

## ZEUS'S REWARD AND THE AMBIGUITY OF EASTERN DECADENCE IN VIRGIL'S *AENEID*

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Virgil's *Aeneid* was one of the most studied and imitated classical epics in the Middle Ages. A school text used to teach Latin, the poem also spurred various literary responses ranging from epics like Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis* and Dante's *Commedia* to comic poems and romances like Chaucer's *House of Fame* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Virgil held a central place in the medieval imagination. His use in the epic of the topos of eastern decadence, largely unremarked by critics, particularly underscores his view of punishment and reward—the topic of this collection—a view that comes most into focus at the poem's end. In this article, I explore the theme of Aeneas's eastern lineage and the resulting dispensation by Zeus of punishment and reward for Aeneas and Turnus.

By the final book of the *Aeneid*, book 12, the decisive duel between the Trojan Aeneas and the Rutulian Turnus for dominance in Italy and marriage with Latinus's daughter Lavinia is imminent. The entire scene is long, a little over 250 lines, and heavily modeled on the duel between Hector and Achilles in book 22 of Homer's *Iliad*. In this final scene, Aeneas vanquishes Turnus on the battlefield and kills him in anger after noticing the belt around his shoulders, a spoil taken by Turnus from Aeneas's dead protégé, Pallas. Turnus's soul speeds to the underworld with a groan ("gemitu ... indignata") and the epic abruptly concludes. Thus, it would seem that Aeneas is the winner and reaps the rewards while Turnus is the loser who is punished for daring to impede the inevitable foundation of Rome. Although this ending is normally read as the climax of the epic, it is not; it is actually the anticlimax. The climax is the reconciliation scene between Juno and Jupiter embedded in the final duel wherein Juno names the terms and conditions allowing for the appeasement of her wrath against Aeneas and the Trojans (12.791-842). The price for Juno's abandonment of Turnus and acceptance of Fate is steep, amounting to a complete rejection of any Trojan contribution to the Roman national character in favor of Latin primacy. She says,

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“cum iam conubiis pacem felicibus (esto)  
component, cum iam leges et foedera iungent,  
ne vetus indigenas nomen mutare Latinos  
neu Troas fieri iubeas Teucrosque vocari  
aut vocem mutare viros aut vertere vestem.  
sit Latinum, sint Albani per saecula reges,  
sit Romana potens Itala virtute propago:  
occidit, occideritque sinas cum nomine Troia.” (12.821-28)

Seeing as now they will make peace through favorable marriages (let it happen!), seeing as they will now share in common their laws and custom, do not order the indigenous Latins to change their ancient name or become Trojans and be called Teucrians or order the men to swap their language or alter their dress. Let Latium be as is, let the Albans rule as kings through the ages. Let the Roman race be powerful through Italic excellence. Troy has fallen and allow her to be erased along with her very name.<sup>1</sup>

Juno’s requirements necessitate a complete rejection of all Trojan traditions and full acceptance of the Latin identity: the retention of the Latin name, ethnic identity, language, dress, leadership, and character. There will be no new Troy; indeed, hardly a Trojan element will survive at all. If Jupiter accepts this divine settlement, the physical struggle between the two men and Aeneas’s eventual triumph on the battlefield shall have been rendered inconsequential since the war’s outcome has already been settled on the divine level. Jupiter immediately agrees to all these conditions without any protest and even additionally promises future reverence for her divinity, saying,

“do quod vis, et me victusque volensque remitto.  
sermonem Ausonii patrium moresque tenebunt,  
utque est nomen erit; commixti corpore tantum  
subsident Teuceri. morem ritusque sacrorum  
adiciam faciamque omnis uno ore Latinos.  
hinc genus Ausonio mixtum quod sanguine surget,  
supra homines, super ire deos pietate videbis,  
nec gens ulla tuos aequae celebrabit honores.” (12.833-40)

I will grant what you ask, and, both because I have been persuaded by you and of my own volition, I concur with you. The Ausonians will retain the speech and customs of their fathers, their name will remain as it is. The Teucrians will subside once they have contributed their blood line alone. I will add a standard of conduct and the rites for the divine and will unite the Latins under one language. And from the Latin stock a new race will arise, one mixed with Ausonian blood; you will see it go beyond men and even the gods in devotion nor will any other people show you respect with equal zeal.

Jupiter's complete, almost gleeful ("victusque volensque") acquiescence to Juno's demands is puzzling as one does not expect at the end of the epic a rejection of "all things Trojan." The reader knows that Aeneas's triumph on the battlefield is predetermined, and this interchange between Jupiter and Juno contrasts starkly with the reader's expectation built up at the end of the narrative of the duel's importance; indeed, it is jarring. In this scene, it is clear that Turnus is rewarded and Aeneas, while not punished, is at least not the real victor. Hence, this pivotal scene invites a natural question: what then *is* the Trojan contribution to the Roman national character? The answer to this question is complex.

