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Vir Romanus: Roman Manhood and Aeneas' Quest for Masculinity

From the very first line of the *Aeneid* : *Arma virumque cano* ("I sing the arms and the man," 1.1), Vergil poises masculinity to be a central focus of his epic. Concepts of gender permeate the literature and social policy of ancient Rome. From the conservative writings and ideals of Cato the Elder, to the progressive poems of Catullus and the elegy of Ovid, gender is not an unfamiliar concept in ancient Rome. However, few works have addressed the notions of Roman manhood to the extent of Vergil's *Aeneid.* Throughout the first half of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas is portrayed as both physically and ideologically lost. Struggling to find something around which to orient himself, Aeneas eventually finds his footing in the characteristics of old-Roman manliness. This ideological journey demonstrates the immense struggles required of Aeneas in transitioning from disoriented confusion to masculine focus. In the events following Aeneas' newfound masculine center, Vergil calls the broader definition of Roman manhood into question, and subverts the traditionally attractive values and characterizations of masculinity.

The early Books of Vergil's *Aeneid* characterize Aeneas as physically and ideologically lost, distinguished by dispassion and aimlessness. In his introduction in Book 1, Vergil writes : *frigore membra; ingemit / refert 'mene Iliacis occumbere campis non potuisse'* ("with cold limbs; (Aeneas) groans / and he says 'why could I not have been able to die on the Trojan fields.'" 1.92.96). The diction of "cold limbs" and "groaning" indicates the tired lack of "heat" or

drive from his actions. His wish to "lie dead on the Trojan fields" demonstrates Aeneas' rejection of toil and hardship in favor of simple death. These sentiments of pointlessness are echoed in the midst of Troy's destruction, where Aeneas says : *jamque adeo super unus eram / erranti passimque oculos per cuncta ferenti*. ("thus I was alone / wandering and bearing my eyes everywhere (ie. 'through all things'), randomly." 2.567.570). This image of Aeneas' lonely wandering in the Trojan conflict is symbolic of his disposition throughout the early portions of the *Aeneid*. When faced with hardship or conflict, Aeneas is completely alone, "casting his eyes everywhere" in search of a direction that does not exist. In both of these instances, Vergil characterizes Aeneas as confused and lost, an individual in search of some defining characteristic, or a purpose that encourages him to move forward.

Aeneas attempts to find self-definition and direction in sources distant from masculinity. Throughout early portions of the epic, Aeneas clings to a nostalgic view of Troy and the past. For example, in observing a frieze of Troy at Carthage, Vergil writes : *stupet obtutuque haeret defixus in uno.* ("he stood agape, having been transfixed, he clings to one view." 1.495). Similarly, upon hearing stories of old Troy in Book 3, Aeneas says : *Obstipui miroque incensum pectus amore*. ("I stood amazed, and my heart was burned with marvelous love." 3.298). Phrases such as "marvelous" and "my heart was burned with love" emphasize the nostalgic passion Aeneas holds for Troy. The verbs of attachment such as "clings", "transfixed", and "stood agape" highlight the extent of Aeneas' emotional bond to the events of the past. In addition, Book 4 sees Aeneas attempting to find focus and meaning in the foreign opulence of Carthage. Upon seeing Aeneas decked with an embellished sword and gold-purple luxury garments, Mercury says : *Heu, regni rerumque oblite tuarum! / qua spe Libycis teris otia terris?* ("Alas,

forgetting your kingdom and your fate! / with what hope do you waste leisure in Libyan lands?" 4.267.271). In this message, Mercury subtly criticizes Aeneas' lack of masculinity. His focus on *otia* (leisure) and luxury rather than his own kingdom, and his fixation on the past, juxtapose the focus and ambition characteristic of a driven man. Interlocking Aeneas' bizzare attempts at finding meaning in non-masculine sources, Vergil demonstrates that the sense of direction necessary for Aeneas' mission must be found somewhere else.

Aeneas' journey into the depths of the Underworld provides the directional switch critical in Aeneas' development. Aeneas meets his father Anchises in the Underworld, who guides him on a journey into the future of Rome. In leading him, Anchises says : *Huc geminas nunc flecte acies, hanc aspice gentem Romanosque tuos.* ("Now turn both of your eyes here, look at this race and your Romans" 6.288-289). In Anchises' prophetic presentation, Vergil's diction provides a noteworthy contrast to the aimless, confused Aeneas of the preceding Books. Rather than wandering, "bearing his eyes randomly, " Anchises uses imperative mood and a strong directional *huc*, demanding that Aeneas specifically "turn his eyes right here*"* at his future race of Romans. Additionally, earlier word choice of being stuck and clinging to a single view of the past is replaced with symbols of vast expanse and aspiration, *extra sidera / extra anni solisque vias*. ("beyond the stars / beyond the annual path of the sun." 6.795). Through this imagery, Anchises specifically alters Aeneas' previous disposition from wandering and lost to ambitious and determined.

