The Self vs. The Collective:
Moral Projects behind the Heroes of the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad*

Homer’s Achilles and Vergil’s Aeneas, the epic heroes of Greece and Rome respectively, differ greatly in their heroic drives. While Achilles’ acts are propelled by private passions, Aeneas is governed by a sense of duty to the collective. Achilles’ violent individualism alienates him from society and even human identity, while self-sacrificing Aeneas stands at the centre of society, to herald in a new social order. Hence, the opposing personal conflicts and war-making motives of these characters mark great contrast between the Homeric and Vergilian heroic paradigms. Through depictions of Dido, Turnus, and the great Latin war, Vergil stresses the unity between Aeneas and Roman civilization, to announce and celebrate the superiority of each. Conversely, through Achilles’ obsession with personal fame and retribution, Homer underscores with more complexity the conflict between the self and the collective. Through their relationships with society, both heroes shape the moralist and pacifist commentaries of their narratives. However, while Vergil’s Aeneas overcomes passions of the self for the sake of the collective, and thereby propagates a heroic and social ideal; Homer maintains tension between the self and civilization, to generate a more critical, less celebratory view of the hero, and the social structure in which he functions.

The personal conflicts between Aeneas and Dido, and Achilles and Agamemnon each present a critique of individual passion, which is resolved in the *Aeneid*, but left to fester in the *Iliad*. The overwrought conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon shows the hero’s selfish disregard for the Greek collective. By contrast, the relationship between Aeneas and Dido impels Aeneas to forgo his passion and to piously embrace his project of civilization. Dido’s fall, from her position as Aeneas’ promising equal, to his passion-struck inferior, enables Vergil to present selfish desire as incompatible with stable civilization. There is, meanwhile, no clear moral superior in the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon. Instead, readers are prompted to criticize each man’s claims of personal entitlement, and consequently, to question claims of entitlement and authority in the greater conflicts of the *Iliad*.

Essential to the Vergilian heroic paradigm is Aeneas’ acceptance of his responsibility to reestablish the social order. Our hero finds his mirror in Queen Dido, who is likewise engaged in a civilizing mission: we find her erecting the towers of Carthage. Vergil’s initial portrait of Dido is aglow with hopeful potential; Aeneas “star(es) amazed as Carthaginian promise,” and is reminded of his own great purpose (Fitzgerald 20). Having mastered

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1 Vergil, *Aeneid*. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990). In-text citations for this and other ancient sources are to the page numbers of the specific translations, rather than to the original line.
past passions and become wizened by her wanderings, Dido is immediately embraced as Aeneas’ ally, and heroic equal. However, Dido’s noble aims are perverted when she falls prey to passion. Dido’s weakness in love makes her both a cautionary exemplar for Aeneas, and a catalyst in his heroic development. Vergil conveys the dangerous power of love by making it an instrument of immortal agency. The goddess Venus uses love to subordinate Dido to Aeneas, against the woman’s conscious will. Thus, Dido becomes enslaved, and inflamed by a passion over which she has no control. The imagery of fire that encircles the Queen at numerous instances suggests the destructive nature of unbridled emotion, with its power to smolder higher ambitions. Through Dido’s suicide on a flaming pyre, Vergil cautions that a hero must extinguish selfish passions, or else become consumed by them.

Aeneas emerges as the clear superior in his relationship with Dido. This is largely because the love to which our hero succumbs is presented as the Queen’s, not his, tormenting pathogen. When describing intimate moments between the lovers, such as their union in a cave, Vergil focalizes narrative perspective on Dido: “she thought no longer of a secret love, but called it marriage” (101). This focus of character creates a buffer between Aeneas and the experience of passion, allowing Vergil to downplay his hero’s culpability in this transgression of heroic duty. Moments that are dramatically romanticized through Dido’s perspective may be alternatively related as mere sexual encounters through Aeneas’ perspective. Further, while medieval artists like Andrea Mantenga focus on the immorality of Aeneas’ abandonment of Dido, Vergil’s use of structural opposition on the level of plot affirms Aeneas as morally superior to his lover. As Aeneas embraces his civic duty, Vergil depicts Dido as deserting her people. Dido’s deteriorating heroic self-command causes the dilapidation of her city, Carthage. While Dido describes herself metaphorically as a “declining house,” with its walls falling down (107), her failing city literally exhibits this pathetic condition, “towers (of Carthage), half-built, rose no farther” (98). In effect, Aeneas’ departure from Dido and Carthage marks the hero’s escape from civil catastrophe and his admirable recommitment to social order. Moreover, by framing Aeneas’ decision as a struggle between base physical desire, and higher spiritual destiny, “...the course heaven gave him” (110), Vergil expresses Aeneas’ departure from Carthage as an ascent to higher (Roman) civilization.

