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The Advantage of the Stronger: Hercules and Cacus in Vergil's *Aeneid*

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Abstract: *The Hercules and Cacus episode in Book VIII highlights the problematic nature of Aeneas' exploits throughout the Aeneid. Through the violence of Hercules, Vergil makes the reader question whether a story like the founding of Rome and its eventual imperial expansion can be as cut and dry as the story of a rugged hero slaughtering someone whose name literally means "evil one" might superficially seem. Calling into question Aeneas' morality and his justification for settling in Italy in turn casts doubt on Augustus' own means of attaining power. The Hercules and Cacus episode is fundamental to our understanding of the Aeneid as a whole inasmuch as it brings up the question of right. The question of the rightful owner of Geryon's cattle finds its parallel in Aeneas and Turnus' dispute over betrothal to Lavinia, as well as in Augustus' contested claim to rule Rome. The Italy of Hercules' day, in which violence determines right, must be compared with the universal empire Augustus will eventually establish. This paper explores to what extent the Hercules and Cacus episode can influence our understanding of Aeneas and Augustus and how Vergil might be reacting to the political climate of his day through his poetry.*

Vergilian scholars widely accept that the characters of Hercules and Cacus¹ find their parallels in Aeneas and Turnus respectively. In their view, the association of Hercules with Aeneas also extends to Augustus. Llewelyn Morgan states that "the good Hercules thus parallels the good Aeneas and of course the good Augustus" and that "behind Cacus we can discern (amongst others) Turnus the enemy of Aeneas," when describing the views of traditional Vergilian scholarship.² Superficially the hero Hercules, a "*vera Iovis proles*,"³ would indeed seem like a positive model for Aeneas and Augustus with his defeat of Cacus, a cave-dwelling, semi-human, fire-breathing, murderous monster⁴ whose name literally means "evil one" in ancient Greek. Hercules' motives and means of defeating Cacus, however, cast doubt on the validity of the claim that Vergil creates a "good Hercules," which in turn makes us question whether Vergil wishes the reader to view Aeneas and Augustus as purely "good," given the clear parallels between the three figures. In addition, a close reading of the Hercules and Cacus episode not only reveals as problematic the relationship between Hercules, Aeneas and Augustus but also the inherent difficulty of a simple equivalency between Cacus and Turnus, given the fact that Cacus finds a parallel in Augustus himself. Far from contributing to Augustan propaganda, Vergil designs the Hercules and Cacus episode to show that any conflict cannot in reality represent a simple struggle between good and evil. The implications of this throw into question the morality of Aeneas' conquest of Italy and indeed Augustus' "refounding" of Rome.

The dispute between Hercules and Cacus evokes a discussion of the right to property, or what we can justly call our own. Cacus comes into contact with Hercules when he "*quattuor a stabulis praestanti corpore tauros avertit*."⁵ When Hercules learns of this theft he becomes enraged⁶ and then decides to settle the conflict by force when he "*rapit arma manu nodisque*

¹ Vergil and R.A.B. Mynors, *P. Vergili Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), *Aeneid* Bk. VIII.

² Llewelyn Morgan, "Assimilation and Civil War," in *Vergil's Aeneid: Augustan Epic and Political Context* (London: Duckworth, in association with the Classical of Wales, 1998), 176-177.

³ Vergil and Mynors, *P. Vergili Opera*, 8.301. "true offspring of Jupiter." All translations are my own.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.192-199.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.207-208. "he turns away from the stables four bulls outstanding in their body"

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.219.

gravatum robur.”⁷ Hercules’ immediate condemnation of Cacus’ action comes into question when we consider that Hercules not only stole the cattle from their original owner Geryon by force⁸ but also went so far as to murder Geryon.⁹ In drawing this comparison, Vergil forces the reader to consider both whether Cacus’ theft of the cattle from Hercules is somehow more unjust than Hercules’ original theft from Geryon and, if not, what right Hercules has in reclaiming the cattle from Cacus using lethal force.¹⁰ Can one rightfully hold claim to something that was stolen in the first place? This question cuts to the core of the problematic nature of Aeneas’ right to marry Lavinia and thereby settle Italy and of Augustus’ claim to the Roman Empire after his participation in an extremely bloody civil war.

