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David Dysert
Portland State University

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Vergil's Aeneid: A Homeric Dichotomy?

*Twinkle, twinkle little star.
How I wonder what you are.*

MOZART'S *Ah Vous Dirai-je Maman*, K.265, is a timeless series of variations on the children's classic "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," a pervasive melody in Western culture. Mozart brilliantly manipulates the previous work creating an entirely different musical statement while retaining elements of the original throughout. Beginning with a nearly exact copy of the original, the composer moves to a somewhat melancholy tone and then concludes with a race to the finish. The listener is delighted by Mozart's use of the common melody. Vergil's contemporaries were probably equally, if not more, delighted with his work, the *Aeneid*. Vergil, like Mozart, (or should we say Mozart, like Vergil!) incorporates the material of many predecessors to create a different poetic statement.

Vergil displays mastery of the cultural mythos of the Greek world — a mythos that was transferred to and manifested in the Roman world to a pervasive depth. Keeping with the

Roman tradition of imitation and improvement, he fashioned the originally Greek myth of Rome, despite all its versions and vagueness (which one might argue were to his benefit), into a brilliant show of epic poetry. (*The Art of Vergil*, 8-12) In effect he became the "Roman Homer" and, one could argue, a better Homer. Vergil fused the elements of the Homeric epic style and its mythos with the history and values of Rome to create a work of profound patriotic and cultural meaning. So vast is the amount of previous material Vergil manipulates in the *Aeneid*, that it is impossible to cite all of it at one time. From Homer to Cicero to Apollonius to Plato to Euripides, in short the entire Greek and Roman literary tradition, Vergil encompasses a multitude of resources in his epic poem. Without question Homer is Vergil's main resource. A myriad of scholars have written on the Homeric qualities of Vergil 'dichotomising' the *Aeneid*. I, however, differ with this approach. For this reason I shall deal primarily with the question of the dichotomy's validity and the *Aeneid's* primary Homeric source, if, indeed, there is one.

The detail in which Vergil executes his work is extraordinary and the subtlety he achieves marks him as a true genius of his art. To read the *Aeneid* with all its subtlety and depth of allusiveness one must be as versed in the Greek and Roman traditions as Vergil himself. Thus the amount of detail one wishes to extract from the work is dependent upon the time taken in the cross-reference process. In his *The Aeneid of Virgil*, R.D. Williams has revealed an impressive amount of allusive material. Dido's curse to Aeneas, for example, that his limbs be torn and scattered over the sea, is a direct reference to one of the most horrible of Greek myths in which Medea tore her brother into pieces and scattered them on the sea. During Vergil's Rutulian catalogue of men, a purely Homeric device, he lists Virbius and an elaborate piece of mythology. Virbius is the son of Hippolytus who refused the love of his stepmother, Phaedra (Theseus' wife). Out of grief she committed suicide and left a note accusing Hippolytus. At Theseus' request, Neptune caused Hippolytus' horses to be frightened and Hippolytus was killed. Euripides' play *Hippolytus* is a dramatization of the myth. Vergil employs the imagery of previous works as well. Thus, Aeneas' encounter with Dido in the Underworld begins with a simile of the moon's dim light, which refers to Apollonius Rhodius' account of the love story of Jason

and Medea. Apollonius' epic poem was the first intimate analysis of the emotions of love within the genre. It sets the precedent for Vergil's use of Dido, and parallels between Jason, Medea and Aeneas/Dido can be reasonably defended. The moonlight encounter also echoes the *Odyssey* where while Odysseus speaks to the ghost of Ajax, the ghost leaves without a word, just as Dido will leave Aeneas. Then, too, the emblem worn by Turnus (a Chimaera) suggests the violence and love of fighting of the archaic world; it is yet another example of Vergil's commitment to detail. But this is not merely detail for the sake of detail; it is meticulous craftsmanship which leads to a higher level of reading is the work.

Vergil, as mentioned above, uses a vast amount of material in the *Aeneid*. It is without question, however, that the primary source for Vergil is Homer. The most basic example of this is Neptune's prophecy that Aeneas is destined to escape Troy and rule over the Trojans (*Iliad*, 20). It is the price that will be paid in order to fulfill this prophecy that is the subject of the Roman hymn. Vergil undoubtedly regarded the epic poet with great esteem and attempted, I believe quite successfully, to imitate the Homeric tradition if not to compete with it. The challenge of his task was twofold: to incorporate the dactylic hexameter of Homer into the Latin tongue and to incorporate the pervasive Greek mythos of Rome into an epic which would uphold the virtues of Roman culture, e.g. pietas, truth, etc. He succeeded at both. The *Aeneid* is regarded as one of most beautiful poems ever written and Vergil's Aeneas experiences the epic environment of Homer, yet he remains unquestionably Roman. Yet, ironically, Aeneas is a Homeric character — a Trojan.