While Aeneas functions to establish and legitimize new structures of order and hierarchy, the hero of the Iliad, Achilles, poses an ideological threat to preexisting structures numbers.


3 The conflict between Dido and Aeneas is an historical allegory for the age-old enmities between the Romans and Carthaginians. Through the heroic parallelism, and contrast between Dido and Aeneas, Vergil positions Rome as the superior city.
of authority. The threat emerges out of Achilles’ uncompromising individualism at the expense of the collective. Achilles’ conflict with Agamemnon arises out of each man’s notions of entitlement. Through this conflict, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, behaves in accordance with the accepted social hierarchy. As Agamemnon has returned his war bride out of duty to the god Apollo, he in turn is in a position to take Achilles’ woman, as the hero’s political superior. In response, Achilles refuses to fight for Agamemnon, for the king has assaulted his personal dignity. The dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon exposes an unsettling disunity within the Greek collective, a conflict that is mirrored on Mount Olympus. Here, Hera’s defiance against Zeus, Father of Gods, parallels Achilles’ defiance against the king. Although unlike Achilles, Hera is violently silenced by her superior (96-97), she still manages to undermine Zeus’ will through sexual deception. Because tensions between rulers and their subjects, both in the heavens and on earth, remain alive and unresolved for much of the narrative, the *Iliad*, unlike the *Aeneid*, can offer its readers no obvious moral victor and corresponding code of ethics. In the *Iliad*, morality and heroic destiny are not as aligned as they are in the *Aeneid*. While we foresee that the Greeks will defeat the Trojans, and that Achilles will achieve great fame, readers cannot so readily pick sides in the battle, or in the disputes between Achilles and Agamemnon, Zeus and Hera. For instance, we may criticize Agamemnon’s hubris and his exploitations of monarchical power; however, self-serving Achilles, who refuses to assume his role as warrior even as hundreds of his comrades die, becomes equally deserving of moral condemnation. Thus, while the Roman poet Vergil is prescriptive in assigning moral superiors—always Aeneas and Rome—and inferiors—always his non-Trojan opponents—Homer’s heroic paradigm sets the hero apart from, and against, his society to prompt greater criticism of both tyrannical authority and subversive individualism.

Next comes war. A comparison of Aeneas and Achilles’ divergent motives and behaviors in battle reveals how Vergil and Homer craft opposing heroic models to express uniquely different pacifist attitudes. Whereas Aeneas battles dutifully, striving for peaceful social assimilation, Achilles fights with a personal wrath which threatens to efface human civilization, thereby exposing the dark underbelly of war. Aeneas enters war with the motive to quell native insurgency in Latinum and there found the new peaceful nation of Troy. Even before this hero begins battle, Vergil foreshadows Trojan victory through an image of his shield, “there the Lord of Fire...had wrought the future story of Italy, the triumphs of the Romans...” (378). These *ekphrastic* flashes of conquest dramatize the great objectives of Vergil’s hero, as well as that of Vergil himself: Aeneas fights, and Vergil writes, for the glory of Rome and its peaceful conquest over inferior peoples. Vergil expresses the *Aeneid*’s pacifist stance through Aeneas’ anti-war attitude. Although Aeneas

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sees justification for war, he does not relish in it, and favours negotiation over bloody combat. Books VII-XII of the *Aeneid* present Aeneas as a rational diplomat in contrast to his barbaric adversary, Turnus. In fact, Aeneas’s opposition, the Rutulians, turn to support Vergil’s hero when he shows stronger concern for peace than their commander, Turnus, who fights only out of personal vengeance. Through the dramatic realignment of Rutulian loyalties, Vergil celebrates the humanitarian heroism of Aeneas and Rome, while signaling the inevitable triumph of peaceful civilization over savage individualism.

Unlike Aeneas, Achilles’ attitude towards war is not shaped by hopes for a future society, but rather by personal retribution for past crimes. First, Achilles removes himself from war in rage against Agamemnon for taking his female captive Briseus; later, he embraces war, in rage against Hector for the slaying of Patroclus. The passionate love between Achilles and Patroclus by no means finds its parallel between Aeneas and Lavinia, the girl whose hand Vergil’s hero wins. Achilles’ wish that his ashes rest together with those of Patroclus, shows his love to be deliberately isolated and severed from the Greek army, and the nation for which he fights. By contrast, Aeneas is not drawn to Lavinia, daughter of the native King Latinus, out of affection; this woman functions solely to symbolize the land that the hero will acquire for his people. The contrast between Achilles and Aeneas’ romantic partnerships indicates that unlike those of Achilles, Aeneas’ war motives are not founded on personal loss or vanity. Instead, Vergil’s hero both figuratively and literally leaves behind the loves of his past, Creusa and Dido, to fulfill the greater epic and collective purpose of the *Aeneid*.