The well-established parallel between Hercules and Aeneas and between Cacus and Turnus is critical for understanding how the Hercules and Cacus episode relates to the *Aeneid* as a whole. Hercules’ relationship to Aeneas is evident from the pair’s common relationship to Jupiter (father to Hercules and grandfather to Aeneas) and their mutual status as savior to Evander’s people. Cacus has a relationship to Turnus apart from their status as the enemies of Hercules and Aeneas respectively. Vergil uses at least two extremely similar phrases to describe both Cacus and Turnus. When Cacus sees Hercules he “*fugit ilicet ocior Euro.*”¹¹ After Turnus breaks his sword while fighting Aeneas, Turnus then “*fugit ocior Euro.*”¹² In addition, Evander says that in Hercules’ final showdown with Cacus the “*ingens specus aestuat.*”¹³ Vergil says that, while considering the Rutulian casualties, Turnus’ “*aestuat ingens pudor.*”¹⁴ Through Vergil’s intratextual linkage of Cacus and Turnus by this strikingly similar language we see that the Cacus-Turnus parallel is grounded in the text, and is not just a convenient parallel created by Vergilian scholars.

In our schema, if Hercules is Aeneas and Cacus is Turnus, then what are the cattle? What does Aeneas claim as his own which a foreign foe contests? While it may not be flattering for a young princess to be compared to a herd of cattle, the answer is Lavinia. As Hercules uses Cacus’ theft of his cattle as a reason for his ultimate destruction of Cacus, Aeneas uses Turnus’ refutation of Aeneas’ right to Lavinia as a reason for his war against the Italian tribes and his ultimate destruction of Turnus. By calling into question Hercules’ justification for his assault on Cacus with Hercules’ original theft of the cattle from Geryon, Vergil draws a parallel to the problematic nature of Aeneas’ own justification for his claim to Lavinia, his murder of Turnus, and by extension his right to conquer all of Italy.

A discussion of the circumstances under which Latinus “promises” his daughter to Aeneas is in order to understand whether Aeneas is any more justified in warring with Turnus for Lavinia than Hercules is in battling with Cacus.¹⁵ Ilioneus while suing for peace¹⁶ on Aeneas’ behalf tells Latinus, “*dis sedem exiguam patriis litusque rogamus innocuum et cunctis undamque*

⁷ Ibid., 8.220-221. “he snatches up with his hand weapons and the oak club heavy with knots”

⁸ Ibid., cf. 8.209-212 for Cacus’ sneaky yet nonviolent theft.

⁹ Ibid., 8.202 (*nece Geryonae*).

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.259-261.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.223. “he at once flees more swiftly than the east wind”

¹² Ibid., 12.733. “he flees more swiftly than the east wind”

¹³ Ibid., 8.258. “the giant cave seethes”

¹⁴ Ibid., 12.666-667. “his giant shame seethes”

¹⁵ Many of the examples and ideas used in discussing the encounter between the Trojans and Latinus were originally pointed out to me by Professor Marc Witkin in his Ancient Epic Poetry course.

¹⁶ Ibid., vid. 7.155 *pacemque exposcere Teucris*.

*auramque patentem.*¹⁷ This statement is especially strange when we compare it to Aeneas' activities at the beginning of Book VII. Just after sending his emissaries to Latinus,¹⁸ Aeneas begins building up his settlement and he even "*pinnis atque aggere cingit.*"¹⁹ Ilioneus in his speech to Latinus²⁰ neglects to mention not only that the Trojans have already started constructing a settlement, but also that they are preparing for war while they are suing for peace. Aeneas, through Ilioneus, also withholds much information which he learned in the underworld from his father Anchises, namely that Rome will encompass the whole world.²¹ In light of this, "a small settlement" is a gross understatement.

