Vergil's Mezentius, though admittedly not a major character in the *Aeneid*, is a most fascinating personality. Scholars are agreed that his delineation of Mezentius' character is a striking proof of the poet's creative imagination and poetical genius. In fact, from his very first appearance in the epic Mezentius stirs the reader's enthusiasm. To ensure this effect Vergil not only bestowed upon him a rich diversity of apparently contradictory qualities but also considerably reshaped the mythological tradition of Mezentius that was current in his day. In reshaping this tradition Vergil did for Mezentius exactly what he did for Dido and other characters. In this regard R.G. Austin succinctly observes: 'He has taken a traditional story, of which we possess faint echoes, and has removed it from the museum of myth into the living world.'

Let us first briefly consider the Mezentius tradition as presented by, amongst others, the elder Cato, Varro, Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Ovid, whose version in the main is substantiated by Servius' detailed commentary on *Aen.* 1.259. In this account of the story Mezentius, king of Etruscan Caere, assisted Turnus in his struggle with Aeneas but was eventually killed in a subsequent battle, not by Aeneas, as Vergil has it, but by his son Ascanius. It is also stated by some of these writers that Mezentius demanded from either the Rutulians or Aeneas the 'primitiae' or first-fruits of the vintage, which the Latini apparently were accustomed to consecrate to Jupiter. This, then, in short was the Mezentius tradition which Vergil supposedly had at his disposal. To what extent he 'has removed it from the museum of myth into the living world' (Austin), we shall next try to establish by a brief analysis of the passages in which Mezentius appears.

We first encounter Mezentius in *Aen.* 7.647–53. Accompanied by his son Lausus ('filius huic iuxta Lausus', 649) Mezentius is heading the catalogue of Italian leaders who have mustered as Turnus' allies in his struggle with Aeneas (647–48):

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primus init bellum Tyrrhenis asper ab oris
contemptor divum Mezentius agminaque armat.
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Vergil's characterisation of Mezentius is significant. Why is he furious ('asper'), and why a scion of the gods ('contemptor divum')? Vergil does not tell us here. However, from king Evander's account in Book 8 we learn that Mezentius, ousted by his own subjects from Caere for his gruesome behaviour, found shelter with Turnus, becoming the latter's ally against Aeneas. In other words,
Mezentius joins the battle as an embittered exiled prince, which perhaps explains his ferocity and impetuosity.  

This picture of an embittered, ferocious and impetuous king is remarkably intensified by the phrase 'contemptor divum', which is also elsewhere applied to Mezentius. I do not think these words are intended to earmark Mezentius as an atheist or infidel. Perhaps they merely imply that Mezentius is impious in the sense that he has little or no regard for the gods, or at least adopts an attitude of indifference towards the gods, as may be deduced from the further narrative, and from the elder Cato's significant statement: 'Mezentium Rutulis imperasse, ut sibi afferrent, quas diis primitias afferebant.' Moreover, it would appear that Vergil intended Mezentius to figure as a 'homo impius', the exact adversary of Aeneas, who throughout the epic figures as 'pius Aeneas'. We shall, however, return to this point again.

In sharp contrast to this rather negative picture of Mezentius the ferocious father is the portrait of his noble, attractive son Lausus. Of Lausus it is stated: 'Lausus . . . dignus patriis qui laetior esset/ imperiis et cui pater haud Mezentius esset' (651–54). These words, and especially the phrase 'patriis . . . imperiis', imply that Mezentius by his brutal behaviour as king not only defrauded Lausus of his paternal kingdom but by his impetuous leadership on the battlefield also deprived him of his life. Obviously these lines in some sense already set the scene for the tragedy in Book 10, where Lausus, coming to the aid of his severely wounded father, is killed by Aeneas. But they also hint at an important aspect of Mezentius' complex character, viz. his tendency towards what is abnormal, or the 'inversion or disruption of the normal scheme of things', as Burke puts it. Surely it is abnormal that a king is ousted by his own subjects, but even more so that a father defrauds his son not only of his paternal heritage but also of his life!

After a brief appearance at Aen. 8.7, Mezentius next figures in Aen. 8.478ff. Here Aeneas learns from king Evander the gruesome story of Mezentius' cruelties and his subsequent exile from his homeland Etruria by his own subjects. The gist of this lengthy story, which is specifically directed at blackening the character of Mezentius, runs as follows. Founded long ago by Lydian settlers, Agylla or Caere for many years was a flourishing Etruscan city until Mezentius became its king. Subjecting the city and its people to a tyrannical rule based on a ferocious use of armed force, Mezentius committed acts of bloodshed marked by insanity and wickedness. The monstrosity of his atrocities is highlighted in particular by Evander's account that in killing his people Mezentius resorted to an abnormal and hideous practice ascribed to Etruscan pirates. Mezentius used to bind ('iungebat', 485) together live and dead people hand-to-hand and face-to-face, leaving them thus to suffer the utmost agony (485–88):

"mortua quin etiam iungebat corpora vivis
componens manibusque manus atque oribus ora,
tortenti genus, et sanie taboque fluentis
complexu in misero longa sic morte necabant."

