THE DEATH OF TURNUS VIEWED IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

by S. Farron
(University of the Witwatersrand)

It is the purpose of this article to demonstrate how vicious and brutal the end of the *Aeneid* is from the viewpoint of the sensitivities of Vergil's contemporaries and official Augustan propaganda.

Vergil contrived to make Aeneas' killing of Turnus as harsh as possible. After Turnus is wounded, Vergil emphasises how humbly he begs Aeneas: "lowly and as a suppliant (humilis supplexque), lifting his eyes, and stretching out a pleading hand" (930-931). Turnus takes all the blame on himself: "I have deserved this" (931). He then states that he does not ask that his life be spared, only that Aeneas give his corpse to his father (932-936). Paternal love is an important emotion in the *Aeneid* and among the ancient Romans in general. Turnus' mention of his father reminds the reader and Aeneas of the pain that his death will cause him. It means that Aeneas kills him despite that knowledge. Even more effective is the last part of his plea: "You have won and the Italians have seen me stretch out my hands in defeat; Lavinia is your wife; do not go further in your hate" (936-938). He is still asking that his corpse be returned to his father. Vergil has made Turnus too noble to beg for his life. Yet his words clearly and incontrovertibly point out that there is no reason for killing him. That is the effect that his plea has on Aeneas, who "held back his right hand and more and more the speech began to sway him in his hesitation" (933-941). But then Aeneas sees Pallas' belt and kills him.

Vergil has completely departed from his Homeric model, *Iliad* XXII, by having Aeneas hesitate before he avenges his dead comrade. The question is why he did it. Servius comments on XII, 940 that Aeneas' hesitation adds to his glory since he is shown to be *pius* both by considering sparing Turnus and by slaying him. But actually the opposite is true. By showing that Aeneas nearly spared him, Vergil confirms Turnus' words that there was no reason for him to be killed. Viewed in the light of policy, his death was gratuitous. Furthermore, although Aeneas' apologists, such as Servius, defend his killing Turnus by explaining it as *pietas*, Vergil does not do so. In fact Aeneas is not described as *pius* anywhere in the last 640 lines of Book XII. Instead, Vergil describes him as being motivated by *furia* (fury) and *ira* (anger) and as being "aflame": "aflame with fury and terrible in anger" (*furiis accensus et ira terribilis*: 946-947). The last adjective that is used to describe Aeneas in the *Aeneid* is "burning" (*fervidus*), which is made emphatic by its position at the beginning of the line (951). This adjective was used in XII, 293 of Messapus, when he broke the truce. The last three times it occurs (748, 894, 951), it describes Aeneas.

That Aeneas' last act is indulging in wild, wrathful revenge by killing an
unarmed, wounded man, who in the course of his pleading shows that there is no political necessity for his death, is especially significant in relation to Augustus' career. Augustus claimed that he fought the civil wars mainly to defend the liberty of the Republic, and that he handled his father's murderers not by killing them himself but by driving them into exile and then punishing them by legal trials. Furthermore, he boasted that after he was victorious in war he spared anyone who asked for pardon. On the shield presented to him in 27 BC, which was an important element of his propaganda, one of the inscribed virtues was *clementia*. Similarly Propertius stated: "This is Caesar's *virtus*, this is his *gloria*, that with the hand with which he conquered he put away his arms" (II, 16, 41–42). Also Velleius Paterculus argued that the killings attributed to Octavian were forced on him by his fellow triumvirs or his soldiers (II, 66, 74) and that after his victories he was completely merciful, even to his fanatical enemy, L. Antony (II, 74).

On the other hand, Seneca states in *De Clementia* I, 11, 1 that although Augustus was gentle and forgiving in his mature years, nevertheless, "in his youth he was hot-tempered (caluit) and burned with anger (arsit ira) [just like Aeneas], and did many things which later he did not want to recall." Tacitus in *Annals* I, 9 records a defence of Octavian which is similar to the argument that Aeneas' anger was justified by *pietas* to Pallas: "He was driven to civil war... by *pietas* to his father and the needs of the Republic." But this is answered in the next chapter: "The deaths of Brutus and Cassius were offered to inherited private hostility (*inimicitia*), although it would have been right (*fas*) to abandon private hates for public utility."

