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12-1-1979

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Recommended Citation

McDermott, Emily A. "The 'Unfair Fight': A Significant Motif in the Aeneid" *Classical Journal* Vol. 75 Iss. 2 (1979).

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THE "UNFAIR FIGHT":
A SIGNIFICANT MOTIF IN THE *AENEID*

When Virgil began to write the "Iliadic" half of his *Aeneid*, he enjoyed a great deal more freedom in setting up its action than had Homer, whose characters' lots were generally predetermined by received myth as surely as by any Fate. As a result, it is possible to achieve keen insight into Virgil's poetic design in the *Aeneid* by examining the particular cast he has given to the poem's action or specific variations he has introduced into his literary models. For instance, the incident of Nisus and Euryalus in Bk. 9, the role of Pallas as youthful Patroklos to Aeneas' Achilles, and the death of Lausus at Aeneas' hands all seem to have been Virgil's own innovations in the traditions. Many critics have pointed out that the pathos of these young heroes' deaths emphasizes the poet's deep sense of the tragedy of war. They have not noted, however, Virgil's systematic exploitation in these stories of the dramatic potential of the "unfair fight." I have found discussion of this Virgilian motif to be a useful device for explaining to students the "dual voice" of the *Aeneid*, through which the city of Rome and its mission to *regere imperio populos* (6.851) are glorified, while at the same time war and its ethic are decried as tragically cruel and wasteful.

Let me begin with an analogy from the modern Western drama. If Gary Cooper in a white hat and silver star faces off against Jack Palance (in a black hat and a sneer), we as audience may await the outcome with anxiety, but we rest assured that this will at least be a fair fight. No matter what our personal judgments might be on the duel code, the even matchup of antagonists allows us to suspend those judgments for the moment and to accept instead the rules or code of the genre. If one of the bad guys proceeds to shoot Gary Cooper in the back from the roof of the jail, we become outraged at the deceit and honorlessness of the human animal, but we still need not question the code, for it frowns on ambushes like these as disapprovingly as we do. Imagine, however, this third scenario: the stagecoach drives up to discharge a single passenger—a dude school-teacher, carrying a valise full of books and wearing a gun in a shiny new holster strapped tight around his waist. As this dude descends from the stage, smiling diffidently, he accidentally jostles Jack Palance's elbow: we watch with growing horror as, inexorably, the young man is drawn to certain death. It is now that we are forced to shout, "But it isn't fair!" and so to call the entire ethical basis of the genre into question. For this duel, despite the participants' obvious disparity in age, skill, and experience, is nonetheless sanctioned by the code.

Just so, Virgil stacks the deck in his mounting of combats in the *Aeneid*.¹ In Bk. 2, the aged Priam is so feeble that when he is goaded into action by the murder of his young, fleeing son before his eyes, his sword will barely penetrate the first layer of Pyrrhus' shield. Yet he is slaughtered (slipping and sliding in his son's blood) with the kind of savagery and insolence that might more justifiably be accorded to a Mezentius. At Bk. 7.475f, when Ascanius goes hunting (the peacetime analogue to combat for the pursuit of *laus*), his target is not a wild and noble stag of the forest, but a tame and defenseless pet, deluded by long years of coddling into expecting no evil from human hands. The night raid of Nisus and Euryalus in Bk. 9 is patterned on the foray of Odysseus and Diomedes in *Iliad* 10, but Virgil has introduced two significant variations into the outline of his story: first, Virgil's heroes—especially Euryalus—are young and inexperienced; and (as a result) their mission, unlike Homer's, fails. The mismatch here is that boys have been sent to do a man's job: Euryalus foolishly dons the tell-tale helmet (9.373f) and so sends first himself, then a gallant Nisus, to sure death. (In a somewhat parallel "maiden voyage" in war, only divine intervention can save Ascanius from death [9.638f].)

The poet's deliberate creation of mismatches is most evident in Bk. 10. Pallas, Aeneas' young ally, and Mezentius' son Lausus would seem to have made a natural pair of antagonists: they are equal in age, skill, and valor. In fact, Virgil sets the scene following the *aristeia* of Pallas so that these two may be seen inching ever closer to one another, till they must inevitably clash. But this match was not to be:

hinc Pallas instat et urget,
hinc contra Lausus, nec multum discrepat aetas,
egregii forma, sed quis Fortuna negarat
in patriam reditus. ipsos concurrere passus
haud tamen inter se magni regnator Olympi;
mox illos sua fata manent maiore sub hoste.
(10. 433-438)

Fate intervenes. The result? Pallas, the promising neophyte, meets the greatest of the Italian warriors, Turnus; Lausus falls to Aeneas (ironically, in a futile attempt to stave off one of the poem's few *fair* fights—that between his father and Aeneas). No matter what the poet *says*, it is not fate, nor Jupiter, nor even received myth, which denies a meeting between Pallas and Lausus. It is Virgil himself: the tragic potential of these two egregious mismatches is irresistible to the poet.

Virgil makes no openly negative comment on the fairness of these matches or on the system which allows—and even demands—them. On the contrary, he blesses Nisus and Euryalus for the glory they have attained (9.446f) and has Aeneas assure the dead Lausus that it is an honor to have fallen at Aeneas' hands

¹Virgil, of course, makes abundant use of the second scenario above as well: the horrors of trickery and ambush are movingly expounded in, e.g., the tale of Sinon and the Trojan horse and the death of Deiphobus (6.494f).

(10.829-30). But the very relentlessness with which he repeatedly sets up combat situations in which the outcome is a foregone conclusion forces his audience to question the heroic code. In a world where boys repeatedly die on their first day of battle, and old or otherwise defenseless creatures are ruthlessly cut down, we cannot avoid uneasy doubts as to the propriety of the code from which such outrages arise.

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