

Images of Liminality in Book VI of The Aeneid

Pouneh Saeedi  
*University of Toronto*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

### Recommended Citation

Saeedi, Pouneh. "Images of Liminality in Book VI of The Aeneid." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.2 (2009): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1474>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 11 Issue 2 (June 2009) Article 9**  
**Pouneh Saeedi,**  
**"Images of Liminality in Book VI of *The Aeneid*"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss2/9>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.2 (2009)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss2/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her paper "Images of Liminality in Book VI of *The Aeneid*" Pouneh Saeedi discusses the concept of "liminality" in Virgil's *The Aeneid* and its potential in defying designated boundaries. The concept of liminality undercuts binarisms such as those separating winners and losers as well as heroes and monsters. In addition, an investigation of liminality as a zone of constant becoming continues to shed light on a vast array of new transitions. Aeneas's future success in the construction of a new empire and the rebuilding of a Roman nation, to a large extent, is indebted to his having ventured onto the thresholds and fought the *monstra*. Being the embodiment of the earthly and the divine, hence liminal, he is naturally predisposed to grand possibilities. His encounter with liminal entities such as the Sibyl and Charon, along with his appreciation for the function of the "golden bough" and all the monsters emerging from the interstices of in-between-ness, in the end, empower Aeneas in conquering the hurdles placed against him in Latium, the destined terrain of the Roman race. Such are the potentialities offered by liminality and Book VI of *The Aeneid* is just one of many examples thereof.

## Pouneh SAEEDI

### Images of Liminality in Book VI of *The Aeneid*

The concept of liminality in humanities scholarship was brought to the fore by ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) followed by anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983). Their focus has been on the association of "liminality" with a series of rites known as *rites de passage*: "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Turner, *The Ritual* 94). The set of rites are divided into the three phases of "separation," "transition," and "reincorporation," but given the importance of liminality, the notions have been re-labeled around that concept as "preliminal, liminal, and postliminal" (Turner, *On the Edge* 159). The individual, who has been separated from the masses to undergo these rites, is later reincorporated into the *communitas*, so to speak, reborn. One of the sources of fascination with liminality is that only a few elect have the capacity to withstand its high demands. Even in the case of the selected few, the individual undergoing the *rites de passage* has to manifest signs of readiness and maturity. Aeneas, for instance, has to overcome his fears and surmount many an obstacle before he becomes worthy of the rites of passage concretized in his journey to the Realm of the Dead. Only when he is officially "tried of Illiacis fate" (*exercitat(us) Illiacis fatis*) (*The Aeneid* V 725) does the spirit of his dead father, Anchises, summon him officially to the Underworld to witness the fate of the dead and the unfolding of the future of his race before his own earthly eyes. However, as I demonstrate in the article at hand, within the context of Book VI of *The Aeneid*, which abounds in images of marginality, the notion of liminality is not confined to heroic individuation and can also be linked to morphological and ontological beginnings and openings in the form of the presencing of new forms of being and marginal characters that fail to fall into any distinct category. Not only monstrous beings, but also heroes, in being endowed with capacities that exceed human limits, manifest signs of liminality.

