

A Familiar Setting for a New Hero:
Aeneid 1.91-110

Non-Assessed Assignment #3 / Latin Epic HPLA 7022
12 November, 2020 (1,540 words)

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Aeneas' first words in the *Aeneid* are remarkable for their despair. Tossed about on seas made stormy by Aeolus because of Juno's hatred for the Trojans, Aeneas laments that he has survived to see such extremes:

extemplo Aeneae solvuntur frigore membra;
ingemit et duplicis tendens ad sidera palmas
taliam voce refert: 'o terque quaterque beati,
quis ante ora patrum Troiae sub moenibus altis
contigit oppetere! o Danaum fortissime gentis
Tydide! mene Iliacis occumbere campis
non potuisse tuaque animam hanc effundere dextra,
saevus ubi Aeacidae telo iacet Hector, ubi ingens
Sarpedon, ubi tot Simois correpta sub undis
scuta virum galeasque et fortia corpora voluit!'

He groans and, raising both palms to the stars, he speaks these words, "O thrice and four-times blessed, who happened to meet their end before the faces of their fathers under the high walls of Troy! O Diomedes, strongest of the Greek people! Was it not possible for me to fall on the fields of Troy, and to pour out this life by your right hand, when fierce Hector lay dead by the arms of Achilles, when huge Sarpedon, when so many men's shields and helmets and brave bodies rolled, snatched beneath the wave of Simois."¹

This passage echoes Odysseus' speech as he tries to pilot his ship across seas made stormy by Neptune:

καὶ τότε Ὀδυσσεύς λυτο γούνατα καὶ φίλον ἦτορ,
ὀχθήσας δ' ἄρα εἶπε πρὸς ὃν μεγαλήτορα θυμόν:

[...]

τρίς μάκαρες Δαναοὶ καὶ τετράκις, οἳ τότε ὄλοντο
Τροίῃ ἐν εὐρείῃ χάριν Ἀτρεΐδῃσι φέροντες.

ὥς δὲ ἐγὼ γ' ὄφελον θανέειν καὶ πότμον ἐπισπεῖν

ἥματι τῷ ὅτε μοι πλεῖστοι χαλκήρεα δοῦρα

Τρῶες ἐπέρριψαν περὶ Πηλεΐωνι θανόντι.

τῷ κ' ἔλαχον κτερέων, καὶ μεν κλέος ἦγον Ἀχαιοί:

¹ Verg. Aen. 1.92-101. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

νῦν δέ λευγαλέῳ θανάτῳ εἴμαρτο ἀλῶναι.

Then were the knees of Odysseus loosened and his heart melted, and deeply moved he spoke to his own mighty spirit: "... Thrice blessed those Danaans, aye, four times blessed, who of old perished in the wide land of Troy, doing the pleasure of the sons of Atreus. Even so would that I had died and met my fate on that day when the throngs of the Trojans hurled upon me bronze-tipped spears, fighting around the body of the dead son of Peleus. Then should I have got funeral rites, and the Achaeans would have spread my fame, but now by a miserable death was it appointed me to be cut off." ²

Scholars have noted the similarity between the passages,³ sometimes even dismissing Vergil's lines as derivative.⁴ Despite the similarities, it is the differences between these passages that matter, because they most clearly show Aeneas as a unique hero in his own right, far removed from his Odyssean counterpart.

Odysseus' worry during the storm at sea was that he would die anonymously, and therefore fore without glory. But Christine G. Perkell has argued that Aeneas, though he shares Odysseus' words, does not share the same concern; rather, it is the absence of any mention of burial and glory in the Vergilian passage that points to the difference between Odysseus and Aeneas:

Aeneas, in fact, says nothing of burial. Rather, precisely by *means of this omission* he appears to be speaking of sentiment: those are lucky who die before their fathers' eyes, that is, where people see their sacrifice, where they are known and loved (emphasis added).⁵

² Hom. Od. V.298-98 and V.306-12, trans. Murray 1919.

³ See Stahl, 1981, pp. 160-62 for discussion of the Homeric influence on this passage and its relation to interpretations of Aeneas' character.

⁴ "Virgil here again closely copies his model [i.e., Homer]. ... Latin literature made little claim to be original." Page, 1892, p. 43.

⁵ Perkell, 1999, p. 40. See also Farron, 1977, p. 207, who likewise argues that Aeneas, unlike Odysseus, envies those who died at Troy because they did so in the presence of loved ones. "...in the Aeneid the presence of a loved

It is through the words that Vergil leaves out of his Homeric paraphrase that we are better able to understand Aeneas as the hero of this epic. Moreover, with his lament on not having died at Troy being the very first words Vergil has Aeneas speak in this poem, the difference between Odysseus' craftiness and Achilles' anger makes Vergil's hero stand out even more starkly.

There is another difference between this passage and its Homeric intertext that further highlights Aeneas' uniqueness as an epic hero. When Odysseus was beset by the storm in Book V of the *Odyssey*, he was alone. Aeneas, however, leads the survivors of Troy, and is thus responsible for their safety. Not only does he have to safeguard their lives, but, as refugees fleeing a conquered land, their culture and their gods are also in his hands. Vergil emphasizes this responsibility by dedicating a full 16 lines (108-123) to describing the mounting losses caused by the storm, enumerating not just ships, but also specifying Aeneas' lost companions by name. Crucially, Vergil describes this scene specifically from Aeneas' perspective: *ipsius ante oculos ingens a vertice pontus / in puppim ferit* ("before his [i.e., Aeneas'] eyes, a huge wave strikes from its peak onto the stern").⁶ Unlike Odysseus, the lost ships and fallen companions are the focus of Aeneas' attention, and they continue to occupy his thoughts, even after the storm has abated and the survivors have landed on the coast of Carthage:

praecipue pius Aeneas nunc acris Oronti,
nunc Amyci casum gemit et crudelia secum
fata Lyci fortemque Gyan fortemque Cloanthum.

Dutiful Aeneas groans especially now for the death of firerce Orontes, then for Amycus, and in his heart for the cruel fate of Lycus and for brave Gyas and brave Cloanthus.

one makes death less terrible. The importance of having one's loved ones near one at death is brought out in Aeneas' first speech (1, 94-101) when he changes the Homeric model (Od5, 306-312) by making the most enviable thing about those who died at Troy that they died 'ante ora patrum'."

⁶ Verg. Aen. I.114-15.

That he spends a full three lines showing Aeneas lamenting lost companions, well after the storm has ended, demonstrates the emphasis Vergil wishes to place on his hero's concern for his people.⁷ In this way, Vergil uses Aeneas' focus to underscore the difference between his hero and his Homeric models.

This change from the Homeric model underscores a key theme in the *Aeneid*: the hero's duty to his people. By showing such deep concern for his people, Aeneas manifests an aspect of the term *pius* often used to describe him in this epic. Piety in the Roman sense is not purely a private dutifulness to family or gods—it has a public element that imposes obligations while also granting privileges on a leader, and allows those under his leadership to judge him.⁸ Unlike the general indifference toward others that Achilles and Odysseus show to all but a few key characters, this public dutifulness helps make Aeneas a unique hero in the epic tradition.⁹

The responsibility of leadership that Aeneas bears is hinted at with the phrase *ante ora patrum*, which Vergil adds it almost immediately after *terque quaterque beati*. The phrase *ante ora patrum* is Vergil's own unique addition into the Homeric allusion,¹⁰ and it highlights Aeneas' changed role from follower to leader. Like the parents who previously watched their children die at Troy, Aeneas now finds that he is the one watching his loved ones die. While the phrase *terque quaterque beati* directly links Aeneas to Odysseus, the notion of seeing Trojans dying *ante ora patrum* likens Aeneas to the Trojan parents who suffered the grief of loss, and the leaders who failed in their responsibility to safeguard those lives.

⁷ Verg. Aen. I. 220-21.

⁸ Noonan, 2007, p. 66. It is the embrace of private pleasures and neglect of the public duties of leadership that makes Aeneas and Dido subject to the accusation that they were *regnum immemores* in Aeneid IV.194.

⁹ "...Vergil found one way to surpass both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or at least a way to surpass both Achilles and Odysseus, precisely by making his hero *pius* in the civic or public sense." Noonan, 2007, p. 70.

¹⁰ Death *ante ora patrum* looks back to the death of Hektor before his parents' eyes, but the phrase itself, occurring eight times in the Aeneid, is a Vergilian phrase, having no Homeric precedent. O'Sullivan, 2009, p. 448.

Despite the similarities between Vergilian and Homeric storm scenes, there are key differences that highlight the uniqueness of Aeneas as an epic hero. Vergil's allusion to Homer links Aeneas to Odysseus through the similarity of speech and situation, but diverges sharply in their respective points of focus. While Odysseus bemoans the lack of glory in a solitary death at sea, Aeneas' lament is that he is far from his loved ones, forced to watch his companions die. The focus on the losses wreaked by the storm emphasize Aeneas' concern for his followers, and thus underscore a key difference between him and Odysseus. It is this difference that gives rise to the despair that permeates Aeneas' first words in the poem. Far from merely copying Homer, Vergil uses a Homeric allusion to craft a new scene and introduce an entirely new hero.

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