

Aeneas, turnus, and the greater labor



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In *The Aeneid*, Virgil introduces the post-Homeric epic, an epic that immortalizes both a hero's glory and the foundation of a people. The scope of the *Aeneid* can be paralleled to the scope of the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, which explores the origins of a social institution, the Areopagus of Athens, and presents this origin as coinciding with a shift from the archaic matriarchal society ruled by the ties of blood to a civilized patriarchal society ruled by a court of law. Likewise, in the *Aeneid*, the founding of a civilization carries its own destructive consequence: the symbolic death of Turnus, and with it, the passing of an entire way of being. Virgil offers Turnus as a foil to Aeneas, in character and in culture, and Turnus's death, though relayed with compassion, is necessary to effect this transition from an archaic past to the creation of the Roman civilization. Virgil articulates the conflict between the existing structures of the home and city, a conflict that appears throughout the *Aeneid*, through his characterization of Aeneas and Turnus. In counterpoint to Aeneas and his essentially political orientation, Virgil gives Turnus a domestic nature. These associations arise in their actions during battle: Turnus chooses to burn Aeneas' ships instead of setting aflame the newfound fortress of the Trojans. In contrast, looking towards Latium, Aeneas sees "the city / free from the stress of war, intact, at rest. / Straightway the image of a greater struggle has kindled him" (12. 751-4). Though this is to be his "promised land," Aeneas sets fire to the walls of Latium, begrudging this kingdom for its peace, rest, and walls, and recognizing that something must fall to allow something else to arise (7. 153). This, Aeneas' "greater labor," moves him to act (7. 55). While Aeneas razes walls, the structural images of domesticity, Turnus razes ships, symbols of imperialism, conquest, and the spread of civilizations. To further

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support the characterization of Turnus as oikos-centric, Turnus is championed both by Amata, the matriarch of Latium, and Juno, the goddess of marriage and hearth. Aeneas's entry into the city will violate Virgil's image of the tender housewife at the hearth, "her first task to sustain life," and forces the unraveling of the family structure (8. 536). As Queen Amata looks out from her high palace and fails to see the Rutulians and Turnus, she commits suicide; her daughter Lavinia "tears at her bright hair and cheeks;" King Latinus "defiles his aged hairs with filthy dust" (12. 813, 819). The social order of domestic life must be sacrificed for the genesis of a new and manifestly political Roman order. If Aeneas stands apart from the pulls of the domestic sphere, why does the family play such a prominent role in the Aeneid? How is this view of Aeneas as the debaser of the home reconciled with Virgil's account of an epic hero who bears his father and his household gods upon his back and his young son by hand as he flees, an exile from Troy? Although Aeneas has filial piety and fatherly love, these characteristics are analogous to his historical and political duty. For Aeneas, the preservation of his genealogical line and the founding of a civilization are of far more importance than the preservation of a household. As such, his sons, sons, with unlimited fortune, unlimited time, and an empire without end," play an instrumental role in bringing about the Roman rulership of nations" (1. 390, 6. 1134). Yet in this, too, in conserving Anchises and Ascanius, one must fall by the wayside. Aeneas journeys in the night through the fiery remnants of his captured city, "in fear for son and father," as his wife Cressa follows behind, and upon reaching the safety of the shrine, discovers that "she alone / [is] missing " gone from husband, son, companions" (2. 984, 1002-3). Cressa

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is the first in a line of persons sacrificed for the completion of Aeneas's "greater labor." Dido, a victim of a quasi-marriage to Aeneas, questions Aeneas's piety and exposes its apparent contradiction: "This is the right hand, this the pledge of one who carries with him, so they say, the household gods of his land, who bore upon his shoulders his father weak with years?" (4. 823-6) Finally, Lavinia, whose hand, land, and kingdom inspires the Rutulians and Trojans to war, is pursued by Aeneas not through love or a desire for family, as in the case of Turnus, whose love drives [him] wild" and makes him "even keener now for battle," but through a desire for civilization and walls (12. 95-6). Aeneas's three marriages traced through the Aeneid show increasing distortions of the household and hearth. Domestic sanctity is necessary primarily to allow divine prophecies to achieve historical realization, and is always secondary to political compulsion. Aeneas does not bear simply his father upon his back. He carries a greater labor: "Upon his shoulder he / lifts up the fame and fate of his sons' sons" (8. 954-5). In addition to the juxtaposition of the domestic/matriarchal and political/patriarchal orientations of Turnus and Aeneas, Virgil portrays Turnus as being linked to the past but paints Aeneas with an eye to the future. Turnus spurs his men to battle by recalling the glory of their hearth and past, saying, "Let each / remember wife and home, recall the bright / acts and glories of his ancestors" (10. 390-2). When inspiring his men, Aeneas instead looks toward the future: "Perhaps one day you will remember even these our adversities with pleasure. Through so many crises and calamities we make for Latium... Hold out, and save yourselves for kinder days" (1. 283-9). Tied to this opposition of past and future is the identification of Turnus with the traditional, insular, and

