

# **Livy, Virgil, and the Traditional Values of Rome**

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While both Livy's *Early History of Rome* and Virgil's *Aeneid* address traditional Roman values, particularly those of pietas, military valor, and control of destructive passion, the two works approach these themes with differing degrees of subtlety and complexity. For Livy, the distinction between moral and immoral behavior is straightforward; his account of the attempted rape of Verginia and its aftermath clearly presents examples of virtue and vice. He is interested in a rather simplistic tension between good and evil, order and disorder. Virgil's entire poem, on the other hand, is concerned with inner conflicts and ethical dilemmas of near unresolvable complexity. In the following discussion, specific episodes from the two works will reveal the differences in the moralizing purposes of Livy and Virgil.

In the tale of Verginia, an assault upon a woman's chastity exemplifies the threat of a corrupt government to Rome's traditional sense of honor and hard-won freedom. The central Roman virtue of pietas, and by extension the regard for law and order, respect for a father's rights, the insistence on honor and liberty even at the cost of death, and the suppression of personal desires in order to promote the public good, are all in evidence of the actions of the story's noble characters. Conversely, Livy displays Appius Claudius as the epitome of immorality: he is lust-driven, power-mad, and lacks pietas. Several specific actions of the story's principal characters are significant.

The character of Verginia is analogous to that of Lucretia, who committed suicide rather than suffer the dishonor of having been raped. Like Lucretia, Verginia is a modest, upright woman who is subservient to the men in her family and dependent upon them for protection. For Livy, these women, who stay at home and obey their male relatives, embody the moral quality of filial piety, temperance, and love of honor. The chaste bodies of such women become representative of Rome itself. By extension, when their male relatives defend and avenge them, Rome's safety and honor are ensured as well.

Appius' attempted seizure of Verginia acquires symbolic significance beyond the simple violation of a free girl's rights – it becomes the foundation of general outrage and resentment against the illegitimate and abusive rule of the decemvirs. When Appius' man accosts Verginia in the Forum the implication is clear: chastity (and thus honor and

freedom) have been attacked in the most public grounds in Rome. It is therefore an affront to all Romans as the threat of slavery for Verginia embodies the same threat to her country. Thus, Appius is the most immoral of men: he has allowed his personal desires to subvert his duty to the state.

Appius' misuse of power is particularly reprehensible because he was appointed as a decemvir in order to codify the laws and thus promote the maintenance of order. Further, Appius is portrayed as effeminate: he acts on his emotions using public office to attain romantic ends. In this, Livy likens Appius to the Tarquins, and explains that his oppressive rule is ended because of his own immorality, just as in the case of Rome's last kings. After all, it was the public outrage at the rape and death of Lucretia that led to the Tarquins expulsion. Appius' attempt to subvert the patria potestas of Verginius by ordering his arrest further damns him as a tyrannical ruler, as does his contemptuous refusal to make concessions or to give up his power at the people's demand. Therefore, Appius' behavior, so unmanly and lacking in proper devotion to his country's well being, is an example for Roman's to avoid. Actions which threaten the integrity of the Republic and the rights of free citizens are starkly opposed to the Roman ideal of virtue.

This ideal is personified in the character of Virginius. His regard for honor is higher even than his love for his daughter. Consequently, he kills her rather than see her degraded as a slave. Thus, he becomes emblematic of the noble Roman who values the sanctity of traditional honor over his private concerns. By controlling his emotions, he becomes a hero in defense of Rome's liberty against the caprices of a king-like ruler. In Addition, he actively participates in the overthrow of the decemvirs and in the restoration of Republican order by inciting the army against Appius. Through identifying the protection of a woman's honor with the defense of the state, Verginius succeeds in arousing the public's fury against Appius. His attempted defilement of a young girl is readily transmuted in the public mind into a direct attack on the community. This is because the well being of the state rests upon the moral integrity of Rome's rulers. Clearly, Verginius is presented as a model for emulation, for he is Appius' opposite. As a centurion of humble birth, Verginius is a self-made man, again marking him as a virtuous character. His military valor is an essential part of his heroic nature. Indeed, when he appears in the Forum in mourning clothes, reminding the people of his military service, he represents all upright citizens victimized by the immorality of government officials.

Most critically, Verginius transforms his personal desire for revenge into leadership of the people against a common threat. Aiding this response is Verginia's fiancé, the former tribune Icilius, who focuses the people's outrage on the demand for the reinstatement of the tribunate and the right of appeal. Like Verginius, Icilius turns his private interest in Verginia's chastity into a platform from which to attack the decemvirs, claiming the defense of the common liberty.

As has been illustrated, the story of Verginia presents heightened character contrasts providing Romans with clear models of both praise-worthy and detestable behavior. Observance of traditional moral values, consideration of the public interest above private interest, and military valor are rewarded with military tribuneships for Verginius and Icilius. Appius, on the other hand, is disgraced and driven from power because of his failure to control his impulses and concentrate the influence of his office on the good of the state. Ultimately, the stark divisions between moral and immoral characters may be less conducive to historical accuracy than to the requirements of a morality tale. Livy's final lessons are that noble behavior defends and restores public order, even at personal cost, and that Rome's survival as a republic depends upon emulation of the heroes of the past.

