Abstract

This paper utilizes ancient ideal kingship philosophy as a framework for interpreting the Achaemenides episode at the end of the *Aeneid's* Book 3. The paper employs this facet of Hellenistic political philosophy to understand Vergil's characterization of Aeneas in this passage. It argues that Aeneas displays two kingly virtues, *clementia* and *pietas*, and discusses their presence in the passage comprehensively. Further, the paper concludes that Vergil, by displaying Aeneas as an ideal king, purposefully associates these same characteristics with Aeneas' descendant, Caesar Augustus. As he often does throughout the rest of the poem, Vergil means to influence his audience's perception of the *princeps* by drawing upon the mythological past.

AENEAS, ACHAEMENIDES, AND AUGUSTAN IDEAL KINGSHIP

Perhaps the greatest typological connection in the *Aeneid* is that of the poem's namesake, Pater Aeneas, to the dominating political and cultural figure looming in the background of the poem, Caesar Augustus. Though various typological parallels between the two appear woven into the *Aeneid*, scholars of Vergil often draw attention to the association of these two in terms of ancient ideal kingship theory. This paper applies aspects of the "ideal ruler" typology to one particular episode of the *Aeneid*, 3.588-654: Aeneas' encounter with the Greek Achaemenides on the island of the Cyclopes. From this passage of the *Aeneid* then, I shall argue that the meeting of Aeneas with Achaemenides intentionally displays two aspects of Aeneas' character as an ideal ruler: *clementia* and a public-orientated *pietas*. Indeed, it appears that the act of *clementia* itself seems motivated at least in part by *pietas*. From there, I shall argue that Vergil uses this episode to communicate something about the *princeps*. That is to say, as a good ruler, Augustus owns and ought to aspire to the same qualities of *clementia* and *pietas*.

Before jumping into the textual analysis, let me first establish the basics of this ideal kingship concept as far as it pertains to my argument. The concept of the ideal ruler was a prominent theme of ancient political thought, particularly in the Hellenistic world. In essence, ideal kingship theory presented a set of moral and practical characteristics a ruler ought to have. The characteristics ranged from capability in war to justice. Perhaps the most famous of works dealing with the concept of ideal kingship is the Epicurean Philodemus' *On the Good King According to Homer*. In short, it is originally a Greek idea that came to the Romans through their intellectual engagement with Hellenistic world, and one with which Vergil's audience would have been familiar. For the Romans, the virtues of *clementia* and *pietas* played a role in ideal kingship. As often stated by scholars, *pietas* probably represents the single greatest characteristic of Aeneas, as well as serving as one of the chief emphases of the Augustan ideology. *Clementia*

also appeared in the Augustan ideology, listed alongside *pietas* as one of the virtues ascribed to Augustus in the *Res Gestae*.

Generally speaking, the Achaemenides episode in the later part of Book 3 is a puzzling scene to scholars. Besides serving as an obvious allusion to Homer's *Odyssey*, the passage does not play a particularly clear role in the overall story or message of the poem. Indeed, some have even suggested that Vergil's intention, prior to his death, was to cut out this material. In other words, this odd passage begs explanation. Ideal kingship may offer a lens of interpretation that explains intent of the passage.

What arguments are there to support the presence of ideal kingship in this passage? One minor but sound argument for such an approach is the sheer prominence of this particular theme elsewhere in the *Aeneid,* often with some form of *pietas* on display. Francis Cairns and others have made effective arguments in support of this motif as one of the major ways of interpreting the *Aeneid*. Thus, in light of this supportive scholarship, it seems reasonable that this interpretational paradigm can play a useful role in understanding Vergil's intentions. If that interpretational motif holds true elsewhere in the poem, I would argue that it is hardly unreasonable to attempt its application at the end of Book 3.