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self-contained kingship, while Aeneas is identified with a new system of social and political organization, that of the empire. The founding of this empire requires a breaking from tradition and custom, symbolically captured as the desecration of the wild olive tree of Faunus, where the Latins once hung votive garments and offerings.”...Heedless of this custom, the Teucrians had carried off the sacred tree trunk to clear the field, to lay it bare for battle” (12. 1020-3). As he prepares to duel Turnus, Aeneas cannot wrench free his spear from the deep root of the tree. Turnus cries for Faunus and Earth to hold fast the steel, citing the rites he has kept, the rites that “Aeneas’/ men have profaned by war” (12. 1032-3). But with Venus’s help, Aeneas regains his spear. Custom, embodied in the tree, yields, and so, the necessary profanity of establishing a civilization is legitimized, allowing the shift from the traditional and archaic worldview to one that looks towards what is to come. Analogous to this characterization of Turnus as a dweller in the past and Aeneas as a creator of the future is the portrayal of Turnus as representative of a more lawless society, one that will be supplanted by the ordered society Aeneas will found, though this order will first be shadowed by warfare and conflict. King Latinus welcomes the Teucrians into his palace, asking them not to forget that the Latins need: “No laws and no restraint for righteousness; they hold themselves in check by their own will and by the customs of their ancient god” (7. 269-71). Virgil presents the Rutulians, breakers of the truce, and Turnus, “driven by the Furies,” as restrained and driven by both their own free will and ancient gods (12. 137). In contrast, Aeneas acts responsive of the orders of the gods but is fully aware of his own human agency: “if fate had willed my end,” he says, “my hand had earned it” (2. 583). The hand of Aeneas, poised at the cusp between the primitive

society he must displace and the ordered civilization he must found, has much labor ahead of him, but as Jupiter decrees: "...With battleforgotten, savage generations shallgrow generous. And aged Faith and Vesta, together with the brothers, Romulusand Remus, shall make laws" (1. 408-12). As in the Oresteia, the succession of institutions comes with a transition to greater order. As a foil to Aeneas, Turnus embodies the domestic and ancestral concerns of mankind's domain, which in the Aeneid must be supplanted by a new order that gives the state and future priority. The closing book of the Aeneid gives a disturbing account of the death of Turnus, a " man [who] does not know the end / or future fates" (10. 690-1). Virgil writes, " His limbs fell slack with chill; and with a moan / his life, resentful, fled to Shades below," capturing through his diction the hesitation and unease of Turnus's death (12. 1270-1). However, his death should not be viewed as an impious and inconclusive act performed by the epic hero; rather, it is an obligatory and conclusive act, the compelling event that drives out the old establishment and allows the new establishment to enter. The necessity for Turnus's death is linked to Virgil's treatment of Pallas's belt. Throughout the Aeneid, works of art serve as triggers to Aeneas's emotions, as in Dido's palace, when the frieze depicting the fall of Troy moves him to tears. Likewise, when he encounters the fallen Turnus, Aeneas's wrath is initiated by the recognition of the belt of Pallas upon the Latin's shoulders. Pallas's belt is described as " ponderous," containing an engraving of " a band of fifty bridegrooms, foully slaughtered / one wedding night, and bloodied marriage chambers" (10. 683-6). And when his eyes drank in this plunder, this memorial of brutal grief, Aeneas, aflame with rage " his wrath was terrible " "...he sinks his

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sword into the chest of Turnus (12. 1262-9). In this, the final recognition scene of the epic, Aeneas associates Turnus with the violence, plunder, and marital desecration to which he himself has had to resort in order to found his fated city. In addition, he associates Turnus with the destructive dwelling in grief from which he seeks to liberate himself, as the belt is both a "memorial of brutal grief" and a memorial to brutal grief. In order to divorce himself from both the violence and the grief, Aeneas kills Turnus. Turnus's death is the transitional climax of the grand-scale shifting of powers, lands, and peoples, but it is also the transitional climax of Aeneas's heroism, allowing him to set aside once again a warrior ethos and human pathos and to embrace his role as founder of Rome, his greater labor. This role includes the building of great walls, the teaching of peace to the conquered, the sparing of defeated peoples, and the taming of the proud (6. 1136-7). But like the shade of Turnus, who descends to the underworld unwillingly, and like the golden bough which yields to Aeneas only hesitantly, both transitions will not be easy, wrought with war, conflict, and suffering.