Aeneas' newfound focus sees his spirit inflamed with images of militaristic might and glory, where Anchises' proposal of the Roman mission cements Aeneas' new sense of direction. Characteristics of *regere imperio* ("to rule with power"), and *parcere subjectis debellare*

superbos ("to spare the conquered and wear down the haughty with war" 6.853), give Aeneas a personally appealing sense of ideological focus. Upon expounding these traits and continually presenting the extent of Aeneas' future renown, Anchises, *incenditque animum famae venientis amore*. ("He inflamed his spirit with love of the coming glory." 6.889). Once again, Vergil employs inversion of diction. Rather than being "cold" and *incensum amore* ("inflamed with love") for his Trojan past as in Books 1 and 3, he is inflamed with an love of his future glory and strength. A focus on military strength and personal glory appears to present a simple image of Aeneas as an ideal Roman soldier. However, Jonathan Walters confirms the complexity of this characterization in his article on Roman manliness, where he writes "the Roman soldier is a symbol of all that is manly in Roman society" (Walters, 40). Therefore, Aeneas' newfound ideological focus and direction initializes his characterization not as a simple Roman soldier, but as a symbol of old-Roman masculinity.

An analysis of old-Roman masculinity in the Aeneid requires a foundational understanding of the gender characteristics prevalent in ancient Rome. The concepts of *durus* and *gravitas* stem from figures in Early Roman history, and from gendered contrasts with the feminine. The connection of prowess in battle and the masculine quality of *gravitas,* meaning weight, importance, and self-respect, is rooted in the Roman figure of Cato the Elder. In his biography of Cato, Plutarch describes his character in battle extensively, writing "In battle, he showed himself effective of hand, and of a fierce countenance…thenceforth the weight and dignity of his character revealed themselves" (Plutarch, 307). This manly, stern fierceness in battle was rivaled only by his stability and self-control. Plutarch writes, "his self restraint was beyond measure…(compared to lavish opulence) he was far more desirous of high repute in

battles" (Plutarch, 305). Within a general focus on possessing *gravitas* and strength in battle, the old Roman man is also characterized as *durus,* or cold and harsh, in contrast with the feminine. Generally distinguished by severity and emotional unaffectedness, "Roman society exalted the hard, the dry, and the masculine (against) the soft, the liquid, and the feminine" (Miller, 401). The masculine characteristics of prowess in battle, *gravitas,* and *durus* become central to Aeneas' ideological focus and direction after Book 6 of the Aeneid.

Aeneas' growth in old-Roman masculinity is initially emphasized in his actions of *gravitas* and militarism. In Book 7, the arrival of Aeneas in Italy is quickly followed by him sending a group of Trojan envoys to speak with the Latins concerning peace. But as the Trojan envoys searches for peace and diplomacy, Aeneas fortifies his first *castra* ("military camp") on Latin soil. In addition, Aeneas is seen presenting himself to the Etruscans with masculine presence and weight. Vergil writes : *Tum pater Aeneas puppi sic fatur ab alta / excepitque manu dextramque inhaesit* ("Then the father Aeneas thus spoke from the lofty deck / and he seized his right hand and gripped it tightly" 8.115.124). The appositional "father" describing Aeneas, his position on the lofty and elevated deck of a ship, and his act of a firm handshake with Pallas all characterize Aeneas as a man of strong self-presentation and *gravitas*. Both of these examples indicate Aeneas' increasing adherence to the qualities of manhood. Although Aeneas' militaristic preparation and strong self-presentation are positive instances of banal masculinity, the later events of the Aeneid bring the stereotypical concepts of Roman manhood into question.

