Vergil and Augustus: An Imagined Dialogue on Virtue and Manhood

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Vergil: ...The Greeks held all the city gates.

There was no hope of help. I yielded

And, lifting up my father, sought the mountains.

There is silence in the chamber as Vergil concludes his reading from his unfinished poem. The emperor, AUGUSTUS, sits deep in thought. Vergil cautiously prompts the ruler.

V: Great Caesar, your silence leaves the room on edge.

A (slyly): Great poet, your reading leaves me on edge. Why would you choose to share this passage with me?

The room sits uneasily. The emperor makes no further comment. Vergil, somewhat baffled, probes even further

V: In what way does my poetry leave you unsettled? The work itself is meant to directly honor you and your ancestors! How I show Aeneas, the patriarch of our race, is as the noblest of all heroes. And, though he is downtrodden in this selection, he is a paragon of Roman virtues and is clearly on a divine path to his ultimate victory. It is well known
that man’s true nature shines forth brightest in times of adversity. To pay his proper respects to state, family and gods would be easy in peacetime, but I wanted to show you how Aeneas had to struggle to be and to do what was right. Can you fault him for how he behaved in Troy? I think any Roman would be hard pressed to do so. When he awakes to find his beloved city aflame, no cowardly instinct takes hold. Rather, he thinks only of “how glorious it is to die in combat” (2.374) and asks the priest of Apollo where the fighting is thickest so that he may fight “to save / A city in flames” (2.413-14) and “rush onto [Greek] swords and die” (2.415). Despite Hector’s ghostly warning, Aeneas is determined to die defending his fatherland. The same Roman sentiment follows him to protect his father, lulus and his household gods. In the midst of “Troy’s Holocaust” (2.778) Aeneas puts Anchises on his shoulders and refuses to desecrate the sanctity of his country’s gods by handling their idols directly. All at a time when by all rights every gods-fearing man could have understandably abandoned his family, his state and his religion! Your ancestor was the model Roman in his own time, and such a depiction praises you by association. I do not understand what you find objectionable.

Vergil, now quite nervous after speaking so freely to the emperor, remembers his place too late. Several guards exchange tense glances, anticipating the seemingly inevitable imperial rebuke which never comes. Augustus instead quietly gathers his thoughts.

A: Nobody questions your poetic talent, Vergil. I enjoy your craftsmanship immensely. Rome is well served by artists such as you. Thematically, though, I am at a loss. Your exposition leaves several major issues unanswered and provides questionable
responses to certain concerns. At this present time, I do not mean to question the honesty with which you make your claims, but I will not commit the intentional fallacy and let your stated goals and intentions for the text be the final word on its meaning. With your permission, Vergil, I would like to delve into the finer points of your performance.

V: Surely you do not need my permission for anything, Pater Patriae.

A: Let me remind you that though “I [excel] all others in influence... I [have] no greater power than the others who [are] my colleagues” (Augustus 34). I am the princeps, the first among equals, but we are entering your territory. You are the imperator of your own work.

V: I understand, Caesar. Please enlighten me on your thoughts so that I may respond accordingly and advance our greater understanding.

*Preparing to deliver a lengthy lecture to receptive and eager students, a professor will pause and give a brief yet keen smile before launching into his speech. So too Augustus.*

A: My main objection is that I do not agree totally with your virtuous assessment of Aeneas’s conduct during the fall of Troy. Your claim, essentially, is that Aeneas is irreproachable and the noblest of all possible proto-Romans. By honoring Aeneas, you
honor me indirectly and therefore decided that this passage would be, in a word, ideal to read before me and my beautiful Octavia. Am I far afield?

Vergil shakes his head.

A: Good. Since I understand your claim, I will lay out why I do not agree with your assessment and must ultimately question your intentions for sharing this particular book from your extensive epic poem. Your argument rests primarily on the claim that Aeneas behaves with perfect Roman virtue towards three things: his state, his family and his city’s gods. Now, either you do not understand our great Roman ideals as would befit a citizen, or Aeneas is not as virtuous as you claim.

V: I would like an explanation of such a bold claim!

