

Is aeneas a good
warrior?



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' I sing of arms and of the man, fated to be an exile', begins Virgil, and it is on precisely the issue of this man of arms that critical debate in recent years has tended to centre. Scholars continue to disagree on whether or not Aeneas is presented as a good soldier, although the question itself is certainly far from black and white, complicated by the culturally relative nature of terms such as ' conflict' and ' courage', as well as by the rather oblique definition that ' good' itself holds. In this essay I will attempt to resolve these complexities and ambiguities by juxtaposing Aeneas against the Roman and Homeric ideals of the warrior, exemplified by Aemilius Paullus and Odysseus respectively. I will argue that Aeneas meets the criteria set by neither model and that, ultimately, he is an emotionally unstable, morally dubious and even an incompetent military leader.

However, the very fact that he is the protagonist needs to be stressed: his character is necessarily sympathetic, dynamic and intricate. My intention is not to assert that Aeneas is a villain or a coward; he is quite obviously neither of these things and such an interpretation of the Aeneid, a text rich and ambiguous in meaning, would be nothing short of reductive. And in this way he must, and does, have some positive, somewhat redeeming features.

K. W. Gransden notes that, ' Virgil created in Aeneas a new type of Stoic hero'¹, a point that is perhaps most evident in Book Four when Aeneas leaves Carthage. His speech to Dido is indicative of his determination to suffer both silently, Aeneas did not move his eyes and struggled to fight down the anguish in his heart. (Bk. 4, p. 91) and willing: Do not go on causing distress to yourself and to me by these complaints. It is not by my own will that I still search for Italy. (Bk. 4, p. 92) Emotional restraint and acquiescence in regard to one's own fortunes and torment is intrinsic to a

Roman conception of a warrior. Plutarch, for instance, emphasises exactly this in his description of the life of the potentate Aemilius Paullus who stoically accepts the death of his son and heir as ‘retribution’ for the Roman’s successful military campaign against the Macedonians. 2 Equally, the presentation of Aeneas in Book Four can be seen to parallel that of Odysseus in Book Nineteen of the *Odyssey*, where the reader is told that, in spite of his wife’s tears, the hero’s ‘eyes were steady’. 3 Aeneas, then, does conform to both the Roman and Homeric paradigms in his ability to endure the sufferings that Fate has allotted him. And yet his chief characteristic is not his endurance, as is the case with Odysseus, but rather his *pietas*, a quality essential for a Roman warrior. Time and time again in the *Aeneid* he is referred to as *pius Aeneas*, ‘famous for his devotion’ (6, p. 145), so the Sibyl extols. This devotion is threefold in that it is not only religious and extends to both his family and to his duty as ‘Father’ of Rome. The latter of these has already been demonstrated by his separation from Dido, in which he subordinates his personal wishes in order to fulfil his destiny, while one can see the first two aspects of this *pietas* at work quite clearly in Book Five, in which the funeral games, ‘held in honour of the divine father of Aeneas’ (5, p. 122), combine a celebration of the familial and of the holy. Yet this *pietas*, as much as it appears to pervade Virgil’s characterisation of the hero, might be called into question. Aeneas, on frequent occasions, seems reluctant to implement his *Fatum* and also uncertain as to the rewards it offers. In Book Five the poet externalises Aeneas’ thoughts as he wonders ‘whether he should forget about his destiny and settle in the fields of Sicily’ (5, p. 126), and throughout the first half of the poem he needs to be constantly prompted to continue in his search for his *patria* (homeland): by

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his wife's shade in Book Two, his father's shade in Book Five, and twice by Mercury in Book Four: Mercury wasted no time: ' So now you are laying foundations for the high towers of Carthage and building a splendid city to please your wife? Have you entirely forgotten your own kingdom and your own destiny?' (Bk. 4, p. 89) Aeneas seems rather less than devoted to his duty at this moment. He is shown to be quite contented in Carthage and it seems unlikely that he would have left its ' sweet' shores under his own volition. Gordon Williams remarks that ' Dido is Aeneas' first serious test, and he seems to give way without a struggle'⁴, and one may see the character here as close to the antithesis of Odysseus who, in his pig-headed determination to return to Ithaca, even rejects Calypso's offer of immortality. Indeed, Aeneas, ' whose sword was studded with yellow stars of jaspers' (4, p. 88) is a picture of decadence and almost a parody of Mark Antony in the manner in which he has been softened and seduced by an exotic land. Nor is devotion to duty the only aspect of his pietas that can be found wanting, and as much as Aeneas appears to be a truly devoted son it should be noted that he repeatedly fails to protect his family. When one considers those personages in the poem that could be seen as intimate with Aeneas it must be realised that virtually none survive: Cruesa, his first wife, is lost at Troy; Dido, debatably his second, commits suicide; Anchises, his father, dies in the port at Drepanum; and finally Pallas, to whom Aeneas is surely a surrogate parent, is slain by Turnus. Only his son and heir, Ascanius, is still standing at the end of Book Twelve. Of course, it may be argued that the hero is culpable for not a single one of these deaths were it not for the fact that, with the exception of Anchises, Aeneas readily confesses to his personal failure in the role of warrior-protector. For instance, he admits to being '