"arma virumque cano" 'I sing the arms and man' (1.1): these four words that initiate Virgil's *Aeneid* are pregnant with meaning and literary allusion. The terms "arms" and "man," reinforced by the dactylic hexameter, announce that the poem will be a heroic epic, and certain literary assumptions associated with that genre naturally ensue. The literary reference invokes the great epics of Homer, *arma* recalling Achilles from the *Iliad* and *virum* recalling Odysseus from the *Odyssey*. From this foundation expectations are built concerning the epic. The poem will be heroic in nature, with the protagonist, the Trojan Aeneas, being a combination of the two great Homeric heroes. Further, in the first seven lines of the poem we are informed of Aeneas's mission in the *Aeneid*: "multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem / inferretque deos Latio; genus unde Latium / Albanique patres atque altae moenia Romae" 'and many thing also he endured in war until he might found a city and carry his gods into Latium; from this source arises the Latin race, the Alban fathers, and even the walls of lofty Rome' (1.5-7). Hence, the *Aeneid* will chronicle the escape of the hero, "pius Aeneas," who dutifully flees with divine sanction from the

wreckage of Troy with the remnants of his family to found Rome and the Roman race after defeating the indigenous prince Turnus. As traditionally read, Virgil meant the *Aeneid* to be a nationalistic poem of unqualified praise of the Roman empire and the “princeps” Augustus, the literary patron of Virgil. Thomas Chase sums up this vision of the *Aeneid* and Aeneas as follows: “A valiant warrior and pious worshipper of the gods, Aeneas represents Virgil’s ideal of the Roman people. Indirectly, the object of the poem is to gratify the pride of the Romans, to quicken their patriotism, to heighten their regard for religion, and to exult their monarch, Augustus” (281).

However, as I argue here, it was not Virgil’s intention to write a simple, heroic, nationalistic poem in praise of Rome and Augustus, but instead an etiological poem explaining the contradictory nature of both empire and Augustus by utilizing the topos of eastern decadence. In the actions of all empires and strongmen both good and evil lurk. Rome, the empire that brought the “Pax Romana” to the Mediterranean basin, also brought conquest and bloody civil wars as strong men vied for power and domination. The emperor Augustus himself ended nearly a hundred years of civil war, but at the price of massive civil conflict, bloody proscriptions, and the final demise of the Republican form of government. Virgil himself suffered the confiscation of his farm (later restored by Augustus) and no doubt witnessed worse incidents, either through personal experience or second hand reports. The *Aeneid* is more than a simple glorification of the end result of these tumultuous times, but an answer to the question of how an empire and a man so great could also be capable of such appalling atrocities. I will propose that the *Aeneid* offers a unique, yet very Roman, solution to this question. Virgil, like many other Roman authors, employs the topos of the decadent East to explain the excesses of empire and character flaws of Augustus. Virgil’s epic presents the initial amalgamation of nationalities, cultures, and traditions, with two being central: the Latins under Turnus and the Trojans under Aeneas. Each bloodline will establish qualities in the national character: Turnus and the Latins the hardihood and valor that will make Rome great, and Aeneas and the Trojans the decadence inherent (at least in a Roman’s mind) in the East. The dominant strain will be the Latin character; however, the Trojan eastern element is submerged just below the surface and at times emerges at the national and individual levels.

### **1. Traditional Nationalistic Reading: the *Aeneid* and Aeneas**

There are numerous problems with the traditional interpretation of the epic as nationalistic panegyric, and we can interpret many scenes, both major and minor, as critique of empire and Augustus rather than praise. Three examples will suffice for proof that the epic is not as straightforward as it may seem to Chase and others. First, in book 6, Aeneas goes into the underworld to meet his father, Anchises, and learn of his upcoming ordeals (6.236-901). At the end of the book, Anchises treats Aeneas to a parade of significant Roman souls and explains the deeds of many of the men who will make Rome great. After the great eulogy of Livia's deceased son Marcellus, Virgil tells us that there are two gates by which one may leave the Underworld, that of true dreams (horn) and that of false dreams (ivory) (6.893-96). Anchises then sends Aeneas and the Sybil out by the gate of false dreams in the last lines of the book.

The gate of false dreams? Surely Anchises should have sent Aeneas out by the gate of true dreams since all he has seen will come to pass. Chase notes of this episode that "No satisfactory explanation has been given of the reason why Aeneas is dismissed through the ivory gate" (370). Indeed, if the epic is read as a nationalistic glorification of Rome, no explanation of this passage will make sense. This exit suggests that something Aeneas has seen in the underworld must be false. Because the facts related by Anchises are unquestionable (they have already happened by Virgil's time), it must be Anchises's positive interpretation that is false. Virgil is here criticizing the entire project of empire and suggesting to the readership that the greatness of Rome can be no more than a "false dream." This scene challenges an easy nationalistic interpretation of the epic and invites the reader to consider the meaning at a deeper level.