The *Aeneid* traditionally has been viewed as composite: half *Odyssey* and half *Iliad*. Structurally, in general terms, this is true. The first six books depict travel and the last six depict fighting. But Vergil was a master of subtlety and generalities can inhibit a more complete viewing of the work. The bipartite view is typical of late Roman scholarship and it might possibly stem from as early as the Augustan age. (*Virgil's Augustan Epic*, 177) K.W. Grandsen in *Virgil's Iliad* accepts the traditional dichotomy as given and focuses on the second half of the work as an "imitatio" of the *Iliad*; brilliantly establishing its equivalence as epic narrative to the more popular first half of Vergil. Ironically, Vergil himself regarded the second half as the "greater" half. Grandsen makes a valid point

regarding the place of repose at the end of *Aeneid* VI: although readers have a choice at the end of book VI to go on or to pause, they will pause because it is not only a spatial metaphor (ship drops anchor thus ending voyage) which indicates a significant landmark in a long narrative, but it is a particularly significant moment in the narrative. Book VI in terms of structure is pivotal to the *Aeneid*: Aeneas must leave the underworld and move to Latium. He cannot turn back. The future has been revealed by his father and he now must go forward. Grandsen certainly makes a strong case for a dichotomy of the *Aeneid* by citing this apparent shift. However, I would argue that this shift does not force the reader out of the world of the *Odyssey* and into the world of the *Iliad*. Grandsen admits that "as the reader moves into book VII he finds that the mood of remoteness and alienation which had pervaded book VI has not yet been dissipated." Although the "mood" may not shift at that point, there indeed is a shift from book VI to book VII, but is it a shift from the *Odyssey* to the *Iliad*?

This transition appears to be a gray area for many scholars who are confident with the beginning and the end of the work, but are somewhat hesitant to draw Homeric boundaries, within its mid-section. Viktor Poschl has written:

Vergil with his wonderful sense of balance permeating the whole poem thus achieves perfection: he rises from the narrowly Homeric to his own zenith and returns again to Homer. Within the Homeric shell lies the Vergilian kernel. (*The Art of Vergil*, 28)

Poschl notes that the first book of Vergil relates closest to the *Odyssey* and similarly the last book is the closest to the *Iliad* — a conscious intention on the part of Vergil to create "a classical feeling for symmetry." His statement does not support fully the traditional view nor does it articulate a clear opposition to it; however, his observations by implication negate the traditional dichotomy by viewing the Homeric epics as essentially one body of work and recognizing that they are "intertextualized"; thus transcending the bipartite view and in effect rendering it invalid. His references to the "Homeric man" tend to minimize the distinction between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and emphasize the distinctions between Vergil and Homer. He offers a tripartite

division of the work. The "Trojan *Iliad*" in the first third, the "hero's emancipation" in the middle third, and the "Italian *Iliad*" in the last third are Poschl's answer to the question of organization in Vergil's epic; thus he contends that the *Aeneid* is an expression of organized thought. Poschl mentions a fusion of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* which creates a higher unity, avoiding any lengthy discussion on the question of whether or not a particular epic of Homer is a primary source for Virgil, and he instead deals with Vergil's more highly developed use of poetic symbolism and the other distinctions that set him apart from Homer.

F. Cairns clearly rejects the traditional dichotomy. He writes:

If trivial and merely verbal items are left aside, it leads to the conclusion that sustained Iliadic influence begins only in *Aeneid* 8, and Odyssean influence declines only in *Aeneid* 9. (*Virgil's Augustan Epic*, 178)

The terms "trivial" and "merely verbal" with regard to Vergil could be nearly akin to blasphemy to the ears of those who maintain Vergil's genius. Nonetheless, Cairns makes a thoughtful point in suggesting that a more accurate view of the *Aeneid* is needed. Crucial to his argument is the negation of the transition from book VI to book VII. He contends that the material in books VII-VIII (Aeneas' arrival and initial experiences in Italy) is derived from Odysseus' and Telemachus' arrivals in the *Odyssey*. Thus there is not a shift from one Homeric epic to the other. The games of book V, the account of the Trojan horse in the "Odyssean" half, the suitor motif in the "Iliadic" half, the fact that both stories are "returns" and both climax in civil war, etc, are mentioned to strengthen his argument. Cairns admits that this is an oversimplification of plot summary, however, he maintains that no parallel Iliadic account could be sustained. Thus Cairns' "more accurate view" is of the *Aeneid* as a "unitary *Odyssey* with significant Iliadic episodes." He further argues that the *Odyssey* and its hero were more favored by the Romans; in support we can cite the works of other Roman poets, chiefly Horace.