Furthermore, Augustus' propaganda emphasising his *clementia* to defeated enemies is an illustration of how highly this virtue was regarded by the ancient Romans. Vergil himself made it the distinguishing Roman virtue (VI, 851–853), a view that was repeated by nearly every major Augustan author. Indeed, Horace in his most purely propagandistic poem, the *Carmen Saeculare*, prays that Augustus may 'be gentle (*lenis*) against the fallen enemy (50–52). As the Romans knew, the greatest obstacle to *clementia* is violent emotions, especially anger and the desire for revenge. This is evident from the statements about Octavian recorded above and from judgements about other people. For instance, Cicero contrasted Julius Caesar's *clementia* with Pompey's anger (*iracundia*); and Plutarch contrasted Cinna's and Marius' cruelty with Sertorius, who "never killed anyone to satisfy his anger (*δόργη*)". In fact, Seneca defined *clementia* as "temperance of mind in the power of punishing". Throughout his *De Clementia* the greatest obstacles to clemency are *furor*, *ira*, and the memory of injuries and injustices (e.g. I, 5,5). Cicero said that through *clementia* "the emotions that are aroused to hate someone are restrained by generosity", and he advised Julius Caesar that much more important than his victories is "to conquer the mind, to restrain anger (*iracundiam cohibere*), to moderate the victory... not only to lift up the fallen enemy, but even to increase his..."
previous status... When we hear or read of something done with clemency, gentleness... especially in anger, which is hostile to deliberation, and in victory... not only in fact but even in fiction, how zealously we are inflamed so that we often love those whom we never saw." 13

This is exactly what Aeneas does not do, either at the end of Book XII or when he is avenging Pallas in Book X.

Also significant for the Aeneid is that an important aspect of clementia among the ancient Greeks and Romans was generosity to a defeated leader. There were many exceptions to this in practice. But it was the ideal and therefore should have been reflected in the Aeneid. An example is Herodotus's story of how Cyrus spared Croesus and made him his advisor (I, 86-90). Familiarity with this story among Vergil's readers is guaranteed by Cicero's description of Herodotus as the "father of history." 14 This is done in a casual manner which indicates that it was a standard designation. In fact, in another passage Cicero mentions specifically this encounter between Croesus and Cyrus. 15 Another example is Euripides' Heracleidae. Eurystheus brutally hounds Heracles' defenceless family. When Eurystheus is brought in as a captive after his defeat in battle, he refuses to beg for mercy and coolly defends his cruelty (983–1008). But he asserts that "by the law of the Greeks" it is unholy to kill a captive (1010–1011) and that Athens is sensible and so will have a higher regard for god (δ θεός) than for its hatred of him (1012–1013). Furthermore, when Alcmena, Heracles' widow, does insist on having him killed, he promises that his body will guard Athens against her descendants (1026–1035). There is no doubt that Alcmena is wrong to kill Eurystheus despite her considerable reasons for hating him and his own brutality. 16

As for Roman history, Valerius Maximus, among examples of humanitas and clementia, describes Aemilius Paullus' very gracious treatment of Rome's arch-enemy Perseus, concluding, "it is laudable to know how to pity the unfortunate" (V, 1,8). In fact, even after Perseus had been brought to Rome, Aemilius Paullus was solicitous for his comfort. 17 Valerius Maximus' next example is Pompey's generosity towards Tigranes, culminating in his restoring him to the kingship of Armenia (V, 1,9). Even if Pompey had practical reasons for this policy, the significant fact is that it is praised as an admirable example of clementia. That this type of conduct was normal for Pompey in his Eastern campaign is clear from Diodorus Siculus' account of him telling the Jews who followed Hyrcanus that although they do not deserve it, he will pardon them on account of "the ancestral clemency (ἐμπείκτεια) of the Roman people" (XL, 2). Conversely, Plutarch in his biography of Pompey tries to exonerate him from the aspersions against him because he killed Perperna, with the defence that it was required by unusual necessities of security (20,3–4), even though Perperna was hardly a sympathetic person. He had just treacherously murdered his commander, Sertorius. And Plutarch states that because Pompey had Brutus killed, "he incurred much blame" (16, 4–5). Cicero in his Philippics (V, 39) says about Lepidus that the "most glorious memorial of his clementia" was that he
"restored Sextus Pompey to the state."

