Mortal Control & Self-Control in the Aeneid

The mortal characters of the Aeneid are shown to be subject to a range of ethical, historical and divine influence that, in colliding or balancing, leave those characters with an essentially human choice to make between courses of action. Nothing is ‘necessary’ in the Aeneid, and the way things actually work out is never the only possibility. To the extent that they have genuine, free choices set before them, the mortal characters are in control of their actions. However, Vergil raises questions about the extent of their self-control that complicate these choices.

Vergil’s gods are more remote than their epic predecessors but still involved in important ways, and this creates an important tension. The phantom Aeneas which Juno contrives to draw Turnus from the battle at 10.633-637 is an example of the remoteness of Vergil’s gods; the scene resembles that at Iliad 5.431ff1, with the difference that in Homer Apollo rescues Aeneas personally and then creates a phantom to distract Diomedes. Vergil has transformed the Homeric scene by reversing its order. The scene also illustrates the continued involvement of the gods in the narrative, and indeed much in the poem can only be explained by divine causation. For example, when Turnus’ mortal sword breaks at 12.738-741 it is Aeneas’ divine weaponry that allows him to disarm Turnus, and Vergil emphasises the divinity of the weaponry by describing it as both Volcania and dei. However, both scenes equally illustrate the extent to which divine causation depends on human impulses; Juno operates by deluding Turnus, playing on his natural inclination to hunt down Aeneas, whereas in Book XII Turnus was only left with a mortal sword because he forgot his own divine weapon in his haste to go into battle2. Thus Oliver Lyne has said that the gods of the Aeneid ‘work with’ mortals3. There is, therefore, significant scope for mortals to be responsible for their own actions. Literary correspondences likewise leave Vergil’s characters with scope for control over their own choices because these correspondences are imperfect. A literary correspondence may predetermine or prefigure action in the Aeneid because such correspondences bring with them a set of generic expectations based on that literary background. Book III, which has been said to depict at Buthrotum a ‘city of the living dead’4, presents a realisation of the Andromache of Iliad VI, who told Hector

It is the literary background of the character that gives her special pathos when she appears in the Aeneid. When Aeneas lands in Italy a link to Jason, and between Latinus and Aeetes, is achieved by the correspondence of Aeneas’ labores with Jason’s á.ê6λOt5 and the assimilation of Latinus’ dynastic history with that of Aeetes6. In the context of these Apollonian correspondences, Latinus’ gift of two fire-breathing horses to Aeneas6 portends the war to come because a pair of fire-breathing bulls was

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1 Conington (1883) on 10.636.
2 Aen. 12.735-737 – fama est praecipitem...patrio mucrone relictio, dum trepidat.
5 ll. 6.410-413.
7 Ibid at 283-285.
8 Aen. 7.280-283.
one of the trials Aeetes set for Jason. However, as shall be argued, these historical patterns are not
decisive because Vergil contradicts and undermines them.

The tension between divine activity and passivity, and the imperfections in the literary
correspondences Vergil creates, leaves humans largely responsible for their own choices. To the
extent that decisions are theirs to make, they are in control of their own destinies, yet the Aeneid
questions the extent to which the characters are in control of themselves. Stephen Smith has
demonstrated the importance of perspective in the Aeneid by considering the ways in which
characters’ assessments of Achilles are determined by their personal experiences of him. Similarly,
mortal characters act in a particular emotional context, and this limits the scope of their decision-
making. For example, Aeneas must repeatedly be told to flee Troy, but in context it is
understandable that he should think only of staying to defend his city to the last. To show him the
reality of this *ineluctable tempus* Venus must un-blind him; a telling analogy for a human character
whose perspective is limited by his emotions. The power of emotional responses, therefore, presents
problems for the degree of self-control the characters can exercise because of the way it clouds
perspective.

This is illustrated by the story of Dido. Although Dido’s love for Aeneas is the result of the
conspiracies of Juno and Venus, Book IV begins with an expression of determination to resist the
strength of these feelings.