Wearied to death by the cruelties of this monstrous madman ('infanda fu-
rentem’, 489), his subjects eventually rose in arms against Mezentius, killing his friends and setting fire to his palace (‘ig nem ad fastigia iactant’, 491). Mezentius, however, somehow escaped their ‘furor’, finding refuge with his guest-friend Turnus. This is why all Etruria, set aflame by just wrath against Mezentius (‘merita accendit Mezentius ira’, 501), now demands the surrender of their king. Fate, however, has ordained that a foreign leader should command them, and this task awaits Aeneas. To this most gloomy picture a final touch is added by Evander’s statement in Aen. 8.569 that his remonstrances with Mezentius against his atrocities were only met by arrogant insults (‘insultans’, 570). From Evander’s account Mezentius therefore emerges as a ferocious, cruel and arrogant tyrant prone to monstrous atrocities. This picture of Mezentius is largely enhanced by Vergil’s phraseology. Notable in particular are ‘furentem’, ‘accendit’ and ‘insultans’, terms which obviously imply that by his arrogance and ‘furor’ Mezentius kindled fiery ‘furor’ in his subjects.

From this it would appear that fire as a symbol of ferocity is an important aspect of Vergil’s characterisation of Mezentius. That this is indeed the case, is borne out well by his behaviour in Aen. 9.521–22, where we encounter Mezentius, be it noted, in the role of an incendiary. In the thick of battle around the Trojan camp Mezentius is brandishing an Etruscan torch” while attacking his enemies with fire and smoke:

‘parte alia horrendus visu quassabat Etruscam pinum et pumiferos infert Mezentius ignes.’

It is obvious that the fire image here is indicative of his own ‘furor’. In the Evander story related above it was his brutal behaviour that stirred ‘furor’ in his subjects, to which he fell victim. Here, however, it is his own ‘furor’ that is stirred and directed against the Trojans. Mezentius is no longer a victim of ‘furor’ but the very embodiment of ‘furor’ itself, which here finds expression in his brandishing a torch and hurling incendiaries at his adversaries. The purpose of this passage, again, is to stress Mezentius’ ferocity, a fact which is neatly underscored by the phrase ‘horrendus visu’ (521).

In Aen. 9.581–89, a passage dominated by a pathetic tone and a sense of tragic, futile loss, it is Mezentius the grim and brutal warrior that we meet. Using his sling, he ruthlessly dispatches the son of Arcens, an inexperienced warrior, who was sent to the war by his father. The poignancy of the scene is in particular enhanced by the marked contrast drawn between the grim Mezentius and his handsome (‘insignis facie’, 583) but vulnerable opponent clad in his armour and finely embroidered cloak; however, even more so by the tragic irony of so inexperienced a young warrior dispatched by so ferocious a veteran, intensified by the fact that Mezentius’ adversary is not named but only referred to as ‘Arcentis filius’ (581). Noteworthy, too, in this regard is the subtle play on the words ‘filius’ and ‘genitor’ (583). This, no doubt, is to remind the reader of another father and his son, Mezentius and the handsome Lausus. And so this passage not only harks back to Aen. 7.647ff., where Mezentius, accompanied by Lausus (‘filius huic iuxta’, 649), enters the ranks but also points forward to the
tragic scene in Book 10, where Lausus, just as vulnerable as Arcens' son, is killed by Aeneas in an equally ruthless manner. Mezentius' ferocity is well captured (586–89):

'stridentem fundam positis Mezentius hastis
ipse ter adducta circum caput eget habena
et media adversi liquefacto tempora plumbo
diffidit ac multa porrectum extendit harena.'

Mezentius' name appears at Aen. 10.150–51, and again at Aen. 10.204. The latter instance is important for our understanding of his characterisation by Vergil. Though not a part of it, Mezentius figures in the catalogue of Etruscan forces entering the war as allies of Aeneas. Of Mezentius, whose name appears, be it noted, in the midst of a number of monsters, it is stated: 'hinc quoque quingentos in se Mezentius armat' (204). But what is the point of Mezentius' arming five hundred of his own subjects from Mantua against himself? Surely it only underlines that Mezentius here again symbolizes, as Burke has pointed out, 'the inversion of what is natural and proper'. In other words, Vergil here reiterates an aspect of Mezentius' character which he has hinted at earlier. What is more, this picture of Mezentius as an inverter of what is natural and proper is substantiated by some of his characteristics which we have already noted, viz. his ferocity, impetuosity and cruelty.