As for Julius Caesar, *clementia* was one of the qualities for which he was most famous. This included his generosity to the leading Pompeians no matter how seriously, or even criminally, they had wronged him. He even tried to come to terms with Pompey himself. Furthermore, all our sources state that Caesar at least pretended to be very upset at Pompey's murder and that he put his murderers to death. According to Cassius Dio, when he saw Pompey's head, he "wept and lamented, calling him countryman and son-in-law" and "enumerated all the help they had given to each other." Dio, who had a generally cynical attitude toward Caesar, states that he was really glad that Pompey was dead but "pretended to miss him (ποθεῖο)” (XLII, 8). However, especially if this was only hypocrisy on Caesar's part, it shows that he thought it would further his reputation to adopt this pose. Also, Propertius, in one of his most propagandistic poems, mentions as a possibility Pompey's surrendering alive to Caesar (III, 11,38).

It might be argued that Caesar's *clementia* caused his death and this taught Octavian to follow a different course. However, Octavian tried hard from the very beginning of his career to acquire a reputation for pardoning enemies. More important, as I have shown above, by the time Vergil was writing the *Aeneid*, Augustus was carefully cultivating an image of *clementia*. The fact that his early career violated that principle was all the more reason for a propagandist not to mention anything that might remind his readers of the reality that belied the propaganda. Of course, after Octavian had secured power he did show generosity to defeated enemies. Lepidus was Pontifex Maximus until his death in 12 BC. Indeed, Seneca stated, with exaggeration, that most of his subordinates were former enemies. Most relevant is that Augustus' generosity toward Messalla Corvinus was regarded as creating for him and his son an obligation of *pietas* toward Augustus. So the pardoning of Turnus would have been the ideal end of the *Aeneid*, if it was meant as pro-Augustan or pro-Roman propaganda.

Even if a defence could be found for Aeneas killing Turnus, it could not be more than an unfortunate necessity. But Vergil gives it special prominence by ending his epic with it. Moreover, its place at the end implies that it was the type of activity which was most characteristically Roman. Yet Vergil's contemporaries did not regard military pre-eminence as the ultimate Roman virtue. Cicero and Sallust asserted that other peoples were superior to the Romans militarily, but that Rome owed its greatness to other factors. Livy, in his first book, written while Vergil was working on the *Aeneid*, states that through warfare men's minds are made savage (*effarari*) and unfit for civilised life (19,2).

Furthermore, the great achievement of Augustus which was constantly celebrated was that he brought peace. After 27 BC the military praenomen *Imperator* (commander) was never once applied to Augustus by either poets or prose writers. It was also generally avoided on coins, as was the other military title, *Dux* (leader), which, when used, tended to be demilitarised. In fact,
Suessionius states explicitly that Augustus had no interest in military glory, and Cassius Dio corroborates this (LVI, 33,6). In his Res Gestae Augustus boasted that the closing of the gates of Janus, symbolising universal peace, occurred three times during his reign (13). This was celebrated in the Aeneid as his greatest achievement (I, 293–296). The great sculptural monument that he had built in order to commemorate his achievements was the Altar of the Peace of Augustus. According to Horace, Augustus’ ending of the fury (furor) and anger (ira) of war was much more praiseworthy than any military achievements. Similarly Ovid in the Fasti, which contains more fulsome Augustan propaganda than any other extant work written during his reign, constantly dwells on Augustus as the bringer of peace: for instance, “Come, Peace, wreathed with the leaves of Actium ... and remain gently in the whole world ... you will be a glory to our leaders greater than war” (I, 711–714). Also, Velleius Paterculus considered Augustus’ great achievement that “civil and foreign wars were ended, peace recalled, everywhere the fury (furor) of arms was put to rest”, the constitution restored, and prosperity, religion and security returned (II, 89,3–4). Tacitus says that Augustus’ main claim to rule was that he established peace.