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sed mihi vel tellus optem prius ima dehiscat
vel pater omnipotens abigat me fulmine ad umbras,
palentiis umbras Erebo noctemque profundam,
ante, pudor, quam te uiolo aut tua iura resoluo.
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The use of the indicatives *uiolo* and *resoluo* in place of the more typical subjunctive conveys Dido’s
determination by ‘substituting the mood of fact for that of possibility’. Furthermore, although the
‘marriage’ of Dido and Aeneas in the cave was ordained by Juno and Venus and was contrived to
look like a legal marriage, Vergil nevertheless says *coniugium uocat, hoc praetexit nomine culpam*.
The language implies a willed choice on Dido’s part and authorial condemnation of it. Phrases such
as *dant signum, fures ignes* and *ulularunt* are ambiguous, and they conote war, divine wrath and
mourning as much as the rituals of a wedding; although these portents were supplied by the
goddesses, and Dido’s love for Aeneas was their design, the choice of interpretation was Dido’s own,
and it is in this sense that 4.172 acquires meaning. At the end of the Book, the poet comments that
Dido’s *anima* was *luctans*.

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nam quia nec fato merita nec morta peribat,
sed misera ante diem subito aue accensa furore.
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Explicitly, then, the death of Dido was not the necessary result of any action of the gods; it came about by her own choice.

Dido is also subject to the generic expectations that literary correspondences impose on her, but these too are flexible. In Book I, the mural ecphrasis ends with a description of Penthesilea made all the more vivid by the novelty of the language used to describe her; this scene merges into reality as Dido makes her appearance. There are parallels between Dido and Penthesilea in the situation of Penthesilea mediisque in milibus ardent. It could also be said that Dido’s act of giving laws and justice to men (specified as viri) parallels Penthesilea aude te uiris concurrere virgo. As Aeneas begins to adopt the role of Achilles during the ecphrasis, the expectations that the roles assigned to Dido and Aeneas bring with them suggest that Dido’s story too will end in her death. This is the more so because of the vocabulary of wounding and flame (prefiguring the funeral pyre) used to describe her love. Dido also bears comparison to Apollonius’ Medea. Fire and wound imagery is used similarly of both. Furthermore, Medea meets Jason in a temple, and in this context she is compared to Artemis; in the Aeneid, this is paralleled by the meeting of Dido and Aeneas in Juno’s temple and the comparison of Dido to Diana. The Medea of Apollonius is the Medea of Euripides to-be, and the correspondence thereby prefigures the later tragedy of Dido; the curse Dido places on Aeneas’ descendents echoes schematically Medea’s murder of Jason’s children. However, if Dido is compared to Medea it is significant that she says non socios, non ipsum absumere ferro. Ascanium patriisque epulandum ponere mensis.

Dido does not do the sort of thing Medea would have done. Likewise the similarity with Penthesilea is not total because the faint suggestion of powerful sexuality in Penthesilea conveyed by exsertae mammae and audetque uiris concurrere virgo is replaced in Dido by a comparison with the virgin goddess Diana and a chaste piety to her dead husband. Dido embodies Penthesilea and Medea to an extent, and to that extent her destiny is predetermined, but at the same time Dido defies these roles.

The hunt scene sums up Dido’s choice.

it portis iubare exorta delecta iuventus...
Massylique ruunt equites et odora canum uis.
reginam thalamo cunctantem ad limina primi
Poenorum expectant ostroque insignis et auro