confused' and 'robbed' of his 'wits' when, in Book Two, he quite literally loses his wife: I never saw her again. Nor did I look behind me or think of her or realise that she was lost. (Bk. 2, p. 53) By his own admission he simply forgets about Cruesa and as a result the encroaching Greek forces slaughter her. He pleads equally guilty to Dido's downfall when he greets her shade in the Underworld saying: 'Alas! Alas! Was I the cause of your dying?' (6, p. 146-7); his question is never answered, but the widow's telling silence speaks louder than any words could. And this pattern of self-condemnation is continued in his response to the slaying of Pallas, his ward, where his turn of phrase is similarly unequivocal: 'This is not what I promised Evander, when he took me in his arms' (11, p. 273). It is important to understand that it is impossible to extricate Aeneas the warrior from the various other roles that he fills in the poem, as lover, as husband, as father, and as son. The character is a complex composite in which all these facets become inextricably bound together and as a result his shortcomings as guardian to his family has an impact on his position as a warrior and as a guardian to the citizens of Troy. Once again Aeneas seems to fall short of the Homeric model and it is worth remembering the value which Odysseus places on oikos (household); his actions throughout the final section of the Odyssey are motivated by a determination to secure not only his material possessions, but also to protect Penelope and Telemachus from the threat of the Suitors. However, there are moments in the poem where Aeneas appears as neglectful and ineffectual as a military leader, as he does as on the domestic front. This is most particularly, and astonishingly, the case with his complete absence from the conflict in Book Nine. Through Iris' speech Virgil elucidates the hero's incredible blunder: Aeneas has left his city, his allies and his fleet,

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and gone to visit the royal seat of Evander on the Palatine. And as though that were not enough, he has travelled as far as the remotest cities [٤] What are you waiting for? (Bk. 9, p. 214) Aeneas has made two crucial errors: firstly he has 'left' his troops leaderless and thus vulnerable; and secondly, he has compounded this initial mistake by travelling such a great distance that both communication with his army, and a swift return in the event of an attack, have become logistically unfeasible. His 'no-show' nature in this book could not provide a greater contrast to Plutarch's description of Aemilius Paullus at the Battle of Pydna (168 BC), who, though 'filled with fear', 'put on a happy, smiling face' and 'rode past them [٤] without helmet or breastplate'. 5 If one were to seek a parallel to such courageous and assertive leadership in Book Nine, it might be rather found in the figure of Turnus, whose tenacity and fearlessness allow him too to charge into the battlefield ahead of his men. 6 While Aeneas' disorganised and directionless people 'turn and run in terror' (9, p. 239), he enjoys the 'juice of Bacchus' (8, p. 195) at the court of King Evander. It is surely an intended irony that he is called the 'greatest of warriors' (9, p. 215) in this book and were it not for divine intervention, on the part of the ships-turned-nymphs who inform Aeneas of the Rutulian attack, his absence might have resulted in considerably more destruction. Yet, even on his return his competence as military potentate is, at times, to be doubted, and as the truce descends into further conflict in Book Twelve he demonstrates both an inability to manage his troops and lack of awareness as to the severity and immediacy of the situation: Where are you rushing? What is this sudden discord rising among you? Control your anger! (Bk. 12, p. 312) Aeneas is at this moment standing unarmed in the centre of a battlefield and rather than defend himself or