Disgust with war is especially evident in Vergil’s works. Examples in the Eclogues are “impious soldier” (1,70), “the insane love of harsh war” (10,44), and the fact that in Eclogue 4 the first aspect of the return of the rule of Saturn, thanks to the miraculous child, will be that “the traces of our crime will be effaced and free the world from perpetual fear” (13–14). In the Georgics the horror of the civil wars after Caesar’s assassination is powerfully expressed in I, 469–497, followed by the statement in the last seventeen lines of the poem that all wars are evil and unnatural. Especially noteworthy is the fact that even the battle of Philippi is not viewed as a glorious victory for Octavian but another instance of the terrors of civil war (489–492). In Georgics II, 538–540 the distinguishing feature of the Golden Age of Saturn was that there was no war. Similarly, one of the main aspects of the farmer’s life that makes it ideal is the absence of the vicious brutality of war (II, 459, 495).

Most significant is that in the Aeneid also the ultimate achievement of Augustus is generally the bringing of peace. In the tremendous propaganda speech put into Jupiter’s mouth in Book I, the great achievement of Augustus is establishing peace (291–296). The description of War in this passage is full of loathing: “Impious Fury sitting on savage arms ... will roar horribly with his bloody mouth” (294–296). It was based on a painting “in the most visited part of his [i.e. Augustus’] forum.” This is another example of the general disgust with war at this time. The next great praise of Augustus, in Book VI, begins (792–794) with the prediction that he will re-establish the Golden Age of Saturn in Latium. When Vergil described the Golden Age of Saturn in Eclogue 4, 13–14 and Georgics II, 538–540, its distinctive characteristic was that it was completely peaceful. In Aeneid IX, 642–643 Apollo predicts that under Iulus’ descendants all wars will cease.

Vergil’s aversion for war is attested by many passages in the Aeneid. When
Anchises views the spirits of Caesar and Pompey in VI, 826–835, he does not mention any of their great achievements, but dwells with repulsion on the horrors of the civil war they will cause. Then, in Book VII, the instigator of the war in Italy is Allecto, who is described in 324–328 as “grief-bringing... to whom sad war, anger (ira), ambush and harmful crimes are dear. Even her own father Pluto hates her, as do her own sisters in Hades.” The description that follows of how she arouses characters to warfare brings out very graphically the wild, blind insanity that motivates people to want war. An example is VII, 460–462: “Mad (amenus) [Turnus] roars for arms... love for the sword and the criminal insanity (sceletara insania) of war rages (saevit), and above all anger.”

In his narration of actual battle scenes, Vergil constantly reminds the reader of the loss and suffering involved. For instance, seven times in the last six books he focuses attention on the misery and terror of the mothers of the combatants.34 Even in the description of the battle of Actium in Book VIII, which is by far the most highly developed praise of military activity in Vergil’s works, there is the following passage: “In the battle’s midst rages (saevit) Mars... and from the sky the grim Furies, and Civil War (Discordia)... after whom follows War with a bloody whip” (700–703). So it is understandable that Aeneas describes returning to war as, “the horrible fates of war call us to other tears” (XI, 96–97).

Among the names used for war in the Aeneid, some as many as ten times, are crimen, diluvium, discordia, furor, incendium, insania, insidiae, ira, letum, minae, periculum, pestis, procella, rabies, strages and tempestas. Among the adjectives are asper, caecus, cruentus, crudelis, demens, dirus, durus, horridus, impius, importunus, infandus, insanus, lacrimabilis, mortiferus, nefandus, noxius, saevus, sanguineus, scelestus, and tristis.

It is only natural that Vergil and his contemporaries should have felt such a strong loathing for war and longing for peace, because to them war meant overwhelmingly civil war. Since the defeat of the Teutones and Cimbri in 102 and 101 BC there had been no external threat to the peace and security of Italy. But since 90 BC Italy had been convulsed by a series of vicious, bloody wars fought among Italians. So it is no wonder that the Augustans were fascinated by the topic of the civil wars and regarded them as immoral, dishonourable and the cause of evil.35 Victory in a civil war did not bring the winner any glory, as symbolised by the fact that he could not celebrate a triumph.36 Vergil praises Augustus’ military achievement in five passages in the Georgics and Aeneid. In the first four instances it is for generally never achieved victories over distant, exotic enemies, which are described briefly and vaguely.37 The fifth is the description of the battle of Actium in Aeneid VIII, 675–713. Here emphasis is put on the Italian nature of Octavian’s side as opposed to the extremely un-Italian nature of his enemies. Of course, this conformed to Octavian’s propaganda that he was defending Italy against Eastern domination.38 Similarly in the other Augustan poets this civil war is treated as a victory of Italy over foreign opponents, and in all other praises of war the remoteness and foreignness of the enemy is emphasised.39 Indeed, the virtue of wars against foreign enemies is their
contrast with civil wars as a legitimate outlet for military activity.