One might argue that liminality is embedded primarily in anthropology and has little to do with literature, however, the concept does embrace anthropocentric discourse as the epic genre, to which *The Aeneid* is believed to belong, by definition, has man, as heroic as he may be, at its centre. It is to be noted that Aeneas despite all his godlike qualities possesses enough foibles to render him a member of the human race. The concept of liminality is, in fact, present in a variety of forms in *The Aeneid*, an epic invested in geographical transitions of the Trojan people and the transformative odysseys of their hero, also the legendary founder of Rome, Aeneas. For one thing, Aeneas is a liminal figure in being connected with the world of the mortals and that of the gods, a characteristic which allows him to embark upon a *katabasis*, a journey to the Underworld. The term *limen*, meaning threshold in Latin, permeates various parts of the poem, although it does not herald an altogether new experience in all cases of its usage. Book VI of *The Aeneid*, in which Aeneas is initiated into the mysteries of the Underworld and the future of his race, abounds in diverse images of liminality. Given the hero's state of in-between-ness, as a half-divine mortal who embarks on a journey to the Land of the Dead, while he himself is alive, there remains little wonder as to why liminality is so conspicuously present in this section of the poem. Book VI of *The Aeneid* is not only significant in terms of delineating a Virgilian view of the mysteries of the universe in general, and the Afterlife in particular, but also in giving the heroic founder of Rome the quantum leap required to move towards the fated city of Latium, the site of the reborn Empire. Book VI of *The Aeneid*, which marks a watershed in the course of the epic's twelve books, signals both the rebirth of Aeneas as a hero ready to take on the hardy Latians and the re-emergence of the Roman nation. Along with Aeneas, the Trojan nation goes through a transitional phase that incites them to move on to the next leg of their journey.

Aeneas is not the only liminal figure in Book VI of *The Aeneid*, nor is he the only liminal hero to appear in epics, the grandeur of which, to a large extent, hinges on thresholds and boundaries ushering in new beginnings. As Martin Heidegger has suggested: "A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which *something begins its presencing*" (qtd. in *Bhabha* 1). It is along the interstices of *Dasein*, along the boundaries of in-between-ness that new forms of beings emerge challenging the prevailing norms. Amongst the diverse shapes of in-between-ness, one of its most enigmatic forms happens to be the purgatorial existence between life and death. In some eschatological systems, there is a period after death during which the

soul of the deceased is "betwixt and between," being neither part of this world nor that of the next. The split nature of the soul finds a manifestation in the experiencing of, as it were, two bodies. This is in line with Raymond A. Moody Jr.'s and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's or Kenneth Ring's documentation of the period of in-between-ness recorded, upon much research and many interviews, which have led some to believe that those undergoing near-death experiences feel as if they had two bodies (*Life After Death* 21). In fact, it is in accordance with belief in the liminality of the soul that many religions engage in intense offerings to the god(s) during that *intermezzo* of worldly being and non-being, in the hopes that the soul embark on a peaceful journey to its final abode. According to Carol Zaleski: "Mere departure from the body does not suffice to make the soul a full-fledged citizen of the next world; in medieval Christianity as in many other eschatological traditions, the newly deceased soul is pictured as lingering by the body for a brief interregnum during which it belongs to neither world. ... Those on the earthly side of the threshold can help through funeral rites and prayers for the dead" (52-53). However, what is significant about the heroes portrayed in a number of world epics including *The Aeneid* is that they come to experience in their earthly flesh, and not in their soul, an otherworld, usually either the Underworld or a locus sharing certain characteristics with the Land of the Dead. These heroes, although not on a literal level, experience a form of death, a demise of their old selves leading to the emergence of transformed selves. Not every individual is capable of going through the rites of passage that signals the death of one self and the birth of another. Aeneas, in being goddess-born (*natus dea*), the son of divine Venus and earthly Anchises, is already predisposed to liminality. His connection to another plane of existence manifests itself in his prophetic dreams including one in which he sees before him the spirit of Hector who informs him of the dangers lurking ahead in Troy as he encourages the Trojan hero to escape (Book II 289-90).