Second, during Aeneas's visit to the underworld in book 6, Virgil extols the future deeds of Augustus in the parade of souls (ushering in the golden age and surpassing both Heracles and Bacchus), and this description can be pointed to as blatant, fawning praise of Augustus (6.789-807). However, Virgil's placement of Augustus in the parade serves to undermine these accolades, seeing that Augustus's soul is positioned between Romulus and Numa, the first two kings of Rome. Why place him here? Virgil could have easily situated Augustus at the end of the catalog as the climax of the Roman race or at the beginning in a prominent position, but he does not. Beside the sublimated position, he is included in the list of kings, subtly implying that

Augustus is not so much “princeps,” ‘chief man,’ as the equivalent of a king. This is a stinging indictment of Augustus, and a Roman reader would readily recall that Julius Caesar had been murdered for his imperial ambitions and more recently the loss of the republican form of government. This episode is not so much praise of Augustus as a warning to his fellow Romans regarding the real meaning of the title “princeps.”

In book 8, we witness a third episode, the description of the shield of Aeneas (8.626-728), that can be touted as promoting nationalism or alternatively read as criticism of Augustus. There are numerous scenes of Roman history and culture on the shield that Hephaestus has made for Aeneas at Venus’s behest. Virgil chooses to locate a glowing description of the great triumph of Augustus over Antony and Cleopatra at Actium at the very center of the shield (8.675-714). Although he frames the battle as one of Octavian and Agrippa against Antony, Cleopatra, and the wild forces and gods of the East, it can not be forgotten that this scene represents the culmination of a destructive civil war and that the altars erected after the battle celebrate a Roman victory over Roman enemies (8.836-53). Surely this is a peculiar episode to pick for the very center of the shield so soon after the fact, especially as feelings in the Roman readership would still be raw on both sides of the conflict. The shield scene can again undercut the traditional view of the epic and function as an indictment of the evils of civil war and Augustus’s role therein.

The character of Aeneas is equally troublesome for the nationalistic interpretation, and first-time readers of the epic usually sense that he is not the typical hero one would expect from the Homeric tradition; he is often passive, indecisive, ignorant, and ineffective as a leader.<sup>2</sup> Virgil is clearly doing something more with his character than simply appropriating a Homeric hero to send to Italy to found the new Roman race. Aeneas undeniably has heroic pedigree: his mother is the goddess Venus, his father a Dardan prince, he himself a Trojan prince (albeit married into the royal family), and a major hero in the *Iliad*. Yet, many times in the epic Aeneas acts contrary to what one would expect from a hero.

In book 1, for instance, when Aeneas and Achates are searching for their companions who are lost in Lybia, they meet Venus in disguise. After chiding Aeneas to stop complaining, she cloaks them in a mist so they can enter Carthage and approach Dido unmolested (1.305-417). Aeneas hides in the mist during his approach, and even

remains in it when Ilioneus, another shipwrecked Trojan, approaches the Queen and begs for aid. Ilioneus addresses the Queen with courage (“placido ... pectore” ‘with a calm demeanor’ [1.521]), providing a grand contrast with Aeneas who is cowering in his maternal mist and waiting to see how events unfold. Indeed, he leaves the mist only when the situation is safe and Venus finally takes it away. There are two ways to read this scene. First, Aeneas is blessed with a goddess mother who helps him out in a difficult situation, showing divine favor and luck. It is, after all, only prudence that makes him remain in his mist. However, the stark contrast drawn with Ilioneus emphasizes that he is a “mama’s boy” who lacks the courage to face Dido himself and allows a subordinate to take his place in a potentially fatal situation.<sup>3</sup>

The nature of Aeneas’s character is further complicated by the expectation established in the opening line that Aeneas will be another Odysseus and Achilles. However, while Virgil clearly utilized the structure of Homer’s epics, Aeneas as a character bears no resemblance to either Odysseus or Achilles. Odysseus is a curious and resourceful adventurer, not only meeting but encouraging every adventure on his way home. In contrast, Aeneas deliberately skirts all adventures in book 3 and contends directly only with the Harpies (3.209-57). Even this episode, based on the dire threat of birds defecating on the Trojans’ dinner, can be read as a mock epic. Since Aeneas bypasses rather than confronts his challenges, he has no opportunity to show the wit, cunning, resourcefulness, and grit that characterizes Odysseus and makes him a hero. Aeneas is clearly no Odysseus.<sup>4</sup> The case is even worse with Achilles. If the story of the *Iliad* was simply a battle epic showcasing Achilles’s martial prowess, then Aeneas resembles Achilles in that he does demonstrate substantial martial prowess in the second half of the epic. However, that is not the real significance of the *Iliad*. The *Iliad* is the story of a highly gifted, but self-centered, young man who needs to experience loss to understand the true meaning of being human. At the conclusion of the epic, Priam teaches Achilles respect for humanity and the human condition, not simply respect for Hector as an individual. Achilles experiences psychological growth and personal maturation and adopts an entirely new and advanced system of values. In the case of Aeneas, there is no psychological growth or personal maturation. He learns no deep truths about humanity, the human condition, or his duty to his people or humanity as a whole. He simply fulfills his destiny without ever considering the cost of the human carnage left in his wake: Dido, Palinurus, Pallas, Lausus,

Amata, Turnus—all callously discounted as the cost of empire. The difference between Achilles and Aeneas is seen most starkly in Aeneas's complete indifference to Dido's fate, demonstrated by the peaceful nature of Aeneas's sleep, which is directly contrasted to Dido's tortured existence: "Tantos illa suo rumpebat pectore questus: / Aeneas celsa in puppi iam certus eundi / carpebat somnos rebus iam rite paratis." 'Dido was giving utterance to such complaints from her heart while Aeneas, now sure he is leaving, was enjoying sleep on the high stern' (4.553-55). Should he not at least feel pity, if not even empathy, for this guiltless enemy of Rome? Is this not the lesson that Achilles learns from Priam at the end of the *Iliad*? Aeneas is clearly no Achilles either.