It is, therefore, very striking not only that Aeneas’ ultimate action is the killing of a wounded, unarmed man, who has admitted his mistakes and demonstrated that there is no reason for killing him, but that Vergil constantly emphasises that that man is much more Italian than Aeneas is. For instance, during the single combat at the end of Book XII Aeneas’ spear sticks in a tree and he tries to pull it out. Vergil states that the tree was “sacred to Faunus . . . for a long time revered by sailors . . . but the Trojans making no distinction had removed the sacred stem” (766–770). *Sacrum* is emphatic at the end of line 770. Then Turnus prays to Faunus, reminding him that he always worshipped him, “but in an opposite way Aeneas’ sons have profaned your worship by war” (779). Faunus acknowledges the validity of this plea by holding Aeneas’ spear. So at this climactic point Vergil chose to stress Turnus’ piety and the Trojans’ sacrilege. Even more significant, this piety and sacrilege concern Faunus. Faunus was several times mentioned as Latinus’ divine father. Here in Book XII, and in VII, 82–84, he is associated with the vegetation of Latium. The plural of his name, *Fauni*, are ancient Italian rustic divinities. So in VIII, 314 Evander tells Aeneas that the original inhabitants of the woodlands around Rome *(haec nemora)* were the native *(indigenae)* *Fauni* and nymphs; and in *Georgics* I, 10 Vergil invoked the *Fauni* as “always present gods of the country people”.

Vergil further emphasises Turnus’ extreme Italianness by his family. He assigns an important role to Juturna. She was a divinity with very strong Roman associations. Vergil seems to have been the first to connect her with Turnus. Moreover, he has Juno emphasise Turnus’ Italian nature by mentioning Turnus’ grandfather and mother, both of whom are Italian deities (X, 76). His ancestry is again stressed in XII, 649, when Turnus’ last reason for meeting Aeneas in single combat is that he will prove himself “never unworthy of my great ancestors.” These last two words are emphasised by being in the genitive form “-orum”, a form which Vergil usually avoids.

Furthermore, Turnus is the nephew of Amata. In VII, 366 she calls him “of our common blood” *(consanguineus)* when speaking to Latinus. In XII, 29 Latinus talks to Turnus of “our related blood”. Aeneas’ attack on Laurentium causes Amata’s death. He ends the epic by killing one of her relatives. This makes it very difficult to envisage Aeneas’ future reconciliation with Latinus and marriage to Lavinia. Even more important, it means that Aeneas, after causing the death of the wife of the eponymous progenitor of the Latins and mother of the progenetrix of the Roman people, has as his last deed the killing of their kinsman.

So Aeneas’ last act is the killing of a defenceless Italian after the war is over. This would have reminded his readers of nothing more than the savagery displayed by Octavian during the civil wars, especially the proscription. Appian, with exaggeration that was nearly certainly derived from contemporary sources, described the suffering caused by the proscription as “such as could not be recalled among civil or foreign wars of the Greeks or Romans themselves, with
the sole exception of Sulla." Juvenal also stated that the three triumvirs were "the students of Sulla" (2, 28). But according to Cassius Dio the proscription of 43 BC caused worse suffering than Sulla's (XLVII, 3-5). Among those proscribed was Cicero, whom Octavian had called "father". Not even Velleius Paterculus could deny the horror of what happened, but argued that Octavian opposed it (II, 66-67). However, Suetonius' account is fuller and nearly certainly more reliable:

"[Octavian] opposed his colleagues for some time on whether there should be a proscription. But once it began, he carried it out more bitterly than the other two. They often spared people because of their influence or prayers, [Octavian] alone strove eagerly that no one be spared and even added his own guardian... When the proscription was over, M. Lepidus... in the Senate held out hope for clemency in the future, since enough punishment had been taken. But [Octavian] spoke in the opposite sense: he had put an end to proscribing on the condition that he had a completely free hand in the future" (27, 1-2).

