλέξαι· ὁ δὲ ἄν σύνδεσμος ἀναιρεῖ τὰ παρωχημένα.
>
> Aristarchus treats ἀνηρείψαντο ('caught up') as one word, namely ἀνήρπασαν ('carried off'). There are others, instead, who employ the conjunction ἄν; among these, Apollonius, son of Theon, who interprets the passage as something like: 'the gods would have carried him off for Zeus because of his beauty, had he been alive'. He says so, because nowhere does the poet introduce him as Zeus' servant: for Hebe and Hephaestos are seen (in that role). Against this argument, others, including also the Ascalonite, rightly argued that the poet never uses ἠρείψαντο ('cast down') without a preposition. Secondly, (they claim) that, if the conjunction ἄν were present, a cause would necessarily have to be provided, as in the case of 'Yet the noble Achaeans would in no way have given ground from their course, had not Alexander, the husband of fair-haired Helen, halted Machaon, shepherd of men'. How does he make mention of Ganymede's abduction elsewhere, when Diomedes says 'For they are of that stock from which Zeus, whose voice resounds afar, gave to Tros as recompense for his son Ganymedes'? But, he says, Ganymede does not act as a servant. Reasonably. First of all, because there are two symposia in total, one in book 1, where Hephaestos is introduced as a servant for comic relief, the other in book 4, in which Hebe pours wine to all gods alike. We have to add the most important point, namely, syntax: the conjunction καί has an opposite function compared to ἄν: for the former affirms, or rather connects, whereas the conjunction ἄν negates what precedes it. (*schol. A Il.* 20.234)

[50] Ancient mythography also sought to rationalize Ganymede's abduction in ways that removed the involvement of Zeus. Among the sources mentioned in *schol. bT ad Il.* 20.234d and Eusthatius (*in Il.* 1205.396), the pre-Virgilian authors Mnaseas (*FHG* 3.154, fr. 30) and Dosiades (*F.Gr.Hist.* 458.5) depicted him as abducted on Mount Ida, as in *Aeneid* 5, but by human figures, while other anonymous accounts suggest that he died prematurely and that his divine translation was a later fabrication. Although these rationalizing approaches do not directly inform Virgil's treatment, they attest to a broader tradition of reinterpreting the myth in ways that downplay or alter its divine dimension.

[51] Erbse's apparatus *ad loc* tentatively identifies him with the Apollonius described by Cohn 1895: 135.

[52] Thus Baege 1882: 33.

[53] See Steph. Byz. *s.v.* Ἀσκαλών (Meineke 1842: 132). Nagy 2004: 205 stressed how much Herodian is indebted to this Aristarchean scholar.

[54] *Il.* 4.2-3.

[55] *Il.*1.584-5, 597-98.

[56] *Il.* 11.504-06.

[57] *Il.* 5.265-66.

[58] *Il.* 1.584-604.

[59] *Il.* 4.1-4.

Apollonius argues that if Ganymede were truly Zeus' cupbearer, the poet would have depicted him in this role, rather than omitting him from the banquet scenes in *Iliad* 1 and 4, where Hephaestus and Hebe serve the gods instead. In response, Herodian concedes that, while Homer explicitly states Ganymede's abduction was for this purpose, the poem does not show him fulfilling the duty. However, rather than supporting Apollonius' counterfactual interpretation, the scholiast seeks to reconcile two seemingly contradictory facts: (1) that Homer states Ganymede was taken to be a cupbearer and (2) that he is never shown fulfilling this function. Rather than denying the first point, he explains the second. This reasoning follows a broader pattern in ancient Homeric scholarship, where scholars sought to preserve Homer's internal consistency while acknowledging interpretative gaps and narrative silences.