From our analysis so far the picture of Mezentius that emerges is indeed a negative one. It is, however, notably brightened in the next passage, Aen. 10.689–746, which, being devoted to Mezentius' aristeia on the battlefield, focuses on some of his more positive characteristics. It has been pointed out that this modified picture of Mezentius to a large extent is enhanced by Homeric reminiscences. To this effect, no doubt, is added considerably by Vergil's phraseology in the introductory lines (689–92):

'at Iovis interea monitis Mezentius ardens
succedit pugnae Teucrosque invadit ovantis.
concurrunt Tyrrhenae acies atque omnibus uni,
uni odiosque viro telisque frequentibus instant.'

Here, again, it is the fire image as a symbol of Mezentius' ferocity that dominates. Evidently 'ardens' (689) has associations of a devastating fire sweeping everything before it. With similar destructive force Mezentius, prompted — strangely enough — by Jupiter ('Iovis . . . monitis', 689), plunges into battle as Turnus' substitute. Moreover, the picture of Mezentius as a ferocious destroyer, forcibly impressed upon us by the repetition of 'uni' (691–92) and the juxtaposition of 'omnibus uni' (691), is intensified by the poet's vivid account of the Etruscan counter-attack which, sparked off by hatred, is concentrated on Mezentius alone.

Mezentius' astounding prowess on the battlefield is illustrated by the introduction of three similes, which are all found back in Homer. In the first (693–96) he is likened to a sea cliff which, though battered incessantly by the raving winds and waves, is never shattered. The point of this simile is twofold:
Mezentius, on the defensive, is not only steadfast like the cliff but, like the waves lashing against the cliff, his assailants are hurled back again and again. In the second (707–18) Mezentius, at bay and surrounded by enemies showering him with darts, is compared to a boar caught in the toils. Vergil's phraseology is most striking. Of the boar, snorting savagely and bristling up its shoulders, it is stated. 'substitit, infremuitque ferox, et inhorruit armos' (711). These words undoubtedly very much resemble those used of Mezentius: 'ille autem impavidus partis cunctatur in omnis/dentibus infrendens et tergo decutit hastas' (717–18). The third simile (723–29) likens Mezentius, now on the offensive, to a lion that, maddened by hunger ('impastus', 723; 'suadet enim vesana fames', 724), pounces on a timorous goat or an antlered stag. With similar vigour and ferocity Mezentius is said to storm into the thick of the foe ('sic ruit in densos alacer Mezentius hostis', 729). First he kills the Greek Acron, the tragedy of whose death, resembling that of Arcens' son mentioned above, is greatly emphasised by what Vergil tells us about him. Clad in his crimson plumes and purple robe, a gift from his betrothed whom he had left behind, Acron, like Mezentius, be it noted, joins the battle as a refugee ('profugus', 720).

Two important aspects of Mezentius' character are underlined by the next passage (732–46), viz. his valour on the battlefield and his contempt for the gods. Mezentius displays his valour by not attacking his next victim, the fleeing Orodes ('fugientem ... Oroden' 732), from behind but by meeting him face to face ('obvius adversoque occurrit seque viro vir/ contulit', 734–35). Vergil significantly comments: '... haud furto melior sed fortibus armis' (735). Before dying, the fallen Orodes, however, predicts Mezentius' own death: 'te quoque fata/ prospectant paria atque eadem max arva tenebis' (739–41). Mezentius' reaction to this is typical of the attitude of a 'contemptor divum' or 'homo impius' for that matter: 'ad quem subridens mixta Mezentius ira' (742). The participle 'subridens' clearly underlines Mezentius' indifference not only to Jupiter but also to his own fate, a fact which is borne out by his taunting reply to the dying Orodes: 'nunc morere. ast de me divum pater atque hominum rex/ viderit' (743–44). These words are an obvious reminder that Mezentius, though he, in fact, acknowledges their existence, does not have any regard for the gods. Page aptly remarks: 'The whole phrase is distinctly scornful as befits a contemptor divum: Mezentius will do as he pleases, and the lord of heaven and earth can do what he likes.'

Our next encounter with Mezentius is when the fierce combat, poised in even balance, stirs the pity of the gods in heaven (755ff.). Shaking a gigantic spear, Mezentius enters the fray: 'At vero ingentem quatiens Mezentius hastam/ turbidus ingreditur campo' (762–63). The description of Mezentius as 'turbidus' is significant. Often used of natural phenomena like storms, the weather and rain, this word here clearly accentuates Mezentius' ferocity on the battlefield. The implication is that Mezentius moves like a tornado causing chaos, disorder and destruction everywhere, an idea that is emphasised by the introduction of yet another simile (762–68), which likens him to Orion. Orion, Vergil maintains, is
so huge that when stalking through mid-sea his shoulders overtop the waves, or when moving on the ground he hides his head amid the clouds. Likewise Mezentius moves and acts on the battlefield: 'talis se vastis infect Mezentius armis' (768). The Orion simile, no doubt, underlines, first of all, Mezentius' extraordinary size and might but, secondly, also his destructiveness and monstrosity.31

From the passages discussed above it is evident that Vergil has stressed Mezentius' heroic qualities as displayed in his aristeia. This picture of Mezentius as a valiant hero is greatly enhanced by the introduction of the similes. Vergil's intention was to present Mezentius, before his combat with Aeneas, as an opponent fully equipped to stand up to the 'Trojan hero.32 This presentation virtually also concludes Vergil's description of Mezentius' qualities as a hero, for in the next section in which he appears (10.769–908), it is no longer Mezentius the hero but Mezentius the father that we meet. As will be presently shown, it is the father-son relationship, a union which was most dear to every Roman, that dominates this section.