Vergil seeds Aeneas' growing masculinity with ominous roots in his continued interactions with Evander and Pallas. Specifically, Evander gives Aeneas a tour of the area that will one day be Rome. They eventually come upon the house of impoverished Evander, where he

says : *limina victor Alcides subiit / aude, hospes, contemnere opes et te quoque finge deo* ("The victor Hercules stooped under this threshold / dare, my guest, to look down on wealth and to deem yourself worthy to be a god." 8.363-364). The diction of "daring" to scorn wealth and luxury in favor of personal glory echos values of stereotypical manhood. However, Evander's comparisons to Hercules are a much more dire call to brutish manliness. Evander's previous references to Hercules characterized his behavior as driven "not by high minded, metaphysical reasons…but by anguish, anger, and fury" (Putnam, 5). Aeneas, in an effort to identify with these features of strength, also stoops down and enters the house, mimicking the past entrance of Hercules. This literal and metaphorical crossing the *limina* ("threshold") symbolizes Aeneas' increasing acceptance of savage, self-interested masculine extremism on his journey in becoming a victorious hero. In addition to Aeneas' foreboding acceptance of extreme masculinity, Vergil continues to question and blur the lines of idealized Roman manhood.

The interactions between Evander and Pallas further illustrate the complexities of masculinity. Evander entrusts his son Pallas to Aeneas while proposing assistance for the Trojans. This action can be viewed "as an example of *conterbernium,* whereby the younger tiro learns from the more experienced ways of battle" (Putnam, 6). Evander's engagement in the purely-militaristic concept of *contubernium* indicates a focus on his personal interest of grooming his son for military life, rather than on care or consideration. Emphasizing such dispassion, Evander calls his son a *robora pubis lecta* ("choice flower of manhood," 8.518-519). Rather than calling Pallas by name, Evander refers to his son via an image of abstraction, focused purely on his growth as a man of military strength. Through this comment, Vergil calls attention to the impersonal and public-mindedness of Evander's behavior, who displays no

qualms or feelings in bequesting his own son to the dangers of military combat. In contrast with idealized Roman manhood, Evander's behavior is rather off-putting. In showing no affection towards his own son, Evander's *durus* ("cold") behavior appears to sacrifice his paternal care at the expense of masculine leadership. In this subversion, Vergil calls masculinity into question, asking whether an adherence to the characteristics of an ideal Roman man entails the removal of emotion and humanity.

While the initial portrayal of Evander calls *durus* and militaristic focus into question, his contrasting behavior upon Pallas' final departure emphasizes the thinness of the idealized masculine dialectical. As Aeneas and Pallas are about to depart, Evander suddenly clings to his son and begins to weep incessantly, crying out in a prayer to the gods : *sin aliquem infandum casum, Fortuna, minaris / nunc, nunc o liceat crudelem abrumpere vitam* ("If you threaten any unspeakable tragedy, Fortune / now, o' now let me break off cruel life." 8.578-579). This image of hopelessness and despair echoes the introduction to a non-masculine Aeneas from Book 1, wishing to die at sea rather than endure any difficulty. In tandem with these statements of desperation, Evander's passionate diction lovingly embraces his son, calling him *care* ("beloved"), and his *voluptas* ("joy" 8.581). Evander's prior impersonal and characteristically manly conduct portrayed him as stern and strong at the expense of natural human emotion. This instance illustrates the opposite, with Evander's emotion and distress replacing harsh masculinity with emotional softness. This behavior, although contrasting Evander's earlier coldness and *gravitas*, is equally concerning in its soft, compassionate weakness. In undermining both ends of the spectrum of manhood, Vergil emphasizes the precarious balance of the typical masculine duality in times of difficulty or strife.

Having called the dialectic of masculinity into question through the behavior of Evander, Vergil cements Aeneas' commitment to the side of off-putting coldness and glory in battle. Prior to the events between Evander and Pallas, Aeneas' embrace of Herculean manhood established an ominous gravitation towards hypermasculinity. Aeneas then receives a shield from Venus, intricately depicting events of the Roman future. The shield is filled with disturbing, violent imagery: dismemberment by horse, the dragging of a man's entrails, and events of war, death, and slaughter cover the shield (Vergil, *Aen,* 8.642-713). Although these images may be dismissed as historical pandering to a Roman audience, Aeneas' reaction after extensive observation of the shield is quite telling. Lacking any emotional response to the horrid events portrayed on the shield, Aeneas simply, *miratur / imagine gaudet, attolens umero famamque et fata nepotum* ("he marvels / and delights in the images, lifting on his shoulder the fame and fate of his descendents." 8.730-731). Vergil's word choice of *miratur* (marvels) and *gaudet* (delights) are disturbingly positive reactions to such horrific images, implying a sense of wonder and pleasure at the slaughter and destruction of battle. This reaction indicates Aeneas' sway to the side of exaggerated manliness, focusing solely on the "fame" of his descendents and delighting in images of death and conflict. This image, combined with Vergil's prior demonstration of the precarious boundary between emotional weakness and excessive masculine *gravitas,* makes Aeneas' subsequent venture into battle cautiously foreboding rather than an inspiring call to arms.