Apart from a journey to Orcus, in many cases the hero is depicted as having a foothold in two different worlds, this world and an otherworld -- not necessarily the Underworld. For example, in *Das Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried undergoes a heroic initiation in an otherworld where he finds the two princes, Schilbung and Nibelung who give him Nibelung's sword, Balmung as a reward for his help to divide their treasure (Aventiure 3 93), following which he ends up surviving a violent conflict against the princes, twelve giants, seven hundred warriors, and the dwarf Alberich (Aventiure 3 93-96) and consequently gains access to their hoard and the *Tarnkappe*, the cloak of invisibility. In the Persian epic *The Shahnameh*, the fact that the hero Rostam lives in Sistan, a remote outpost of the empire, explains his anomalous features. His success in overcoming in the Otherworld of Mazandaran, the White Div, a creature whose defeat endows the hero with an otherworldly awe of *draconitas*, is to a large extent, due to being located along social and geographical margins. In *Beowulf*, Beowulf is himself a liminal figure in having been "stained" (*fah*, line 420a) with the blood of monsters and consequently received a boost to his physical prowess. Therefore, it is not surprising to see him succeed in penetrating the otherworldly habitat of the giant Grendel and his mother, a locus evocative of the *Visio St. Pauli* of Hell that appears in Blickling Homily XVI (see Orchard, *Pride* 38-45) as is indicated in the description below: "Although the strong-antlered stag, roaming the hearth, may seek out the forest when driven from afar, hard pressed by hounds, he will sooner yield up life and spirit on the bank than hide his head there. That is not a pleasant place: ðeah þe haeðstapa hundum geswenced, / heorot hornum trum, holtwudu sece, / feorran geflymed, aer he feorh seleð, / aldor on ofre aer he in wille / hafelan [beorgan]; nis þæt heoru stow" (lines 1368-72).

The habitat of the visionary Sibyl, a deep cave, which tends to be a potential heterotopia in and of itself, exudes a similar sense of eeriness pervading the lupine den of Grendel and his mother as is indicated in the phrase *warigeað wulfhleopu* ("wind-swept slopes") (line 1358a). The Sibyl's cave also projects the image of a tabooed territory which hardly any mortal would dare to penetrate. The objective correlative for the haunted atmosphere portrayed in the timid hart in *Beowulf* (an image that conjures up the Danish mead-hall, *Heorot* or "Hart-House" itself) is echoed in the figure of "flying creatures" (*volantes*, line 239), which, similarly, shun the fearsome otherworldly setting: "A deep cave there was yawning wide and vast, rough with stones, safe by the black lake and the darkness of groves, over which no flying creature could safely fly their way: such a vapor from those dark jaws poured into the vault of heavens when the Greeks spoke of the name of Avernus: spelunca alta fuit vastoque immanis hiatu, / scrupea, tuta, lacu nigro nemorumque tenebris, / quam super haud ullae poterant impune volantes / tendere iter pinnis: talis sese halitus atris / faucibus effundens super ad

convexa ferebat / unde locum Grai dixerunt nomine Aornum" (lines 237-42). Just as the hart does not wish to place its head anywhere near the waters of Grendel's mere, the birds cannot safely *tendere iter pinnis*. Along the borders separating the earthly world from the Underworld, danger looms large.

The Sibyl is one of the primary liminal figures in Book VI. She is a frenzied female who has constructed her stronghold within a space, which bears the hallmarks of liminality and fits Mary Douglas's following description of marginal characters: "There are people who are somehow left out in the patterning of society, who are placeless. They may be doing nothing wrong, but their status is indefinable" (95). The image that is formed in our minds of the Sibyl at the very beginning of Book VI of *The Aeneid*, is one that evokes fear if not awe: "But pious Aeneas seeks the heights which lofty Apollo presides over, within some distance, the retreat of the dreaded Sibyl, the enormous cavern, into which the Delian seer breathes a mighty mind and soul, disclosing the future" ("at pius Aeneas arces, quibus altus Apollo/ praesidet, horrendaeque procul secreta Sibyllae,/ antrum immane, petit, magnam cui mentem animumque / Delius inspirat vates aperitque futura") (lines 9-12). Also, the manner in which she is portrayed, according to R.D. Williams, is that of horse-driving in lines 100-01: "violently did Apollo shake the reins as she raged, turning the goads in her heart" ("ea frene furenti/ concutit et stimulos sub pectore vertit Apollo") (466). All in all, she conveys a sense of otherness as a frenzied woman who is chanting dreaded words from the "entrance" (*adyto*) of her cavern. Her abode evokes a feeling of fear and awe in that it is explicitly said to be a threshold to an unknown realm, the enigmatic quality of which is only heightened by the fact that the Sibyl herself appears to be removed from the rest of the human race in every possible aspect:

The huge side of the Euboean rock is carved into a cavern, to which lead a wide hundred entrances, a hundred mouths, from which rush as many voices, the Sibyl's responses. They had come to the threshold, when the virgin said: "It's time to ask the fates; the god, behold, the god!" As she spoke these words to him before the doors, suddenly neither face nor color was the same, the hair did not remain braided; but her chest heaves, her heart swells with frenzy, and she seems taller, nor does her voice sound like a mortal as now the breath of a deity is blown closer: Excisum Euboicae latus ingens rupis in antrum, / quo lati ducunt aditus centum, ostia centum, / unde ruunt totidem voces, response Sibyllae. / ventum erat ad limen, cum virgo, "poscere fata / tempus" ait: "deus, ecce, deus!" cui talia fanti / ante fores subito non vultus, non color unus, / non comptae mansere comae, sed pectus anhelum, / et rabie fera corda tument, maiorque videri / nec mortale sonans, adflata est numine quando / iam propiore dei. (lines 41-51)

The passage above, in addition to depicting the Sibyl's in-between-ness, abounds in images of openings and entrances. The imagery of *ostia* is a fascinating one since it takes us back to the way the "Gospel of Nicodemus" and Jesus's *Descensus ad Infernos* is portrayed in iconography. As Northrop Frye has posited: "In pictures of the descent of Christ to hell, hell is often presented as the open mouth of a monster: Jesus walks through the open mouth of this monster, whose body is the body of hell, and then returns with the redeemed behind him. In the interests of general decorum, he is assumed to be returning by the same route by which he entered" (86). The image of openings is a recurring one and so is that of monsters, as the two become bound in Book VI of *The Aeneid*. There are certain images that make direct reference to gates, entrances and thresholds, another prime example of which appears in the following: "I beg for one thing: since here is said to be the *gate* of king of the underworld and the gloomy marsh from Acheron's overflow, may it come to pass that I walk towards my beloved father's sight and face; teach the way and open the sacred doors" ("unum oro: quando hic inferni ianua regis/ dicitur et tenebrosa palus Acheronte refuso, / ire ad conspectum cari genitoris et ora/ contingat; doceas iter et sacra ostia pandas" (lines 106-09). In fact, the god Janus, from whose name *ianua* comes, is himself a prime representative of liminality, in that he is able to see both backwards and forwards and look both into the immediate past and present. Monsters are expressive of a different aspect of liminality in Book VI of *The Aeneid* as they make their presence felt "at the doors" (*foribus*): "And many monsters besides various wild beasts are housed at the doors, Centaurs and double-shaped Scyllas, and the hundredfold Briareus and the beast of Lerna, hissing horribly, and the Chimera armed with flames, Gorgons and Harpies, and the shape of the three-bodied shade: multaue praeterea variarum monstra ferarum, / Centauri in foribus stabulant Scyllaeque bifformes / et centumgeminus Briareus ac belua Lernae, / horrendum stridens, flammisque armata Chimaera, / Gorgones Harpyiaequae et forma tricorporis umbrae" (lines 285-89).

It is no mere coincidence that Virgil has peopled the gates of the Underworld with monsters, mostly hybrids. Given the etymological explanations offered for the term *monstrum*, in being "that which

