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Augustus and the Aeneid

In the years following Julius Caesar's death, Augustus sought to fill his place in the Roman government and take hold of the power Caesar had held before his death in 44 BC. One of the ways he did this was through his use of propaganda. One of the most famous examples of this is Vergil's *Aeneid*, also sometimes referred to as Augustus's *Aeneid* because of his heavy influence and work to ensure its publication. In this essay, I will explore Augustus's use of the *Aeneid* to secure his position as emperor of the Roman Empire.

In her paper "Augustus' Divine Authority and Vergil's *Aeneid*," Sabine Grebe examines the power structure of the Roman government, explaining the importance of "the trinity of authority, tradition, and religion" as being ingrained in the Roman political system (Grebe 36). The Romans looked to the past, to their ancestors to define laws and what a leader should look like; "the official had to justify his decisions and deeds in terms of the past. In sum, a Roman politician derived his authority in a backward-looking process that could be traced to the very first beginnings of Roman history" (Grebe 36). In the fallout of Caesar's assassination, Augustus fought to rise to the top and fill the position left open by his death. In order to strengthen his claim to power, Augustus, the adopted son of Caesar, needed to affirm his position among Roman elite and the

Aeneid traced his lineage all the way to the very beginning of Rome and the end of Troy, through Aeneas.

First, I will endeavor to demonstrate Vergil's allusions to Augustus in the *Aeneid* and his subtle comparisons of Augustus to Aeneas himself. In his paper "Aeneas, Augustus, and the Theme of the City," James Morwood looks at Augustan buildings mentioned in the *Aeneid*; the list contains many but includes the temple of Apollo in Actium to which Augustus made improvements and which was mentioned twice in the *Aeneid* and a temple to Jupiter on the Capitol whose location is discussed in the *Aeneid* (Morwood 218). These examples are used to show Augustus's connection to Aeneas through his building projects in areas which were important in the *Aeneid* and thus Aeneas's story.

Furthermore, Grebe argues that Augustus is represented as a calming power in the chaos of the late Roman Republic and early Roman Empire, similar to Aeneas at the end of Troy and founding of what would eventually become the Roman people,

Both Aeneas and Augustus founded political and cultural order out of disorder. They brought back stability and security after a period of war and destruction. Aeneas was able to establish a new home for his Trojan followers with the help of the gods. Vergil's likening of Augustus to Aeneas suggests that Augustus, too, can create order out of disorder, with divine support... (Grebe 38).

In this passage, Grebe explains that, just like how Aeneas lead the Trojan people to peace and prosperity, helping them find a home after the war and destruction of Troy, Augustus can bring peace and prosperity back to Rome after the civil war and

destruction of the preceding years and the chaos still going on in the wake of Caesar's assassination. Grebe reinforces this idea later in her paper, pointing out Vergil's implied comparisons of Augustus to Hercules as well as Aeneas. Much like Aeneas's journey to bring peace and safety to the Trojan people, Hercules had fought horrific monsters to bring peace and safety to people all over the world in his travels. According to Grebe, Vergil equates Hercules and Aeneas's use of violence to eliminate chaos to Augustus's use of violence to wipe out chaos in the Roman Empire (57). However, these examples of propaganda in the *Aeneid* may seem a bit thin on their own, just ideas of what Vergil may have been implying but overall a little vague. So, let us now turn our attention to some more direct evidence of Augustus in the *Aeneid*.

One passage of the *Aeneid* commonly cited for its direct relation to Augustus is that which describes the shield made for Aeneas by Vulcan. This passage, in book eight, describes a shield depicting Augustus's future parade into Rome after his victory in Actium. Sergio Casali wrote on this extensively in his paper "The making of the Shield: Inspiration and Representation in the Aeneid." Casali discusses Vergil's agreement with Augustus to depict an "Augustan vision of Roman history" on the shield, centering on Augustus's victory at the battle of Actium (Casali 193). Another passage cited as propaganda for Augustus is one in which Aeneas first sees the building going on in Carthage. Morwood compares the state of frenzy and excitement in Carthage during this time of growth and building to that which must have been felt in Rome with at the time of the *Aeneid*'s publication due to all of Augustus's building projects. He explains that while Aeneas did not found Carthage, he spent some time there helping

build the city in the *Aeneid* and, now, Augustus was setting out to rebuild the city of Carthage which had previously been destroyed (Morwood 219).

The prophecy in book one of the *Aeneid* is often looked to as a heavily propagandistic section of the epic. It is made clear that it is Jupiter's will that Augustus lead the Roman people and set up a monarchy and Grebe argues that Vergil seems to imply that "Caesar was moving in the right direction [before his death] and that Augustus is now continuing this direction" (Grebe 49). In "Hero and Theme in the *Aeneid*," L. A. Mackay takes this idea so far as to suggest that Aeneas actually represents Caesar, not Augustus. Mackay argues that Vergil's depiction of a "lonely, disillusioned warrior... who himself represents an old order destined to disappear, but it engaged in founding, by a reluctant violence, a new order that he will not live to enjoy, a new order to be administered by his son..." is clearly Caesar and even compares Aeneas's relationship with Dido to that of Caesar and Cleopatra (Mackay 159). This idea is an interesting one and to hear Mackay explain it, certainly one that makes sense. However, the prophecy itself, as delivered by Jupiter in book one, specifically states

wars will be laid aside and the years of bitterness will be over... The dread Gates of War [the temple of Janus] with their fastenings of steel will then be closed and godless Strife will sit inside them on his murderous armour roaring hideously from bloody mouth, hands shackled behind his back with a hundred bands of bronze (*Aeneid* 1. 286-296).

During Caesar's life and time as *imperator*, the temple of Janus was not shut; in fact, Caesar's rise to power was the cause of civil war in Rome and in 49 BC, he crossed the Rubicon, bringing the war home to the city of Rome. In direct conflict with Jupiter's

prophecy, Caesar seems to be the cause of much of the chaos and “bitterness” that is supposed to be brought to an end. Conversely, Augustus sought to end the warring and destruction in Rome and ordered the closing of the temple of Janus multiple times during his reign, the first time being in 29 BC, shortly after Vergil started work on the *Aeneid*. This fact seems to pull attention back to Augustus rather than Caesar.

So, now that we have established some connections between Augustus and Vergil’s depiction of Aeneas, we must also establish whether these connections were intentional on Vergil’s end and whether Augustus wanted to use his poetry as propaganda. James Morwood argues that, in Vergil’s eyes, if Aeneas is the father of the Roman race and the first founder of Rome, Romulus the founder of the city and the second founder of Rome, then Augustus, who was responsible for building and restoring so much of Rome and its territory, must be considered a sort of third founder (Morwood 221). In his paper, Morwood refers to Augustus as “Augustus the builder,” arguing that Vergil does not only subtly refer to Augustus’s building but goes beyond that, “incorporating these buildings into the literary texture of his poem,” and that Augustus is even “one of the great heroes of the *Aeneid*” (Morwood 219, 221).

In addition, Vergil also refers back to Augustus’s divine lineage to further support his claims to power. Through his adoption by Caesar, Augustus becomes not only a descendant of Venus through Aeneas, but also the son of the deified Caesar (Grebe 57). Grebe also cites Brooks Otis as arguing that through his pageant of heroes, Vergil suggests that Augustus is a “divine man, who, like Hercules and Romulus, will achieve divinity through his deeds” (Grebe 57). This connection with the gods is important for Augustus because, as previously discussed, religion and the gods played a large role in

Roman politics. As Grebe explains, ancestors were used as an example for leaders (Grebe 36). However, in the case of the *Aeneid*, it is possible that the ancestor (Aeneas) was written more to fit the current leader (Augustus), rather than the other way around.

Now that we have established that Vergil wrote the *Aeneid* as a piece of propaganda, we must also establish what role, if any, Augustus played in its creation. Casali compares the relationship between Venus and Vulcan to that of Augustus and Vergil, compares Venus's seduction of Vulcan in order that he will produce arms for her illegitimate son to Vergil's relationship with Augustus. He argues that "in the night Vulcan spends with Venus Vergil vividly depicts the way in which he has 'got into bed' with the Augustan regime" and goes on to explain that in the same way Vulcan did not want to make the shield but eventually gave in and agreed when offered payment, Vergil was persuaded to write the *Aeneid*, Augustus's propaganda (Casali 193).

In "The Poet as Prince: Author and Authority Under Augustus," Ioannis Ziogas describes the ways in which Augustus took away Vergil's power as author. Ziogas explains that Vergil requested his manuscript of the *Aeneid*, wanting to burn it before his death and also asked Varius to destroy it should anything happen to him (Ziogas 118). Unhappy with the work, Vergil did not want it to be published without his approval and requested it be destroyed. However, upon his death, Varius instead published the *Aeneid* according to Augustus's wishes (Ziogas 118). Augustus effectively took away Vergil's authorial power and instead chose to publish the work which made him look good.

Although the *Aeneid* is assuredly not the only piece of propaganda surrounding Augustus, it is certainly one of the most well-known. Throughout, his epic Vergil drew

parallels between Augustus and Rome's famous ancestor. While he may have regretted the work and sought to destroy it both before and after his death, he was not able to retain control over his own poetry and Augustus published the work, using it as a piece of masterful propaganda in his efforts to take and maintain sole power in Rome.

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