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Homer in Virgil

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After studying Virgil's *Aeneid* one can surmise. that Virgil understood Homer's epics, and that he wanted to incorporate both *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* within *The Aeneid*. Although Virgil drew upon a large array of predecessors including Lucretious, Appolonious, Homer, and Plato (to name a few), I believe that the biggest influence was Homer. It can also be said that Virgil did not just imitate Homer, but that he transformed his works to make them the base of his own poem (Knauer 402). In this essay, I will show how Virgil has made use of Homer's epics, their structures and units of action, and a few select characters that Virgil deemed important enough to imitate in a related yet diverse fashion to benefit his own poem and intent.

I believe it is first necessary to mention Virgil's intent in writing *The Aeneid* and why he chose to emulate Homer's epics. Virgil's intent was not singular, yet one main purpose was to identify the family of Augustus with Aeneas through Aeneas' divine ancestry — with hopes of popularizing a "divine" emperor. One way that he achieved this was by comparing Aeneas to Herakles in the first part of the poem by introducing Aeneas as "a fugitive of fate" and "a man persecuted by harsh Juno." These are certainly echoes of Herakles and his story

(Galinsky 277). Throughout the poem Virgil portrays Aeneas as a hero who excels Odysseus and Achilles in events mirrored from *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. These units of action from Homer were used by Virgil to elevate Aeneas as a greater hero in the public eye. Doubtless Virgil hoped that his Italic readers would regard Aeneas with the same kind of personal intensity with which they worshipped Heracles and Odysseus (Galinsky 294). There may not have been a better way to accomplish this than to use Homer as a model to emulate and connect the primordial ancestors with Augustus.

The structural relationships of Homer and Virgil are apparent yet fairly complicated. The effects Homer achieved with his structure were a success that Virgil wanted to draw upon, but not copy. In many cases Virgil condensed key elements of Homer's action into shorter images of the original. One can say that the "Virgilian Odyssey" exists in books 1-6, yet with a closer look one must restrict this statement because Aeneid 1 and the departure of the Trojans corresponds with Odyssey 5 (not Od. 1), where Odysseus leaves Ogygie, an island like Sicily (Knauer 396). Virgil reaches the same point of action at the end of Aeneid 1 as Homer reaches at the end of Odyssey 8: Odysseus is the unknown guest of Alcinous and is asked to recite his adventures, and correspondingly, Virgil has Aeneas describe his own adventures to Dido. Homer's narration of the wanderings of Odysseus is contained in chapters 9-12, and Aeneas' "Odyssey" is in Aeneid 2-3. Virgil has preserved the relative size of the narrative in proportion to the entire poem, as each narration is one sixth of each entire poem (Knauer 396). This leads to the point that Virgil has imitated the Homeric structure, but has not exactly duplicated it. The size and content of the narratives are alike, but it seems as though Virgil's intent here was to make use of the great Odysseus and then surpass him with Aeneas. The action of the wandering Odysseus is surpassed by Aeneas, whom Virgil deems a bit wiser by letting him pass Scylla and Charybdis and

the storm at Cape Maleia unscathed. Another example shows Odysseus' journey to the realm of the dead *(nekyia)* is much smaller in proportion to the *katabasis* of Aeneas. This shows how important the element of addressing the dead to see the guaranteed future was to Virgil. He took the Homeric structure and moved the journey: in *The Odyssey* it is in chapter 11, in the middle of the narrative, whereas in *The Aeneid* it lies at the end of the wandering narrative and close to the arrival of the Trojans in Italy. Virgil made the *katabasis* twice as long in relation to the *nekyia* of Odysseus. He also added the important idea of learning about the predestination of the family of Aeneas to Augustus, thus strengthening one intent of his poem. Virgil used Homer's structure in alike, amplified, and dissimilar ways as a means of accomplishing the task of writing *The Aeneid* and giving it individual, yet Homeric, structure and impact. From Homer Virgil took what he wanted. He went on to mix, slightly alter, and in some cases greatly change the Homeric imitations. Then he formulated his own relative poem with its own intent.

Many characters from both of Homer's epics are imitated in *The Aeneid*. Often Virgil has taken more than one Homeric character and combined them into a single character in *The Aeneid*. In some obvious examples one sees Odysseus, Achilles, and Telemachus within the character of Aeneas, one sees Lavinia as both Penelope and Helen, and in Dido one sees even more: Arete, Alcinous, Circe, Calypso, and Medea. Virgil has also done this in a reverse fashion by combining three characters in the Homeric character of Elpenor. The obvious imitation in the Aeneid is Palinurus and his sleepy fall to his death — an accident like Elpenor's drunken fall. Both of these characters approach Odysseus and Aeneas on each's journey to the underworld, where they ask each hero for a proper burial. Elpenor receives his burial after the return of Odysseus. Yet in *The Aeneid* Virgil has changed a few instances by echoing the burial with that of the nurse Caieta

instead of Palinurus, who was lost at sea, "whereas Virgil has already imitated, in the funeral of Misenus in Book 6, details of that of Elpenor. Elpenor thus has become Palinurus, Mesenus, and Caieta" (Knauer 395).