shows' [Isidore] or 'that which warns' [Augustine]," which makes it "definitionally a displacement: an exhibit, demonstrative of something other than itself" (Cohen, *Of Giants* xiv), it is only natural to find its kind along the boundaries at the site of ontological beginnings. The presencing of the *monstra* tends to transpire at the "doors" (*foribus*) (line 286), along the thresholds where the possibility of the formation of hybrids is at its highest. The liminal creature in being neither "a" nor "b" along the margins has the potential to take on the characteristic "x" and thus turn into a being manifesting signs of "ax" or "bx" (see Turner, *The Edge* 161). What had morphologically and ontologically been "betwixt and between" in the first place, emerges from the borderlines manifesting various signs of hybridity or even monstrosity. In any case, the initial reaction to these anomalies appearing in the form of hybrids is a paralyzing sense of wonder combined with fear: "Here, in sudden fear, the terrified Aeneas, snatches his sword and turns the naked edge against the coming ones" ("corripit hic subita terpidus formidine ferrum/ Aeneas, strictamque aciem venientibus offert" (lines 290-91). However, in Aeneas's case, as these hybrids, being located in the Land of Shadows, turn out to be mere phantoms, trepidation gives way to a sense of relief once he becomes convinced that they are faint and bodiless lives (*tenuis sine corpore vitas*).

In general, the monster, as a creature which brings together a combination of opposites, has been an object of wonder, which, according to Stephen Greenblatt, "is so new that for a moment at least it is alone, unsystematized, an utterly detached object of rapt attention" (20). Monsters, in tending to expose features that are unique in their combinations, appear original, hence objects of wonder. Caroline Walker Bynum maintains how wonder and *coincidentia oppositorum* (which is a feature of some monsters) are associated: "Wonder was moreover associated with paradox, coincidence of opposites; one finds *mira* (marvelous) again and again in the texts alongside *mixta* (mixed or composite things), a word that evokes the hybrids and monsters also found in the literature of entertainment" (43). As *mixta*, it is natural to find these creatures along the borders, between the upper and lower worlds, given that liminality and hybridity are closely associated. It is essential to bear in mind that as various passages of *The Aeneid* have demonstrated, the term *monstrum* does not necessarily carry a demonic charge. In fact, R.D. Williams in his commentary on line IV.849 of the text points out that *monstrum* has been used to convey "a vast and supernatural agent of evil" only five other times in the course of the corpus, including the wooden horse (Book II 245), the half-woman, half-bird Harpies (Book III 214), the giant Polyphemus (Book III 658), Fama, i.e., rumour personified (Book IV 181) and the cannibal fire-breathing giant Cacus (Book VII 198) (455). Monsters mark not only spatial beginnings as they appear along the *limina*, but also figure during temporal beginnings. and as related by Anchises, *monstra* are part and parcel of the story of *creatio mundi*: "In the beginning, the heaven and the earth, and the watery fields, the shining globe of the moon and Titan's star, a spirit within nourishes, and mind infusing its limbs, drives the whole mass and mixes it with its massive body. From which the race of humans and beasts, the lives of flying creatures and the monsters the ocean bears beneath the marble-waters: Principio caelum ac terras camposque liquentis / lucentemque globum lunae Titaniaque astra / spiritus intus alit, totamque infusa per artus / mens agitat molem et magno se corpore miscet. / Inde hominum pecudumque genus, vitaeque volantum, / et quae marmoreo fert monstra sub aequore Pontus" (lines 724-29).

The fact that *monstra* figure in the very early stages of the creation of the world is testified in the Bible and replicated in literature, particularly heroic poems. Frye, quoting Genesis 1, points out to the fact that the terms *tehom* ("deep") and *Tiamat*, the Mesopotamian dragon, are cognates. In "And the darkness was upon the face of the deep," the original word for "deep" is *tehom*. Frye posits: "And the scholars tell us that those Hebrew words are connected etymologically with the proper name Tiamat, the goddess of the bitter waters" (34). Therefore, a monster (the dragon being a monster *par excellence*) is latent in the story of creation in the Bible. Monsters also emerge in microcosmic examples of creation as is the case in *Beowulf* in which upon the construction of Heorot and its celebration in the Cadmon-like song of the minstrel, the giant Grendel comes to the fore. Monsters appear along the spatio-temporal margins of new beginnings and can only be fought by figures who, on grounds of possessing characteristics of liminality, are willing to venture onto the peripheries. Paradoxical as it may sound, heroes in being outside the norm are themselves generally liminal figures. At times, their liminality is reflected in their semi-divine (e.g. Aeneas) or even semi-demonic (e.g., Rostam in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*) birth. Birth aside, in evincing signs of liminality, heroes have a predilection to explore the peripheries. Only Beowulf, being a liminal figure himself, in possessing corporeal powers that surpass those of any man alive; as a Geatish man, and hence, an outsider to the Danish realm, is capable of fighting Grendel. Rostam, as he is half-div himself, is capable of an advancement into the territory of the demonic divs in *The Shahnameh*. Likewise, the legendary Arthur, himself half-