When Aeneas prepares to meet him, Mezentius is undismayed, standing firm like a rock: 'manet imperterritus ille/ ... et mole sua stat' (770–71). The latter line clearly recalls the simile of the cliff. Moreover, firm in his conviction as 'contemptor divum', Mezentius, relying only on his own power and ability, now invokes his right hand and weapon as his god: 'dextra mihi deus et telum, quod missile libro,/ nunc adsint!' (773–74). These words, a seeming proof of Mezentius' self-confidence and disdain of divine aid, are downright blasphemous. This picture of Mezentius, self-confident and defiant, is considerably intensified by the fact that it is a 'homo impius' that here faces a 'homo pius'. In this regard Sullivan observes: 'Here, dramatically confronting one another, are a pius and an impius: Aeneas who feels keenly his dependence on the gods, and a man who relies solely on his strong right arm and his great spear.'33 Significant, to the same effect, is Mezentius' mocking of the practice of dedicating the arms of a slain enemy as a trophy to some god. His living trophy, he claims, will be his son Lausus, decked out in the arms of Aeneas (774–76). There is an unmistakable tone of tragic irony here. The grim reality is: Mezentius will soon see Lausus slain and carried to him on his own shield!

Mezentius is the first to cast his spear. Glancing from Aeneas' shield, however, it pierces the handsome Antores (778). Next Aeneas hurls his spear which, striking Mezentius low down in the groin, leaves him helpless. Here, too, the theme of a 'pius' facing an 'impius' presents itself. Vergil's description of Aeneas as 'pius', 'tum pius Aeneas hastam iacit' (783), is deliberate and notably underscores this idea. The next passage, one of the finest in the Aeneid, brings on the tragedy of Lausus (789–832). Notable in particular for its pathetic tone, this passage largely contributes to our understanding of Vergil's delineation of Mezentius' character. Always at the side of his deeply beloved father, Lausus immediately comes to the rescue of the severely wounded Mezentius. This sincere expression of filial love
Vergil captures in two lines that in tone, sound and phraseology beautifully convey the boy’s heart-felt grief: ‘ingemuit cari graviter genitoris amore,/ ut vidit, Lausus, lacrimaeque per ora volutae’ (789–90). However, it is just this display of filial love that causes his tragic death at the hand of Aeneas.

Mezentius’ escape under the cover of Lausus’ shield leaves Aeneas seething with rage. Vergil’s choice of words here is noteworthy. ‘Furit’ (802) clearly suggests that by his behaviour Lausus has kindled ‘furor’ in the Trojan hero. That such is indeed the case, is borne out by Aeneas’ address to Lausus. It is a taunt (‘increpitat’ 810) and a threat (‘minatur’, 810). What Aeneas deplores in Lausus is, in my opinion, not so much his ‘pietas’ towards his father, but rather the fact that his ‘pietas’ has rendered him imprudent. It is just this imprudence that tricks him into feats incommensurate with his abilities, and that spurs him on to persist in his crazy defiance (‘moriture’, 811).

Vergil’s description of the tragic death of Lausus is moving. It is notably intensified by the apparent futility suggested by the loss of a young and noble hero in his prime; the seeming paradox of a noble son sacrificing his life for a wicked father; and by the apparent inconsistency of the huge and mighty Mezentius rescued by Lausus’ light and feeble shield (‘parma’, 800). However, the phraseology also enhances the description of this scene. The reference to Lausus’ ‘parma’, a shield that was small and light and therefore easily penetrable, a fact here suggested by the epexegetic ‘levia arma’ (817), underlines the vulnerability of the boy. Significant too, is the marked contrast in ‘levia arma minacis’ (817), which stresses the fact that, though armed with a light shield and therefore exceedingly vulnerable, Lausus is, nevertheless, threatening, a fact further heightened by the poet’s sensitive description of Aeneas’ reaction to the death of Lausus. It is a picture that arouses deep emotions. Looking into the extraordinarily pale face of the dying boy, Aeneas, now recovered from his momentary ‘furor’ and thus called ‘Anchisiades’, at last fully grasps the significance of Lausus’ valiant deed: Lausus has sacrificed his own ‘pietas’ for his father. The boy’s ‘pietas’ reminds him of his own ‘pietas’ for his beloved father Anchises. Once more it is the father-son theme that is forcibly stressed (821–24):

‘At vero ut vultum vidit morientis et ora, 
orae modis Anchisiades pallentia miris, 
ingemuit miserans graviter dextramque tetendit, 
et mentem patriae subiit pietatis imago.’

