Duty, Piety, and Prayer in the *Aeneid*

Although the prayers in the *Aeneid* are not ideal for the purpose of drawing conclusions about Roman religion, they nevertheless can teach the reader much within the context of the narrative. Throughout the text, Vergil builds on the theme that prayer works; characters who prayreceive aid from the gods, and those who do not ultimately fail. The pattern of successful and unsuccessful prayers suggests that Vergil was trying to teach his readers that the fulfillment of duty, whether it was religious, civic, familial, or otherwise, was both rewarding and something to be emulated in everyday life.

The idea of duty that Vergil promotes throughout the *Aeneid* is linked very closely to the idea of *pietas.* In *De Inventione,* Cicero wrote this of *pietas, “pietatem quae erga patriam aut parentes aut alios sanguine coniunctos officium conservare moneat,”[[1]](#footnote-1)* which is roughly translated as “*Patria* [*respublica*]are owed duty like that towards parents or others joined by blood expressed in acts of service.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Such *pietas* was seen as a necessary quality in a Roman, and its presence was an indication of an ongoing relationship between two parties or groups. Cicero further suggested that varying degrees of *pietas* existed “in a hierarchical working order, namely *pietas erga partiam; pietas erga parentes…*[and arguably] *pietas erga amicos.”[[3]](#footnote-3)* The obligations that *pietas* represented, at least as far as Cicero saw them, existed between members of a family, between those members and the family as a whole, between citizens and the state, and even between individual units of the state (i.e. towns, provinces, districts, &c.) and Rome.

After leaving Crete in Book III of the *Aeneid,* Aeneas and his crew land at Buthrotum, where Aeneas consults with Helenus about what he should do next. Helenus prophecies “[o]ne thing before all others…supplicate great Juno’s power; [t]o Juno pay your vows with willing mind; [o]verpower the mighty queen with gifts and prayers.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Aeneas does so dutifully over the course of the epic, even though Juno is dead set against him and his men. Even though the individual prayers were not successful, they showed that Aeneas was a *pius* individual who was holding up his end of the bargain that *pietas* represented in a dutiful manner as any good Roman should, and in the end, despite Juno’s best efforts, *pius* Aeneas prevailed.

To the Romans, *pietas* represented a two-way street. Simply being subordinate and dutiful to someone was not enough to establish *pietas*, it was also necessary for a person to stand in fulfillment of their obligations toward the other involved party.[[5]](#footnote-5) When someone was truly *pius,* such a state of affairs indicated the presence of “a relationship that was understood to be reciprocal [where] the other party could and should offer benefits in return…over time.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This being so, it was only natural for the Romans to assume that the contract that *pietas* represented would exist between the gods and their subjects. If a person made the right offerings and performed the right rituals at the right times, it was believed that the gods would be pleased with them and would reward them in due turn.

In the *Aeneid*, Vergil used this underlying principle of reciprocation in order to reinforce his points about duty. Several times over the course of the narrative, characters remind the gods of their piety in the past and ask for favors to be granted in return for that piety. One example of this occurs in Book IX, which finds Euryalus beset by a group of enemies. Before attempting rescue, his close friend Nisus prays to Diana thus, “O, goddess…guardian of the woods be near, [a]nd to my arm now give propitious aid! If ever on your altars Hyrtacus [m]y sire laid gifts for me, if I myself [h]ave added anything…direct [m]y weapon, that I may disperse this band!”[[7]](#footnote-7) Since his prayer is independent of any other action (such as a sacrifice) it can be assumed that Nisus believes, at least to a certain extent, that Diana owes him something as a result of his past service.

When the gods are prayed to in this manner, the outcome is not usually entirely what the character expects; Nisus was given just enough success in his venture to draw him close to his enemies, prompting them to kill Euryalus which in turn made Nisus throw himself into a hopeless battle of vengeance against them resulting in his death. In Book XI Aruns is also only granted part of his prayer, “Apollo, you...greatest of the gods [w]e worship! You for whom the pine-wood fire [is] fed, and we your pious votaries walk [o]ver heaps of burning coals,-grant…[t]hat from our arms this stain [Camilla] we may erase…If by my hand struck down [t]his direful pest shall fall, then…willingly [w]ill I return…home.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Here Apollo is reminded of how Arun has exhibited piety in the past and grants Aruns the boon of slaying Camilla, but “that he should see again [h]is native land, this part the god refused.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Vergil believes that just as where paying attention to the gods for a time and then neglecting one’s duties is unacceptable, the same holds true with duty. Duty and piety were virtues to be practiced at all times, rather than only when convenient. Just as the gods must be regularly appeased to maintain a sort of personal *pax deorum* or peace with the gods in one’s own life lest they act in the way a person might not want or expect, the obligations of duty must be regularly fulfilled lest unforeseen consequences result.

