Solar Sons: Ovid, Phaethon and Memnon in Quintus of Smyrna’s Posthomerica

James Oakley | ORCID: 0000-0003-2637-3385
Wadham College, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom
james.oakley@wadham.ox.ac.uk

Received December 2021 | Accepted March 2022

The question of whether Quintus read and used Latin texts in the composition of his Posthomerica has persisted throughout the history of scholarship on this poem. Direct allusions to Latin literature are complicated by the fact that Quintus is writing not only in a different language, but also in an intensely Homeric idiom perhaps just under 1000 years old, with all the tradition and formulae that accompanied it.¹ Intertexts and evocations of other poems written in the same epic diction are thus much easier to detect even than other Greek texts (such as tragedies), let alone Latin ones. This ‘Latin question’ was dominated in the mid-20th century by Rudolf Keydell, who argued for prodigious use of Latin literature in the Posthomerica, including works by Virgil, Ovid, Seneca and Cicero, and Francis Vian, who more cautiously preferred to see Greek models (even if not extant) for Quintus’ poem.² Keydell may indeed have been over-eager to detect allusions in some instances, but his analysis of very close verbal parallels between passages of the Posthomerica (12.358-407) and the Aeneid (9.440-517), both narrating the formation of a military testudo and its destruction by Trojan defenders, convincingly argued for Quintus’ close reading and use of the Aeneid.³ Since then, and for fairly obvious reasons—partially shared setting and characters—the focus has largely been on Virgil’s

¹ Indeed in many ways Quintus’ idiom is more Homeric than Homer’s: Baumbach and Bär 2007a, 22 calculate that around 10% of Quintus’ entire vocabulary consists of Homeric hapaxes, and Scheijnen 2017, 8 notes that epic similes make up around 16.6% of his verses, as opposed to 8.2% and 3.4% in the Iliad and Odyssey respectively.
² See Vian 1959, 95-101 for a summation of his objections to Quintus using Roman models, and Keydell 1961 for his review of Vian’s arguments and restatement of his own views. James 2007 summarises and critiques the prejudicial nature of 20th-century scholarship on this issue.
³ Keydell 1954, 255-256.
poem. Ursula Gärtner’s monograph on this subject detects a number of potential allusions by Quintus to the *Aeneid*, though she remains cautious in her conclusions.⁴ Within the past decade the case for Quintus’ use of Latin models has been made increasingly strongly, and the purpose of this question has moved beyond a focus on the historical author (i.e. *did* Quintus know Latin, *did* he allude to Latin literature),⁵ to a more audience-based assessment of how any such allusions (as detected by us as readers) enrich our understanding of the *Posthomerica* itself.⁶

This approach has improved our understanding of the *Posthomerica*: Greensmith emphasises the importance of Quintus’ ability to either overlap with Virgil or, even more pointedly, to not do so, and shows how Quintus productively uses Virgil in his construction of temporality.⁷ The *Aeneid* is not, however, the only Latin text worth considering with regard to the *Posthomerica*: though Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* has more in common structurally with Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* amongst late Greek epics, a relationship with the *Posthomerica* has long been suggested for the debate between Odysseus and Ajax in Book 5 over the arms of Achilles (also narrated in *Metamorphoses* 13).⁸ But another passage of the *Posthomerica* in which Quintus may use Ovid (the mourning for Memnon and subsequent metamorphosis of his soldiers in Book 2) has further implications for what this engagement can tell us about how and why he uses Latin poetry.

Throughout the *Posthomerica* there are a number of passages that would not be out of place (and indeed generally do have a place) in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.⁹ These include the metamorphoses of Memnon’s soldiers (Q.S. 2.642-655,