Although the phrase "arma virumque cano" indisputably announces a heroic theme and is an allusion to the Homeric epics, it also boldly announces a key theme in the epic: Virgil is singing of an Easterner. Achilles and Odysseus, while heroes, were Greek heroes, not Roman. The stereotype of an Easterner was so strong in Greek and Latin literature it became a topos, an easily recognizable literary convention. While the Romans occasionally admired the intellectual achievements of the Greeks,<sup>5</sup> they were dismayed by their cultural decadence and associated a set of negative characteristics with them. Therefore, once Virgil chose an Easterner as his protagonist, a defined set of expectations accompanied that choice. This announcement of theme also offers a different interpretation to lines 5-7 cited above; Aeneas does indeed found a new city, import his gods, and contribute the Trojan blood line to the Roman race. Whether this is a positive or negative contribution is yet to be determined in the remainder of the epic. It is the central argument of this paper that this contribution, while perhaps necessary, is essentially negative.

## 2. Aeneas as Easterner

Aeneas is not a Roman and never becomes a Roman but instead begins and ends the poem as a Trojan. He never self-identifies as a Roman and is only called a Roman once, by Anchises in the underworld, and even then in the vocative case "Romane" (6.851). In his descriptions of Aeneas, Virgil clearly calls attention to the eastern nature of his physical appearance. The Trojan dress and grooming habits would be completely foreign to a Roman and would immediately invoke an image of the East. Iarbus, the North African prince spurned by Dido, gives this physical description of Aeneas: "et nunc ille Paris

cum semiviro comitatu / Maeonia mentum mitra crinemque madentem / subnexus, raptō potitur” ‘and now that man, Paris, with his effeminate retinue, a Maeonian turban tied under his chin and dripping hair, he possesses his booty’ (4.215-17). Clearly this is not the portrait of a typical Roman as a Maeonian turban was not standard legionary issue and oiled hair would be a completely foreign fashion. This appearance of Aeneas and his men in traditional eastern garb would be immediately identified by a Roman audience and understood at literal and figurative levels. Haden White describes these two levels of discourse thus:

The point is this: even in the simplest prose discourse, and even in one in which the object of representation is intended to be nothing but fact, the use of language itself projects a level of secondary meaning below or behind the phenomena being “described”.... As thus envisaged, the historical discourse can be broken down into two levels of meaning. The facts and their formal explanation or interpretation appears as the manifest or literal “surface” of the discourse, while the figurative language used to characterize the facts points to a deep-structural meaning. (110)

On the surface level of discourse this physical description is simply that, a description of Aeneas’s dress. However, on the secondary level it is intended to associate the Trojans with stereotypical negative characteristics of the East, reinforced by the appellation Paris, the quintessential eastern playboy, and by referring to Dido as booty, making a connection with Helen.

One could perhaps blame jealousy for Iarbus’s description of the Trojans and suspect hyperbole except that it is not the only case of this eastern description. Numanus, the Latin, taunts Ascanius, the son of Aeneas, with this description of the Trojans in book 9, saying,

“vobis picta croco et fulgenti murice vestis,  
desidiaē cordi, iuvat indulgere choreis,  
et tunicae manicas et habent redimicula mitrae.  
o vere Phrygiae, neque enim Phryges, ite per alta  
Dindyma, ubi adsuetis biformem dat tibia cantum.  
tympana vos buxusque vocat Berecynthia Matris  
Idaēae; sinite arma viris et cedite ferro.” (9.614-20)

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Your clothes are made from embroidered saffron and gleaming purple, sloth is your delight, and your addiction to dancing. Your tunics have sleeves, your turbans have bands. Truly you are Phrygian women and not Phrygian men. Go over the Dindymian heights, where the double pipe gives a song to those who are accustomed to listen. The timbrels call you and the Berecynthian flute of Mother Ida. Leave arms to men and give up the sword.

Here again Numanus emphasizes the exotic nature of Trojan dress: fancy embroidery, the turbans with bands, and long-sleeved shirts. The association this time is not with a thievish character as above, but with music and dancing, pastimes branded as corrupt and effeminate by Roman moralists. Again, the physical description of the Trojans creates a negative connotation on the secondary level.

