Mackenzie McAnear

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Fate in Virgil's *Aeneid*

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, fate is a domineering force—what fate proclaims will happen must happen. It is Aeneas's fate to establish the city of Lavinium in Italy, so it shall be done. The characters in *The Aeneid* can and do have the free will to resist fate. However, ultimately, such resistance is futile. Juno can postpone Aeneas reaching Latium for a while, but not perpetually. Dido can make Aeneas stay in Carthage for a moment, but not forever (Virgil 4.403- 04). Turnus can fight Aeneas off temporarily but not permanently (Virgil 10.280-81). While, for the gods, resistance to fate scarcely seems to have consequences, for most mortals, such as Dido and Turnus, attempts to resist fate end disastrously, indicating that resistance to fate is seen in a negative light (Duckworth 357). Though the predestined fates may seem to kill the suspense of the storyline, there is a different kind of drama at work in *The Aeneid*—whether and how the characters welcome their fates in the circumstances of their journeys to fulfilling their fates or if they will fight back and risk the consequences that come with questioning fate.

The theme of fate serves to intertwine the tale of Aeneas with the era of Augustus Caesar, the ruler of the Roman Empire, during the composition of *The Aeneid* (Williams). Aeneas's destiny is to establish the civilization that will evolve into Rome and to initiate the lineage of kings that will culminate in Augustus (Virgil 6.914). Consequently, the poem confers upon Augustus's reign an impregnable, divinely ordained authority: Augustus was destined to rule, in a fate that traces back to his illustrious ancestors (Williams). Anchises underscores this point in the

Underworld when he reveals to Aeneas the future leaders of Rome (Virgil 6.910-22). Not only does fate shape the plot of *The Aeneid*, but it also fortifies Augustus's governance.

In the *Aeneid*, fate reigns supreme, even overpowering divine intervention. Virgil introduces the primacy of fate in Book I through the meddling of Juno, who is aware of Aeneas' destiny but still takes action against him. "Defeated, am I? Give up the fight? / Powerless now to keep that Trojan king from Italy? / Ah but of course—the Fates bar my way" (Virgil 1.46-48). Despite Juno's knowledge that fate dictates Aeneas will dismantle Carthage and journey to Italy, her wrath, born out of the events that led to the Trojan War, compels her to try to thwart him. Despite her best efforts, Juno cannot alter Aeneas' fate, but she can complicate it and make his path to Italy even more treacherous and bloody.

In Book IV, Venus uses her son Cupid to control Aeneas because she is driven mad with love for Dido. However, her attempt to possess Aeneas fails, proving that even a power such as love does not affect the greater force of fate. Once more, Aeneas' willingness to part with Dido, whom he loves, in pursuit of the destiny laid before him hints at his acceptance of the role of fate within his life. In his article, "Man's Fate In the Aeneid," David Halperin states that “Aeneas does not especially want to found Rome, but he is honestly overawed by the historical and racial responsibility which has devolved upon him. For all his complaints, delays, and regrets, Aeneas carries out his hated mission” (Halperin). This steadfast pursuit of destiny is illustrated most clearly after Jupiter sends Mercury to Aeneas with a message. Jupiter understands that fate must be obeyed, which is why he sent Mercury to tell Aeneas,

> What are you plotting now?
>
> Wasting time in Libya—what hope misleads you so?

> If such a glorious destiny cannot fire your spirit,
>
> [if you will not shoulder the task for your own fame,]
>
> at least remember Ascanius rising into his prime,
>
> the hopes you lodge in Iulus, your only heir—
>
> you owe him Italy's realm, the land of Rome. (Virgil 4.338-43)

After receiving this message, Aeneas grows restless, "[h]e yearns to be gone, to desert this land he loves, / thunderstruck by the warnings, Jupiter's command..." (Virgil 4.348-49). This is just another step towards Aeneas' greater destiny.