Latinus' physical behavior immediately after Ilioneus' speech and before his own allows further insight for interpreting Aeneas' intent in sending the envoy. Before responding Latinus "*defixa... obtutu tenet ora soloque immobilis haeret, intentos volvens oculos.*"²² Latinus could be reacting in this way and "delaying"²³ because he is starting to realize he has no choice in the matter. Foreign soldiers have appeared in his kingdom and he must be careful not to offend them. This could be why Latinus hedges his bets and offers Lavinia to Aeneas.²⁴ Latinus is, however, at pains to specify his terms by saying, "*pars mihi pacis erit dextram tetigisse tyranni.*"²⁵ Aeneas never actually fulfills Latinus' terms for peace and marriage but later acts like he did, waging a full-scale war against Turnus for Lavinia. While it could be argued indefinitely whether either Aeneas or Turnus has more of a claim to Lavinia, suffice it to say that we are far from being able to claim that Aeneas, beyond any doubt, has an absolute right to marry her. Through Ilioneus, Aeneas conceals a great deal of information from Latinus and then does not even fulfill the terms which Latinus specifies. There is also the possibility, as we have seen, that Latinus only gives in to the Trojans' requests because he is intimidated by the Trojan arrival in Italy. Aeneas will obtain Lavinia by any means necessary, just as Hercules did both to obtain the cattle in the first place from Geryon and to retrieve them from Cacus.

It is not clear whether Hercules has any real right to his cattle or whether Aeneas has any real right to Lavinia, yet they both relentlessly attack the only thing that stands in their way (Cacus and Turnus respectively) to demonstrate their perceived right. Evander's description of Hercules' killing of Cacus includes many grotesque details which point to the excessive violence of Hercules. Evander says, "*hic Cacum in tenebris incendia vana vomentem corripit in nodum complexus, et angit inhaerens elisos oculos et siccum sanguine guttur.*"²⁶ This violence, along with the fact that throughout the passage Hercules is associated with fury,²⁷ an emotion which occludes reason, shows that Hercules is not acting according to any principle about justice. Even if Hercules did have some rightful claim to the cattle, although he himself stole them from Geryon, he is not acting to ensure that any universal principle about right to one's property remains intact *in perpetuum* or even to protect the townspeople from Cacus' savagery. Hercules

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.230-231. "we ask for a small settlement and a harmless shore and water and air which lies open to all"

¹⁸ Ibid., 7.152-155.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.159. "girds it with ramparts and a mound"

²⁰ Ibid., 7.213-248.

²¹ Ibid., 6.781-782.

²² Ibid., 7.249-251. "holds his face fixed in a gaze and, immobile, keeps it to the ground, turning his intent eyes"

²³ Ibid., 7.253.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.268.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.266. "a term of peace will be for me to grasp your chief's right hand."

²⁶ Ibid., 8.259-261. "then he (Hercules) after gripping him in a knot, snatches Cacus, who was belching out useless fires in the shadows, and throttles him until his eyes popped out and his throat was dry with blood"

²⁷ Ibid., 8.219-220. *hic vero Alcidae furiis exarserat atro felle dolor, 8.238 ecce furens animis aderat Tiryntius.*

simply gets angry²⁸ that Cacus stole his cattle and then proceeds to exact revenge upon him. Hercules' inherently selfish motivation carries an especially large importance when contrasted with the veneration for him of Evander's people. Evander says, "*ex illo celebratus honos laetique minors servavere diem.*"²⁹ They honor Hercules as if he had accomplished this "great" feat specifically for their good and not for personal reasons.

At the end of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas and Turnus' final confrontation strongly invites comparison with that of Hercules and Cacus. In his killing of Turnus, Aeneas exhibits both the extreme violence and selfish motivation of Hercules. After being wounded, Turnus, a "*humilis supplex*,"³⁰ tells Aeneas, "*vicisti et victum tendere palmas Ausonii videre; tua est Lavinia coniunx.*"³¹ Turnus puts himself in the position of a suppliant, admits defeat in front of his people and confirms that he relinquishes his claim to Lavinia. Turnus no longer will thwart Aeneas' goal of founding a settlement in Latium and marrying Lavinia. As Michael Putnam puts it, "after Turnus' speech Aeneas can no longer use his mission as justification for or cause of the use of force."³²