A: Yes, that is your right. First, I will begin with his devotion to the state. While Aeneas does fight valiantly for a time in the burning city, he does not defend it to his death. When a hero’s state is threatened, he must defend it to the end. In my own lifetime, I have demonstrated this ideal by raising “an army with which I set [Rome] free” (Augustus 1). Aeneas should have defended the city and its sovereign, wise Priam, until forcibly cast into Hades. For me, Priam’s weak struggle against Pyrrhus is the greatest embodiment of pure devotion to the state and yet it is Aeneas on which the poem focusses! How can you explain this betrayal of state? Is this loyalty the type that Rome
rewards? It seems to me that Aeneas’s very survival is shameful to his honor and this is why he must explain so carefully to Dido his version of Troy’s destruction.

V: You are truly wise as you are powerful. I cannot argue that Aeneas does not abandon his city. Nor can I dispute that he did not fulfill his oath to defend Ilium to the bitter end. Thus, Aeneas’s loyalty to Troy is flawed. I could maintain Aeneas’s own line that he was reluctant to leave Troy, just as he will be reluctant to leave Dido (a future reading, if you permit it!) and only survived because he was forced to leave the battle, but I suspect that your great mind will reject such explanations as elementary and overly convenient. Therefore I will introduce a new line of reason. Your primary mistake was a misunderstanding of the conceit. You admirably picked up that Aeneas represents your own noble line, but erred in assigning Roman status to Troy. Though he does not know it yet, our hero’s loyalties fall ultimately with Rome and not Troy. Troy is an ancient, failed and dying state. Rome is the holiest of cities and lives in its extreme infancy in Aeneas’s loins. Aeneas betrays Troy, but in doing so fulfills his greater duty to Rome. Nothing but death remained in Ilium, and with his death would have died all of Rome. Aeneas did not abandon Troy instead of defending the city charged to his defense; he left precisely in order to defend that city.

A: But Aeneas knew none of this. His fate was divine knowledge and beyond mortal levels of perception.
Ah, but the gods do reveal themselves in several ways. But first, I will say that you are correct to praise Priam. Troy had many of the whispers of Roman ideals, including the reputation revealed by the traitorous Sinon that Trojans “Stand by [their] word and keep [their] faith” (2.191) like good Romans, but Troy was Priam and Hector’s city, not Aeneas’s. The gods send Hector himself to encourage Aeneas to abandon the city in order to “seek... the great walls [he] will found” (2.349). With both Hector and Priam dead, Ilium’s true line died as well. Priam’s death was the true fall of Troy. Not only would continuing to fight unnecessarily jeopardize Aeneas’s Roman destiny, but it would be a useless exercise in a post-Priam world. His greater, divinely sanctioned duty was to the Roman state, not Troy.

So a message of the passage is that loyalty to Rome trumps all other oaths?

Your perceptiveness is second to none, your grace.

Then I suppose that explains Aeneas’s lacking family values.

Silence holds the room. Vergil appears genuinely confused.

Did I hear correctly? Family loyalty is one argument that I did not expect to have.

Yes, you fox. You tried to slip Aeneas past as fulfilling his duty to his family perfectly. The glaring hole I see with such a claim is that he loses his wife Creüsa in doomed
Pergamum! True, mistakes happen and a man cannot always save those he loves, but he lost her when he “panicked... robbed of [his] wits” (2.864-65). If Aeneas were truly a moral paragon, Creusa would not have been “taken from [Aeneas] / By some evil fortune” (2.867-68). Would such a thing ever happen to my dear Octavia? You can bet your family’s recently restored lands that I wouldn’t allow it so long as I live. Though his paternal and filial responsibilities are fulfilled beyond question, I find Aeneas to be unconvincing in matrimonial devotion. The family is the bedrock of Roman society. The pater familias rules his family and I rule the state as a father would. How can Aeneas represent us if he spares so little thought for his wife’s safety? Loyalty to a future Roman state can hardly explain this fault away.

*A chess player tensed in the pressure of a game will recline and cross his arms in satisfaction after he is convinced of his opponents defeat. So too Augustus. However, a true master player remains calm, even when he recognizes a player has fallen in his trap. So too Vergil.*

V: Aeneas does seem complicit in the Creusa’s cruel fate.

A (satisfied): Yes. He seems completely to blame. He does not pay his wife her proper respect, like I do to Octavia. She is constantly by my side and always in my thoughts. I cannot imagine continuing life without her, let alone founding a great and noble line.