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⁵ This approach is, of course, still useful for shedding light on the extent of bilingualism amongst the Greek elite of the Roman Empire, Quintus’ attitude towards Roman rule over the Greeks, and his own poetic ability. Carvounis 2019, lvii-lxv provides an up-to-date summary of the historical evidence for potential Latin influence on Greek literature.
⁶ Maciver 2011, 692-693 describes this approach as “when I read an allusion to the *Aeneid* in the *Posthomerica*, I (as subjective reader) make Quintus a poet who alludes to the *Aeneid*”.
⁸ Keydell 1961, 280-281. James and Lee 2000, 80-102 develop this argument, arguing for thematic and structural connections between the poems. The *Posthomerica* is markedly linear in its structure, both within the narrative (see Schenk 1997, 372-373 for Quintus’ repeated use of Calchas to remind us of the *telos* of the poem) and metatextually: Greensmith 2018, 261 points out verbal parallels at the beginning and end of the *Posthomerica* that connect it to the end of the *Iliad* and beginning of the *Odyssey*. This approach differs from the more digressive *Metamorphoses* and *Dionysiaca*, which while broadly linear—Ovid begins with the birth of the cosmos, Nonnus with the birth of Dionysus, and both end with an apotheosis—are marked by frequent diversions before that *telos* is reached.
⁹ I use Vian’s 1963-1969 text for the *Posthomerica* and Tarrant’s 2004 text for the *Metamorphoses*. All translations are my own.
Met. 13.576-622), Phaethon (Q.S. 5.625-630, Met. 1.749-2.400), and Hecuba (Q.S. 14.348-351, Met. 13.565-571). The two poems also share the judgment of Achilles’ arms (without any metamorphosis), a set of rhetorical speeches by Odysseus and Telamonian Ajax (Q.S. 5.121-332, Met. 13.1-383). The narratives in the Posthomerica, however, typically diverge almost entirely from those of the Metamorphoses, and this trend is particularly prominent in the case of the Memnonidae in Posthomerica 2, where most of the details of the metamorphosis differ. After Achilles has killed Memnon (Q.S. 2.542-548), Eos has him taken away from the battlefield to be buried (2.549-592). The Ethiopians, wanting to accompany their king’s body, are given the ability by a god ‘to be carried in the air’ (ὑπηέριοι φορέσθαι, 2.573), foreshadowing their imminent metamorphosis into birds.10 After encouraging us to expect a metamorphosis—and, given Ovid also narrated this episode, perhaps more specifically the Metamorphoses—Quintus delays narrating it for over fifty lines (until 2.642-655) and instead describes Eos descending to earth to mourn.11 Accompanying Eos on her descent are her twelve companions (κοῦραι ἐυπλόκαμοι δυοκαίδεκα, 2.595), identified earlier as the daughters of Helios (2.501-502), and Quintus describes them at 2.595-602 in terms of their temporal, calendrical function. This digression appears somewhat inappropriate, interrupting not just the funeral of Memnon but also the expected narrative of the metamorphosis of his soldiers; Wenglinsky states (a little harshly) that “[t]he lengthy description of the daughters of Helius (2.594-604) adds nothing”.12 The description ends with mention of the seasons:

10 Campagnolo 2011, 369 points out that υπηέριοι is a hapax in the poem, suggesting the unusual nature of what is about to happen, and that it perhaps also alludes to Opp. C.1.380 (τέρσαις τ’ ὄρνις), foreshadowing the imminent avian metamorphosis. For Quintus’ unusual focus on aetiological metamorphoses, particularly in Book 2, see Campagnolo 2011, 37-40. Hopkinson 2000, 28 lists other sources for the myth: Memnon is associated with birds as early as the 6th century BC in figurative art, and birds called Memnonidae that fight in the Troad are described by Pliny the Elder (Nat. 10.39) and Aelian (NA 5.1); it therefore seems likely that a reference to Memnon’s soldiers being ‘carried in the air’ would suggest an imminent metamorphosis to the audience. The only extant account of this metamorphosis, as Campagnolo 2011, 19 notes, is in fact Ovid himself, though Aelian’s cryptic mention of ‘the secrets of nature’ (τὰ τῆς φύσεως ἀπόρρητα) that he has no leisure to track down (with regards to the reasons that the birds fight) perhaps implies that he is aware of this supernatural account.

11 Greensmith 2020, 296 notes that self-conscious references to Quintus’ use of delay are common throughout the poem, particularly in Book 2.

12 Wenglinsky 2002, 213. Greensmith 2020, 298 more productively points out its relevance to the general theme of cyclicity with Memnon. Such digressions are not common in the general linearity of the Posthomerica, though the narrative does split in books 6-7 as Odysseus and Diomedes travel to Scyros while the fighting continues. One other notable digression comes at 10.332-360, when Paris’ death is interrupted by Hera gossiping with
icy winter and flowery spring,
and lovely summer and autumn with many grapes

At first glance there may seem to be little that is remarkable here: it does not take a great stretch of the imagination to link ice, flowers, and grapes to winter, spring, and autumn. But this apparent obviousness belies how unusual these lines actually are. For a start, they are—despite their very Homeric sound (with the repetition of the epic genitive -οῖο)—inherently un-Homeric. Quintus very emphatically has four seasons (two lines of two seasons each), while in early Greek there were only three, ὀπώρα being originally a part of summer.14