If, however, Aeneas proceeded to kill Turnus without hesitation one could conceivably argue that Aeneas either ignored Turnus' logical appeal or still viewed Turnus as a threat to the completion of his mission. Instead, we see that Turnus' words cause Aeneas to give pause,³³ an indication that Aeneas understands that it would be useless to kill Turnus at this point. Then Aeneas sees Pallas' baldric on Turnus' shoulder³⁴ and becomes enraged.³⁵ Ruled by his anger Aeneas tells Turnus, "*tunc hinc spoliis indute meorum eripiare mihi? Pallas te hoc vulnere, Pallas immolat et poenam scelerato ex sanguine sumit.*"³⁶ Based on what he says, Aeneas kills Turnus³⁷ not for any principle or higher purpose but instead, much like Hercules did to Cacus, to exact revenge for a personal reason. In addition, Aeneas attempts to relieve himself of responsibility for this final act by attributing it to Pallas. We see that Aeneas has killed Turnus, a suppliant, not for any logical end, but instead because he was overcome by rage stemming from a personal loss. Since Evander's people praise Hercules and yet do not understand the motivation for his deeds, similarly the conventional praise of Aeneas, and by extension of Augustus, is made out of ignorance of their true nature and intent.

The story of Hercules and Cacus encapsulates the essential problem of the *Aeneid* as a whole. Vergil, barring the obvious excuse that "the gods willed it," cannot justify the treacherous and excessively violent means which Aeneas uses to lay claim to Italy. Vergil forces the reader to compare Hercules and Aeneas' problematic interpretation of right with that of Augustus. If Hercules and Aeneas lay claim to and eventually obtain by extremely violent means something which was not their own in the first place, one cannot help but reflect on whether Augustus has any legitimate claim to Rome, other than that he was the strongest, most violent contender for it.

²⁸ Ibid., 8.219.

²⁹ Ibid., 8.268-269. "from then his honor was celebrated and future generations happily safeguarded that day"

³⁰ Ibid., 12.930. "humble suppliant"

³¹ Ibid., 12.936-937. "you have won and the Ausonians have seen me, conquered, outstretch my hands; Lavinia is your wife"

³² Michael Putnam, "The Hesitation of Aeneas," in *Vergil's Aeneid Interpretation and Influence* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1996), 155.

³³ Vergil and Mynors, *P. Vergili Opera*, 12.938-941.

³⁴ Ibid., 12.941-944.

³⁵ Ibid., 12.946-947 *furiis accensus et ira terribilis*, cf. Hercules 8.219, 8.228.

³⁶ Ibid., 12.948-949. "will you from here, wearing the spoils of my people, be snatched away from me? Pallas sacrifices you with this wound, Pallas exacts punishment from your criminal blood"

³⁷ Ibid., 12.950-952.

Vergil's characterization of Aeneas, which is at best ambiguous and at worst completely damning, would suffice to taint the reader's perception of Augustus. R. J. Tarrant explains, "Although [Aeneas] is an independent character and not an allegorical substitute for Augustus, the connections between the two are so strong that the view taken of one must inevitably colour [sic] one's view of the other."³⁸ In addition to this explanation, textual evidence corroborates a less than purely positive depiction of Augustus in the *Aeneid*.

Augustus resembles not only the "heroes" Hercules and Aeneas, but also the hideous monster Cacus. Vergil connects Cacus to Augustus by applying very similar language to both of them. Vergil uses the verb "*vomo*" or "vomit" three times in describing Cacus.³⁹ Through the constant application of this verb to Cacus, Vergil associates any future use of it with this character. The center of Aeneas' shield depicts "*Augustus... geminas cui tempora flammis laeta vomunt*."⁴⁰ Out of all possible choices, Vergil uses "*vomo*" of Augustus, the supposed antithesis of a cave-dwelling monster. "Such closely related imagery... cannot help but make us associate Cacus and Augustus."⁴¹ Vergil also connects the two through images of extreme violence. In Cacus' cave "*semperque recenti caede tepebat humus, foribusque adfixa superbis ora virum tristi pendebant pallida tabo*."⁴² At the battle of Actium "*arva nova Neptunia caede rubescunt*."⁴³ Whereas the speed with which they fled their enemy formed the primary link between Cacus and Turnus, carnage, gore and death do so between Cacus and Augustus. Vergil separates the "*semihomo*"⁴⁴ Cacus into his human and inhuman halves, giving one to Turnus and Augustus respectively. Turnus receives the sympathetic Cacus' mortal fear of death while Augustus receives the monstrous Cacus' savagery towards humans. Cacus forces the reader to sympathize with Turnus' plight and fear the violence of Augustus.