Another scholion recapitulates many of the same textual arguments but also introduces an interesting consideration about plausibility to the discussion. While acknowledging that Homer explicitly states Ganymede was taken to be a cupbearer, it offers a different justification for his absence from the divine banquet scenes:

> τινὲς δὲ τὸν ἄν σύνδεσμον ἀνεδέξαντο, ἵν' ᾖ ὁ λόγος οὕτω· 'τοῦτον δὲ ὅσον ἕνεκα τοῦ κάλλους καὶ ἀνηρείψαντο ἄν οἱ θεοί', δηλονότι εἰ μὴ ἐτεθνήκει· καὶ γὰρ οὐδέποτε, φασί, παρὰ τῷ ποιητῇ εἰσάγεται οἰνοχοεύων ὁ Γανυμήδης. ἀλλά πρὸς τοῦτο λεκτέον πρῶτον μὲν ὡς οὐδέποτε χωρὶς τοῦ ἄν ὁ ποιητής λέγει τὸ ἠρείψαντο· ἔπειτα ἐν ἑτεροῖς λέγει 'δῶχ' υἱὸς ποινὴν Γανυμήδεος.' τὸ δὲ πάντων μείζον· ὁ καὶ συμπλεκτικὸς ἐπιζητεῖ πράγματα, ἃ συμπλέκει, ὁ δὲ ἄν ἀναιρειτικός ἐστι τῶν προυπαρχόντων· πῶς οὖν δύναται συνταχθῆναι ὁ ἄν τῷ καί; εἰ δὲ φασιν ὡς οὐ φαίνεται διακονούμενος τοῖς θεοῖς, ἴστωσαν ὅτι δύο συμπόσια παρεισάγονται τῶν θεῶν τῷ ποιητῇ καὶ ἐν μὲν τῷ πρώτῳ γέλωτος ἕνεκεν Ἥφαιστος οἰνοχοεῖ, ἐν δὲ τῷ ἑτέρῳ Ἥβη· παρεῖναι αὐτὸν οὐχ εἰκὸς εἰς καταστροφὴν Ἰλίου βουλευομένοις θεοῖς. (*schol. bT Il.* 20.234)

> Some, however, accepted the conjunction ἄν, so that the phrase would read: 'and this one, because of his beauty, the gods would have carried off', meaning, if he had not died. For, they say, Ganymede is never introduced by the poet as a cupbearer. But against this it should be noted that the poet never says ἠρείψαντο without ἄν; secondly, that elsewhere he says '(he) gave (them) as recompense for his son Ganymede'. The most important part, however, is that the copulative conjunction καὶ requires actions that are connected, whereas ἄν negates what precedes it. How then can ἄν be syntactically combined with καί? If they say that he is not shown as serving the gods, they should know that two symposia are depicted by the poet and in the first one Hephaestos pours wine for comic relief, in the other one Hebe does that; it is unlikely that Ganymede would be present while the gods deliberate on the destruction of Troy.

The scholiast is responding to the argument that Ganymede cannot have been described as Zeus' cupbearer in *Iliad* 20, since he is never shown fulfilling that role elsewhere in the poem. In reply, he/she dismantles this claim by observing that there are only two other scenes, namely, the divine banquets in *Iliad* 1 and 4, where such a depiction might have occurred. In the first, Hephaestus fills the role of cupbearer to relieve the tension built up over the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. In the second, Hebe has this function because it would have been unlikely for Trojan Ganymede to appear before the gods while they deliberate the demise of Troy. It is difficult to determine whether the scholiast believed Homer would not have depicted Ganymede in such a context because it was implausible, or whether they judged the boy's presence implausible because Homer would not depict it based on his narrative habits. In other words, the reasoning risks circularity: what is excluded from the poem would be what is deemed unfitting, and what would be deemed unfitting is what the poem is assumed to exclude. Rather than appealing to a fixed narrative pattern in Homeric epic, the scholion invokes a broader sense of what is unlikely.