In Book V, Aeneas evaluates what to do next after all but four of his ships are burned, and Nautes advises him to keep going to seek Italy:

> Son of Venus, whether the Fates will draw us on
>
> or draw us back, let's follow where they lead.
>
> Whatever Fortune sends, we master it all
>
> by bearing it all, we must. (Virgil 5.783-86)

As Nautes accurately points out, since Aeneas's fate rests in Italy, any action or move that Aeneas might take, either sailing where he has not been yet or sailing back to where he comes from, will lead him to this place. Aeneas must work to defeat all the obstacles the gods and other antagonists put in his path toward fulfilling his fate. He must utilize his strength and that of his people to achieve his destiny to give rise to the Roman people.

At the beginning of Book VI, Sibyl frantically reveals to Aeneas that a bloody, hard-fought war lies in his future, "...Wars, horrendous wars, / and the Tiber foaming with tides of blood, I see it all" (Virgil 6.103-04). However, Aeneas' remains undaunted, saying,

No trials, my lady,

can loom before me in any new, surprising form.

No, deep in my spirit I have known them all,

I've faced them all before. (Virgil 6.122-25)

Aeneas's calculated reaction shows that he has come to accept that his fate is to establish Rome no matter the challenges that Sibyl has cited. He will get through whatever is against him, whether by god or man. A new earnestness of purpose seems to engulf Aeneas, who will no longer be as distracted as he was in Carthage, so he begins looking for the most direct path to Italy.

In Book X, Jove concedes to Juno's request that Turnus be removed from battle long enough to say goodbye to his father.

If what you want is reprieve from instant death,

some breathing space for the doomed young man,

and you acknowledge the limits I lay down,

then whisk your Turnus away,

pluck him out of the closing grip of Fate. (Virgil 1.735-39)

The way that Juno has worded her request shows that after so many efforts to intervene, she is officially accepting destiny. "But now, as it is, / let him die and pay his debt to the Trojans" (Virgil 10.727-28). Aeneas's fate is to establish Rome, and as the antagonist to Aeneas' protagonist, Turnus's fate is to die defending the Latinum he knows. Juno is no longer attempting to block Turnus's death; she is only trying to deter it for a specific purpose and amount of time.

The theme of Fate is especially important in *The Aeneid*. "Virgil has a strong idea of personal fate. A certain fate becomes attached to a certain person (or community) and follows him all his life" (Matthaei 11). It seems like every five minutes, the reader is reminded that the Trojans are going to find a new city in Italy. When the reader sees the souls of future Roman heroes in the Underworld or the astonishing images of Roman history on Aeneas's shield, these firmly indicate that the Trojans are going to be successful. Some may think that this might take away from the poem's suspense, but that detracts from the main point. The ancients had a distinct view of fate. In *The Aeneid*, the goddess Juno never gets tired of mentioning to the readers that destiny may decide that the Trojans will find a city in Italy, but does not stipulate how they end up doing it. Juno uses this as her angle to give the Trojans an absurd amount of trouble. The other side of this is that even though the ancients believed in fate, this does not mean that they disbelieved in free will. Thus, when Aeneas tells Dido, "I set sail for Italy— / all against my will" he does not mean that the Fates are forcing him to go there (Virgil 4.450-51). By this, Aeneas means that he has an obligation to go to Italy, and he has decided to accept his fate.

As a born leader, Aeneas has learned to respect the gods and their prophecies. "Aeneas is a fate-driven wanderer, pursuing his reluctant way from Troy to Italy" (Clausen 139-40). Although Aeneas knows what he is destined to accomplish, he still must make choices that conflict with those fated duties. Those choices ordinarily come at an emotional price. Aeneas must lose the people closest to him, such as his wife Creusa and then later Dido. He also faces many dangerous obstacles that Juno has put in place before him on his journey. Aeneas is a man of duty and piety. No matter the heartache and turmoil he faces, he accepts his fate and the role he must play without unnecessary protest.

Many characters try and fail to stop their fate from catching up to them, but they are unsuccessful. Aeneas does not really want to fulfill his fate, but he does it anyway because he does not want to know what might happen otherwise. *The Aeneid* is full of characters who want to test the limits of their fate and the circumstances of their journeys to fulfill it.

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