Vergil via Ovid on the Semiotics of Augustan Victory

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Daphne's transformation into a laurel tree after Apollo’s attempted rape in Ovid's Metamorphoses 1.452-567 intertwines in unnoticed but provocative ways with Pyrrhus' murder of Priam, overhung by the same tree, in Vergil's narrative of the sack of Troy at Aeneid 2.469-568. Vergil's laurel reluctantly commemorates Pyrrhus' sacrilegious victory in ways that problematize the ascendancy and iconography of Rome's first emperor, Augustus. Later in the principate, Ovid further destabilizes this tree's significations within Roman culture by giving it a retroactive origin story as a symbol for the physical and semantic violence that victors inflict upon the defeated. This chronologically tangled epic intertext thereby raises literary and political questions about the ethics of conquest, the memorialization of past violence, and the process of signification itself.