

The picture of a governor in the aeneid



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In the government of any civilization, virtue is not only a preferable characteristic of the ruler or rulers, but a necessary one. Of the virtues, perhaps the two most intrinsically necessary for political decisions are justice and clemency. These virtues are significant to a government simply because they are the foundation for civil law, and if they are not exercised properly, a breakdown of civil law and civilization itself could result, but if they are exercised correctly, the civilization will prosper. An example of both the breakdown and flourishing of civilizations are exhibited in Virgil's Aeneid, represented by Troy and Rome, respectively. In order to prevent the fall of the newly forming civilization that Aeneas is attempting to create, Aeneas must attain understanding of exactly how to use both of these virtues in a manner that is most effective for the government of his people, so that his civilization will not fall like Troy. Through his experiences and observations in Carthage, Sicily, Hades, and the battlefield, Aeneas learns about impartial justice as well as tender clemency, both of which are vital to making political decisions, and acquires the wisdom to determine which of these to use in making choices under unique political circumstances.

Such an observation of balancing justice and clemency is shown when Aeneas travels to the underworld and observes through Rhadamanthus what it means to be impartial in one's judgements. Rhadamanthus is given the authority to determine the eternal punishment of the souls who were wretches in their former lives: " This realm is under Cretan Rhadamanthus' iron rule. He sentences. He listens and makes the souls confess their crooked ways..." (6. 762-764). Thus, the Sybil explains to Aeneas the punishments of each offender they come into contact with as a result of the wicked things

they had done while on earth, but is unable to articulate every possible offense to Aeneas' benefit because they run short on time. The trip to the underworld has the purpose of the location of Anchises and subsequent conversation with him to further Aeneas' understanding of the fate of Aeneas' line, but this trip across the sill of evil also serves Aeneas well in his understanding of impartial justice. The trip allows him an inside look at how the gods themselves administer impartial justice through eternal punishment and anguish using agents such as Rhadamanthus and Tisiphone. The sentencing of souls to eternal pain shows Aeneas the importance of impartial justice when it is one's duty, both to the gods and to those who live virtuously, to exact such justice.

An example of Aeneas impartially exercising such a duty to the gods is in his following of the will of Jupiter in Carthage by leaving his love, Dido, for his destiny of founding Rome. When Jupiter makes apparent that his will is not for Aeneas to stay in Carthage with Dido, but rather to travel elsewhere to found Rome, Aeneas heartbreakingly complies. In his explanation to Dido for leaving, Aeneas shows his true impartiality in his decision-making skills: " I sail for Italy not of my own free will" (4. 499) Aeneas does not want to sail to Italy, and would rather stay in Carthage with Dido, but he understands that leaving is the right decision to make because it is the will of Jupiter, so he does it, even after Dido explodes into a fit of rage and begs Aeneas to stay. Aeneas' impartiality, even in conflict with his own interest, should truly inspire confidence in the reader's imagination as to the potential excellence with which Aeneas will rule the city of Rome.

While the previous example illustrates justice through Aeneas' duty to the gods, the final battle between Aeneas and Turnus, in which Aeneas strikes Turnus dead serves as a testament to Aeneas' justice through his duty to his virtuous fellow men. This is because while Turnus' killing of Pallas is justified, as Turnus and Pallas are fighting on opposite sides of the field of battle, his excessive arrogance after killing Pallas is not only unjustified, but impious when he says to " Arcadians, note well and take back to Evander what I say: In that state I send back Pallas. And I grant in full what honor tombs confer, what consolation comes of burial. No small price he'll pay for welcoming Aeneas." (10. 685-690). After this, Turnus takes Pallas' belt as a spoil of war. Both these actions taken by Turnus after Pallas' death represent Turnus' wickedness and the need for Turnus to be brought to justice. By taunting King Evander and Aeneas, Turnus has done injustice to them and those that fight with them, and has simultaneously done injustice to the gods for taking Pallas' belt in an act of impiety. In the final battle between Aeneas and Turnus, once Turnus is wounded and begging for mercy from Aeneas, Aeneas originally plans on sparing Turnus. This changes as soon as Aeneas sees Pallas' belt being worn by Turnus, as it reminds Aeneas of Turnus' wickedness and impiety. As a result of Turnus' actions against King Evander through the killing of Evander's son and consequent taunting of Evander, as well as Turnus' impiety for Pallas' body, Aeneas slays Turnus. This shows Aeneas' willingness to exact justice in a similar fashion to Rhadamanthus. However, while Rhadamanthus allows people the ability to be accountable for their transgressions through confession of crimes before their punishment, Aeneas does not even allow for Turnus' admittance of fault and repentance. Instead, he immediately exacts punishment. This fits with

Turnus' crimes though, as Turnus reveals his true nature to Aeneas through his message to King Evander, and any apology offered by Turnus would simply be for the sake of his own life, rather than sincere contrition for what he did. This serves as an example of Aeneas fulfilling his duty to his virtuous fellow man, King Evander, and shows the excellence with which Aeneas will rule in his ability to be punitive as a ruler.

Another example of the excellence Aeneas possesses in the rule of his people is Aeneas' excursion to Sicily, as it shows the reader Aeneas' capacity for the utilization of clemency, in this instance, towards the women that attempt to burn down the Trojan ships. Because of the deception of Iris, the women of Troy attempt to burn down the Trojan ships in a ploy to stay on the relatively peaceful island of Sicily. Iris provokes the women into a frenzy: "Come now, all of you, set fire to those infernal ships with me!" (5. 821-822). Aeneas, after dealing with the burning ships, could have punished the disobedient women in the same manner as Odysseus punished the traitorous women of his own house and had the women executed or just beaten. However, after careful deliberation, the reader can easily see that taking such an action could lower the morale of the hopeful band of Trojans to a dangerous level. Instead, Aeneas decides to exercise clemency in his sentence of the women, and does not punish them at all, but rather, he allows them to stay in Sicily along with the injured, in order that he may be rid of any more troublesome antics without lowering the crew's morale. One might posit that this action is not Aeneas' clemency at all, but rather him casting aside those he does not wish to keep onboard. This position is not feasible, as he is not leaving them in a wasteland, but in the port city of Eryx,

and he establishes a government for them, leaving them under the care of Acestes. This clemency also allows Aeneas to have a “ rough draft” of the implementation of the Roman government. The settlement he creates in Sicily demonstrates his ability to rule by giving laws, designating land, and founding a temple. This rough draft would not have been possible if he had not exercised clemency, and this is yet another demonstration of Aeneas’ fitness as a ruler of his people.

By Aeneas’ use of both the virtues of justice and clemency, one can see the need for a ruler to utilize each virtue in accordance with what is advantageous to his people. In The Aeneid, Aeneas’ character can be seen in his loyalty to his people through the use of both justice and clemency to bring about a positive outcome for the Trojans, rather than a positive outcome for his own self. While a ruler may have the capacity to use each of these two virtues according to his own self-interest, it is in his use of power for the good of his people that the good character of the ruler is seen. Following this logic, it is in the use of justice and clemency for a ruler’s self-serving purposes, rather than the purpose of public good, that the bad character of a ruler can also be seen. Virgil uses the example of Aeneas to counsel his own ruler, Caesar Augustus, about this same principle. This counsel can be used in the study of the character of any given political ruler, whether they ruled over past civilizations or currently rule over present ones. Through the use of justice and clemency, a ruler can show his character, and subsequently bring about the prosperity or destruction of their own nation, depending on how well they use these virtues in tandem with what their motives are for using them.