The prominence of the abduction in ancient philological discourse suggests that it constituted a recognized *quaestio*. These ancient observations remind us that the myth was debated within a well-established culture of philological engagement long before the Augustan period. Such discussions help us reconstruct one of the lenses through which Homer might have been approached by Virgil and his contemporaries. In this context, the figure of Ganymede, textually contested and morally scrutinized, offers more than an intertextual echo: it becomes a site where inherited interpretative tensions may be silently registered.

6. CONCLUSION

Virgil's version of the myth is marked by a notable restraint: Jupiter's desire and Ganymede's service among the gods remain unstated. To be sure, the *Aeneid* does not entirely exclude references to episodes where Jupiter's relationships with mortals are marked by sexual violence. Yet precisely in contrast to these narratives, Virgil's handling of the myth of Ganymede does not explicitly mention the erotic elements of the tradition. What distinguishes this boy from other victims of Jupiter's desire mentioned in the *Aeneid* is the structure and consequence of his story: his abduction results not in punishment, lament, or mortal offspring, but in his elevation into the divine household and his acquisition of a privileged, quasi-apotheotic status. It is precisely this fusion of erotic desire and divine favour that made the myth so troubling for ancient philosophers and critics, and the feature that would have posed the greatest conceptual difficulty for an Augustan epic in which Jupiter legitimizes Aeneas' authority. To allow the erotic version of the myth to surface in the ekphrasis would have risked contaminating the poem's presentation of divine selection, aligning Aeneas' genealogy with a morally problematic pattern of divine behaviour. Virgil's suppression of the erotic tradition can be seen as a deliberate act of theological management: by detaching Ganymede's translation from Jupiter's desire, the poet preserves the decorous coherent model of divine favour on which the epic's teleology depends.

This metamorphosis of Ganymede into a remote, silent figure fits into a broader Virgilian pattern: divine interaction with mortals is often abstracted, distanced, or rendered ambiguous. In contrast to Homeric epic, the gods in the *Aeneid* rarely intervene through physical contact. Even in Book 5, the instance of Portunus pushing Cloanthus' ship with his own hand only a few lines before the ekphrasis (5.241-2) stands out as unusually corporeal. More often, physicality is displaced into memory, as when Diomedes recalls the time he wounded Venus (11.275-7), or presented as a visual from afar, in line with the poem's broader tendency to encode divine presence through visual distance.[60] In Book 2, for example, during the sack of Troy, the gods are not absent, but their agency is rendered in remote imagery: Venus instructs Aeneas to look as Pallas sits on the citadel, while Jupiter supports the Greeks and stirs the gods into war, present, yet spatially removed (2.615-18). Virgil's dealing with the myth of Ganymede reinforces this tendency.

This reading complements a broader pattern observable in the *Aeneid*: divine activity, though central to the plot, is frequently presented with a degree of abstraction or restraint that distinguishes Virgil's narrative world from that of the Homeric epics. The diminished physicality and more ambiguous presence of the gods reflect an evolving aesthetic.[61] The myth of Ganymede, as reframed here, participates in this tendency: it evokes transcendence while withholding spectacle, inviting reflection rather than affirming a specific doctrine. In this sense, the ekphrasis exemplifies Virgil's broader poetic strategy of negotiating inherited mythological material through a decorous lens informed by concerns that had accrued around the Homeric poems over the previous centuries. While decorum in the poem is not limited to questions of sexual propriety,[62] in this case it engages deeper ancient anxieties about attributing erotic passion to Jupiter, anxieties sharpened by Ganymede's role in Aeneas' genealogy.

[60] A mode that, as Mac Góráin 2017: 403–20 has suggested, can also serve to articulate asymmetries of power.
[61] On this point, see Heinze 1913: 482–84.
[62] Clausen 2002 is among the few scholars, following Heinze 1913, to devote sustained (if limited) attention to Virgil's tendency to suppress or moderate indecorous elements in the *Aeneid*.

