

Sajid Ahsan

Professor Carranza

Humanities I

12 October 2016

“A Man at War”:

Turnus, The Latins, and The Emergence of a Nation in the *Aeneid*

“Warfare and a man at war” are the primary topics broached in the opening line of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (1.1). Rather than just a simple tale of warfare, however, the *Aeneid* presents an exploration of Rome’s origins and what it really means to be Roman. As a national epic depicting the founding of what would one day be the Roman Empire, it centers its thematic conflict on the struggle between constructive and destructive impulses and how they fit within the narrative of building a nation. In the penultimate passage of Book VII, what appears at first glance to be a simple description of the Latin armies marching to war paints an intricate image of the interplay of those impulses as they relate to Turnus and to the future of the Latin peoples. The Italians, whose positive potential is stressed in the passage, will have a role to play in the nation to come, but Turnus, whose depiction both here and throughout the text is solely defined by his destructive nature, has no future.

This passage marks the culmination of Juno and Alecto’s machinations to set the Latins and Trojans at each other’s throats. The Fury arouses Turnus’ rage, and this anger spreads so rapidly that by the close of Book VII, an army is assembled consisting of soldiers from across Italy, marching off to wage war against Trojans who had days ago presented no threat to them whatsoever. As he runs through a list of those present, Virgil frames the soldiers in terms of a very deliberate contrast. Although here they are nothing more than “a cloud of infantry,” marching as

the field “filled up with troops in arms,” Virgil makes note of what these men occupy themselves with in times of peace (7.1090-1091). Whether they “plowed (the) sacred shores” of Numicus or Tiber’s “woodland pastures,” or “turned clods on Rutulian hills/ And Circe’s ridge,” the men as they appear in these images are calm and peaceful, engaging in constructive behavior (7.1095-1098). This sudden shift into descriptions of pastoral life clashes with the foreboding violent imagery that preceded it just a few lines before.

This contrast underscores the conflict Virgil focuses on throughout the *Aeneid*. Whipped into fury, the men become soldiers focused only on warfare. In this sense, rage is a reductive force, whittling the Italians down to the basest anger until they are only capable of destruction. However, their pastoral duties in peace are a reminder that these same men have constructive impulses as well. The Italians have a role to play in the Roman nation moving forward, and this illustrates that they have positive contributions to make to the new nation.

At the front of it all marches Turnus himself, whose armor and physical features cut an especially imposing figure, even when compared to the rest of the warriors marching alongside him. The description of his helm is particularly ominous, adorned with images of a “Chimaera’s head/ Exhaling Aetnean fires” that seem to burn more intensely “the more blood flowed, the wilder/ Grew the battle” (7.1080-1083). This immediately sets Turnus apart from the rest of his ranks as more ferocious and bestial than the other soldiers, taking on something of a mythological dimension. Depicted on his shield is Io, “that instant/ Changed... into a cow” by Juno as punishment for a tryst with Jupiter (7.1085-1086). As he leads an army against Juno’s hated enemies, Turnus marches into battle literally bearing the image of her wrath on his arm, appearing in this passage to be the very image of fury. Like Achilles of the *Iliad*, he is overcome with a sort

of warrior rage that transcends description as a mere soldier. Indeed, Turnus appears larger than life here, like a myth walking amongst his mortal allies.

One of the virtues Virgil holds in the highest regard throughout the work is a respect for order and discipline. This is where Aeneas is shown to be a model Roman, “a man apart, devoted to his mission” (1.16). Despite being overcome with rage upon seeing Helen during the fall of Troy, he heeds Venus’ warning not to “let such suffering goad (him) on to fury beyond control” and spares her life (2.781-782). While taking refuge in Carthage, he obeys the gods’ commands to leave his beloved Dido, with whom he has been embroiled in a passionate affair, and seek out Latium, “sailing for Italy not of (his) own free will” but because “the gods’ interpreter, sent by Jove himself... has brought/ Commands down” (4.499, 492-494). Turnus serves as a foil for Aeneas because while he is just as great of a warrior as the Trojan, his fury is not tempered with wisdom. Even in battle, his rage prevents him from making tactically advantageous decisions, as he displays when laying siege to the Trojan encampment when he does not think to open the gates once inside to allow his army to join him and win the war. Instead, “high rage and mindless/ Slaughter drove the passionate man” to fight the Trojans by himself, killing as many as he can before he is forced to escape (9.1054-1055). As the *Aeneid* tells the story of the movement from disorder into civilization, it becomes apparent that there is no room for a man like Turnus in this new age. Such a warrior is useful for conquering city walls, but does not quite fit inside of them.

The Turnus presented in this passage is reminiscent of a superhuman figure torn from the pages of mythology because that is where he is destined to stay, as opposed to Aeneas, whose virtues are supposedly passed down the Roman line. This is foreshadowed by the difference between the depictions appearing on his armor and those on the shield Aeneas receives from the gods. The Trojan’s shield is emblazoned with images of “the age to come...the future story of

Italy, / The triumph of the Romans,” but everything represented on Turnus’ gear is formless or in a state of flux, from the chimaera, a beast made of incongruous parts of animals without real structure, to Io caught in the midst of her transformation, to “Inachus, the rivergod, (pouring) out a stream” (8.849-851, 7.1088-1089). There is no future for Turnus, only shapeless, indefinite rage.

Looking back to Jupiter’s earliest prophecies of the ideal peace that will one day come to Rome, it is the lawgivers who triumph as “the Gates of War/ Will then be shut,” locking away “unholy Furor” (1.394-395). With this prophecy and the values it endorses in mind, it becomes apparent that the savage warrior drive that compels Turnus and his men has no future in the nation that is to come. While the Italians are given a productive alternative to divert their energy towards so they can one day be integrated into Rome’s society, Turnus is deliberately presented without any factors that mitigate his unbridled rage, condemning him forever to the pages of legend.