

# Fate, the Hero and Empire: Anger in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Lucan's Civil War

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Current scholarship provides us with as many viewpoints on Aeneas' anger at the end of the *Aeneid* as there are scholars. Is there nothing "reassuring about the vision with which Virgil leaves us – either of Aeneas or consequently of Rome?"<sup>1</sup> Michael Putnam is inclined to think so, and Lucan would likely agree. Rosanna Warren is somewhat less pessimistic, connecting the "moral shock" of "blood spilled in rage" with the cost of founding Rome, and "the price of peace."<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Richard Tarrant argues that the *Aeneid* and its conclusion accomplish the aim of all epic, to show "in a particular set of circumstances, what it means to be human and to act in a human way."<sup>3</sup> What are we to make of Aeneas' very human yet morally questionable bout of rage that ends Virgil's epic?

My own view is admittedly influenced by the belief that there are larger story arcs in motion, both divine and imperial, than that of a particular human. Virgil's aim is not simply to sing the exploits of Aeneas, nor are the hero's personal concerns of critical importance to the plot. Goddess-born though he is, Aeneas is neither the apex of Roman history nor of Roman virtue, but rather an instrument in the hands of Fate, used to trace out the future foundations of empire. Fate requires that Aeneas survive the fall of his own city, where we would otherwise expect men such as he to die in the throes of battle, rather than sneaking out through a side door. Furthermore, Fate requires Aeneas to forsake the possibility of personal happiness with Dido in order to ensure the future kingdom of his heirs.<sup>4</sup>

Like a well-behaved stoic, Aeneas conquers his subjective passions in order to align himself with the will of Jupiter as the necessity of Fate demands. The fury Aeneas displays as he takes

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1. Michael Putnam, "Virgil's *Aeneid*: The Final Lines," in *Poets and Critics Read Vergil*, ed. Sarah Spence (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 86-104, see 104.

2. Rosanna Warren, "The End of the *Aeneid*," in *Poets and Critics Read Vergil*, ed. Sarah Spence (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 105-117, see 107.

3. Virgil, *Aeneid: Book XII*, ed. Richard Tarrant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 28.

4. *Aeneid*, IV. 269-77.

Turnus' life is in no way an affront to Fate, indeed, the death of Turnus is just as Jupiter has proclaimed that it must be, but it is an affront to our understanding of the hero's virtue. As Tarrant puts it, "Aeneas does the right thing (or the necessary thing), but he does it in a terrifying way."<sup>5</sup> Though we accept the act itself, we remain troubled by the hero's rage.

Much of the human anger throughout the *Aeneid* is the consequence of divine meddling. At Juno's behest, Electra visits the Latin, Tertullian and Trojan camps in turn, sowing anger and passion for war.<sup>6</sup> Dido's rage at Aeneas' departure is a more circuitous example, but her love for him is both god-breathed and god-inspired, and many a jilted lover has burned with a similar fury. While Aeneas' anger is not of divine origin, it could be called a divine imitation. More than one goddess of Olympus demonstrates divine rage in the early pages of Book I: Juno, whose anger is both irrational and unjust, and Athena, whose anger rises from a more legitimate foundation, though her vengeance exceeds the bounds of just retribution.<sup>7</sup> Aeneas follows Athena in his justifiable anger and his immoderate response, yet, unrestrained though his anger may be, the act which it provokes is no less in accord with Fate, and therefore with justice.

Aeneas' anger differs from Juno's insofar as his actions remain in harmony with Fate, while hers fly directly against it. As we have seen with Juno's earlier attempts to overwhelm the Trojan ships at sea and to waylay Aeneas during his sojourn in Carthage from pressing on to Italy and Latium, even the gods themselves are unable to outmaneuver the dicta of Fate. They can, however, add further content to these necessary outcomes, beyond what necessity requires. This is the nature of divine anger's impact in the lives of mortals, not in altering their overarching destiny, but in the added trials and tribulations that colour their journey along the way.

When Jupiter and Juno are reconciled in Book XII, concluding the theme of divine anger which was the impetus for so many of Aeneas' sufferings and the very war in which the Trojans and the Rutulians are then engaged, questions linger about the bargain struck, and whether Juno, representing Fortune to Jupiter's Fate, has any real leverage. One wonders to what degree Jupiter is

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5. Virgil, ed. Tarrant, 24.

6. *Aen.* VII. 342-510.

7. *Aen.* I. 40-2.

actually influenced by Juno's pleas, or whether their reconciliation is simply Juno's willful realignment of her own objectives with the Fate that she can neither alter nor deny. She can neither safeguard Carthage nor prevent the rise of Rome, but she finds solace in the notion that at least the name and the language of the Trojan people will pass away, yielding their cultural markers to those of the local inhabitants. Yet, though Juno is placated by the terms of her bargain<sup>8</sup> and Jupiter professes to relent,<sup>9</sup> what assurance do we have that Jupiter, whose word Virgil identifies so closely with Fate, had ever intended otherwise? Jupiter's soothing words to his Cytherean daughter in Book I foretold a toga wearing race and a name change for Aeneas' immediate heir.<sup>10</sup> It could well be that these concessions, which Juno believes she has won from her husband, were always implicitly present in the Parcae's song.