monstrous, succeeds in overcoming the giant of St. Michel and another giant named Riton in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Similarly, the gates of the Underworld despite housing a host of monsters, open up to Aeneas, as he is a prime embodiment of liminality in the sense of incorporating both human and divine features. Virgil's epic itself brings to the fore, Aeneas's dual nature. While our first glimpse of Aeneas is one that portrays him as a mortal subject to fear and trepidation: "Rightaway Aeneas's limbs loosen with chill; he groans and stretching his two upturned palms to the stars, he speaks thus" ("extemplo Aeneae solvuntur frigore membra;/ ingemit et duplicis tendens ad sidera palmas/ talia voce refert" )(Book I 92-5), in Book VI of *The Aeneid*, Aeneas is depicted in more dignified terms such as *heros* in line 103, *fortissimus heros* in line 169 and *ingen(s)* in line 413 an adjective which, I believe, goes beyond his mere physicality. Aeneas is also addressed as *invicte* ("the unconquered one") by the helmsman Palinurus in the Underworld (Book I 365). There is always the possibility of a surprise at the portals, the site of constant egress and ingress; the likeliness of a transformation, if not a foreboding: "before the entrance itself and in the foremost jaws of Hell, Grief and avenging cares have placed their beds" ("vestibulum ante ipsum primisque in faucibus Orci/ Luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae" (lines 273-74). It is thus not surprising to see how it takes Aeneas a great deal of prodding from the side of his father to tempt these "thresholds," the potential site of dangers: "Your image, father, your sad image, meeting me so often, drove me to strive after these thresholds" ("tua me, genitor, tua tristis imago/ saepius occurrens haec limina tendere adegit" (lines 695-96).

Another example of liminality comes to the fore in the figure of Charon, the ferryman whom Virgil has also made mention of in *Georgics IV*: "nor did the ferryman of Orcus (grant) further passage through that barrier-like marsh" ("nec portitor Orci/ amplius obiectam passus transire paludem" (lines 502-03). Through Charon, the inhabitants of the dead cross from one bank of the River Acheron to the next. The river itself represents liminality in that one has to be carried over from one side of it to the other and in so doing, experience a transition that will potentially open up new ontological vistas [the German term *übersetzen*, which can be read both as "to cross over (one side of the river to the other)" and as "translation," depending on syllabic stress, is in itself indicative of the clear association of the river imagery with the concept of *translatio* so closely bound with liminality]. Given the tendency of monsters to emerge along liminal *loci*, it is not surprising to see the ferryman Charon assuming monstrous features: "A dreaded ferryman guards these waters and streams, Charon in terrible squalor, on whose chin lies a mass of unkempt hoary hair; his eyes are fixed flames; his dirty clothes hangs from a knot from his shoulders. He himself drives the boat by the pole, ministers the sails and his rust-colored boat carries the bodies, now aged, yet a god's old age is hardy and green: portitor has horrendus aquas et flumina servat / terribili squalore Charon, cui plurima mento / canities inculta iacet, stant lumina flamma, / sordidus ex umeris nodo dependet amictus. / ipse ratem conto subigit velisque ministrat / et ferruginea subvectat coropora cumba, / iam senior, sed cruda deo viridisque senectus" (Book VI 298-304).