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23 cf. R.D. Williams (1972) on 4.696-697; Conington (1884) on 4.696.
25 Ibid at 256.
26 Aen. 1.493.
28 e.g. Aen. 4.1 (at regina graui iamdudum saucia cura), 4.2 (caeco carpitur igni), 4.54 (his dictis incensum animum inflamavit amore), 4.66-67 (est mollis flamma medullas / interea et tacitum uiuit sub pectore uulnus), 4.69-73 (qualis coniecta cerua sagitta...).
29 Otis (1964) at 71-72, Nelis (2001) at 134.
31 Arg. 3.286-287; Aen. 4.66-67.
32 Arg. 3.876-884.
33 Nelis (2001) at 172.
34 Aen. 4.622-623 (tum uos, o Tyrii, stirpem et genus omne futurum / exercete odiiis); 4.629 (pugnet ipsique nepotesque).
35 Med. 1236-1250.
36 Aen. 4.601-602.
37 Aen. 1.492-493.
38 Aen. 4.129-172.
It is one of movement, as indicated by the position of it, emphatically, at the beginning of its line, and by the verb ruunt. The enjambment of *primi / Poenorum* conveys the impatience of the Phoenician princes by placing them figuratively on Dido's doorstep; likewise, *stat sonipes, frena ferox* and *spumantia mandit* convey impatience through insistent sibilance and alliteration. In the midst of this *cunctantem* stands in contrast. The placement of Dido in her *thalamus* specifically is significant because the word connotes the inner sanctum of domesticity and security, contrasted (by Dido herself) with the wilds beyond it. The situation is liminal (cf. *ad limina primi / Poenorum exspectant*), balanced between home and the world outside and between the queen's hesitation and her companions' impatience, and might be compared to, for example, Julius Caesar at the Rubicon. This choice is made weightier by the graphic illustration surrounding it of all the people and riches that depend on Dido. As has been demonstrated, neither the influence of the gods nor the literary roles Dido re-enacts are decisive; it is a human choice. At this moment Dido is in control of her future, but it is less clear that she is in control of herself because of the way Vergil has described her growing passion. It is described as an unseen flame or a silent wound, and is said to possess her (*caeco carpitur igni*); this emphasis on stealth and possession suggests that she is being subtly robbed of her reason and taken over by her emotions. For Lucretius deer were an example of an animal with an elemental imbalance that prevented them from being able to stay calm or control their temperaments. The comparison of Dido to a deer that runs madly through the woods, just as she *uagatur urbe furens*, suggests that a similar mental imbalance may have taken her actions out of her hands. This is supported by the authorial comment that Dido died *subitque accensa furore*, the verb *accensa* in particular suggests the uncontrollability of the passion. The importance of Dido's fiery passion, explicitly said to be the cause of her death, argues that even though her decisions were her own, Dido was not in control of her own emotions; this problematises the extent to which Dido can be said to be in control of her destiny.

The decision faced by Aeneas at the end of Book XII furnishes further illustration. The gods play a decisive part in creating this situation by sending a Dirá to drive off Juturna and incapacitate Turnus, but the weighing of the fates at 12.725-727 is conspicuously vague about who will die and nothing is said of who receives the respective fates. In the Homeric scene it is based upon (*Il. 22.209-213*), by contrast, it is clearly indicated that Hector is doomed by the weighing to die. Turnus' death is apparently fated at several points; but if the fates required Turnus' death, the injunction to *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* would seem to require that Aeneas exercise mercy, since Turnus' supplication and speech indicate (*uiciisti et uictum tendere palmas Ausonii uidere*) that he is *subiectus*. In any event, Vergil builds the final scene up as one of choice, and it is a choice that could easily have been avoided – the wound Achilles inflicts on Hector in *Iliad* XXII is explicitly said to be

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39 Aen. 4.130-135.
40 Aen. 4.550-551.
41 Segal (1990) at 4, 9.
42 Ibid at 3 – ‘This rapid accumulation of divinities, followers, and animals around her, along with the massive luxury of golden and purple accoutrements, contributes to the heavy pressure of decision and destiny...’.
44 e.g. Aen. 4.2; 4.67.
45 Austin (1955) on 4.2.
46 Lucr. 3.299-322.
47 Aen. 4.68-69.
48 Aen. 4.697.
49 R.D. Williams (1972) on 12.727; Conington (1883) on 12.727.
50 Il. 22.212-213.
52 Aen. 6.853.
fatal\textsuperscript{54}, but Turnus is merely incapacitated. This choice is portrayed as the collision of different potential interpretations, perspectives and motivations.