Nor are the attributes assigned to the seasons well-attested before Quintus. ‘Icy’ (κρυερός) is in epic used to describe routs and laments,15 and ‘icy winter’ first appears in Greek only in Oppian’s Cynegética (χεῖμα ... κρυερόν, 3.457), and in a medical poem written by Andromachus, physician to Nero (κρυεροῦ ἀπὸ χείματος, preserved by Gal. Ant. 1.37). Flowers and spring are associated in early epic, but only when characterising the flowers rather than the season, and only in the formula ἄνθεσιν εἰαρινοῖσι (Hom. Il. 2.89; Hes. Th. 279, Op. 75); slightly closer in sense to Quintus is h. Pan. 17 (ἐαρος πολυανθέος). The adjective ἀνθεμόεις applied to ‘spring’ only occurs in a fragment of Alcaeus preserved by Ath. 10.429b. Neither ‘lovely summer’ nor ‘autumn with its many grapes’ appear in Greek literature before Quintus. Further, the standard iconography for the seasons in Greco-Roman artwork was based on the fruit produced in each season and the results of hunting in winter,16 which Quintus only adopts for autumn. Even πολυστάφυλος, however, is a rare word used in Greek hexameter to describe either places (Arne and Histiaea at Hom. Il. 2.507 and 2.537)
or a god (Dionysus at *H. Hom.* 26.11), not the season. Parallels not just in Greek literature, but in Greek culture overall, are therefore lacking.

A very close parallel can, however, be found in the *Metamorphoses*. Phaethon, son of Sol (the Roman equivalent of Helios), arrives at his father’s palace and sees him sitting on his throne; beside him are the Seasons:

Verque novum stabant cinctum florente corona,
stabant nuda Aestas et spicce serta gerebat,
stabant et Autumnus, calcatis sordidus uvis,
et glacialis Hiems canos hirsuta capillos.18

and fresh Spring was standing there, garlanded with a flowery crown, nude Summer was standing there and was carrying sheaves of corn, and Autumn was standing there, stained with trodden grapes, and icy Winter, bristling with grey hairs.

Both passages deal with children of the Sun (the Heliades in Quintus, Phaethon in Ovid), which means there is a contextual connection between the two. Linguistically, Quintus’ descriptions of summer, autumn, and winter all pick up the primary adjectives Ovid uses to describe them; in particular, χειμῶνος κρυεροῖο is a direct translation of *glacialis Hiems*. For spring Quintus adopts Ovid’s image of flowering, but again uses an almost direct translation (*εἴαρος ἀνθεμόεντος = ver ... florente*) strengthened by the fact that for only this season he forgoes the -οῖο ending in the adjective in favour of one phonetically closer to Ovid (*ἀνθεμόεντος, florente*). Similar stylistic approaches are also visible in the use of repetition (Ovid with *stabat*, Quintus with the -οῖο endings) and variation of connectives (Ovid repeatedly shifts their position in the line, while Quintus uses the three different epic connectives καὶ ... ἠδὲ ... τ’ in succession). And although Quintus initially begins describing his seasons

17 Campagnolo 2011, 378.
19 Given both previous attestations of this phrase occur after Ovid, and that one of these attestations was written by a Greek at the imperial court and therefore more likely than most to have read the *Metamorphoses*, this does not diminish the likelihood that Quintus uses Ovid directly.
20 See Carvounis 2019, 226 for another passage alluding to Latin literature, Quintus’ narration of the storm that destroys the Greek fleet: Q.S. 14.494-495: οἷα κατὰ κρημνοῖο κυλινδο-μένας φορέωσκε | βυσσὸν ἐς ἠερόεντα seems to be modelled on Verg. *A.* 1.106-107: *hi summo in fluctu pendent; his unda dehiscent*; *terram inter fluctus aperit*, reinforced perhaps by the phonetic similarity of *φορέωσκε, dehiscent*. See Radiciotti 1998, 112 for the practice of writing bilingual glossaries, including for Latin literary texts, entirely using the Greek alphabet, meaning that such similarities would have been visually clear to the reader.
as calendrical concepts (and unlike Ovid not as personifications), this process begins to slip in the second line: ἐρατός can easily be applied to people (e.g. Hom. Od. 10.99: παίδ' ἐρατόν), and, as noted above, in early hexameter poetry πολυστάφυλος is only applied to proper names (the towns Arne and Histiaea, and the god Dionysus). The seasons are, in a sense, gradually metamorphosed into the Seasons across these two lines.