Aeneas' conquest in battle demonstrates the extent of his inhumanity, suggestive of emotionless, extreme masculinity. After Aeneas arrives to fight the Rutulians in battle, Turnus kills Pallas, the son of Evander. Aeneas, having ignored the soft, sensitive emotion of Evander in

favor of masculine harshness and militaristic prowess, responds in the only way such manliness permits: brutal acts of horrific violence. Initially, Aeneas, *gladio latumque per agmen / ardens limitem agit ferro* ("drove a path, burning, through the wide column with his iron sword." 10.513-514), with the contained placement of *gladio* and *ferro* at either end of the phrase emphasizing the extent of his carnage. While such a fierce response of mass carnage is disquieting, Aeneas' acts of brutality fully cross the barrier of restrained, ideal manhood. For instance, Aeneas rejects the pleas of a defeated soldier, and : *galeam laeva tenet atque reflexa / cervice orantis capulo tenus applicat ensem* ("he held back his helmet with his left hand, and having bent the neck of the beggar backwards, drove in his sword up to the hilt." 10.535-536). An outright rejection of the Roman virtue of "sparing the conquered" as espoused by Anchises, this is one example of many during Aeneas' rage where Vergil's grotesque and brutal imagery stresses the extremity Aeneas' masculinity. Summarizing his slaughter, Aeneas is described as : *torrentis aquae vel turbinis atri / more furens* ("raging in death like a torrent of water or a dark whirlwind." 10.603-604). A torrent of cold, indecent terror and animalistic rage replaces the self-restraint, strength, and composure of ideal manliness. In Aeneas' unpleasant characterization, the appeal of masculine *gravitas* and strength in battle is dramatically lessened.

The final conflict between Aeneas and Turnus is the ultimate assertion of Aeneas' now-objectionable manhood in the face of adversity. After a long and fierce fight, Aeneas subdues Turnus and forces his surrender. In his final plea to Aeneas, Turnus says : *miseri te si qua parentis tangere cura potest / ulterius ne tende odiis.* ("if any care for parental grief is able to touch you / do not hold your hatred further." 12.933.938). Unlike Aeneas' cold, rage-induced slaughter in Book 10, Turnus' emotional appeals cause him to hesitate. Some scholars have

interpreted this hesitation as "an extraordinary moment of humanity…(it causes) the 'good' anger that results from an examination of what the nature of affairs really is" (Galinsky, 197). However, Aeneas' previous actions undermine this claim. Having been lost at sea, having had his family ripped apart and his city of Troy destroyed, the difficulty of Aeneas' journey from confusion and despair to masculine strength and focus has been immense. Additionally, his actions in Book 10 indicate an extension of his masculinity beyond the ideal limits of tempered *gravitas* and *durus* to extreme self-interest and emotionless bloodthirst. Therefore, Aeneas' brutal act of murder following this moment of hesitation appears not out of consideration and humanity, but out of retaliation. Turnus' ability to make Aeneas hesitate poses a threat to the very characteristics of masculinity that Aeneas has worked so hard to attain and apply in his actions. His final gesture of savagery is driven not by "good anger", but is savage retribution against a threat to his masculine identity. This penultimate act cements Aeneas not as a Roman hero of ideal manhood, but as a hypermasculine leader of inhuman brutality.

Ultimately, Aeneas' ideological journey of masculine, heroic discovery illustrates the underlying complexity to dialectical perceptions of Roman masculinity. Aeneas' progression throughout the epic subverts idealized perceptions of manhood by presenting an unattractive, off-putting hypermasculine image. This ominous characterization is extended in Juno's final plea to Jupiter, when she says : *sit Romana potens Itala virtute propago (*"let the Roman race be strong in Italian virtue." 12.827). With this line, Vergil expands the concerns with Aeneas' extreme manliness to the entire Roman race, insisting its inheritance throughout Rome for generations. In this extension, Vergil begs the larger question of what characteristics are more important to Roman manhood. Is Aeneas' sacrifice of what makes one human for the sake of

impersonal ferocity and public-minded motivation what defines a man? Or is the human emotion of Aeneas early in the epic, or the familial love of Evander, more important to true manhood than *gravitas* and prowess in battle? In posing this dichotomy, Vergil breaks the stereotypical mold of Roman masculinity, and calls his Roman readers to question their own definitions of what it means to be a man.

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