Aeneas’ struggle against passion for the good of the collective comes under critical investigation with regards to his similarities with Achilles. Critic W.S. Anderson argues that although the character of Turnus, Aeneas’ war opponent, is modeled on Achilles, Vergil establishes *Aeneas* as the true heir to Achilles’ model of heroism as the epic progresses.\(^5\) Turnus is certainly like Achilles; he is vengeful, passion-inflamed, and personally accountable for the deaths of his allies. Thomas Van Nortwick correlates that “Turnus’ fervid intensity is fed by a preoccupation with personal honour and fame akin to that of the Homeric hero.”\(^6\) Corresponding with Anderson’s thesis, readers may find that through the confrontation between Aeneas and Turnus, Aeneas himself becomes irrationally Achillean, “Aeneas raged at the relic of his anguish...he sank his blade in fury in Turnus’ flesh” (402). However, Anderson’s notion of Aeneas as “heir” to Achilles is problematic to the ideology of the *Aeneid*, which privileges piety and restraint over gratuitous violence. If we

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are to compare Aeneas and Achilles, it must therefore be argued that through his moment of fury, Aeneas eclipses the heroic qualities of both Turnus and Achilles. Unlike his heroic counterparts, Aeneas manages to channel his emotional intensity to confront, and eradicate a dangerous threat to the social order. Ironically, Aeneas assumes Achilles’ violent heroism in order to destroy it.

While Vergil presents a promising ideal of peace through his rational and humanitarian hero Aeneas, Achilles’ fury in war seems to herald the destruction of peace between civilized men. The wrath of Achilles is truly apocalyptic. In battle, Homer’s hero undergoes a paradoxical process of dehumanization, whereby he both ascends to godliness and descends into animalism. Excesses in the *Iliad*’s narrative form forcibly express this transformation. Homer piles simile on dramatic simile, as Achilles piles the corpses of his victims: “like inhuman fire…like a frenzied god…like oxen broad in the brow…to crush white barley heaped” (519). The multiple, and rapidly-transforming portrayals of Achilles, expressed through breathless hyperbole, show this hero bursting out of the confines of his narrative, as he likewise transcends the constraints of humanity. The threat that one man can pose to society materializes in the image of Achilles clearing the battlefield: “The Trojans fled en masse… streaming into Troy, no daring left…to wait for each other, any fighter whose racing legs could save his life” (540). While Aeneas’ diplomacy unites enemies on the battlefield, the Trojan retreat from Achilles symbolizes the failure of collective action against selfish barbarity. Achilles’ confrontation with Hector heightens the tragic element of such a threat. Readers sympathize with Hector for his selfless devotion to his family and his city. Conversely, Achilles fights for no living man: he symbolizes destruction, without hope of rebirth, and in this sense becomes a predecessor to the modern anti-hero. Homer’s hero refuses to maintain the civility for which Hector pleads when he cries, “don’t talk to me of pacts, there are no binding oaths between men and lions….“ (550). In accordance with Achilles’ hateful wishes, the men devolve into beasts through their combat. Homer describes Hector dashing away like a fawn from a hound (547), and next frantically swooping on Achilles like an eagle (551). Ultimately, through the dehumanizing wrath of Achilles, Homer achieves a pacifist stance. The *Iliad* does not justify war as a civilizing force in the manner of the *Aeneid*. Instead, this epic presents war and civilization as tragically incompatible states.

Achilles’ selfish heroism is the microcosmic core of the greater moral critique of the *Iliad*, which exposes the futility of war. When examining the forces propelling the Trojan War, one finds that just as Achilles fights for himself, the Greeks fight in the name of one man’s fury and the Trojans fight to defend one man’s promiscuity. The petty conflict between Menelaus and Paris over Helen, which parallels the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon, is that which has sparked ten grueling years of war. The mass destruction resulting from such personal riffs indicates that war is the terrible product and province of a few men’s selfish passions. Whereas through the heroic example of Aeneas, Vergil
expresses that war may be a means of establishing just and stable social ends, the *Iliad* projects a darker, modern perspective of war by spotlighting its egocentric origins and alienating effects.

The heroic models of Aeneas and Achilles are critical to the development of the moralist and pacifist commentaries of their respective narratives. Through the *Aeneid* and *Iliad*, Vergil and Homer each grapple with the relationship between the individual and the collective. However, while Aeneas’ alignment with Roman civilization-molds him into the moral heroic ideal, Achilles, through his furious self-possession, exposes the unresolved tension between individual desire and social responsibility. Ultimately, as the *Aeneid* directs its readers towards a supposedly superior model of civilization, the *Iliad* invites us to reevaluate the moral foundations of existing social structures—that is, before they crumble to the ground.

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