Vergil’s deliberate choice of words adds a great deal to the poignancy of this scene. Notable in particular is the extent to which the emotional reactions of Aeneas resemble those of Lausus looking at his severely wounded father. Line 823, ‘ingemuit miserans graviter dextramque tetendit’, clearly echoes line 789,
‘ingemuit cari graviter genitoris amore’, both in phraseology and tone. Striking, too, are the pathetic repetition of ‘ora’ (821–22), the use of ‘Anchisiades’ (822), and the emotional effect conveyed by ‘ingemuit’ (823) and Aeneas’ outstretched hand (‘dextramque tetendit’, 823). The latter is a reverent and melancholy token of his grief and pity for the fallen boy. Small wonder that shortly hereafter he is once more called ‘pius Aeneas’ (826).

The next section (833–56) highlights Mezentius’ deep affection for his son, a hitherto unknown aspect of his character. The father-son theme, which here works up to a fine climax, is stressed from the outset by the reference to Mezentius as ‘genitor’ (833); but no less by the vivid description of Mezentius’ anxiety about his son. Sick and gasping (‘ipse aeger anhelans’, 837) because of the severe wound inflicted by Aeneas, Mezentius repeatedly enquires after Lausus, sending him commands to withdraw from the battle: ‘multa super Lauso rogitat, multumque remittit/qui revocent maestique ferant mandata parentis’ (839–40). Vergil’s pointed choice of words adds a great deal to the poignancy of these lines. Both ‘rogitat’ and ‘rernittit’ (839) forcibly suggest the father’s anxiety, enhanced, in turn, by ‘maesti’ (840). The latter term not only suggests the father’s deep sorrow but also underlines his acute awareness that by his failure he, in fact, has surrendered his only son to a superior opponent.

The grim reality is, however, at last realized by Mezentius when Lausus’ companions, in tears (‘flentes’, 842), bring him his son’s lifeless body on his shield. Sensing their deep grief from afar (‘agnovit longe gemitum’, 843), he now realizes that he himself has deprived his dearly beloved son of his life. It is a most dramatic scene, enhanced, inter alia, by the spondee in ‘flentes’ (842), followed by a pause; the slow, heavy movement suggested by ‘ingentem atque ingenti’ (842); the pointed alliteration in ‘vulnere victum’ (842), and the repetition in ‘Lauso . . . at Lausum’ (839–41). As outward tokens of his passionate grief, Mezentius fouls his grey hair with dust, stretches both hands to heaven (as if in prayer), and clings to the lifeless body of his son: ‘canitiem multo deformat pulvere et ambas/ad caelum tendit palmas et corpore inhaeret’ (844–45). Overcome with grief and remorse, Mezentius next stammers his repentance in a pathetic speech of lamentation almost unparalleled in any literature. Obviously the work of a master hand, it notably adds a final touch to Vergil’s picture of this exceedingly complex character. This picture of Mezentius as a repentant father is a far cry from Mezentius the impious scorner of the gods, or Mezentius the ferocious and heroic warrior. In fact, here we meet Mezentius ‘stripped . . . of all his defenses’. The pathos of this scene is considerably intensified by the father’s heart-rending confession of guilt, a candid recognition that by his crimes and failures of the past he has robbed Lausus of both his paternal heritage and his life (846–52):

‘tantane me tenuit vivendi, nate, voluptas,
ut pro me hostili paterer succedere dextrae,
quem genui? tuane haec genitor per vulnera servor
morte tua vivens? heu, nunc miserо mihi demum

64
exitium infelix, nunc alte vulnus adactum!
idem ego, nate, tuum maculavi crimine nomen
pulsus ob invidiam solio sceptrisque paternis!”

The tragedy of Mezentius, it would appear, is that he repents too late. Destined by fate to act as he acts, his ultimate ordeal cannot be escaped, not even by sincere repentance. Therefore he has to sacrifice not only his own life, to which he now appears to be indifferent, but also the life of Lausus who to him is the embodiment of life. Vergil’s highly emotional language befits the sincere though fruitless repentance of the sorrowing father. Noteworthy in particular is how ‘nate’ (846) is repeated, with intense feeling, by ‘quem genui’ (847), which is again picked up in ‘genitor’ (847), followed by a second ‘nate’ (851). The effect is further enhanced by the repetition of ‘me . . . me’ (846–47) and ‘tua . . . tua’ (848–49), the juxtaposition of ‘morte tua’ and ‘vivens’ (849), the marked contrast implied by these words, the use of ‘heu’ as indicative of sincere grief (849), and the deep pathos in ‘misero mihi’ (849).

