

The piety of aeneas in virgil's aeneid essay sample



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The Aeneid is an epic poem written by Virgil from around 30 to 19 BC that tells the story of the founding of Rome. The protagonist and epic hero, Aeneas, is a Trojan captain who escaped the fires of Ilion to lead a group of refugees to establish the Latin race. This mission, designated by the gods and fate, involved a journey filled with hardships that Aeneas and his people faced with determination and adamant resolve. In particular, however, it is Aeneas' piety that is highlighted as his defining feature. It is crucial to note that, in ancient times, the Latin word *pietas* referred to not only religious devotion, but also devotion to one's family and country.

Therefore, Aeneas possesses the values that were seen as most important in Virgil's era, and he serves as a vehicle by which Virgil both glorifies Rome and its founding and instructs the Roman people as to how they should carry out their lives. Virgil's goal was to have the reader identify that high class of character with Rome itself and its leaders, in particular Caesar Augustus, the ruler of the empire at the time Virgil lived. During that period, Augustus attempted to revive the moral standards of Rome, which had deteriorated over the past generation. Like Aeneas, he is a leader that will bring prosperity to the Roman people. The poem is thus designed to glorify the emperor and explain the origins of Rome, all in the style of Homer's Greek epics.

Of the three major aspects of Aeneas' pious character, the duty one has to one's country rises to the foreground. As an accomplished and honored war hero, Aeneas is forced to take on the responsibility of leading the people to the promised kingdom of Latium. As decreed by the gods and fate, he willingly accepts this task and tackles the heavy burdens that it entails. With

each trial, Aeneas becomes stronger and a better leader, eventually fulfilling his destiny as the founder of Rome. With his transformation comes a lesser dependence on the actions of the gods, exemplified best by Jupiter's decree in Book X that the gods must henceforth stay neutral in the battle. Aeneas never loses sight of his goal, all the while maintaining his pious duty to the Trojan people. Even in battle, the reader is reminded of his compassionate nature, especially after he kills young Lausus: " He held out his hand as filial piety, mirrored here, wrung his own heart, and said: ' O poor young soldier, how will Aeneas reward your splendid fight?'"

After the death of Pallas, however, the reader is shown an alternative aspect of Aeneas' character. Giving into his passions, he initiates an *aristeia* in which a killing rampage results in the violent deaths of many Latin soldiers. " As men say the titan Aegaeon had a hundred arms, a hundred hands, and sent out burning breath from fifty mouths and breasts when he opposed Jove's thunderbolt, clanging his fifty shields and drawing fifty swords, just so Aeneas multiplied savagery over the whole field once his sword-point warmed." This merciless side of Aeneas shows him as more human (though brutal) and not necessarily a faultless leader, allowing the reader to better relate to the Trojan hero. Virgil attempts to show his contemporaries that Aeneas is not a distant, divine being, sometimes giving into his emotions. Seen as just a human being, Aeneas' pious character is still quite impressive, but Virgil illustrates that these qualities are ones that all can emulate, and calls on the reader to do so.

Another aspect of Aeneas' piety is his duty to his family and friends. From the very beginning of the poem when he carries his father on his shoulders

and leads his son as they escape from Troy, we see that Aeneas is completely devoted to the well-being of his kin. A major facet of the prophecies is that his son, Ascanius, will be a great ruler of the new Latin nation. Aeneas thus feels that it is his duty not only to himself and to his country to complete his mission but also to his son, who will assume the throne after his time has passed. According to the prophecy, Iulus will hold power for thirty years, and bring about a new kingdom in Latium. A parallel can be drawn here to Caesar Augustus, who, during his time on the throne, revived the empire and created a new era of Roman history.

Although at some points Aeneas may have wanted to abandon his quest, he subordinates his personal desires for the greater good, namely, his country and his son. Another example of Aeneas' commitment to his comrades is his decision to commence the cease-fire so that the dead could be buried. "Meanwhile let us give over to the earth our friends' unburied bodies: the one honor possible for them now in Acheron...and make beautiful the funeral rites for those heroic souls who won this land for us." Aeneas shows how deeply he appreciated the young warrior and how seriously he took the promise to King Evander to protect him. This commitment to honoring the dead was also bolstered by Aeneas' journey through the underworld in which the unburied were unable to cross the river Styx. For this reason along with many others, honoring the deceased was a major concern of Aeneas and his comrades.

The third and final aspect of Aeneas' legendary piety was his duty to the gods. Following the more traditional and widely known interpretation of the word, this quality involved obeying divine decrees and showing reverence for

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the gods through ritual sacrifice and prayer. Because he himself was descended from the gods, Aeneas never forgot his duty to his heavenly mother, Venus, and the rest of the celestial beings. " By these spoken vows they sealed the pact between them in the sight of captains on both sides, then cut the throats of duly hallowed beasts over the flames and tore the living entrails out, to heap in freshly loaded platters on the altars." Along with Aeneas' duty to the gods, the readiness with which he meets the directives of fate is quite apparent. He recognizes the significance of forces larger than himself and unquestioningly accepts his fate, acting as the vehicle through which fate carries out its historical design. It is clear that Virgil wanted to convey the importance of fate and piety toward the gods in both the time of Aeneas and his own day.

One of the main purposes of Virgil's Aeneid was to create a great epic hero who would be an appropriate founder of the new Italian race. Aeneas was able to accomplish his mission and preserve the well-being of himself and his people by subordinating his own anxieties and passions to the demands of fate, the rules of piety, and reason. His pietas stretched to all aspects of his life, including his country, his family, and the gods. Virgil meant for his readers to identify with this Roman hero and strive to develop those characteristics themselves. The poem also glorifies the Roman Empire itself and its ruler, Caesar Augustus, through direct textual correlations to Virgil's contemporary period.

Sources:

Virgil, *The Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Vintage Classics, New York, 1983), 324.