It is worth noting that Dante, too, in emulation of his guide Virgil, has painted a highly negative image of Charon in Canto III of *The Inferno* going so far as to label him a demon: "The demon Charon, with his eyes like embers,/ by signaling to them, has all embark;/ his oar strikes anyone who stretches out" ("Caron dimonio, con occhi di bragia/ loro accennando, tutte le raccoglie; batte col remo qualunque s'adagia") (lines 109-11), yet there is something about his vernal *senectus*, the way Virgil has portrayed him, that betrays grandeur. He seems to be within the *mixta* category: His fiery eyes making him more of a monster -- just as Grendel in *Beowulf* is said to have eyes, from which "very like fire, there gleamed an ugly light" in line 727 -- yet his *viridis senectus* renders him similar unto gods.

A superb example of liminality in Book VI of *The Aeneid* figures, however, in not a human being, but in a "bough," although a "golden" one, to which, the sources are yet unknown (Williams 468): It lurks in the shades which are hinted at by two otherworldly doves, is of a "contrasting color" (Williams 471) and seems to be nourished by a tree other than its own. Its surrounding space is one of *chiascuro* in which the light shines in the midst of darkness: "Hidden in a shady tree is a bough golden in its leaves and flexible stem, held sacred to the Juno of the Underworld (Proserpine); all the grove covers this and shadows close up in dark valleys. But it is not granted to pass underneath the earth's secret places, unless to him who has plucked from the tree the golden-haired fruit: Latet arbore opaca / aureus et foliis et lento vimine ramus, / Iunoni infernae dictus sacer; hunc tegit omnis / lucus et obscuris claudunt convallibus umbrae. / Sed non ante datur telluris operta subire, / auricomos quam quis decerpserit arbore fetus" (lines 136-41). And the following reference to the "golden bough," em-

phasises further its liminal characteristics, in that it marks the borders between the earth and the underworld and is identified by means of magical doves, and exudes exoticism and hybridity:

then when they came to the jaws of the smelly Avernus, they quickly rise and dropping through the serene air, perch on the desired seats, on the tree of twin nature, from which the sheen of gold shone out with its contrasting color through the green branches. Just like the mistletoe which often in the woods in the cold of winter puts out new leaves, nourished by a tree not its own, entwining the smooth trunk with its yellow growth, such was the vision of the leafy gold and the shady ilex, so rustled the foil in the gentle breeze: *inde ubi venere ad fauces grave olentis Averno, / tollunt se celeres liquidumque per aëra lapsae / sedibus optatis geminae super arbore sidunt, / discolor unde auri per ramos aura refulsit. / Quale solet silvis brumali frigore viscum / fronde virere nova, quod non sua seminat arbos, / et croceo fetu teretis circumdare truncos:/ talis erat species auri frondentis opaca / ilice, sic leni crepitabat brattea vento.* (lines 201-09)

Robert Frazer, writing an introduction to James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, claims that the anthropologist's interest for the golden bough passage in *The Aeneid* was heightened only upon reading Servius's commentary based on which a parallel exists between the "golden bough" and a tree close to the temple of Diana built by Iphigenia and Orestes in Aricia as "a prerogative was granted to runaway slaves that whosoever broke this branch might challenge the fugitive priest to single combat and become priest himself in commemoration of the original flight" (xvii). Frazer also comes to link this, to a passage he read in a book by Pausanias in which it is described how Hippolytus raised from the dead, refused to forgive his father Theseus and reigned in Aricia where he "dedicated to Artemis a precinct, where down to (Pausanias's) time the priesthood of the goddess is the prize of victory in a single combat. The competition is not open to free men, but only slaves who have run away from their masters" (xix). In both of the associating passages, it is the marginal figure of the fleeing slave who wins superiority over the free man in being given a chance to gain the invaluable prize of priesthood. In both cases, the potential winner is in "betwixt and between" situations, being neither in the bonds of slavery nor in total freedom and as such he is an "ambiguous figure." Turner's following passage, recaptures the ambiguity associated with liminal figures: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness" (Turner, *The Ritual* 95). In contrast to the "blessed souls" (*felices animae*) of the Underworld who require no fixed abode as mentioned in lines 673-75 of Book VI of *The Aeneid*, most earthlings require a fixed abode where they can feel grounded and secure far from the *limina*. Yet, there is an aura of grandeur associated with the margins that is absent from zones of stability including established cities. Living on the borderlines, without any fixed settlement, as one is exposed to the permanent possibility of encountering monsters, can be termed nothing short of heroic.