Pleas for mercy on the battlefield were never successful in the \textit{Iliad}; for example, in Book VI Menelaus was dissuaded from sparing a Trojan prince by Agamemnon and the narrator comments that Agamemnon ἀδίκησε παρεκτών\textsuperscript{55}. However, when Turnus makes his appeal verbal echoes establish a link between him and Priam, who was successful in his entreaty. Where Priam χεῖραν ἀριστών λαβὲ γούνατα καὶ κύσε χείρας / δεινὸς ἀνδρὸφονοῦς, Turnus \textit{dextramque precentem / pretendens}\textsuperscript{57} and Aeneas \textit{dextramque repressit}\textsuperscript{58}. In conjunction with the focus on the eyes of each hero (\textit{oculos...pretendens; voluens oculos}), this creates a moment of shared humanity between them\textsuperscript{59}, stretching across Turnus' Priam-inspired plea \textit{oro} (\textit{fuit et tibi talis Anchises genitor}) \textit{Dauni miserere senectae}\textsuperscript{60}. The fact that Aeneas and Turnus begin to adopt the auras of Achilles and Hector in the final books\textsuperscript{61} pulls the reader's expectations in one direction, because there is only one way that confrontation could resolve itself; 'for Aeneas to have spared Turnus would have been a violent reversal of code and expectations'\textsuperscript{62}. However, by echoing the language and tropes of Priam's appeal to Achilles Vergil creates another possibility.

Further examples of conflicting possibilities may be cited. Brooks Otis argues that Turnus' treatment of Pallas is contrasted with Aeneas' treatment of Lausus in a way that reveals the moral superiority of Aeneas and thus the necessity of Turnus' death\textsuperscript{63}. Yet when Aeneas slays Lausus

\begin{quote}
\textit{at vero ut uultum uidit morientis et ora,}
\textit{ora modis Anchisiades pallentia miris,}
\textit{ingemuit miserans grauiter dextramque tetendi,}
\textit{et mentem patriae subiit pietatis imago.}\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

The very feature that defines Aeneas' supposedly morally superior conduct in this passage is his sympathy for the filial piety of Lausus, conveyed through the appositive use of the patronymic. However, \textit{dextramque tetendit} prefigures the importance of hands in Turnus' last moments, and \textit{mentem patriae subiit pietatis imago} is what Turnus hopes will happen to Aeneas in his case. Lyne has argued that Juturna's lament for her brother (12.872-884) raises a conflict between two 'admirable human impulses'\textsuperscript{65}. Aeneas' desire to avenge the dishonour of his young friend is a decent enough incentive within the epic tradition\textsuperscript{66}, but through the lament of Juturna and the earlier laments of Latinus and Amata\textsuperscript{67} the reader is allowed to see what the death of Turnus would mean in human terms for those around him\textsuperscript{68}, and his reaction to the death of Lausus raises the possibility that in Turnus' case, Aeneas might see this too.

There is, finally, a collision between the levels at which history and the future are worked into the final scenes. At one level it has been argued that Turnus could not be spared because his \textit{uiolentia} and