Turnus also connects Aeneas's appearance with an effeminate character in book 12 when he states, "da sternere corpus / loricamque manu valida lacerare revulsam / semiviri Phrygis et foedare in pulvere crinis / vibratos calido ferro murraque madentis" 'Grant to me to lay low his body and to mutilate the cuirass of that effeminate Phrygian after I have pulled it away with my powerful hand and grant me to defile in the dust his hair, curled with the hot iron and dripping with myrrh' (12.97-100). There is no turban in this description, but the curled hair dripping with myrrh lends credence to Turnus's charge of effeminacy.

Each of these descriptions is consistent and radically different from what one would associate with traditional Roman appearance and behavior. These portrayals can be read at two levels of discourse, the surface and the secondary. In each case, the surface level of discourse depicts a Trojan hero who has escaped from Troy and come to Italy. However, on the secondary level, Virgil has created a subtextual image of the Trojans based on their physical description, which emphasizes the negative aspects of their eastern origin.

Numanus's description of the Latins in book 9, however, stands in stark contrast to his description of the Trojans. He states,

"durum a stirpe genus natos ad flumina primum  
deferimus saevoque gelu duramus et undis;  
venatu invigilant pueri silvasque fatigant,  
flectere ludus equos et spicula tendere cornu.

at patiens operum parvoque adsueta iuventus  
aut rastris terram domat aut quatit oppida bello.  
omne aevum ferro teritur, versaque iuencum  
terga fatigamus hasta, nec tarda senectus  
debilitat viris animi mutatque vigorem:  
canitiem galea premimus, semperque recentis  
comportare iuvat praedas et vivere raptō.” (9.603-13)

A hard race by nature, at first we take our children down to the river and we harden them in the savage cold and waters. Our boys are devoted to the hunt and lay siege to the woods; breaking horses and shooting arrows with the bow are sport to them. Our youth, enduring in labor and accustomed to little, either break the earth with hoes or shatter cities in war. Their whole life is consumed with the sword, we convert our spears to goads and vex the backs of the bullocks, nor does long old age weaken the strength of our spirit and change our force: we still press the grey hair with a helmet and it always pleases us to gather newly won plunder and to live on booty.

Here are all the characteristics prized in traditional Roman rhetoric: hardiness, skill in the martial arts, endurance, poverty, and a still powerful old age.<sup>6</sup> On the surface level, Numanus is simply stating facts about the nature of his people. On the secondary level, he is establishing the criteria necessary for what it means to be a Roman. The one set of characteristics plainly marks out the Latins as truly Romans while the other marks out the Trojans as non-Roman.

Besides having an eastern appearance, Aeneas is firmly connected in attitude to Troy and his Trojan roots. He is consistently portrayed throughout the epic as a Trojan or Teucrian and he views his mission as founding a new Troy for his people and gods, not the new Roman race. When leaving Dido, Aeneas tells her that

“me si fata meis paterentur ducere vitam  
auspiciis et sponte mea componere curas,  
urbem Troianam primum duclicque meorum  
reliquias colerem, Priami tecta alta manerent,  
et recidua manu posuissem Pergama victis.” (4.340-44)

If the Fates would have allowed me to lead my life according to my own desires and to arrange my affairs according to my own will, in the first place I would have protected the city of Troy and the dear remnant of my people, the tall dwellings of Priam would have endured, or else I would have establish another Pergamum rebuilt with my own hands for those who had been defeated.

Clearly, Aeneas's heart lies with Troy, and his first inclination would have been for Troy to stand, his second to rebuild Troy on the same location. After describing his desires to Dido, he utters the famous line in reference to Italy, "hic amor, haec patria est" 'this is my love, this is my home' (4.347). The word *patria* here is commonly thought to refer to future Rome, but reading it in connection with the previous passage suggests that Aeneas is obviously thinking of a new Troy in Italy, not Rome.

This desire to rebuild Troy extends to his travels and eventual arrival in Italy. He does not intend to establish a new Rome, but to reestablish Troy in a new land. He is forced to go to Italy and so go he will but, when leaving Sicily in book 3 and bidding farewell to Helenus, he notes that Helenus has rebuilt a model of Troy and he himself plans to do the same in Italy:

"si quando Thybrim vicinaque Thybridis arva  
intraro gentique meae data moenia cernam,  
cognatas urbes olim populosque propinquos,  
Epiro Hesperiam (quibus idem Dardanus auctor  
atque idem casus), unam faciemus utramque  
Troiam animis: maneat nostros ea cura nepotes." (3.500-05)

If ever I reach the Tiber and the lands near the Tiber and I see the walls allotted to my people, hereafter let us together make out of our two cities and related peoples, Italy and Epirus (seeing as we share Dardanus as founder and the same calamity), one Troy in spirit. Let this challenge fall to our descendents.

Helenus's final charge to Aeneas is not to settle Italy and found the Roman race, but to revive Troy's greatness: "vade age et ingentem

factis fer ad aethera Troiam” ‘Now go and make Troy renowned again by your deeds all the way to the heavens’ (3.462).