attempt to organise his forces he makes this quite pathetic, and most likely unheard, speech. He is, though, punished for such hesitation and sluggishness when he is wounded by an arrow and compelled to retreat from combat as a consequence, leaving his army leaderless for a second time. Only the mysterious healing potion of Venus, his mother, allows him to rejoin the fight, as once again it is the gods that come to Aeneas' aid. Indeed, Aeneas' is constantly plagued by an equivocality of mind. Later in the same book the poet notes that ' conflicting tides seethed in his mind' (12, p. 317) and it is precisely for this hesitance that the Sibyl of Cumae chastises him (6, p. 134). In retrospect it must be noted that Aeneas' actions are only ever emphatic when he himself is out of control and in the grip of furor. Nowhere is this more the case than in his response to Pallas' death: firstly he captures two sets of four sons as, shockingly, human sacrifices; secondly, he slays Tarquitus and proceeds to taunt the mangled corpse with ' you will be left for the wild birds' (10, p. 259)⁷; thirdly, he kills the prostrate Lucagus, cutting short his pleas for mercy; and finally, he puts father and son, Mezentius and Lausus, to the sword. It would be possible to cite Aeneas' actions here as indicative of a ' good warrior' and yet in truth he is nothing more than a frighteningly successful killing machine who simply ' deals out death' (10, p. 261). As W. A. Camps states, such ' brutalities [عـ] are altogether at variance with the hero's usual humanity'. ⁸ The word ' fury' reverberates throughout this passage so as to emphasis that the character's conduct is not calm or considered, but rather the result of an all-consuming and quite unrestrained rage. Plutarch notes that it was the ' detachment' of Aemilius that the Romans found most impressive and in Book Ten Aeneas could not be less rational or more emotional. However, it is the pervasive moral ambiguity in

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this passage that, more than the protagonist's lack of restraint, undermines his position as a soldier, and even Aeneas seems horrified at his own ruthlessness as he holds the young body of Lausus: But when Aeneas, son of Anchises, saw the dying face and features, the face strangely white, he groaned from his heart in pity. (Bk. 10, p. 268) As before, Aeneas is the judge and jury of his own actions and a poignant sense of guilt is infused in this moment of realisation. A Roman warrior is also a moral warrior, and it is the words of Anchises in Book Six, 'you must be the first to show clemency' (6, p. 159), that the hero violates when he slays Lucagus and Lausus. And yet, for all his regret and self-condemnation in Book Ten, Aeneas is unable to keep his passions in check when he finally defeats Turnus at the poem's close. The Rutulian prince, kneeling as suppliant, begs for his life, but the sight of Pallas' baldric deafens Aeneas to his pleas: Blazing with rage, he plunged the steel full into the enemy's breast. The limbs of Turnus were dissolved in cold and his life left him with a groin, fleeing in anger down to the shades. (Bk. 12, p. 332) Jasper Griffin, in his examination of this final image, points to Virgil's use of the word *fervidus* ('blazing with rage') as a denunciation of the hero's 'lack of self-control'⁹, and moral deficiency is once again the corollary of Aeneas' uninhibited rage. This incident appears all the more shameful when compared with the paradigm offered by Aemilius Paullus: Perseus, however, made a disgraceful spectacle of himself: he threw himself on the floor and clasped Aemilius' knees, whimpering and pleading [ع.] Despite his displeasure, Aemilius raised Perseus to his feet, gave him his right hand. ¹⁰ The parallel between Aeneas and Turnus, and Aemilius and Perseus is striking to the extent that, names omitted, Plutarch's description might easily provide an antithetical ending to the Aeneid. Aemilius here

shows the correct and Roman response to the entreaties of his enemy and it is precisely his clemency, rather than his barbarity, that makes him a 'good warrior'. Equally, though mercy to one's adversaries was less intrinsic to the Grecian morality, Odysseus spares the herald, Medon, in the midst of slaughtering the suitors. 11 He is able to contain his passions in a way that Aeneas is not. The Roman model, and more implicitly the Homeric one, requires a warrior to have as much moral strength as physical and intellectual muscle, and Aeneas quite simply fails to achieve this balance. In Book Eight Aeneas is presented with the shield forged for him by Vulcan, and on it the God of Fire has hammered various scenes and figures from Rome's illustrious history (or rather future for Aeneas). Cato, Augustus and Agrippa are particularly prominent on its design, and yet one might question whether Aeneas is deserving of such a prize. He seems inadequate to his descendants, both as a domestic and as a military protector: renowned for his pietas, yet easily seduced by Dido; held to be 'devoted' by his father, and yet responsible for the deaths of Cruesa and Pallas; seen as a stoic hero, though his behaviour in Books Ten and Twelve is demonstrative of a lack of self-control and an emotional instability. Aeneas' actions are only ever emphatic, such as the slaying of Laucus or Turnus, when they are also morally bankrupt and as a consequence he falls far short of the 'good warriors' that Odysseus, in the Homeric world, and Aemilius, in the Roman, can be seen to exemplify. Virgil may well be credited with the creation of an emotionally complex and ambiguous character, but he certainly cannot be credited with the invention of a good, even a mediocre, warrior. Bibliography Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. David West, Penguin 1991 W. A. Camps, *An Introduction to Virgil's 'Aeneid'*, Oxford University Press, pp. 21-31 Homer, <https://assignbuster.com/is-aeneas-a-good-warrior/>

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