Virgil's treatment of Ganymede thus offers a compact yet telling example of the poet's ability to reshape myth within aesthetic coordinates that still elude us. Set against earlier and often more problematic versions of the myth, its silences speak to a poetic strategy that privileges allusion over assertion, and visual suggestion over narrative elaboration in a poem where every detail could be charged with meaning. Approaching such moments through the lens of ancient Homeric exegesis, be it philosophical or philological, allows us to move beyond a modern reader's expectations and begin to reconstruct the interpretative frameworks available to Virgil and his contemporary audience.[63] Situated within the broader context of Homeric reception, the episode illustrates how Ganymede's story could be reimagined in light of changing cultural expectations, reconfigured not through overt revision, but through tone, restraint, and selective emphasis.

EARLY IMPERIAL RESPONSES (A CODA)

This appendix surveys notable post-Virgilian reimaginings of the Ganymede myth in literature and visual culture, showing how the figure continued to resonate with and be reshaped by tensions that, as this article suggested, might have informed Virgil's restrained depiction in the *Aeneid*. The scope is limited to the first century AD given its closeness to Virgil and for reasons of space. In some cases (e.g., the Flavian epicists), the *Aeneid* may have served as a literary point of reference; in others (e.g., Horace), these treatments reflect parallel strategies shaped by shared poetic, philosophical, or ideological concerns. Some of the symbolic, theological, or ideological dimensions we perceive in Virgil may be refracted through the lens of later receptions.[64] In this sense, the myth's evolving legacy not only reflects Virgil's influence but helps bring into focus interpretative possibilities that may have been available from the start, even if left implicit. The afterlife of Ganymede thus becomes a means of reassessing both Virgil's strategy and the frameworks through which we continue to read him.

Restraint from eroticism appears to inform certain early Imperial visual representations of the myth. The pavonazzetto marble figures discovered at Sperlonga, part of a lavish decorative programme probably installed during the reign of Tiberius,[65] likely represent Ganymede carried off by Jupiter's eagle. The figure is usually identified as the Trojan young man and aligns with known iconographic types; most tellingly for this discussion, the boy is not nude, a trait that it shares with only some earlier depictions.[66] Although the precise intentions behind the image remain uncertain, its decorous presentation of the abduction scene aligns suggestively with Virgil's own version.[67]

The impulse to reinterpret or reframe the myth of Ganymede, however, may also have found metaphysical expression. One of the most striking potential examples appears in the underground Basilica of Porta Maggiore in Rome. In a provocative study, Hans Van Kasteel has argued that the stucco reliefs of the Basilica, many of which feature mythological and religious motifs, form a sustained visual commentary on Virgil's *Aeneid*.[68] He has proposed that the monument was constructed as early as 25-20 BC, and even suggested that Virgil himself may have supervised its iconographic programme. On this view, the reliefs would not only be contemporaneous with the composition of the poem, but would reflect the poet's own allegorical intentions, offering what would be an unprecedented case of literary-visual collaboration in Augustan Rome. Such a hypothesis would entail far-reaching implications:[69] it would revise the dating of the monument, attribute another work to Virgil, this time in visual form, and further support the idea that Virgil himself shaped the *Aeneid* through allegorical lenses, as readers since antiquity (e.g., Servius) have proposed.

Van Kasteel's thesis stands in contrast to earlier and more widely accepted views. In the twentieth century, scholars such as Franz Cumont and Jérôme Carcopino had already proposed a later date for

[63] See Barchiesi 1984/2015: 125–31.
[64] See Martindale's 1993 influential illustration of this reception awareness in classical studies.
[65] Bruno-Attanasio-Prochaska 2015: 389–90.
[66] Turnheim 2004: 897.
[67] One should not conclude from this observation that Virgil influenced the image, a thesis advanced by Hampe 1972 and quickly challenged (e.g., by Hermann 1974).
[68] Van Kasteel 2016.
[69] See Dapsens 2019.

the Basilica, placing it under the reign of Claudius (c. 48-54 CE), and interpreted its decorative programme as shaped by Neopythagorean ideas.[70] More recently, Frédéric Dewez has reaffirmed this hypothesis and challenged Van Kasteel's identification of several scenes, including a supposed Palinurus, more plausibly understood, following Cumont and Carcopino, as Ganymede.[71] In this reading, the myth is reframed through a metaphysical and esoteric lens, consistent with funerary or philosophical contexts.