Furthermore, as Syme pointed out: "For Antonius there was some palliation, at least—when consul he had been harried by faction and treason, when proconsul outlawed. For Octavianus there was none". As has been stated, the brutality of the killing of Turnus gains added significance from the fact that it ends the entire epic. This is especially noteworthy since a conciliatory ending was easily available. All Vergil had to do was end with the final conversation between Jupiter and Juno. Its position in the middle of the duel between Aeneas and Turnus imitates the position of the Zeus-Hera conversation in Iliad XXII, but such an interruption of an episode violates Vergil's normal style. Placing it at the end would have produced a neat balance, since the Aeneid begins with the anger of Juno. Much more important, it would have ended the Aeneid on a note of reconciliation and hope. Its existence near the end shows that Aeneas' mission is not completely destructive. However, its impression is overshadowed by the terribly violent end.

NOTES

1. All translations in this article are my own.
2. Cicero, De Re Publica VI, 14–16; Horace, Satires I, 6, 71 ff; Plutarch, Cato Maior 20, 2–8.
6. Appian, BC V, 17 emphasises the harm caused by generals fighting for private causes.
8. Since this passage seems to show a familiarity with the Aeneid (E. Haight, "An Inspired Message in The Augustan Poets", AJP 39, 4 (1918) 354–355), it is possible that Horace is
censuring Aeneas' conduct in the *Aeneid*. Augustus is described in terms appropriate to Aeneas ("blood of Anchises and Venus"); cf. *Odes* IV, 15, 3–32).


12. *De Inventione* II, 164.


16. Many scholars (e.g. Günther Zuntz, *The Political Plays of Euripides*, Manchester 1955, 41) have argued that by ending the play with the chorus not preventing the murder of Eurytheus, Euripides was attacking Athens. If this is true, then how much more condemnatory is the end of the *Aeneid*, where the archetypal Roman himself kills a much more sympathetic enemy leader?


22. *De Clementia* I, 10, 1. Despite the gross exaggeration of this statement (Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, London 1939, 349–368), the significant point is that the exaggeration is caused by a desire to establish Augustus' policy as an ideal to imitate.


27. Stefan Weinstock, in "Pax and the Ara Pacis", *JRS* 50 (1960) 44–58, provides an abundance of other examples of the care with which Augustus and his contemporaries tried to create the impression of bringing peace.


32. *Horace*, *Odes* I, 2, 29 also describes civil war as a crime (*scelus*).


36. Ibid. 434–460.


38. Ronald Syme, note 22 above, 282–293. Despite the tremendous emphasis that Syme placed on Octavian's programme to arouse Italian national feeling, Arnaldo Momigliano in his review criticized him for not discussing it enough (*JRS*, 30 (1940) 75–80, esp. 79).


40. VII, 47, 82, 213, 368.


42. Ibid.

43. J. Mackail (*The Aeneid*, Oxford 1930, 517–518) argues that the description of Amata's death (XII, 593–611) was "written and inserted in its present place at a comparatively late period ... perhaps only tentatively". His reasons are that it "is technically detachable ... it also interrupts the narrative, in which the confusion and despair in the city (583–92) would otherwise be immediately and dramatically followed by the noble passage beginning *Interea extrema bella tor in aequore Turnus* ... Amata's suicide in the failure of her plans and prayers is no doubt a tragic touch ... But it would hardly be missed if it were struck out ..." Mackail then proceeds to list eleven verbal parallels between this passage and the description of Dido's death.

But Mackail has missed the point. The *Aeneid* ends with three acts of destruction brought by Aeneas on Italians: the attack on Latinus' city, the death of Amata, and the death of Turnus.
These are carefully linked. The attack on the city brings about Amata's suicide. Her immediate motivation is that she thinks Turnus is dead (595 ff.). Earlier (XII, 55) she had been described as moritura as she begins to tell Turnus very poignantly that she cannot live if he dies and Aeneas becomes her son-in-law (56–63). XII, 593–611 is long and intrusive in order to emphasise the destructiveness of Aeneas' mission. The parallels with Dido's death are reminders of the past destruction caused by Aeneas' mission.

44. BC IV, 1.
46. Note 22 above, 191.
Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

For further information go to: