

THE ROMAN HYDRA IN DU BELLAY'S *LES ANTIQUITEZ DE ROME*

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In "Plus qu'aux bords Aetëans le brave filz d'Aeson," the French Renaissance poet Joachim Du Bellay evokes the classical myths of Jason and Golden Fleece, the Hydra, and the Labors of Hercules. In this sonnet, the tenth of Du Bellay's *Les Antiquitez de Rome* of 1558, the poet transforms these classical names and allusions to create his own myth of Rome's fratricidal combats.

Sonnet X

Plus qu'aux bords Aetëans le brave filz d'Aeson
Qui par enchantement conquist la riche laine,
Des dents d'un vieil serpent ensemençant la plaine
N'engendra de soldatz au champ de la toison,

Ceste Ville qui fut en sa jeune saison
Un Hydre de guerriers, se vid bravement pleine
De braves nourrissons, dont la gloire hautaine
A remply du Soleil l'une & l'autre maison.

Mais qui finalement, ne se trouvant au monde
Hercule qui dontast semence tant feconde,
D'une horrible fureur l'un contre l'autre armez

Se moissonnarent tous par un soudain orage,
Renouvelant entre eulx la fraternelle rage,
Qui aveugla jadis les fiers soldatz semez. (283)

(More than on the Æetean shores the brave son of ÆEson,
Who by magic conquered the rich wool,
From the teeth of an old serpent sowing the plain,
Engendered soldiers on the field of the Golden Fleece,

This City, which was in her youth
A Hydra of warriors, saw herself bravely full
Of brave nurslings, whose lofty glory
Filled one and the other house of the Sun,

But which, finally, not finding in the world
Any Hercules who could master such prolific seed,
With a horrible furor, armed one against the other,

All mowed each other down in a sudden storm,
Renewing among themselves the fraternal rage,
Which formerly blinded the proud soldiers sown in the field.)

The grammatical structure of this sonnet is so complicated and involved, with its many relative clauses and participial phrases, that a reader may find it difficult to follow even after multiple readings of the text. One problem is that, although Du Bellay places a period at the end of the second quatrain and another at the end of the sonnet, today, we would consider the whole poem to be only one complete sentence. The quatrains contain the main clause, and the tercets (Du Bellay's second sentence) consist of a long relative clause beginning with the words "Mais qui" ("But which").

Another problem with following the sense of the poem is the density and possible obscurity of the names. The first quatrain begins a long epic comparison whose second term is not introduced until the second quatrain. Furthermore, the actual names of both the first and second terms – Jason and Rome – are not given, and each member of the comparison contains several subsets referring to parts of the legends of Jason and the Golden Fleece, Rome, and the Labors of Hercules. The first quatrain alludes to the legends of Jason and the Golden Fleece. The second treats Rome's glory while introducing the theme of the Labors of Hercules and the invincibility of the Roman Hydra. The tercets combine the Labors of Hercules, the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece, and the fall of Rome.

The sense of the poem seems to be this: Rome in its early days was so full of warriors and so prolific in its population growth that it was like a Hydra, a mythical multiheaded serpent which grew two heads in place of each one cut off (Seyffert, "Heracles" 280). Rome was more densely populated than the field of the Golden Fleece, where soldiers sprang from dragon's teeth sown by Jason. Finally, finding no Hercules in the world to overcome this Roman Hydra, armed with a dreadful rage, the Roman soldiers cut each other down, just as the soldiers sprung from dragon's teeth had killed each other off when Jason, on Medea's advice, threw a stone in their midst, causing them to attack each other and allow him to capture the Golden Fleece (Seyffert, "Argonauts" 63).

Complicated as this retelling of the poem may be, it does not begin to scratch the surface of the sonnet's onomastic richness, which encompasses numerous stories and legends within each name and behind each allusion.

In the first verse, "Plus qu'aux bords Aetëans le brave filz d'Aeson" ("More than on the Æetean shores the brave son of ÆEson"), Du Bellay refers to Jason without mentioning him by name, calling him, rather, "le brave filz d'ÆEson." Both the name of his father, ÆEson, and the adjective "Aetëans" evoke the legend of the Golden Fleece more completely than simply giving us Jason's name would do.

The adjective "Aetëans" is formed on the name of ÆEetes, king of ÆEa. It was he who gave refuge to Phrixus, son of the cloud-goddess, Nephele, and Athamas, king of the Mínyæ in Boeotia. Nephele had transported her son, Phrixus, and her daughter, Helle, on the back of a golden-fleeced ram to escape from the plots of the children's stepmother, Ino, the daughter of Cadmus. Helle fell into the sea, afterwards called the Hellespont, but Phrixus arrived safely at the palace of King ÆEetes (Seyffert, "Athamas" 79). Later, Phrixus married Chalciopé, daughter of King ÆEetes. He sacrificed the ram and hung its fleece in the grove of Ares, god of war, where it was guarded by a dragon which never slept (Seyffert, "Argonauts" 61–62).

The origin of the Golden Fleece, with the story of Athamas, Nephele, Ino, Helle, Phrixus, ÆEetes, and Chalciopé, is contained in the adjective "Aetëans," which is a geographical adjective formed from the proper name "ÆEetes." This name-based geographical adjective contains more allusions to the legends of the origins of the Golden Fleece than the name of Colchis, which is the name later times gave to ÆEa, the realm of ÆEetes, a kingdom at the farthest end of the Black Sea (Seyffert, "Argonauts" 61).