Vergil's representation of the *Dirae*, *Discordia* and *Bellona* fighting on Augustus' behalf render Augustus' claim to rule even more problematic.⁴⁵ The *Dirae* or "Furies" show that Augustus, the master of the known world, is controlled by his emotions, *Discordia* reminds us that the war against Antony was a civil war against fellow Romans, and *Bellona* reinforces the inherent inhumanity of war. Vergil makes the reader remember just what Augustus did to become emperor. It is essentially what Vergil depicts Hercules and Aeneas as doing in the battle with Cacus and in the war against Turnus. Vergil's portrayal of Hercules casts serious doubts on Aeneas' and Augustus' claim to Italy while Cacus further distorts any possible representation of a purely "good" Augustus. The implications of the Hercules and Cacus episode shatter the original good-evil dichotomy which it superficially established.

But what exactly is so frightening about Hercules' destruction of Cacus? It is the fact that Hercules makes himself Cacus' judge, jury and executioner all at once. There is no law against which to measure Hercules' actions. Aeneas puts himself in a similar position with respect to Turnus, as does Augustus with respect to his enemies in the civil war. Hercules, Aeneas and Augustus apparently interpret justice the same way as Thrasymachus does in the *Republic*, that

³⁸ R.J. Tarrant, "Introduction," in *Aeneid Book 12* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 24.

³⁹ Vergil and Mynors, *P. Vergili Opera*, 8.198-199 *atros ore vomens ignis, 8.252-253 faucibus ingentem fumum (mirabile dictu) evomit, 8.259 Cacus in tenebris incendia vana vomentem*.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.678-681. "Augustus... whose happy brows vomit twin flames"

⁴¹ Llewelyn Morgan, "Assimilation and Civil War: Hercules and Cacus," 179.

⁴² Vergil and Mynors, *P. Vergili Opera*, 8.195-197. "the ground was always warm with recent slaughter, and the heads of men hung on the haughty doors hung with sad pale putrid fluid"

⁴³ Ibid., 8.695. "The fields of Neptune grew red with fresh slaughter"

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8.194.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.701-703.

“the just is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger.”⁴⁶ Whoever can violently defeat all his opponents is able to create a system of justice which coincides perfectly with his own deeds. As the saying goes, the victor writes the history books. Vergil is trying to correct this by creating an eternal account of the victors’ inhumanity. In the *Aeneid* he shows the reader that all three figures’ actions presented moral ambiguities up until they demonstrated that they were the strongest, at which point all began to praise them out of fear.

Vergil has removed the possibility that Hercules, Aeneas and Augustus have any sure claim to their objectives. He does not address as clearly whether the results of their actions somehow transcend the violence and moral corruption which gave rise to them. In other words, we are yet to answer the question whether the ends justify the means. Our understanding of Vergil’s view on this is connected to our interpretation of the relationship between Hercules’ and Aeneas’ violent acts and the universal empire which Augustus will eventually establish. Vergil presents Hercules and Aeneas as living in a lawless time. Hercules murders Geryon for his cattle and then murders Cacus to get them back. There is no rule of law to decide who has the right to cattle in the first place and each individual is allowed to decide for himself what is right and then use force or theft to back up his idea of right. In Aeneas’ case, there is no judge to decide to whom Lavinia belonged or whether Aeneas had any right in slaying Turnus. Augustus’ purported establishment of universal peace through empire would ostensibly end any such disputes not governed by the rule of law. Augustus through violence paradoxically establishes an empire which would end any possible violent dispute such as the one between Geryon, Hercules and Cacus or between Aeneas and Turnus. As violence is inherently necessary for peace, injustice is necessary for any just rule. Augustus’ foundation of a world empire prevents a Hercules or Aeneas from creating his own measure of justice while at the same time endowing one man with the ability to do just that for the entire human race. Empire eliminates the possibility of injustice in the individual by creating a universal measure of right, subordinate to the whims of one man, thus destroying the distinction between freedom and slavery. All are free from the injustice of each other yet enslaved by the ultimate injustice of the emperor.

⁴⁶ Plato and Allan Bloom, *The Republic* (New York: Basic, 1968), 338c1-338c2.

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