Deeply conscious of his liability to punishment for his failures and crimes of the past, Mezentius now expresses his resolve to die. Regaining momentarily something of his earlier arrogance (‘haud deiectus’, 858), he calls for his war-horse, his ‘decus’ and ‘solamen’, and the companion of his past victories, now pathetically sharing his master’s grief (‘maerentem’, 860). Convinced that their life is finally over (‘viximus’, 862), and that his horse, as proud as his master, will never respond to the commands of another, Mezentius mounts and rears for the last time (866–69). Returning to the battle in search of Aeneas, his heart is a turmoil of conflicting passions: ‘aestuat ingens/ uno in corde pudor mixtoque insania luctu’ (870–71).

In his encounter with Aeneas one senses a sudden flash of the old Mezentius: ferocious, brave, dauntless, and regardless of the gods. When Aeneas meets him for the final combat, he does not budge and inch. Completely ruined by the death of Lausus and thus prepared to meet certain death, Mezentius, unlike Aeneas, who has just invoked the aid of Jupiter and Apollo (875–76), expresses both his contempt for death and his disdain of the gods outright. Once more the theme of ‘pius’ versus ‘impius’ is strongly underlined: ‘quid me erepto, saevissime, nato/terres? haec via sola fuit qua perdere posses:/nec mortem horremus nee divum parcimus ulli./ desine, nam venio moriturus et haec tibi porto/ dona prius . . . ’ (878–82).

Vergil’s description of the final combat significantly underscores the tragedy of Mezentius. It has been well pointed out that Mezentius does not die in a heroic manner. On the contrary, Aeneas dispatches him while he is pinned down helplessly by his own war-horse, which has been killed by Aeneas’ spear (890–94). Aeneas’ taunt before killing his adversary once more emphasizes some of Mezentius’ characteristics which have been noted: ‘ubi nunc Mezentius acer et illa/ effera vis animi?’ (897–98). These words imply that directed by a passionate and violent temper, Mezentius not only committed violent acts but by his violent behaviour also disrupted an orderly and civilized life. In other words, the
theme of the inversion or disruption of what is natural crops up again.

Mezentius' reply to Aeneas' taunt is typical of his character as a ruthless warrior. Brave and dauntless, he now awaits death which no longer scares him and to which he is indifferent, since it has deprived him of his only son. Firm in his conviction that the first and final task of a hero in battle is to slay or be slain, Mezentius admits that Aeneas is sanctioned by natural and divine law to kill him. And so he does not beg for mercy which, in any case, is impossible owing to the death of Lausus (900–902):

'hostis amare, quid increpititas, mortemque minaris?
nulum in caede nefas; nec sic ad proelia veni;
nec tecum meus haec pepigit mihi foedera Lausus.'

Though he does not ask for quarter, Mezentius, before dying, directs a threefold request to Aeneas, viz. a proper burial, protection from the 'furor' of his own people, and a mutual grave with his beloved son (903–906). The words, 'et me consortem nati concede sepulchro' (905), obviously hark back to the description of the father and his son in Book 7 ('filius huic iuxta Lausus', 649), so that the father-son relationship is sustained right to the end, thus concluding Book 10 on a most elevated note.

Impetuosity, bravery and resolute firmness as some of his most characteristic qualities also mark the death of Mezentius. When he meets the final blow, he does not shrink from death but accepts it with the same courage, vigour and dauntlessness that marked his life (907–908):

'haec loquitur iuguloque haud inscius accipit ensem,
undantique animam diffundit in arma cruore.'

The name of Mezentius finally appears near the beginning of Book 11. Here Aeneas, after his victory, consecrates Mezentius' weapons, the so-called spolia opima, to the war-god Mars as a trophy ('tropaeum', 7), and as a token of his victory over the Etruscan. It is significant that Aeneas styles the spoils taken from Mezentius 'the first-fruits from an insolent king' ('haec sunt spolia, et de rege superbo/ primitiae', 15–16). Perhaps these words are a final reminder that as 'contemptor divum' Mezentius once deprived the gods of the 'primitiae' which were due to them.