Even after Aeneas’s arrival in Italy he always self-identifies and is identified by others as a Trojan and foreigner, looking to reestablish his race and gods. Upon his arrival in Italy in book 6, Aeneas addresses Phoebus Apollo with a prayer not to found Rome and become Roman, but for Apollo to “*da (non indebita posco / regna meis fatis) Latio considerare Teucros / errantisque deos agitataque numina Troiae*” ‘Grant (I am not asking for a kingdom against my fate) that the Teucrians, their wandering gods, and the well-traveled divine powers of Troy may settle in Latium’ (6.66-68). Here Aeneas identifies himself as a Teucrian and with the gods of Troy, looking to reestablish his Trojans in Italy as Trojans. In book 7, Faunus tells Latinus not to wed Lavinia to a Latin but instead, “*externi venient generi, qui sanguine nostrum / nomen in astra ferant, quorumque a stirpe nepotes / omnia sub pedibus, qua sol utrumque recurrens / aspicit Oceanum, vertique regique videbunt*” ‘Foreigners will come as sons-in-law, who, through their blood, will bear our name to the stars and from their stock, descendants will see all things placed under their feet and ruled, as far as the circling sun looks upon the limits of the Ocean’ (7.98-101). Even as deep into the epic as book 8 Aeneas is being strictly characterized as a Trojan and Teucrian, not a Roman, as Evander also identifies Aeneas as a Trojan: “*maxime Teucrorum ductor, quo sospite numquam / res equidem Troiae victas aut regna fatebor*” ‘O leader of the Teucrians, especially while you are safe I, for my part, will never confess that the city of Troy or her royalty has been conquered’ (8.470-71). Indeed, Jupiter reminds the reader that there will be no Romans proper until the time of Romulus: “*Romulus excipiet gentem et Mavortia condet / moenia Romanosque suo de nomine dicet*” ‘Romulus will take up the people and build the Martian walls and call them Romans after his own name’ (1.275-76). It is only in book 12 that Aeneas’s mission of reestablishing Troy is finally specifically denied by Juno when she requires of Jupiter that “*occidit, occideritque sinas cum nomine Troia*” ‘Troy has fallen and allow her to be erased along with her very name’ (12.828). The dream only dies here at last, signifying the true climax of the epic. There will be no new Troy, but instead a mingling of eastern and western bloodlines to form a new race.

Aeneas knows nothing of his part in the founding the Roman race and is told over and over only that he is to go to Hesperia or Italy, by his dead wife Creusa (1.780-81), Apollo (3.94-98), his Penates (3.154-

71), Cassandra (3.182-88), Celaeno (3.250-57), and Helenus (3.374-462). Why would he assume more than that he is to go and reestablish Troy? The parade of souls in the underworld in book 6 would have great meaning for a Roman aristocratic in Virgil's time but would mean nothing to Aeneas. When Aeneas takes up his shield engraved with famous episodes in Roman history Virgil notes that "talia per clipeum Volcani, dona parentis, / miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet, / attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum" 'he is amazed by the things on the shield of Vulcan, a gift from his mother, and ignorant of the content he rejoices in the representation, raising the fame and fate of his descendants onto his shoulder' (8.729-31).

Indeed, Aeneas has more in common with the Carthaginians than with Latins. When Mercury comes down to relay Jupiter's charge while Aeneas is dallying in Carthage, he finds that Aeneas has become Tyrian:

Aenean fundantem arces ac tecta novantem  
conspicit. Atque illi stellatus iaspide fulva  
ensis erat Tyrioque ardebat murice laena  
demissa ex umeris, dives quae munera  
fecerat, et tenui telas discreverat auro. (4.260-64)

He sees Aeneas beginning citadels and building houses. And moreover his sword was studded with yellow jasper and his cloak, drooping from his shoulders, flashed with Tyrian purple, gifts that wealthy Dido had made by interweaving the threads with fine gold.

The move from Trojan to Tyrian would not be a precipitous step as this description of Aeneas could equally well describe a Trojan monarch such as Priam.

To reiterate, then, Aeneas is not a Roman but a Trojan, with all the cultural associations that go along with that ethnicity. He consistently identifies himself as a Trojan, and others likewise identify him as a Trojan and foreigner. He sees his mission not as founding Rome and a new race, but as rebuilding Troy in a new land. He and his men dress as Trojans and wear their hair in Trojan fashion. His character is not that of a Roman but that of an Easterner. None of this should surprise; Aeneas as a hero is a Trojan hero (called "Troius heros" as late in the epic as 8.530), not a Roman hero like Cincinnatus or Manlius. The

question remains: why did Virgil represent Aeneas as an Easterner? While Virgil must honor certain aspects of the myth, he could have constructed a vastly different character, one who was Trojan in the beginning of the epic and grows and matures into a Roman. Instead, he allows Aeneas to remain an Easterner and provides the Latins with traditional Roman values. The answer to this question is that Virgil used the presence of the Trojan bloodline at the very inception of the Roman race to explain the existence of decadent behavior in his own culture. The use of the eastern topos to criticize Roman society is not unique to Virgil but permeated Roman literature.