In conclusion, the concept of liminality showcases a field of various possibilities and presences since ancient times as demonstrated in this analysis of Book VI of *The Aeneid*. Its possibilities go beyond designated boundaries as it blurs taxonomies and manifests similitude in dissimilitude, while undercutting binarisms such as those separating winners and losers, black and white, heroes and monsters and many more. In addition, an investigation of liminality as a zone of constant becoming continues to shed light on a vast array of new transitions. Aeneas's future success in the construction of a new empire and the rebuilding of a Roman nation, to a large extent, is indebted to having ventured onto the thresholds and fought the *monstra*. Being the embodiment of the earthly and the divine, hence liminal, he is naturally predisposed to grand possibilities. His encounter with liminal entities such as the Sibyl and Charon, along with his appreciation for the function of the "golden bough" and all the monsters emerging from the interstices of in-between-ness, in the end, empower Aeneas to conquer the hurdles placed against him in Latium, the destined terrain of the Roman race. Such are the potentialities offered by liminality and Book VI of *The Aeneid* is just one of many examples thereof.

#### Works Cited

- Augustine. *De civitate Dei XV & XVI*. Trans. Philip Levine. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966.  
*Beowulf*. Ed. Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.  
Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.



- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Metamorphosis and Identity*. New York: Zone Books, 2001.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Dante, Alighieri. *Inferno*. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. New York: Bantam Dell, 1980.
- Das Nibelungenlied*. Ed. Karl Bartsch. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Praeger Publishers, 1966.
- Ferdowsi, Abulghassem. *The Shahnameh*. Ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001.
- Fraser, Robert. "Introduction." *The Golden Bough*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. ix-xlvi.
- Frye, Northrop. *Biblical and Classical Myths: The Mythological Framework of Western Culture*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004.
- Geoffrey, of Monmouth. *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Ed. Jacob Hammer. Cambridge: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991.
- Moody, Raymond A., Jr., and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, eds. *Life after Death: The Investigation of a Phenomenon -- Survival of Bodily Death*. Atlanta: Mockingbird Books, 1975.
- Orchard, Andy. *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*. Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2003.
- Orchard, Andy. *Pride and Prodigies*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995.
- Ring, Kenneth. *Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-death Experience*. New York: Coward & Geoghegan, 1980.
- Turner, Victor. *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*. Ed. Edith L.B. Turner. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1985.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.
- Virgil. *The Aeneid of Virgil: Books 1-6*. Glasgow: Glasgow UP, 1972.
- Williams, R.D. *The Aeneid of Virgil: Books 1-6*. Glasgow: Glasgow UP, 1972.
- Zaleski, Carol. *Otherworld Journeys*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.

Author's profile: Pouneh Saeedi is working towards her Ph.D. in comparative literature at the University of Toronto. In her dissertation Saeedi discusses the consequences of monstrous combats in *Beowulf*, *The Shahnameh*, and Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* including the formation of a "third space," the sublation of the monstrous and the emergence of new *mappae mundi*. Saeedi's interests include heroic literature, semiotics, and literary criticism. She is the translator of *Negin-e Pars: Takht-e Jamshid* to English as *Pearl of Persia: Persepolis* (2005) and has contributed to a number of journals and newspapers, both Persian and North American (U.S. and Canada) on topics such as *coincidentia oppositorum* in the works of Hermann Hesse and the dynamics of contemporary politics. E-mail: <[pouneh.saeedi@utoronto.ca](mailto:pouneh.saeedi@utoronto.ca)>.