*Octavia blushes*
V: You don’t give Aeneas nearly enough credit, sire. It took an act of unquestionable divine intervention to remove him from Creüsa. He even attempts, similarly to Orpheus, to embrace the shade of his departed wife. The gods themselves engineer her death, so I would not be quick to dismiss the “evil fortune” mentioned in the poem as simply a convenient excuse Aeneas invents to clear his name. The fates had decreed that Aeneas was to marry Lavinia and through this marriage intertwine the Dardanian and Latin races. Once again, Aeneas’s familial duty is primarily to his distant Roman descendants and not his immediate family. As you yourself stated, the Roman state is based upon the family. You, as emperor, are father to all living Romans. However, Aeneas was father to all Romans, including you, your illustrious father and all who came before. Again, divine duty to Rome trumps all mortal ties. So, although you are correct on an earthly level to fault Aeneas with a measure of betrayal, Rome’s current glory proves that in heaven’s eyes, Aeneas served his family well. After all, every step of the journey was by divine will.

A: I am not so easily convinced. Yes, Aeneas’s actions saved the holy Roman future, but did this require Creüsa’s death?

V: If that explanation does not satisfy you, then remember that Juno’s anger against the Dardanians was total and devastating. Aeneas was the survivor of a dead race. Like a spore afloat on the breeze, he could not be tied to desolate, burned land. Creüsa was his Trojan wife. To take root and propagate the Roman progenitors, he had to wed
Lavinia. I have my doubts as to whether the gods are so wrathful and cruel in the real
world, but unfortunately for Creusa, they are here.

A: It seems we must rest at this impasse. You have not won me over completely in
seeing Aeneas’s actions as noble, but you make a compelling case nonetheless.
However, one thing still jabs at my royal side.

V: Please, I have no secrets with you, my lord.

A: I cannot help but feel you are not honest in your stated intentions for this poem.

V: And how do you feel I have misrepresented myself?

A: The feeling mainly stems from your... family history.

V: Yes?

A: You claim that this poem is to praise my regime and the wisdom of my divinely
inspired rule. Yet, this very book which you have selected to read to me bears the
unfortunate marks of the most painful and difficult period of my reign. I know that you
have firsthand knowledge of my land re-appropriation policies. After all, I personally
ensured that you maintained ownership of your family estate after that unfortunate mix-
up. Ilium’s destruction and the Dardanian expulsion seem to represent such an
appropriation on an ancient and city-wide scale, and the depiction, being sympathetic to the displaced Trojans, condemns me by extension! Is this the real reason you chose to read this selection? To make a political statement directly to your emperor?

A pause. Sometimes, when the weather conditions are correct, an aqueduct will sit silently for several minutes before life-giving water returns, swishing and dripping. So too Vergil.

V: I will not deny that the land requisitioning played an integral inspirational role while writing this poem. Though I am infinitely grateful to you, Augustus, for restoring my estate, the theft of my land continues to shape me and my work to this very day. However, I am not condemning your reign. I must stand firm in this assertion.

A: Really! Then why would you choose to read this passage? You could have read me the fragment of Aeneas’s journey to the underworld again when he sees shades of Rome’s future glory. That would have been a safe and unobjectionable choice.

V: Safe and unobjectionable choices are for the weak ruler, which you are decidedly not. I wanted to have this discussion. My overall intention for composing this epic is still to celebrate you through celebration of your ancient ancestors, but I will not lie. Aeneas was born into an imperfect time. Certainly he is a questionable hero in the ways that you mentioned. He abandons his state, he abandons his wife. But despite these stumbles, he still has greater glory than Agamemnon or Ulysses through the nation that he founds.
You too were born into an imperfect time. Imperfect times occasionally call for imperfect actions, such as the land requisitions and proscriptions. But none of that ultimately matters, for your glory will be the greatest through the empire you have created. What my poem seeks to do is present the story of Aeneas through the complete image of your story. That goal is perhaps most clear in this passage I selected to read.

A: Publius Vergilius Maro, once again you have disturbed my mind only to settle it on a higher plane of understanding. As a piece of music introduces uncomfortable dissonance in order to bring the listener on a great journey back to stable consonance. I do not take kindly to political critics, but I now see that your work is no such thing. You have taken the essence of my reign and immortalized it in art. This is the greatest tribute I could have asked for. I hope to hear another section. Perhaps Aeneas’s adventures in Libya?

V: Yes. A tragic tale, but I am confident that it will please you.
Works Cited