### 3. The Topos of Eastern Decadence

The topos of eastern decadence was so ubiquitous in Latin literature that Catharine Edwards notes, “[M]oralizing rhetoric permeated the habits of thought of those who wrote virtually all the texts which today constitute the principal remains of Roman culture” (2). Before and after Virgil, the topos of the East was exploited at different levels for different purposes.<sup>7</sup> The Greek historian Herodotus reported many exotic stories of the East full of what would become the stereotypical image: wealth, decadence, passion, effeminacy, and the like. For Roman authors, it quickly became a literary topos that Rome was traditionally a country of hardy and courageous men until the conquest of Greece in 146 BC when they were introduced to eastern luxury and effeminacy. Authors quickly took advantage of this topos to create otherness in their enemies, both Roman and non-Roman. Sallust (86-34 BC), in his *Cataline*, blamed the downfall of Roman morality on Rome’s encounter with the East:

Huc accedebat, quod L. Sulla exercitum, quem in Asia ductaverat, quo sibi fidum faceret, contra morem maiorum luxuriose nimisque liberaliter habuerat; loca amoena, voluptaria facile in otio feroces militum animos molliverant. Ibi primum insuevit exercitus populi Romani amare, potare; signa, tabulas pictas, vasa caelata mirari; ea privatim et publice rapere, delubra spoilare, sacra profanaque omnia polluere. (xi.5-7)

This [moral outrage in Rome] happened because Lucius Sulla, wishing to make the army which he had led into Asia loyal to himself, had treated it luxuriously and overly liberally against

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the custom of our ancestors. The pleasant and voluptuous lands easily softened the fierce courage of the soldiers due to idleness. There first an army of the Roman people became accustomed to sex and drink, to admire statues, paintings, and carved utensils, to steal these things privately and publicly, to plunder shrines, and to defile all things both sacred and profane.

This short passage from a larger context is heavily laden with images that contrast traditional Roman institutions with those of the corrupt East. Sallust alleges that Sulla's army, lacking discipline, became soft in Asia and eschewed the customary Roman martial virtues. This softness, instilled in the East, led to behavior not, according to Sallust, traditionally associated with Romans: sex, drink, high culture, theft, and defilement. Here, we find both the cause of decay, eastern luxury and license, and the decadence that results from a relaxation of morality.

Horace (65-8 BC), in Ode 1.38, goes a step beyond Sallust in his censure of contemporary Romans using the topos of the decadent East when he writes:

Persicos odi, puer, apparatus,  
displicent nexae philyra coronae;  
mitte sectari, rosa quo locorum  
sera moretur.  
simplici myrto nihil adlabores  
sedulus, cura; neque te ministrum  
dedecet myrtus neque me sub arta  
vite bibentem.

I hate Persian splendor, slave, and garlands woven with linden bark are displeasing. Quit searching for the places where the late rose yet lingers. Be sure that you are diligent and add nothing to plain myrtle. Myrtle is fitting for both you, the servant, and me, drinking under the thick vine.

This ode has been traditionally read as a simple poem in which Horace express a typical Roman's rejection of oriental luxury. The speaker is assumed to be seriously and straightforwardly rejecting anything luxurious and to cling to old Roman virtues, symbolized by the myrtle.

This reading makes the poem rather trite and hardly worth composing, trite enough to lead R. G. M. Nisbet to comment that "Sometimes it was felt that Horace could not have rounded off the book with so slight a poem; two odes must surely have been lost, to make the number up to forty" (423). However, rather than conjecture the existence of two lost poems, one can read the poem at a deeper level, giving it more weight and complexity. If this poem is read only on the surface or literal level, Horace is simply expressing the literary commonplace that Roman aristocrats abhor eastern decadence. However, on the deeper structural level he is pointing out an insightful truth about the Roman aristocracy: they may *claim* to abhor eastern decadence, but in actuality they have internalized the decadent values of the East to the point that they are indistinguishable from Easterners. The speaker in the poem believes that by simply saying he rejects eastern luxury, he has. However, the speaker is still clearly eastern in character. The intensity of the verb *odi* gives the impression of extreme emotionalism and also recalls Catullus's line "odi et amo" (poem 85, line 1), the reference here subtly suggesting that the Roman elite both hate and love eastern luxury. The haughty tone of the speaker, revealed by the vocative *puer*, gives an unmistakably imperious tenor to the poem. The speaker is obviously wealthy; he has a slave and the leisure to sit and drink. The final line of the poem is dripping with irony as the speaker thinks he has rejected eastern luxury because their garlands are decorated with myrtle instead of linden, an absurd proposition demonstrating the depth of denial involved. A modern-day example of this poem would be a liberal rejecting all things corporate while driving down the road in a Subaru, eating fast food, completely oblivious to the irony involved. This poem is a scathing indictment of Horace's fellow Romans who have unwittingly internalized eastern values, not a weak poem pointing out that Romans abhor decadence.