The Metamorphoses is picked up again with Eos’ lament for her son (Q.S. 2.609-622). Though Helios’ threat to Zeus at Hom. Od. 12.374-388 is probably the original basis for this motif of a solar deity refusing their duty,21 the Homeric passage is very brief and has little in common with Quintus’.22 A much closer parallel is Phoebus’ lament for Phaethon at Met. 2.385-393. Both Eos and Phoebus complain about the lack of honour they feel from Zeus/Jupiter (Q.S. 2.616 ἀτιμοτέρη picking up Met. 2.387 sine honore), a theme absent from Helios’ speech in the Odyssey (where his anger is with humans, not the gods). Both gods also angrily suggest that Zeus/Jupiter should take responsibility for the deaths of their sons, and have someone else carry out their duties. In the Posthomerica it is Thetis:

Θέτιν δ’ ἐς Ὄλυμπον ἀγέσθω
ἐξ ἁλός, ὄφρα θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισι φαείνη23

let him [Zeus] lead Thetis to Olympus from the sea, so that she may give light to gods and men

In the Metamorphoses it is Jupiter himself:

ipse agat ut saltem, dum nostras temptat habenas,
orbatura patres aliquando fulmina ponat24

let he [Jupiter] himself drive, so that at least while he tries his hand at my reins
he may put aside his lightning bolts that bereave fathers

21 Goţia 2007, 103.
22 Wenglinsky 2002, 212. The major difference is that Helios’ desire (the punishment of Odysseus and his men) is able to be fulfilled, and his threat can therefore be appeased; for Eos and Phoebus their threat is based on an unfixable wrong, and so their threats can only be averted by the power of Zeus/Jupiter. Nor does Helios argue that another should take over his duty, threatening only to neglect it. Campagnolo 2011, 388 does not mention any precedents for Eos’ demand that another take over her chariot.
24 Ov. Met. 2.390-391.
There are further parallels between the two texts: Q.S. 2.635-636, οὐδὲ τι θυμῷ | ἀντολίης ἀλέγιζε, μέγαν δὲ ἤχθηρεν Ὁλυμπὸν (‘nor did she have any care in her heart for the sunrise, and she hated great Olympus’) is reminiscent of Met. 2.383-384 lucemque odit seque ipse diemque | datque animum in luctus (‘he hated the light and himself and the day, and gave his heart to grief’). It is also Zeus’ and Jupiter’s threats, rather than the negotiations in the Odyssey, that cause Eos and Phoebus to return to their duties. Zeus could hardly ‘regally add threats’ (Met. 2.397) in any more imposing way than by ‘thundering in anger’ (Q.S. 2.640) at Eos. It is also perhaps relevant that Quintus ends his narrative with Eos ‘opening the gates of the sky’ (αἰθερ ίας ὤιξε πύλας, 2.666), while Ovid ends his with Jupiter ‘circling the walls of the sky’ (moenia caeli | circuit, 2.401-402) to make sure that they have not opened; the two accounts at the end diverge and oppose one another.

The effect is twofold. On the one hand Quintus rejects the Ovidian narratives of the Memnonidae here and later in his own account of Phaethon’s death (Q.S. 5.625-630), in which his sisters do not transform and it is his father Helios who creates the amber from their tears as an honour for his son. Yet on the other he consciously alludes to one metamorphosis while delaying another, and in doing so identifies his Memnon with Ovid’s Phaethon. Thus Memnon’s death is cast, like Phaethon’s, as a foolish and naïve act of hubris, in which he imagined that he could tame and overcome something beyond his power because of his divine parentage. In both cases, it is Phoebus Apollo alone who is able to succeed in the tasks attempted by Phaethon and Memnon, taming his horses in the Metamorphoses and overcoming Achilles in the Posthomerica. By simultaneously rejecting and alluding to Ovid’s poem—by metamorphosing the Metamorphoses—Quintus asserts his own originality and Memnon’s lack of it. The son of Eos is emphatically not the first demigod to aim too high only to crash and burn, nor, as Achilles will immediately go on to prove in the next book, is he the last.

25 A similar approach is undertaken by Nonnus as well, for which see Knox 1988.
26 Scheijnen 2018, 93-94 argues that Memnon is in a sense characterised by this lack of originality, functioning already as a doublet for Penthesilea and Hector. We are repeatedly given the impression that we have seen it all before.
27 I am very grateful to both Laura Miguélez-Cavero and Emma Greensmith for their helpful and thought-provoking comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and similarly to the journal’s anonymous reviewer.
Bibliography