From our analysis it appears that in delineating the character of Mezentius Vergil illuminates three sides of this hero's personality. The first part of the picture, from the mouth of the ill-disposed king Evander, stresses the negative aspects of Mezentius' character. As we have already noted, Evander presents Mezentius as an Etruscan tyrant notorious for his atrocities and gruesome behaviour. The dark side of his picture, however, brightens considerably in the second part where Mezentius' feats on the battlefield are described. Here it is the bravery and resolute firmness of Mezentius the impetuous and dauntless warrior that strike us. It is, no doubt, the third part of Vergil's picture of Mezentius that touches us most. Here we encounter Mezentius the heart-broken and repentant father who finally realizes that not only has he lost his only and dearly beloved son through his own fault but also that in losing Lausus he has lost everything that had
mattered to him. This explains his indifference to death and his firm resolve to meet it. It is immediately evident to what extent and with what degree of success Vergil by sheer creative imagination and poetical genius has combined in a single hero a rich diversity of qualities. Moreover, if ever he has removed a traditional story of a hero ‘from the museum of myth into the living world’ (Austin), Vergil did this in the case of Mezentius. In fact, in his version Mezentius, a rather shadowy figure in the tradition, becomes a man of flesh of blood.54

Two issues remain to be dealt with very briefly. The first concerns Vergil’s model(s) for Mezentius; the second his ultimate intention with Mezentius. Scholars have speculated to some extent on the first issue. Sullivan, for example, argues that in moulding Mezentius, Vergil basically drew upon Homer’s Ajax.55 However, for Mezentius as a scorner of the gods he turned in particular to the Ajax of Sophocles’ drama by the same name,56 though he could also have been influenced by Cephalus and Parthenopeus, who both figure in Aeschylus’ Septem,57 Idas from Apollonius Rhodius’ epic,58 and, finally, by some of the important Roman statesmen dominating the turbulent political scene of his own time.59 However, there is another figure, from Rome’s rather shadowy past, who, in my opinion, could have influenced Vergil while shaping the character of Mezentius. This is Tarquin the Proud. There are quite a number of aspects in which these two characters agree,60 though we need not labour them here.

As to Mezentius’ ultimate role in the Aeneid, I have no doubt that Vergil intended him to figure primarily as a ‘homo impius’, or the direct opposite of Aeneas, who throughout the Aeneid is styled ‘pius Aeneas’.61 Let us consider briefly the term ‘pius’ in order to understand the role and character of Mezentius better. According to Cicero, the ‘homo pius’, such as Aeneas, is a man always displaying his ‘pietas’ or dutifulness towards the gods and religion, his fatherland, parents and fellowmen. In as far as he faithfully demonstrates this ‘pietas’, he preserves the so-called pax deorum or ‘peace of the gods’.62 This is precisely what Aeneas does, thus laying the foundation of a conception that in later years became the corner-stone of Roman belief and society. Lacking this ‘pietas’, the ‘homo impius’, on the other hand, wilfully violates this peace. This is exactly what Mezentius does, in this manner inverting or disrupting the establishment of this conception. True to his nature as ‘contemptor divum’, he not only disdains the gods but also shows disregard for both his fatherland and fellowmen. In fact, owing to his atrocities, Mezentius is eventually ousted from his fatherland by his own subjects. However, by his exile he deprives his only son of paternal heritage. Even worse is that by his impetuous behaviour on the battlefield he sacrifices the life of his own son. In short, whereas Turnus in the Aeneid figures as Aeneas’ most formidable opponent in a purely military sense, Mezentius assumes, as it were, the role of his fiercest adversary in a strictly spiritual sense.63 Representing, therefore, two different sides of the attempt to violate the founding of the Roman nation, both Turnus and Mezentius have to be killed by Aeneas, the embodiment of true ‘pietas’.

Our analysis has shown that Mezentius is one of Vergil’s most fascinating
characters. What is more, it has demonstrated that he is a pivotal personality in the Aeneid. It is small wonder that Chateaubriand referred to Mezentius as the only figure in the Aeneid that was ‘fièremment dessinée’, and Landor described him as ‘the hero transcendently above all others in the Aeneid’.