Even so, the resolution of Juno's divine anger does not produce a similar détente between mortal powers. Certainly, the end of Book XII anticipates the imminent union of the Latins with the Trojan followers of Aeneas. Following the death of Turnus, the warring factions will join in celebration Aeneas' marriage to Lavinia, living henceforth as one people under the rule of Aeneas' line. Presumably, this arrangement will bear great resemblance to Dido's original offering, that the storm-tossed Trojans might settle equally with her in Carthage, with no discrimination made between them.<sup>11</sup> Yet, this is not the picture of perfect peace that Jupiter's prophecy described. As Virgil's Roman contemporaries were well aware, the quasi-civil war that prefaces the union of the Latin and Trojan peoples is only the beginning of civil strife. Virgil glosses over Remus' death at his brother's hand, celebrating their birth and Romulus' exultant rule without addressing the act of fratricide that established him as sole ruler. In more recent memory, short decades after the civil war between Sulla and Marius, Romans bore witness to the dissolution of the first triumvirate and the blood drenched fields of Pharsalus, such as Lucan describes in his *Civil War*.

It is impossible to talk about the effect of divine anger on mortal affairs in Lucan's *Civil Wars*, since in this text, it is impossible to talk about divine anger at all. Minimizing any acknowledgement

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8. *Aen.* XII. 841-2.

9. *Aen.* XII. 833.

10. *Aen.* I. 268-84.

11. *Aen.* I. 572-75.

of divine presence, benevolent or otherwise, is one of Lucan's signature moves. As Frederick Ahl puts it, "the Olympians have ceased to function and no longer wield any power in human affairs."<sup>12</sup> Where the gods are referenced at all, they lack the personification requisite to express anger, or any intimate concern with the human sphere. In the same way, any attempt to map a Virgilian conception of the relation between Fate and Fortune onto Lucan's epic must inevitably go awry. Although we can identify threads of stoic, and to a lesser degree of epicurean philosophy that run through both works, Lucan is far less systematic than his predecessor. "The words for fate and fortune occur more than any other nouns in the poem,"<sup>13</sup> but Lucan is notoriously broad-handed in his usage of them. It is difficult then, to make any direct comparison between the role of divine anger in the *Aeneid* and how the same themes are manifest in Lucan's Civil War.

Perhaps a more fruitful consideration of anger in Lucan is not in relation to its origins, but to its bearing on mortal affairs. The fury Lucan speaks of in the opening proem is a pointed reference to Achilles' anger in the *Illiad* and to Juno's in the *Aeneid*. Here, however, the anger belongs neither to god nor to hero, but to the empire herself. It is Rome who "caused the damage."<sup>14</sup> As the Roman emperor is "enough to empower Roman poems,"<sup>15</sup> so Roman anger is sufficient to turn "on its own heart its conquering hand."<sup>16</sup> There is no sense of external compulsion, either from divine participation or the necessity of Fate. Instead, the human actors must bear the full weight of the blame.

In this way, Lucan seems to credit anger with a greater potency, permitting it to shape human outcomes to a greater extent than Virgil allows, as neither Aeneas' anger nor Juno's can derail the established outcomes of Fate. Indeed, through Juno, we learn that though the gods may lash out with irrational anger, the dicta of Fate are unalterable. Her machinations are therefore destined to failure until she is reconciled to her husband, and by extension to the demands of Fate. Anger that acts in opposition to Fate is not without impact, but cannot bring forth the fruit it desires, whether

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12. F. Ahl, *Lucan: An Introduction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 281.

13. Lucan, *Civil War*, trans. Matthew Fox (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), xxviii.

14. *ibid.*, I. 92.

15. *ibid.*, I. 72.

16. *ibid.*, I. 3.

by divine or human agency. Lucan's rather ambiguous rendering of Fate, however, allows for no such certainty. The only certainty Lucan invokes is the eventual universal conflagration, in which the conqueror and the conquered are again made equal, despite their disparate fortunes.<sup>17</sup>

While the gods of Olympus are absent from Lucan's stage, at least one nascent Roman divinity is in the thick of the action, along with another central figure, whom the author deems a worthy counterweight to divine judgment.<sup>18</sup> In one corner we have Caesar, a boiling cauldron of passions, and on the other we have Cato, who neither burns nor rages, but who ceaselessly submits himself to the demands of reason and of his stoic ideals.<sup>19</sup> These are the men who "guide the destiny of Rome and shape the affairs of the world."<sup>20</sup> Fredrick Ahl and W. R. Johnson are in agreement that "Lucan treats Caesar and Cato as ideas rather than people,"<sup>21</sup> painting them in extreme colours to serve their thematic role in his epic rather than granting them the nuanced shades of character that Virgil permits even to Mezentius.<sup>22</sup> As Johnson insists, "Lucan's Caesar is less a representation of a historical figure than a symbol for certain inscrutable forces that operate behind and beneath what is called history."<sup>23</sup> If this is so, then we would do better not to press Lucan's protagonists into comparison with either the divine or the human elements of the *Aeneid*, but to consider instead what they are symbolic of.