\textsuperscript{54} Il. 22.325-326.
\textsuperscript{55} Il. 6.59-60; 6.62.
\textsuperscript{56} Il. 22.478-479.
\textsuperscript{57} Aen. 12.930-931.
\textsuperscript{58} Aen. 12.939.
\textsuperscript{59} Putnam (1995) at 155.
\textsuperscript{60} Aen. 12.933-934.
\textsuperscript{61} cf. G. Williams (1983) at 221ff.
\textsuperscript{62} Horsfall (1995) at 203.
\textsuperscript{63} Otis (1964) at 352-353.
\textsuperscript{64} Aen. 10.821-824.
\textsuperscript{65} Lyne (1987) at 220.
\textsuperscript{67} Aen. 12.19-45; 12.56-63.
\textsuperscript{68} cf. Ibid at 221 – 'Juturna's lament...gives important and suggestive context to the concluding scene'.
superbia had no place in a future that was to be characterised rather by pietas and humanitas; in this view, Turnus is a necessary sacrifice on the road to peace. And we may of course doubt the sincerity of Turnus' capitulation. But Turnus as a threat to peace is not the only possible analysis of the role of history in this passage. In Book VII Vergil develops connections between the Latins and Augustan Rome in ways that suggest the war may be viewed as a kind of civil war. An example of this is the description of Latinus' palace at 7.170-182, which anticipates Augustus' temple of Mars Ultor; the effigies there seem to depict famous Latins generally, rather than the ancestors of Latinus specifically, and the sacra sedes epulis recall the banquets held in the temple of Mars Ultor by the Salli. The Trojans, moreover, came from Italy originally, as the repeated references to Dardanus in the parley between Latinus and Ilioneus remind us, and it is salient to remember that it is a war between men fated to be father-in-law and son-in-law, which is how the relationship of Caesar and Pompey was often described. Killing enemies in battle may have been the accepted norm, but casting the conflict as a civil war changes the situation; in this context, Julius Caesar had provided a powerful example of clementia.

Because of the range of alternatives presented by this collision of possibilities, no one course of action can be called necessary or inevitable. To this extent, therefore, what happens next is in Aeneas' hands; he is in control of the situation. Once again, however, it is not clear that the hero is in control of himself.

The emotional tone is clear from the designation of Aeneas' dolor as saeuus, or Turnus' sanguis as scleratus, and the repetition of Pallas sounds almost frenzied, especially considering the jerky mixture of dactyls and spondees that characterise Aeneas' speech. In philosophical terms, such emotion may be justifiable; for Aristotle anger was healthy and normal, and a spur to action, and Aeneas' anger has also been compared to the Epicurean Philodemus' ὑπὸκτή ὄργη — justified, temporary anger that is thereby excusable. Even if this is so, the poetic focus of the passage is on how Aeneas' wrath blazes up, and furiis accensus et ira terribilis are unlikely ways of describing ὑπὸκτή ὄργη; the participle accensus suggests that, as with Dido, emotion has taken hold of Aeneas. There were, as has been argued, valid reasons for killing Turnus, but none of these comes to the fore at the end; the focus is rather on what Aeneas feels, as he is seized by passion, and on what he sees. And what Aeneas' vision fixes on at last is not the dextram precantem of Turnus or the patrīae pietātīs imago, but the saeuī monimenta doloris. Aeneas' perspective is thus restricted by his emotions. At the

69 cf. Highet (1972) at 210-218.
70 Otis (1964) at 380-381.
71 Horsfall (1995) at 196, and cf. Livy I.2.3, where Turnus loses a battle against Aeneas and then retreats to Etruria to continue the resistance.
72 Rowell (1948) passim.
73 Ibid at 266, 270.
74 Ibid at 271.
75 Aen. 7.195; 7.207; 7.219; 7.240.
78 Aen. 12.945-949.
79 Wright (1997) at 177.
81 cf. Aen. 4.697, where Dido was said to have died subitoque accensa furore.
end of the poem, whatever justifications he may have had, he is depicted as a man possessed by blazing wrath, and thus not in control of himself.

In the collision of different interpretations and possibilities for the role of the divine, the relevance of history and competing ethical prescriptions that Vergil creates, the mortal characters of the poem are largely left to make a choice. To the extent that this is their choice, they are in control of their own destinies. However, the *Aeneid* also presents us with the limitations on human perspective and reason imposed by the emotions. Because of this humans, though responsible for their own destinies, are shown not to be in control of themselves. Herein lies one of the tragedies of the *Aeneid*. 
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