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M. Contogiorgis

325/4 Roman Epic

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Fate in *The Aeneid*

"But now (since care consumes you, I shall speak
more fully and reveal Fates hidden page)
he'll rage hard war in Italy; savage tribes
he must defeat, and gives them homes and laws." (10)

"You great of heaven, why have you now reversed
your will and moved to strife and cruelty?
I ruled that Troy and Italy must not fight!
Why this forbidden war? (211)

So speaks Jove. Certainly, this incongruity cannot be
resolved; and so it is perhaps fortunate that it does not
actually exist.

Our initial task must be to establish the precise nature
of fate, and that nature primarily demonstrates an
undeniable duality. It is in this twofold quality that the
solution to the non-existent contradiction can be found—
where we might observe it to be nothing more than a matter
of mistaken identity.

The first of the two fates is singular and predominantly universal; the second, pluralistic and aligned more closely to the individual. This might be clarified as the destiny of a nation, or even of a world, within which individual fates of men are contained. The two are depicted as being of quite different constitutions.

Though this seems at first straight forward, the line of division is not always easily observed, particularly when the destiny of an individual is closely aligned with a grander destiny. A good example of this occurs in relation to Turnus. At first glance, it seems that his individual fate is inexorably bound with that of the Trojans, and by extension, with that of the Romans. This is not really the case though, for the establishment of the Trojans in Italy is not dependent upon Turnus' existence—and his opposition to Aeneas is not entirely of his own choice: his individual fate is moulded by the interference of Juno.

The words that decry the fate of the individual then are not chiselled in granite: the possibility to avoid or change the individual's fate is demonstrated numerously in *The Aeneid*. We find one instance of this, regarding Turnus and as indicated above, when Jove tells Juno:

“If you would ask for Turnus brief reprieve
from death, and will accept my ruling so,
save Turnus; let him escape impending fate”. (228)

Here we see individual fate changed by the god's intervention, though it is demonstrated equally that the man

can himself bring about such a transformation. "'Let him have lived whom God or right arm saved.'" (240) Again, this is in reference to Turnus. Certainly the hero is bound to fate, and yet the possibility of free will is maintained, for his life might be saved not only by God, but by his own action, the results of his own "right arm."

The source of man's individual fate, it seems, is within himself. Turnus was unquestionably a bad strategist, a bad politician, a bad diplomat, and a bad character to boot; and it was for these reasons—to a large degree, and once the new course had been set by Juno—that his individual fate was what it was. Importantly, because the source of man's individual fate is within himself, Juno's tampering was necessarily inner tampering, using Turnus' bad character as the means of redirecting his own destiny.

Predetermined though mutable destinies are not the sole properties of heroes. References to fate associated with minor characters are numerous, though for brevity's sake we might take Orodes' dying words to Mezentius as being proof enough: "'A fate like mine/eyes you already'" (232)

Because of the very individual *attachment* of the fates,¹ it is logical that there exist as many of them as of people.

Though we often see fate used as a synonym for death, interestingly an individual's fate does not necessarily end

¹Referred to here in the plural as they are often in *The Aeneid*.

at the point of death. This demonstrates the supernatural in its character as well as adding another dimension to an already complex entity. During Aeneas' voyage into the underworld we find:

“Who were those people that swarmed about its banks?
Then Lord Anchises: “Those are souls whose fate
binds them to flesh once more.”

Fate decides not only the region of hell the departed soul will occupy, but also, in some instances, whether or not reincarnation will allow for its own continuation.

Just as we see a good deal of anthropomorphism in *The Aeneid*, individual fate too, more the word or the choice of god than a god itself, seems at times almost human. In the words of the dead Deiphobus:

Fate and that murdering she-devil from Sparta
gave me these wounds (130)

Even in the last gasps of Orodes, above, there is the element of personification. As we have seen, the relatively mundane fate which aligns itself to an individual has several qualities and complexities to its character. The most important point though, is that this individual fate, this fate specific to one man, individualistic even in itself, not only has the potential and character of mutability, but also the ability.²

²Poetic Licence has been applied for, though several additional forms have yet to be filled in. In the mean time, please read such instances as

Above the individual fates there is that more universal one, which concerns itself with a larger sphere of events. This father fate—so to speak—allows, as we have seen, a certain amount of change and redirection in the lives of the individual and lesser ones, so long as those changes remain within the bounds of that larger destiny.

Just as each individual fate was shown to have its human counter part, it would be logical to assume that so too does this larger one. The attachment, our tidy logic would insist, would be to Jove. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Because of the anthropomorphic quality of the gods, the temptation to judge them on human terms is great. This, for the large part, would not necessarily lead to erroneous reading—indeed, the rivalry between Venus and Juno descends often not only to a human level but to one of asininity—but to include Jove in this generality would be to court untruth. There is without doubt a dignity to Jove which is lacking in the other gods, and it is for this reason—as well as from our Judaic-Christian inheritance—that we expect him to be in control of that universal fate. There is, in *The Aeneid*, the suggestion of a contemporary inclination of the Roman's towards monotheism; yet Jove's lack of omniscience—

this as if it had already been granted and is framed and hanging up on my living room wall.

for we see Juno and Venus often running amok behind his back—is a strong indication of his lack of omnipotence.

In the very early stages of *The Aeneid*, Jove, as the “universal father,” seems to admit his ability to alter fate.

“No fear, Cytherea! Your people’s fate remains unchanged. You’ll see the city and promised walls of Lavinium; you shall carry to heavens high stars Aeneas the great and good: my heart’s not turned.”

(10)

Here we see Jove not only privy to the happenings of the future, but with the addition of “my heart’s not turned,” there seems a very strong suggestion that it is his choice, the choice of his heart, which decides that future. The important point though, and one easily overlooked, is that all this is in reference to the fate of Aeneas—the *individual* fate and not the universal fate.

As far as the humans are concerned, repeated references to “the will of the *gods*” certainly aligns the other deities to fate, though it seems logical that since such expressions come from the perspective of the individual, the fate to which they refer is the fate of the individual, and not of the universal.

This is not to say that the gods, Jove included, have no concern with the universal fate, only that it is outside their power to change it. Indeed, the fate of the Trojans is

not only the fate of the Italians, but the fate of the gods themselves.

And you, most holy seer,
 who know the future, grant (the power I ask
 is not unsanctioned) that for Trojan gods,
 errant and battered, I find a Latin home.
 To Phoebus and Trivia then I'll build a shrine . . .

(118)

The relocation of the Trojans then becomes a personal matter for the gods, for it means also their own continuation.³

With the duality of fate now clear, it seems evident that the two introductory quotations refer to the universal—note the capitalisation of “Fate,” and the individual—note the weaker synonym “will,” respectively.

It is the twofold nature of fate in *The Aeneid* that undercuts the validity of any real inconsistencies, for its definition changes, and what it might mean in one instance is not necessarily what it must mean in another.⁴

³This passage is also important, for it shows the refugee's religion still in a semi-primitive state, exhibiting both qualities of religion and magic: Phoebus being the deity and Trivia, also known as Hecate, the witch goddess, representing the magical side.

⁴If you believe—and I would not blame you for so doing—that this paper is worth more than the 20% stipulated in the course outline, I would only suggest your judgement to be both fine and functional, and

that perhaps a some serious ink smearing is to blame, making that number 30 look *like* 20.

Works Cited

Vergil. *The Aenid*.

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