The ideal kingship paradigm fits this particular passage itself because of the *clementia* and *pietas* on display. The presence of *clementia* in the passage alone strongly supports the ideal kingship approach. A proper degree of c*lementia* stands as one of the qualities of a good king. We see this concept featured prominently in this encounter with Achaemenides, a Greek castaway. His parallel to Sinon—the deceitful Greek agent of Book 2—represents one of the more striking aspects of the story. An Achaean enemy, Sinon, comes before the Trojans begging mercy but expecting death, refusing to deny his Greek nationality, drawing pity for himself from

Trojans, receiving assurance from Priam, swearing an oath by the heavenly bodies, giving an account of himself in which Ulixes plays the antagonist, and finally being received by the Trojans as one of their own. In Book 3, we see striking similarities in the encounter with Achaemenides. He comes before the Trojans begging mercy but expecting death, he causes the Trojans to pity him, affirms that he is Greek (and an Ithakan, no less), he receives assurance from Anchises, he swears by the stars, he explains how Ulixes deserted him, and Trojans rescue him from the island of the Cyclopes. Vergil's audience, however, will immediately recall the most important aspect of Sinon's own encounter with the Trojans: Sinon proved to be a liar whose deceit finally destroyed Troy. Yet Achaemenides tells the truth about his identity where it can only be expected to hurt him: He is a Greek who was able to sack Troy by the treachery of another Greek, who similarly came to the Trojans seeking mercy. Doubtless, we the audience are to remember that Achaemenides knows this, and that he knows that the Trojans also remember the events of Sinon's treachery. We would expect that Aeneas, if he does not kill Achaemenides first out of vengeance, will certainly not rescue him from the island for one simple reason. Namely, he has learned from experience that one cannot trust Greeks.

Aeneas himself says as he recounts the Sinon episode to Dido: *Accipe nunc Danaum insidias et crimine ab uno disce omnis* (Hear now the plots of the Danaans and by one crime learn them all). Furthermore, he refers to Sinon's skill at deception as the *artisque Pelasgae*: a characteristic, in other words, of the Greek nationality. The Aeneas of Book 2 is given over to sweeping generalizations of the Achaeans as a collective people group. He especially despises Ulixes and his men, saying at the opening of Book 2 regarding the story of Troy's fall: "Who among the Myrmidons or Dolopians or a soldier of harsh Ulixes could refrain from tears when speaking such things?" Here, Aeneas marks Ulixes' Ithakan soldiers with an accentuated vitriol:

Even people as bad as Ulixes' men would weep at the story of Troy's destruction. Yet, before him in Book 3 stands one of Ulixes' own ruffians. If anyone ought not receive mercy by virtue of association with a particular group, it is Achaemenides.

Indeed, Book 2 has given Vergil's audience the distinct impression that Aeneas has learned, so to speak, a permanent lesson in prudence: One cannot and should not trust Greeks. Still, Aeneas and Anchises display a remarkable clemency toward their former enemy. The mere fact that Aeneas does not overrule his father—neither slaying Achaemenides nor leaving him to die on the island—dually suggests *pietas* on the part of Aeneas toward his father and also a kingly display of appropriate mercy: *clementia*.

It is also important to recognize that the circumstances under which Achaemenides receives mercy differ greatly from Sinon. There we find the key distinction between the two, which qualifies Aeneas' *clementia*. At the very least, the Trojans of Book 2 probably should have viewed Sinon and his account of the wooden horse with more cautious suspicion. As a pathetic castaway, Achaemenides poses no practical or even possible threat to the Trojans. In short, believing and saving Achaemenides seems far less risky than doing the same for Sinon. Vergil's phrasing in line 594 also gives us an interesting insight into the passage: *at cetera Graius*. This small phrase indicates that Achaemenides' unkept state is contrary to the nature of a Greek. In other words, part of Achaemenides' essential "Greekness," the cosmetic order which helps make them stereotypically such good liars, has broken down and been stripped away. This makes him a declawed Greek, as it were. In other words, the dangerous and deceptive part of his ethnic personality is gone. Thus, we perceive that *clementia* plays a major, unmistakable, and pointed role in this passage but that it also occurs under particular circumstances. Indeed, this

may serve as Vergil's primary motivation for the passage: to display a kind of turning point for Aeneas' character because circumstances now allow and demand it.

Apart from the display of kingly mercy by Aeneas, the passage also seems to underscore Aeneas' *pietas*. In fact, we may even construe his *clementia* as motivated by *pietas*. That is to say, Aeneas' dominant characteristic, *pietas*, partly explains the presence of the other kingly virtue. This display of *pietas* is two-fold.