NOTES

1 I wish to thank my colleague, Mrs. E. van Zyl Smit, for valuable suggestions on this article.
4 P. Vergili Maronis liber quartus, Oxford 1955, Introduction, XVI. The italics are mine.
7 Cf. Ov. Fast. 4.898; Festus 322.17L.
8 Aen. 8.478–93. See Camps 79. Note that in no other account of the story are the Etruscans at enmity with their king.
10 In my opinion, James Henry, Aeneidae III, Dublin 1881, 631 (on 8.7), rightly observes: ‘the offence of Mezentius consisted neither in denying the existence of the gods, nor in entertaining a mean opinion of the gods, but in manifesting contempt for the gods by an habitual disregard of their commands.’ For a similar view, see Sullivan (note 1 above), 221.
13 See Page, Kappes, Ladewig-Schaper-Deuticke ad loc.
14 Aen. 10.789–820.
15 Burke (note 1 above), 202f. But see also Brooks Otis, Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry, Oxford 1964, 326f., who apparently first drew attention to this aspect of Mezentius.
16 The practice is referred to in a fragment of Cicero’s Hortensius (95M.) preserved by Augustine (contra Pel. 4): ‘fit ut . . . verum sit illud quod est apud Aristotelem, simili nos affectos esse supplício atque eos qui quondam cum in praedonum Etruscorum manus incidissent, crudelitate excogitata necabatur; quorum corpora viva mortuis, adversa adversis accomodata, quam aptissime configabantur: sic nostros animos cum mortuis esse coniunctos.’ See Page, Fordyce on 8.485.
17 Cf. Aen. 7.397–98 and 9.72 where ‘pinus’ also signifies a torch.
18. See Burke 204.
22. Burke loc. cit.
23. Burke 205f.
24. Cf. Lewis-Short, s.v. ardens.
25. The phrase 'Jovis monitis' (10.689) implies that even a scorner of the gods like Mezentius is still under the control of Jupiter as the supreme god. For this view, see Kenneth Quinn, Virgil's Aeneid: A Critical Description, London 1968, 229. Cf. also Page ad loc., and Fordyce on 7.648.
26. Cf. Page ad loc. ('intensely emphatic').
27. For the cliff, cf. II. 15.618; for the boar, II. 11.414ff; 13.473; 17.2181ff.; and for the lion, II. 3.23; 12.299ff.; 17.132ff. For parallels between Homer and Vergil, see G. Knauer, Die Aeneis und Homer, Göttingen 1964, Cf. also Sullivan 220.
28. See Page ad loc.
29. Page ad loc. Fordyce, on 7.648, refers to Mezentius' 'flippancy . . . (which he utters 'sebridens' over his victim Orodes)'. The view of Conington and others that Mezentius expresses a pious readiness to die when heaven wills appears to be unfounded.
30. See Lewis-Short, s.v. turbidus.
31. Cf. Page ad loc. ('like a whirlwind'); Burke 207.
32. See Burke loc. cit.
33. Sullivan 222.
35. See Lewis-Short, s.v. parma; Ladewig-Schaper-Deuticke ad loc.; Burke loc. cit.
36. Cf. Page ad loc. ('frail arms for such proud threats'); Kappes ad loc. ('levia arma minacis: ein scharfer Gegensatz').
37. See Burke 207.
39. See Ladewig-Schaper-Deuticke ad loc.; cf. Page ad loc.: 'The outstretched hand is a sign of emotion.'
40. See Kappes, Ladewig-Schaper-Deuticke ad loc.
41. See Page on 10.842.
42. Henry (note 10 above), ad loc., remarks: 'Except David's passion of grief for Absalom (2 Sam. 18.33) . . . I know of no father's grief for the death of a son, no paternal pietas to be compared with Mezentius' for Lausus'.
43. Burke 208.
44. See W.Y. Sellar, The Roman Poets of the Augustan Age: Virgil, Oxford 1897, 401. Cf. Otis, 329, who observes that Mezentius is doomed by 'just fate'.
45. See Page on 10.848.
46. Cf. Page on 10.861: 'The final viximus suggests to a Roman ear the additional thought, "and now our life is over"'.
47. See Burke 208.
48. Suggested in particular by 'offera vis'. 'Efferus' implies that Mezentius behaved like a 'ferus' or wild animal. See Lewis-Short, s.v. efferus. The earlier comparison of Mezentius with a boar and a lion (10.707ff.) is significant in this regard. See Otis 329.
49. See Lewis-Short, s.v. uetus; cf. Page on 10.901.
50. Mezentius' dying words recall Hector's address to Achilles in II. 22.338–43. Note, however, Hector's request that his body be handed to his people for burial. See Burke 208.
51. His resolute firmness is suggested by 'haud inscius' (907). Page, ad loc., refers to the effect of 'acceptum ensis' (907), a phrase borrowed from the gladiatorial games. Note also how the vigour with which he meets his death is suggested by loc. 308: 'undantique animam diffundit in arma cruoere.'

69
52. See Lewis-Short, s.v. *tropaeum*; cf. *Page ad loc.*
53. See above note 7.
54. See Sullivan 224.
55. Of this hero Sullivan, 220, states: ‘In the *Iliad*, Ajax is a fighter second only to Achilles.’
57. Capaneus and Parthenopaeus, both scorners of the gods, figure in *Sept.* 425ff. and 529ff. respectively.
58. For Idas, see *Arg.* 1.467ff.
59. Sullivan, 224, refers to Pompey and Caesar, Brutus and Cassius, and Antony and Octavian.
60. For example, both had connections with Caere; both were exiled by their own subjects; and both were notorious for their cruelty and arrogance.
61. See above note 12.
63. In my opinion, the difference between Turnus and Mezentius may be briefly stated as follows. Turnus opposes the Trojans in order to protect his own country. This appears to be his major task. Mezentius, a refugee and ‘contemptor divum’ with no respect for either divine or human law, is the exact counterpart of the ‘pietas’ of Aeneas whose mission is to fulfil it. Moreover, he also disrupts or inverts a normal, civilized life of which Aeneas is the embodiment (cf. *Aen.* 1.264, with Austin *ad loc.*).
64. Quoted by Sellar (note 44 above), 404.
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