Within the context of the *Aeneid*, characters seem to have more luck with the gods when they don’t rely on their past performance as worshippers but rather offer to give something in addition to their past contributions in return for aid. For example, Ascanius offers Jupiter “solemn offerings, and…a young bull, snow white, [w]ith gilded horns,”[[10]](#footnote-10) in return for help in killing Numanus Remulus. Here, Ascanius fires true and Numanus falls even though it is the first time Ascanius has fired his bow in war. This event and others like it serve to both boost the moral standing of the individual in question for being a dutiful subject of the gods and to show that going above and beyond the call of duty doesn’t hurt and often carries with it additional rewards.

However, it appears that there are cases where Vergil believed that the gods could not affect the outcome of certain events even though they might want to. In Book X of the *Aeneid,* Pallas prays to Alcides for aid against Turnus, “By my sire’s hospitality, the boards [w]here you, a stranger, did partake with him, [a]id, I beseech…see me conqueror!”[[11]](#footnote-11) This is another case where the supplicant tries to use past actions in order to convince a god to give them aid. This time, though it seems to move the god, despite the fact that he wants to help Pallas, he cannot because, “To every one his day [s]tands fixed by fate…Turnus also by the fates [i]s called, and nears the verge of life.”[[12]](#footnote-12) He says this in an attempt to console Pallas over the fact that though he will not be able to kill Turnus, Turnus will die in the end. What Vergil is presumably saying about piety and duty in this instance is that there are times where even the most dutiful and *pius* don’t always get what they want, that Fate still plays a role in life, and that even though that is true, that does not mean that one should abandon one’s obligations, *pius* or otherwise.

This concept is reinforced by the fact that despite the contractual nature of the *pietas* relationship, there appear to be limits to how far Vergil’s pantheon can interfere in the world of the *Aeneid*. In Book X, Jupiter addresses Juno thus, “You yourself know, Aeneas for a hero is deified, [a]nd destined for the starry skies by fate. What plan do you pursue? ...Further attempts than these, I now forbid.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Juno has been trying to hinder Æneas in his quest because of her hatred for Troy, but must stop because her actions have gone against two very important things: the will of Jupiter and the winds of fate, proof positive that proper prayer and other acts of piety could not change destiny, only shape it.

Throughout the *Aeneid*, Vergil tries to express the importance of the virtues of duty and *pietas* to his readers by providing examples of what does and doesn’t work in each case. Within the structure of Vergil’s pantheon, a clearly defined expectation of reciprocation for services rendered on the part of the supplicant and the deity exists, as well as an established concept that rewards are more likely to go to a dutiful and *pius* person as opposed to someone who is neither dutiful nor *pius*. Through the application of this structure to the situations in which his characters operate, Vergil is able to deliver the concept that striving to the fulfillment of duty in all aspects of life, be they religious or otherwise, should be the ultimate goal of every good Roman.

1. Cicero, *De Inventione* II, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Viroli, M., *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism. Oxford University Press US, 1997.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Emilie, G., *Cicero and the Roman Pietas, The Classical Journal Vol. 39, No. 9 (Jun 1944), pp. 536.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ver. *Aen. 3.554-558.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. King, C., *The Organization of Roman Religious Beliefs, Classical Antiquity Vol. 22, No. 2 (October 2003), pp. 302.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. King, C., *The Organization of Roman Religious Beliefs, pp. 301.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ver. *Aen. 9.499-509.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ver. *Aen. 11.1008-18.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ver. *Aen. 11.1023-24*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ver. *Aen. 9.773-776.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ver. *Aen. 10.606-609.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ver. *Aen. 10.615-23.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ver. *Aen. 11.1006-1023.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)