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HUM 1

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Man and Divine Power

In 27 BC, the Roman Empire rose from the ashes of the Republic, amidst a significant period of political and social turmoil. War and the fall of traditional leaders had sent shockwaves coursing through Roman society, leading to doubts among the populace regarding whether the country could return to its former glory. In an ultimately successful attempt to bring an era of prosperity to a disillusioned and conflicted people, the new emperor, Augustus Caesar, began an extensive campaign to reestablish traditional Roman values and cement his claim to power.

It is in these circumstances that Virgil penned his greatest work, *The Aeneid*, an epic centred on the valiant and selfless Aeneas, a demigod ancestor of Augustus to whom he acts also as a literary equivalent. The two men share many parallels, and the glorification of the former within the work can be seen as indirect praise of the latter. Yet, what is ostensibly a propaganda piece becomes far more complex upon further examination. Virgil does not adhere to a clear dichotomy of the winners and the losers, the pious and the wicked, the emotional and the logical. A writer in a time in which emperors of men have become deities in their own right, he subverts traditional tropes of preceding literature. Though he legitimizes Augustus' position as ruler by drawing on religion and mythology, he questions the power of man in a world of destiny and gods.

From the suicide of Dido to the death of Palinurus, we see that the meddling of the gods has grave consequences for the human pawns involved. The most interesting of these cases is that of the epic's great adversary - the rash Turnus, who starts a war for the hand of his beloved and perishes at Aeneas' merciless hands. He is indeed passionate and emotional to the point of self-destruction, and because of it, interprets every omen or action of the gods in his own benefit. Yet he is as much a plaything of the gods as Dido and Amata - it is Juno who, by proxy of the fury Allecto, arouses within Turnus "the brute

insanity of war" and drives him towards violence (VII.635.) To what extent, then, is Turnus responsible for his own demise?

The dueling interpretations of the prince are invoked in Virgil's description of Turnus' armor within Book VII, specifically the two pieces of his helm and shield. The former bears "a Chimaera's head" that exhales flames fueled by the spilling of blood and destruction of life (VII.1080.) It is reminiscent of the Turnus we have seen up to this point - a murderous man, with a lust for violence. However, it is interesting to note that not only is the Chimera an unnatural animal created by and from the gods, in her original appearance, she is defeated not by brute force but by intelligence and logic. The hero Bellerophon lands the decisive blow with a spear headed by a lump of lead that strikes when melted by the Chimera's own flames. Similarly, Turnus falls victim to his own flames, which arise not from divine power, but of the passion and vengeance of man.

On the other hand, Turnus' shield bears the image of Io, a woman punished and transformed by Jupiter - or Juno, depending on the version - into a cow due to no fault of her own. Here is another unnatural animal created by and from the capriciousness of the gods. This creature, however, is one to be pitied rather than feared. Indeed, Turnus' last moments are treated with pity by Virgil, who writes of his death: "with a groan for that indignity/His spirit fled into the gloom below" (XII.1297-1298.) There is no honor here, only tragedy - Aeneas strikes Turnus down without mercy, fueled by hatred and rage instead of acting with calculated rationality. It is a significant departure from both traditional Roman morals and the original Chimera mythos. In that moment, incensed to act not due to gods but by his own personal fury at the death of Pallas, Aeneas has become much different from the noble and dutiful hero who spared Helen at the fall of Troy.

In this way, Virgil deconstructs the expectations of the reader. The gulf between Aeneas and Turnus is not as wide as initially suggested by their characterization. There is none of the traditional dichotomy here - they are both pious, they are both emotional. Even the lines between the winners and the losers of this epic become blurred - Juno and Jupiter come to a compromise that "the Teucrians [Trojans] will mingle and be submerged, incorporated" in the larger Latin society, a muddled kind of

victory and loss for both sides (XII.1133-1134.) Finally, at the climax of the epic, this tale becomes not of a battle between logical man and mindless beast, but of two animals - Virgil compares the fight of Turnus and Aeneas to when "two bulls lower heads and horns and charge" (XII.972.) The two mortal enemies become virtually indistinguishable from each other, set apart only by the paths that fate has dictated for them.

There is no doubt that the meddling of the gods had greatly impacted the course of Aeneas' journey as far. However, it is interesting to note that in this final pivotal clash between Aeneas and Turnus, the gods are markedly absent. There is no last minute interference of Juno or divine arrow from a vengeful Opis, or even an appearance from Venus to plead for mercy on Turnus' behalf - only two men set against each other by the machinisms of the gods. Again, this is a subversion of classic tropes, like the *deus ex machina* that is prominent in the ending of Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Athena arrives suddenly to tie up the primary conflict. Divine power is diminished and the free will of man is emphasized. We can see here a connection to the rise of the Roman Empire, a physical manifestation of mankind's potential and an institution that is blessed by the gods, but not controlled by them. This is especially appropriate considering the creation of the imperial cult during the same time period, which cast Julius and Augustus Caesar as deities in their own rights.

However, it is also telling that Aeneas is cast in a bad light at the end of the epic. Without the influence of the gods, instead of acting honorably, he disregards his father's earlier instruction - "Child of my own blood,/Throw away your sword!" - and acts on hatred (VI.1125-1126.) The parallels between Aeneas and Augustus continue, but now, Virgil's praise of Augustus has turned into veiled but strong criticism. Just as Aeneas killed Turnus unjustly in order to wed Lavinia and have his kingdom, Virgil suggests that Augustus too has acted unethically and committed wrongs for the sake of attaining his empire. By ending on this negative note and offering no justification of Aeneas' actions from god nor man, Virgil makes it apparent that his work is far more than a propaganda piece. He argues that man and his free will can achieve greatness without the interference of capricious gods, but criticizes the idea that man can act as gods do without fear of repercussion.