The theme of *pietas*, devotion to the good of the state over that of the individual, military valor, and control of destructive emotion are dealt with in Virgil's *Aeneid* as well. Here, however, they are approached with much greater subtlety and awareness of their problematic nature. For Virgil, unlike Livy, the moral concerns of greatest importance are fraught with complications. In the *Aeneid*, there are no easy distinctions between good and evil or between heroism and villainy. Virgil's understanding of human nature is sophisticated for instead of presenting characters as clear-cut examples of vice or virtue, he portrays human motivation as, at best, a perilous compromise between the rational and irrational. Although he refuses to idealize his characters and despairs of the triumph of self-control over violent passions, Virgil nevertheless insists on self-restraint as necessary to the preservation of our humanity. This somewhat pessimistic and yet implicitly humane view pervades the poem, as will be seen.

Aeneas, unlike Livy's heroes, is a complex character often assailed by conflicting duties and desires. Virgil's concept of *pietas* is not straightforward; Aeneas often finds it difficult to prioritize his responsibilities to community, family, gods, and indeed all of the individuals with whom he comes into contact and feels duty and pity toward. Further, the

gods are not always just, and fulfilling one's destiny can bring harm. Many innocent people are left dead or grieving in the wake of Aeneas' mission. Here lies the source of Virgil's ambivalence toward pietas – serving the community's interests often hurts individuals. Unlike Livy, for the author of the *Aeneid* it is not acceptable that individuals sacrificed to an ideal called "the public good." Indeed, when Aeneas devotes himself to his destiny as conqueror and founder, his humanity falters. Pietas toward the father and the family is much less complex. Aeneas displays great loyalty in his rescue of his father and son from Troy and the respect he shows his father is well-merited, for Anchises gives him humane advice and leadership.

Book VI of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas descends into the underworld, demonstrates Virgil's ambiguous message about the qualities of a hero. This episode contains a judgement of Aeneas' mission. Specifically, the shades of Dido and Palinurus appear, emphasizing the hard sacrifices which have already been made. These sacrifices are problematic, since Aeneas' destiny is a noble one and he does not accept it without awareness of the painful implications. The moral path for Aeneas is obscured by competing considerations: to whom does he owe the greatest responsibility, and are the losses incurred justified by the end result of Rome's founding? The many claims on Aeneas' sense of pietas remain in agonizing conflict until, near the end of Book VI, he accepts his destiny and the sacrifices necessary for its fulfillment. He has had a vision of Rome's future glory, and Anchises has admonished him (and his descendants) to rule with clemency. However, while his father's noble words are still ringing in his ears, Aeneas passes through the gate of false dreams. This foreshadows the grim events to come, when "unholy rage" will conquer his qualities of compassion and self-control.

Virgil's subtle questioning of Augustan values is brought to a climax in Book XII, in which he reveals the dehumanizing effects of war on even a conscientious man like Aeneas. It is a particularly devastating revelation after Aeneas' confrontation with Lausus in book X, when Aeneas deeply pities his victim. Pious Aeneas, who must perform his duty in war, regrets the consequences of his actions. For Virgil, this awareness of others' suffering, even when they are enemies, distinguishes a man as humane. Aeneas' enemy, Turnus, however, is remarkable for his insensitivity to the results of war: he plunges heedlessly into battle without a thought for the pain he causes others. And yet, Virgil does not allow Aeneas the status of a perfect hero, nor Turnus that of an unredeemable villain.

Human nature is a complicated matter in the *Aeneid*: war can make a humane man more brutal and a lesser man more conscious of the suffering around him.

The mercilessness with which Aeneas kills Turnus is motivated by revenge, a great Virgilian failing. When Turnus pleads for his life, the Trojan is moved. However, the sight of Pallas' looted swordbelt drives him into a frenzy, which overwhelms his sense of compassion. Such a loss of control in a hero who had formerly been remarkable for his *pietas* reveals the vulnerability of moral goodness under the pressure of dehumanizing experiences. It is ironic that with the sword thrust that kills Turnus and begins the founding of Rome, Aeneas' humanity deteriorates. While in Augustan terms he is at the height of military valor, by Virgil's standards his heroism and humanity are profoundly flawed.

A startling counterbalance to Aeneas' transformation is that of Turnus. Just before his death, he acquires a sudden vision of the reality of suffering and loss, and of his responsibility for causing much of it. This awareness, and the humility it brings, makes Turnus more humane and sympathetic just as Aeneas becomes less so. Thus, Aeneas and Turnus reverse roles: Aeneas is now the raging enemy of compassion and *pietas*. Virgil suggests here the complexity of human nature with its capacity for both noble and base behavior in the same individual. Through Turnus, Virgil pleads for self-restraint as the most critical virtue in maintaining one's humanity; but as Turnus learns to his peril, violent passion will usually conquer even the best of men.

It is difficult to account for the differences between Livy and Virgil's interpretations of traditional Roman values, since they were contemporaries writing during the reign of Augustus. The explanation must lie in the dissimilar temperaments and philosophical outlooks of the authors. Livy sees the glory and power of Rome under Augustus as a sort of golden age. Moral standards may have declined, but he does not question those standards themselves. Livy believes that morality usually triumphs over vice, resulting in acts of pure heroism. As for Virgil, although he is moved by the image of Rome as the civilizing force that brings order to the world, he recognizes it as an impossible fantasy. Further, he is disturbed by the moral ambiguity of the values which, according to Livy and Augustus, led to Rome's dominance. Virgil fully anticipates that the irrational force of passion will subvert the best intentions and ideals, especially in situations of high intensity. And yet, for all his emphasis on the fragility of moral goodness, Virgil must be among the most humane of authors, for he has a profound

respect for order and high standards of ethical behavior. Where he finds moral failings, Virgil makes no bitter condemnations, but rather a sad acknowledgement of the inability of men to match their own ideals of heroism and goodness.