First, there is Aeneas' private-oriented *pietas* directed toward his father. Anchises, not Aeneas, is the first one to display *clementia* toward Achaemenides. Based upon what Aeneas has already said regarding the Greeks, it is reasonable to suppose that Vergil intends for his audience to understand a conflict within Aeneas. In all likelihood, Achaemenides took part in the heart-wrenching sack of Troy that haunts Aeneas. Yet Aeneas, the *de facto* leader of the Trojan refugees, does not slay Achaemenides on the spot in vengeance, or take the simpler (and perhaps crueler) alternative of leaving the Ithakan to die among the Cyclopes. Again, the one kingly virtue of *clementia* appears somewhat motivated by the other kingly virtue of *pietas* toward his father. Despite his overall feeling of distrust and animosity toward the Greeks, Aeneas does not overrule the decision of his father to reassure the terrified Achaemenides.

There remains, however, a second way of examining the *pietas* that involves the overarching story and theme of the *Aeneid*. This instance of *clementia* may also represent the beginning of a long-term change in Aeneas' attitude toward the Greeks, animated by his sense of *pietas* toward his nation. Susan Wiltshire argues effectively that Aeneas transitions from a particularly familial-oriented *pietas* to a public-orientated *pietas*. *Pietas,* we must remember, relates to both the private and public dimensions of life. Aeneas' own *pietas* takes on an increasingly public-oriented dimension as the poem continues. Scholars besides Wiltshire often

note this political maturation in Aeneas' portrayal. In order to ensure the success of Rome's eventual founding, Aeneas must overcome his personal animosity toward Greeks. His eventual alliance with the Arcadians against the Latins provides the best example of this. Aeneas has little choice but to seek out the aid of local Greeks in order to help him preserve his people and eventually defeat Turnus.

One would, however, be hard pressed to imagine Aeneas making such a choice in Book 2, which recounts the story of Troy's fall. His choice to save Achaemenides marks a change in the Trojan's relationship to Greeks. With Troy having been definitively destroyed, the old rivalry with the Achaeans loses its importance to the politically maturing leader. This makes sense if we remember Augustus' typological connections to Aeneas. Augustus himself would have to overcome old rivalries with Greeks, fellow Romans, and others in order to create a stable empire and fulfill the ultimate destiny of Rome. Likewise, Aeneas must lay down old hostilities for the greater good of the Roman mission: a pious devotion to his nation and his people. Thus, we may find more than support for presence of kingly *pietas*, but we also have a way of integrating it as a motivating principle for the more obvious exhibition of *clementia*.

This literary illustration of these kingly virtues seems to point to the bigger picture of Augustus and his own political character. I believe Vergil is associating two qualities with the *princeps*: *clementia* and its motivator, *pietas*. It seems likely that this is the primary meaning—the literary point—for Vergil's inclusion of this small side-story in Book 3. Vergil intends to establish the mythological precedent for a prudent mercy based upon one's devotion to the nation, even at the expense of putting one's old hatreds and prejudices aside. Aeneas chooses to do exactly that in the story. He could not fulfill his role as ruler of the Trojan nation without letting go his old grudge with the Greeks, much like his real-world counterpart, Augustus.

Undoubtedly, Augustus still had his share of grudges and enemies by the time his power became firmly established in the post-Actium world. If this passage from the *Aeneid* poses any indication, however, the ruler with *pietas* toward his nation cannot feed his old vendettas, but must exercise a temperate degree of *clementia* for the good of the state instead. Augustus clearly cared about displaying this as one of his own virtues, often in ways that parallel Aeneas in Book 3. For instance, the *Res Gestae* boasts of his policy of mercy toward the defeated, specifically noting how he cautiously spared those foreign nations he deemed "safe" (like Achaemenides) to receive clemency. Likewise, just as Aeneas follows Anchises' lead in showing mercy, so too did Augustus' practice of *clementia* follow the precedent of his adopted father, Julius Caesar. Thus, Vergil seems to construct his story in such a way that it matches the historical Augustus, thereby connecting Augustus to the political virtues of an ideal ruler.

Though in a mythological context, Vergil intends to establish that the ancestors of Augustus, particularly Aeneas, displayed key aspects of ideal kingship, thereby associating Augustus with these same characteristics. In sum, using the ideal kingship motif in this passage fits well with what we know about Augustus, his background, and his agenda. As a whole, this interpretation coheres with the themes of the entire poem, makes sense of this particular passage, and typologically aligns with the *princeps* himself.