Ahl, who takes fewer rhetorical liberties with the actual text than Johnson is inclined to, suggests that "it might be possible to equate Cato and Caesar with the notions of *pietas* and *furor* respectively,"<sup>24</sup> going on to define *furor* as the opposite of *pietas*, "as irrational and amoral as *pietas* is rational and moral."<sup>25</sup> While *pietas* unites civic duty, familial responsibility and deference to the divine, *furor* is

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17. *ibid.*, VII. 947-58.

18. *ibid.*, I. 141.

19. *ibid.*, II. 412-14.

20. Ahl, *Lucan*, 285.

21. *ibid.*, 274.

22. *Aen.* X. 843-907.

23. W.R. Johnson, *Momentary Monsters* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 103.

24. Ahl, *Lucan*, 275.

25. *ibid.*

the “uncontrolled assertion of self.”<sup>26</sup> This opposition harkens to Aeneas’ internal struggle in the moment before he gives himself over to anger and buries his sword in the breast of his supplicating enemy. Yet, while we expect self-control and all manner of virtue from someone whose name is so strongly associated with piety, Lucan reminds us that problematic bloodshed is by no means unprecedented at the time of his *Civil War*. As Lucan points out, “a brother’s blood soaked Rome’s first walls.”<sup>27</sup> As the eternal city sprang forth from familial rage, so too did the empire of the Julio-Claudian line, the same empire that Jupiter describes to Venus as an exemplar of peace.

Aside from their notions about Fate and divine agency, perhaps the greatest difference between the perspectives of Virgil and Lucan stem from their positions in history: Virgil is contemporary to the dearly bought peace and prosperity which so much of Rome’s prior history was reaching towards, while Lucan looks back from the latter end of the Julio-Claudian line with an eye for the brevity of that same peace and the fragile nature of the liberty which so many have sought and so few have enjoyed. The repression of furor and the prophesied peace that Augustus enjoys is purchased with considerable bloodshed, both foreign and domestic. Jupiter foretells just such a cessation of war for the Roman people,<sup>28</sup> but war remains an essential element in the establishment of such an empire.

Is there a way then in which Lucan, as an heir of the epic tradition, can shed light on our understanding of divine and human anger in Virgil? Let us not get ahead of ourselves. In order to use Lucan as a lens through which Virgil may be perceived with greater clarity, we must know Lucan’s own position with some measure of certainty, an implausible venture given the vagaries of his own unfinished text. It seems that a strongly emphatic reading of Lucan requires a volume of rhetorical bluster sufficient to drown out the author’s own voice.

The closing scenes of the *Aeneid* find its hero manifesting a fury that seems to belong more properly to Juno, or perhaps Turnus, rather than Aeneas himself. Tarrant posits that it was necessary for Aeneas to take on Turnian qualities in order to defeat him, leaving

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26. *ibid.*

27. Lucan, *Civil War*, I. 102-3.

28. *Aen.* I. 292-98.

us to question whether a less thumotic hero would have sufficed.<sup>29</sup> If this is so, then there is a way in which Aeneas' fury, however immoderate, was necessary to accomplish his destiny. If it was necessary for Turnus to die, and necessary for Aeneas to kill him, then clemency at such a moment could undermine more than just the narrative arch.

Putnam highlights Virgil's use of *condere* in the antepenultimate line of the poem, suggesting that its double meaning of 'to bury' and 'to build' is a metaphoric hint that Aeneas "could destroy as well as establish cities."<sup>30</sup> Yet, if *condere* is meant to remind us of its usage in the proem, and therefore the labour to establish Rome, it is equally possible that burial of Aeneas' sword in Turnus' breast is in itself part of that same labour, though an act of *furor*.

Perhaps for Virgil, the fury present in his final book indicates that the labour of building so great an empire is still underway, that despite the present reconciliation of Jupiter and his irate wife, it is not yet time for *furor* to be locked away in tightly bound fetters. Perhaps *furor*, unruly though it appears, is yet a useful instrument in the hands of Fate, as war is an instrument in the creation of Empire. Perhaps "the poem's allusions to contemporary events would imply a similar understanding of the horrors of civil war, finally brought to an end by Augustus."<sup>31</sup> Or, perhaps Aeneas' Illiadic wrath is intended to underscore the fateful circularity of not only the poem itself, but of the hero's course and, by extension, Rome's.<sup>32</sup> Even so, if we are inclined toward such a pessimistic reading of Virgil, we may find some solace in the Lucanian assurance that whatever reassurances are lacking in Hero or in Empire, Fate will one day set us among the stars, dust though we may be.<sup>33</sup>

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29. Virgil, ed. Tarrant, 16.

30. Putnam, *Aeneid*, 90.

31. Virgil, ed. Tarrant, 24.

32. Putnam, *Aeneid*, 104.

33. Lucan, *Civil War*, VII. 947-58.