If, as suggested by the scholarly consensus, this latter identification is correct, the Basilica offers a particularly striking example of how the myth of Ganymede was reimagined in post-Virgilian Rome, informed by doctrines concerning the soul's divine origin and eventual return. The boy is not borne aloft by an eagle or by Zeus himself, but by a winged figure identified as a funerary or astral *genius*. He pours wine from an *oinochoe* and points a flaming torch downward towards the earth. This gesture, along with the surrounding scenes, featuring Orpheus and Eurydice, Jason and Medea, and the Dioscuri, has been interpreted as setting an eschatological scheme in which the soul's suffering, transformation, or salvation forms the governing theme. In the Ganymede panel, the soul voluntarily renounces its earthly existence and rises to join the divine.[72] The image of the boy's elevation, in this context, becomes not merely a poetic topos or political allegory, but a symbol of metaphysical transcendence. This development suggests that the myth was adapted to new conceptual systems already a few decades after the publication of the *Aeneid*, something Virgil's own restrained use of the motif may have anticipated, though no proof for this thesis exists.

That Virgil's restrained handling of the Ganymede myth was not idiosyncratic but could function as a viable poetic model within Augustan literature is suggested by Horace. In *Odes* 4.4.1-4, Ganymede is invoked briefly and without explicit erotic colouring (*Qualem ministrum fulminis alitem, / cui rex deorum regnum in avis vagas / permisit expertus fidelem / Iuppiter in Ganymede flavo*). The allusion preserves the boy's association with Jupiter and with ascent to the divine sphere, without mentioning the god's passion and Ganymede's servile role as cupbearer. In this respect, Horace's formulation aligns closely with Virgil's handling of the myth.

If Horace's compressed allusion suggests that Virgil's decorous isolation of Ganymede's elevation could be sustained within Augustan poetry, other early imperial treatments move in a different direction, reintroducing elements that Virgil had left implicit. The clearest example is provided by Ovid. In the *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus recounts that Jupiter once burned with desire for the Trojan boy (10.155-6: *rex superum Phrygii quondam Ganymedis amore / arsit,*) and identifies Ganymede unambiguously as the god's cupbearer (*qui nunc quoque pocula miscet,* 10.160). The clarity of Ovid's formulation shows that neither Jupiter's erotic motivation nor Ganymede's servile role had faded from poetic memory.[73]

Ovid also offers a subtler presentation of the myth in book 1 of the *Fasti*, where the boy is invoked in connection with the sign of Aquarius and the celestial calendar. The poet associates the youth who pours water and wine (1.652) with Ganymede, immediately after identifying Augustus with Jupiter and praising Livia as uniquely worthy of the marriage bed of the king of the gods. This passage might subtly undercuts the poem's imperial panegyric. The myth of Ganymede, particularly its homoerotic overtones and associations with Jupiter's promiscuity, is reintroduced just before a sequence involving the rape of Callisto. The reference is repeated later (*Fasti* 6.43), again following praise of Concordia Augusta. In both cases, Ovid uses the figure of Ganymede to gesture towards the ideological fissures between Jupiter and Augustus, divine myth and political reality.[74]

An explicit contrast with Virgil's formulation emerges in the early imperial reworking of the myth by Germanicus. In the *Aratea*, he attributes the abduction directly to the god's passion (317-8: *hic tamen arduos / unguibus innocuis Phrygium rapuit Ganymeden*).[75] The violence of the act is further