Virgil's Dido is taken from many characters, and the characterization of Dido is another example of how Virgil has used the Homeric structure of characters in contrasting ways to his benefit. Homer's Circe is awestruck to find that she is confronted with Odysseus, who avoids her attempt to transform him into a pig. She had been forewarned by Hermes that he would visit. After she recognizes him, his companions are freed, and Circe and Odysseus eventually make love. Virgil takes Circe's role and gives it to Dido in a different setting with the same function. After Aeneas has witnessed Dido conversing with his companions, who think Aeneas is lost, Venus then dissolves the protective cloud from around Achates and Aeneas as it becomes clear that Dido will shelter the Trojans. Dido is awestruck like Circe was when first confronted with the hero, of whom Dido had learned about earlier from Telamonian Teucer (Ilioneus) (Knauer 400-401). Dido then takes on the role of listening to the narrative of Aeneas, as Arete and Alcinous of Phaeacia did for Odysseus. Virgil then again imitates Calypso within Dido. Both Dido and Calypso vainly tried to marry the heroes, but each hero rescinded the offer, looking to the future and returning to the wives that were awaiting their arrival — Penelope for Odysseus and Lavinia for Aeneas. These previous examples of both character structure and imitated units of action show how diverse Virgil's imitation of Homeric structure was. One reason for this varied approach was to enhance the effect it had on Virgil's immediate audience who was familiar with Homer. I believe it can be said that Virgil wanted to use and amplify familiar structures and images in a new setting and story, with hopes of holding the audience's attention and surpassing the Homeric with his own version.

The character of Aeneas within his own Trojan war shows many faces of Virgil's diverse style of Homeric imitation. In *The Iliad* Achilles needed a new shield because Hector kept his arms after slaying Patroclus. Virgil imitated this action by giving Aeneas new divine weapons made by Vulcan (Hephaistos). Yet the two shields differ in their appearance and meaning. The new shield of Achilles carries representations of the sky, a city at peace with a wedding and a lawsuit in progress, a city at war with an ambush in a river bed, and scenes from a farm, a vineyard, a hunt, and a dance floor — none of them is relevant to the plot of *The Iliad* (West 295). The new shield of Aeneas shows the destined future of Rome with six separate pieces of Roman history and the depiction of the triumph in Actium as the centerpiece. These illustrations were relevant to Virgil's political intent of Augustinian predestination; yet the shield of Aeneas was not needed as his original armor served him sufficiently. It follows that the shield of Aeneas was not necessary and its illustrations were directly relevant, and the opposite is true for Achilles. Virgil's reconstruction of this action is a Homeric paradox that can be easily explained. Virgil has given his hero new divine weapons to mirror the sense of the *aristeia* of Achilles. But added to that, he has taken it a step further to illustrate for his Italic audience the truthful pursuit of Aeneas as surpassing the barbarity of Achilles. The gleaming shield with tangible illustrations of predestination show what Aeneas the true was fighting for. In the case of Achilles one finds him to be godlike in his power and sub-human in his wrath and intent. More than anything Achilles wanted to be remembered as the great warrior along the lines of Heracles. Aeneas wanted to win his own Trojan war and reestablish his *oikos* and *phatria* within Italy. Virgil has taken the great character of Achilles and surpassed him with the restructuring of a more virtuous hero. This example of Homeric imitation is a centerpiece of what Virgil wanted to show his audience. He knew his audience

would receive a hero like Achilles. Yet Virgil wanted to show a truer character that was more godlike in his pursuit of virtue. The original version of Homer's hero gave Virgil's audience a base to compare to and draw from. Since Achilles was already regarded as a great hero, an imitated and improved Achilles would only prove to be more virtuous in his story of Augustus and the birth of Rome from Troy.

All these examples of Homeric imitation lead to the point that the previous existence of Homer's characters and units of action were a necessity for Virgil's success in constructing such an influential poem. He drew upon the work of the primordial, and used its success to amplify his own. Virgil objectively delved into Homer and used key elements of structure and character in addition to using *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* as the bases of his own story. Not only was his use of Homer effective, but it seems as though it was very necessary for Virgil to accomplish his goals in writing *The Aeneid*.

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