Calling Jason "le filz d'Aeson" rather than Jason recalls the reason for his expedition to capture the Golden Fleece. Jason's uncle, Pelias, son of Poseidon and Tyro, had deprived his half-brother ÆEson of the

sovereignty of his kingdom, Iolcos in Thessaly. To keep him safe from harm, Æson had sent his son in secret to Mount Pelion to be educated by the centaur Chiron. When Jason returned to Iolcos at the age of twenty, he demanded that Pelias restore Æson to his rightful place. Pelias, though he had no intention of keeping his bargain, agreed to Jason's terms if Jason would bring the Golden Fleece back from Æa (Rose, "Argonauts" 87; Peck, "Argonautae" 121).

The second verse of the first quatrain refers to the magic by which Jason captured the Golden Fleece, called in this verse "la riche laine" ("the rich wool"). The noun "enchantement" ("magic") recalls the role of Medea, daughter of King Æetes of Colchis and of Idyia, who fell in love with Jason and gave him a magic ointment to protect him while he sowed dragon's teeth in the field he had plowed using two brass-hooved, fire-breathing bulls (Seyffert, "Argonauts" 62–63). The dragon's teeth, "Des dents d'un vieil serpent," are mentioned in the third verse, and the soldiers who sprang from them in the fourth. The final word in the quatrain is "toison," the French word for fleece, usually "la toison d'or" when referring to the Golden Fleece. The word "toison," pronounced /twesō/ in sixteenth-century French, and rhyming the "Æson" in the first quatrain, by means of the rhyme, the goal and the reason for the expedition, just as "laine" ("wool") and "plaine" ("plain" or "field"), that is, the Golden Fleece and its location in Colchis, are united by the rhymes of the second and third verses.

The second quatrain deals with Rome, identified only as "cèste Ville" ("this City"). The word "Ville" is the grammatical subject of this sonnet, just as ancient Rome is the subject of the collection as a whole. Du Bellay, in this quatrain, develops the myth of the Roman Hydra. In her youth, Rome was so full of warriors and brave nurslings whose glory filled one and the other house of the Sun that she was like a Hydra. As soon as one warrior was cut down, two grew in his place. The myth of the Roman Hydra is part of a code of planting and fertility which runs through the poem with such words as "ensemencant" ("sowing") (verse three); "engendra" ("engendered") (verse four); "nourrissons" ("nurslings") (verse seven); and "semence" ("seed") and "feconde" ("prolific") (verse ten). To these may be added "plaine" ("plain") (verse three), "champ" ("field") (verse four), "moissonnarent" ("mowed down") (verse twelve), and even "Soleil" ("Sun") (verse eight).

M. A. Screech found the fourth verse of the second quatrain, "A remply du Soleil l'une et l'autre maison" ("Filled one and the other house of the Sun"), to be most obscure ("Vers des plus obscurs") (Du Bellay 283). Verdun L. Saulnier suggests that the two houses of the Sun are the earth and the skies (119). It seems to me that the two houses of the Sun are, rather, the night and the day or, as Françoise Joukovsky proposes, the east and the west ("L'Orient et L'Occident") (Notes 159).

Helios, the Sun god, was the son of the Titan Hyperion and the Titaness Theia. He was the brother of Selene, the Moon, and Eos, the Dawn. In the morning, Helios rose from the ocean in the east. He climbed the vault of heaven in a chariot drawn by four white horses. In the evening, he sank with his chariot into the ocean. While he slept, he was carried around along the northern border of the earth to the east again in a golden boat, shaped like a bowl (Seyffert, "Helios" 274). The golden bowl of Helios also figures in the Labors of Hercules, for the Sun god gave Hercules his golden bowl to cross the ocean in his quest for the cattle of Geryones (Seyffert, "Heracles" 281). The Latin poets identified Helios with the Sabine god, Sol, who had an ancient place of worship on the Quirinal in Rome (Seyffert, "Helios" 274).

Even Medea, daughter of King Æetes, who married Jason after they escaped from Colchis with the Golden Fleece, is connected to the Sun. She was the granddaughter of Helios, and he sent a chariot drawn by serpents for her to escape in after she had killed the unfaithful Jason's new bride Crëusa, or Glauce; Crëusa's father, Creon, king of Corinth; and her own two sons, Mermerus and Pheres (Seyffert, "Argonauts" 63).

Literary Onomastics

The tercets bring us back to the Labors of Hercules, one of which was killing the Hydra, or water snake, which ravaged the land around Lerna, a swamp or marsh in ancient Greece (Peck, "Heracles" 790). This he did by cauterizing each head as it was cut off so that two could not grow in its place and burying the one immortal head under a pile of rocks (Larousse, "Lerne" 396). The Roman Hydra was the personification of the fecundity of the city of Rome, whose population was ever-growing, so much so that no outside force could conquer her. No Hercules was to be found in the world to overpower her either, for, by the time Rome came into being, Hercules had already joined the immortals (Larousse, "Hercule" 212). Instead, Rome was destroyed by internal dissension. The brave soldiers who had filled the world annihilated each other, just as the soldiers which had sprung from the dragon's teeth in the kingdom of Æetes had destroyed one another.

In the final verse of the sonnet, Du Bellay returns to the soldiers from the field of the Golden Fleece, but the verse before that seems to call for a different comparison. The next to the last verse of the poem, "Renouvelant entre eux la fraternelle rage" ("Renewing among themselves the fraternal rage"), would seem to harken back to the founding of Rome and the murder of Remus by his brother Romulus. The adjective "fraternelle" modifying the noun "rage," rather than another noun, such as "love" or "rivalry," surprises. Yet, it is most apt, as Rome's original sin, with the murder of Remus by Romulus, linked Rome's beginning with its end.

Throughout this sonnet, Du Bellay has included references to pride, to glory, to great exploits, and to a code of sowing and reaping. In the end, what Rome reaps are the seeds of discord sown at the city's founding, just as the soldiers sprung from the dragon's teeth were mown down by their internal discords. The Roman Hydra needed no Hercules to conquer her and no barbarians from the north. She destroyed herself.

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