#### 4. Conclusion: Punishment and Reward

As noted in the beginning, the settlement between Juno and Jupiter did not allow the Trojans to contribute any material culture to Rome, only their bloodline. In the beginning of the epic, it is unclear whether Aeneas will or will not be able to rise above his Trojan roots and become a hero worthy of Rome, but during the course of the epic, it becomes clear to Jupiter and the reader that he cannot. Therefore, Jupiter awards the Latins primacy in the new Rome and submerges the Trojans, despite the fact that Aeneas prevails over Turnus. The

anticlimax of the epic, where Aeneas kills Turnus, functions as proof that Aeneas has not, and cannot, overcome his eastern origins. The traditional reading of the poem supposes the necessity for Aeneas, symbolizing Roman order and empire, to sweep away the old heroic values symbolized by the valiant yet feral Turnus. Under this reading, Aeneas rightly kills Turnus to avenge Pallas's death and pay his debt to Evander. However, there are three major problems with this reading. First, Aeneas's father, Anchises, has charged him in the underworld to "parcere subiectis et debellare superbos" 'spare men once defeated, hammer down those who are proud' (6.853). If Aeneas is to follow this advice, he clearly must spare Turnus since Turnus has been completely humbled and begs for mercy before the entire army by saying, "vicisti et victum tendere palmas / Ausonii videre; tua est Lavinia coniunx, / ulterius ne tende odiis" 'You have conquered and all the Ausonians see that I am beaten and surrendering to you. Lavinia is your wife. Do not incite further hatred' (936-37). By killing Turnus, Aeneas fails to live up to the sacred mission of empire as laid out by Anchises. Second, the ending leaves the reader uncomfortable, as Turnus has been a respectable and admirable character throughout the second half of the epic. Before being maddened by the Fury Electo, he had been reasonably well disposed to Aeneas's arrival and respectful to the gods, especially Juno (7.435-44). The death of Turnus is reminiscent of the death of Hector as it brings no joy even though the reader knows it is inevitable. The difference between Hector's and Turnus's deaths is that the death of Hector was a *sine qua non* for the maturation of Achilles and hence gave meaning to the entire epic. In the case of Turnus, his soul flees "gemitu ... indignata" 'with an indignant groan' (12.952), leaving the reader cold. Third, it is not the fact that Aeneas kills Turnus that rankles, but how he kills him. Aeneas certainly has the right to kill Turnus since he is a captive on the battlefield. However, Aeneas kills him while raging with madness or anger: "furiis accensus et ira / terribilis ... fervidus" 'fired with fury and terrible in his anger ... burning with fever' (12. 946, 951). This is not a description a Roman legionnaire or general would be proud of, but it is entirely consistent with the negative image of an overly emotional Easterner. Indeed, Aeneas's actions evoke more the undisciplined rampages in Nanking or Berlin in World War II than a justified and honorable killing.

Jupiter has learned in the course of the epic that Aeneas is incapable of rising above his Trojan origins, and his treatment of Turnus in the final scene confirms this judgment. If Rome is to fulfill

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her fate and rule the Mediterranean world with order and justice, Jupiter must give primacy to the steady and hardy character of the Latins, and so he willingly agrees with Juno that the Latins will supply the primary bloodline for the future Rome and the Trojan bloodline will be submerged (“subsident”). If he gave the Trojans prominence, he would simply be creating a new eastern monarchy in Italy. Thus, the true reward of the *Aeneid* is granted to Turnus as Rome is to be founded on Italic virtue, not eastern decadence. Yet at times these negative attributes embodied in the eastern character came to the fore. Virgil has successfully crafted an explanation for the excesses perpetrated by both empire and princeps by appealing to a topos with a venerable tradition and great explanatory power in his culture. Hence, Virgil can both praise Rome and Augustus and criticize them in the same narrative.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>All translations from the Latin are mine.

<sup>2</sup>For example, one of my students, himself a combat veteran of the US war in Afghanistan, has suggested that Aeneas was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after his years in the Trojan war. Although I resist this idea, it does demonstrate that students intuitively grasp that there is something awry with the character of Aeneas.

<sup>3</sup>One can easily compare Aeneas's selfish behavior to many selfless Romans, for example the Horatii in book 1, ch. 24-25 of Livy's *Histories*.

<sup>4</sup>One can well imagine Aeneas's grandchildren sitting at his knee asking him to "tell about the time you went around Charybdis, Scylla, and Circe's island, or ran away from the already-blinded Cyclops"; clearly one would want to be Odysseus's grandchild. The Monty Python troop would savage Aeneas's exploits.

<sup>5</sup>For example, see Cicero's *Pro Archia* (ch. 7-12, esp. 10) for a positive assessment of Greek culture.

<sup>6</sup>Compare the image of the sturdy Roman farmer created by Tibullus in his elegies (1.1, 1.5, 1.10, 2.1, 2.3, 2.5, and 2.6 in *Catullus*).

<sup>7</sup>Besides the two examples listed, notable uses of this topos in Latin literature around the time of Virgil occur in Caesar's *Civil War* (see books 1 and 3 for the depiction of the Pompeians as Easterners) and the prologue to Livy's *Histories*. Consider especially Livy's statement in the prologue, "labente deinde paulatim disciplina velut desidentis primo mores sequatur animo, deinde ut magis magisque lapsi sint, tum ire coeperint praecipites, donec ad haec tempora quibus nec vitia nostra nec remedia pati possumus perventum est."

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