The scholarship mentioned is without doubt very detailed and well documented. However, the question remains: why must the *Aeneid* be viewed as a sectioned work of Homeric imitation? Why is there a need to assign a numeric fractional quantity to

correspond with the Greek epics? It is not necessary, for example, to section the *Aeneid* in order to recognize that Dido and Medea can be paralleled, nor to recognize any other Vergilian illusions, for that matter. Vergil, I argue, is much more subtle in his use of predecessors. Vergil clearly does not make reference to the Greek epics with regard to sectioned parts of his work. The complexity of his "intertextualization" of the Homeric epics previously mentioned substantiates this view. His allusiveness is not confined to artificial boundaries created by later scholarship nor are his characters confined to merely Homeric limits. For example the character of Aeneas is not an Achilles nor an Odysseus, and yet he is both. This paradox can be explained by Vergil's attempt to use the Homeric material without creating a Homeric hero. Throughout the work Aeneas (and other characters as well) are given the words of or placed in the situation of one or more of the Homeric heroes. For example in the first section of Vergil, Aeneas in a fit of terror speaks words which recall those of Odysseus. Compare Aeneas' remarks:

How fortunate were you, thrice fortunate and more,
whose luck it was to die under the high walls of
Troy before your parents' eye! Ah, Diomede, most
valiant of Greeks, why did your arm not strike me
down and give my spirit freedom in death on the
battlefields of Ilium, where lie the mighty Sarpedon,
and Hector the manslayer, pierced by Achilles'
lance, and where Simois rolls down submerged
beneath his stream those countless shields and
helms and all those valiant dead!

with Odysseus' remarks during a similar storm at sea:

Three times and four times happy those Danaans
were who died then in wide Troy land, bringing
favor to the sons of Atreus, as I wish I too had died
at that time and met my destiny on the day when the
greatest number of Trojans threw their bronze-
headed weapons upon me, over the body of
perished Achilles, and I would have had my rites
and the Achaians given me glory.

This "juxtaposition" on the part of Vergil implies that the reader is

to use the Homeric reference as a foil to Aeneas. By doing so, the reader is given a more meaningful picture of the nature of the Vergilian hero. Aeneas is both of the Homeric heroes if one applies the "what one does is what one is" mentality to the character. But there is unquestionably a difference between Vergil's hero and Homers'. The difference is the motivation — the psychology of Aeneas. In this passage he cries out in terror, but Odysseus fears that he will die without "glory." It is clearly indicative of a different set of values which is manifest in the work. Why should the reader "box" Aeneas into either of the Homeric roles? There are obvious parallels, but the parallels should be used to compare and contrast in order to lift higher meaning from the work and not to satisfy a need to label or to make decisive conclusions. Why limit Aeneas to merely a Homeric role? Could it be that in this case Vergil is not the imitator that we see him as?

The fact that scholars have differing views as to what exactly the Homeric organization of the *Aeneid* is speaks to the subtlety of Vergil's allusiveness. It is true that Vergil himself has labeled the work dichotomous, but he does not label it a Homeric dichotomy. All this tends to suggest that Vergil is toying with the organization of his Homeric references. It is curious (and I believe quite noteworthy) that in his work he has reversed the alleged order of the Greek epics, that is, our belief that the *Iliad* is the predecessor to the *Odyssey*. Inherent within any manipulation of previous work there will exist a degree of toying with material, but I believe that Vergil has quite intentionally used the material in a playful manner displaying the true poetic artist that he was.

Vergil is a master of subtlety. His work cannot be confined to artificial boundaries which inhibit a more complete viewing of the work and a true appreciation for his artistry. The traditional dichotomy of previous scholarship is valid only in very general terms and any detailed analysis of the *Aeneid* will require a more flexible view allowing for Vergil's synthesis of the Homeric epics. It is this synthesis that distinguishes Vergil (and Mozart) as a master craftsman capable of brilliantly shaping the work of his predecessors into an entirely different work with an entirely different poetic statement.

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