[70] Cumont 1918; Carcopino 1943.
[71] Dewez 2017.
[72] Mayo 1967: 26–33.
[73] Even here, however, the issue of Jupiter's dignity is not entirely abandoned: Ovid notes that the god deigns to assume only the form of the eagle (10.157-8: *nulla tamen alite verti / dignatur, nisi quae posset sua fulmina ferre*).
[74] Šterbenc Erker 2023: 42, 200–2.
[75] On Zeus' eagle in the astronomical tradition, see Aratus, *Phaen.* 311-315 and Cicero, *Aratea* lines 87-90 (in the numbering of Soubiran 1972); neither author elaborates the myth of Ganymede or attributes erotic motivation to Jupiter.

amplified by its consequences: Troy's destruction is presented as the price paid for Jupiter's desire (320: *luit excidio quem Troia furorem*). By restoring erotic motivation and assigning it a catastrophic historical cost, Germanicus foregrounds tensions that Virgil's narrative leaves unarticulated. The contrast illustrates how the myth of Ganymede could be configured in markedly different ways within early imperial poetry and helps to clarify the significance of Virgil's choice to suppress erotic causation in *Aeneid* 5.

Petronius might show that the myth had become legible as a symbol of apotheosis, so entrenched as to be available for parody.[76] It has been proposed, for instance, that the wall painting depicting Trimalchio's apotheosis (*Satyricon* 29.5) can be read as a reversal of Ganymede.[77] In this view, a satirical or demystifying approach unsettles the image of the boy's ascension. A similar attitude does not diminish the ideological force of the myth but rather confirms its centrality as a cultural and literary point of reference.

Finally, the Flavian epicists would explicitly return to the ekphrasis of *Aeneid* 5, reactivating and reconfiguring its imagery within new ideological horizons. In Valerius Flaccus, the myth appears within an ekphrasis: on the chlamys woven by Hypsipyle, Ganymede is shown already translated to heaven, joyfully present at the divine banquet and serving as cupbearer to Jupiter, while the eagle of Jupiter stands by (*Arg.* 2.414-7: *pars haec frondosae raptus expresserat Idea / inlustremque fugam pueri; mox aethere laetus / adstabat mensis, quin et Iovis armiger ipse / accipit a Phrygio iam pocula blanda ministro*). In Silius, the myth likewise appears within an ekphrasis: on Hasdrubal's cloak, an eagle carries a boy aloft towards the heavens (*Pun.* 15.425-6: *aurata puerum rapiebat ad aethera penna / per nubes aquila, intexto librata volatu*). In Statius' *Thebaid*, Ganymede likewise appears within an ekphrasis: on a richly worked patera, the Phrygian boy is shown rising on golden wings as Troy and Ida recede below (*Theb.* 1.548-51: *hinc Phrygius fulvis venator tollitur alis, / Gargara desidunt surgenti et Troia recedit; / stant maesti comites frustraque sonantia lassant / ora canes umbramque petunt et nubila latrant*). In none of these Flavian treatments is Jupiter's erotic desire made explicit: as in Virgil, the emphasis falls on the boy's elevation rather than on Jupiter's lust. Ripoll has argued that these three poets treat Ganymede as a myth of apotheosis, using his figure to reflect on imperial deification.[78] If later texts could parody or reframe the boy's ascension, it is because the association between him and the divine sphere had become a meaningful symbolic shorthand. The Flavian response suggests how the Virgil's treatment of Ganymede's abduction could be viewed as a prototype for a sanitized handling of the episode.

This *Nachleben* demonstrates that the myth of Ganymede remained a potent site of ideological and symbolic negotiation well into the first century AD. Virgil's restrained handling, therefore, should be seen as part of a continuum of ancient responses, anticipating, resisting, or subtly shaping the myth's evolving significance.

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[76] There is no doubt that Petronius knew the myth, since he explicitly mentions it (*Sat.* 83).
[77] Battistella 2006.
[78] Ripoll 2000.

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