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The Clash of Civilizations: Classical & Modern Definitions of Heroism in Vergil's *Aeneid*

Adrienne M LaFrance, Modern Languages and Classics '08

Literary themes are themselves something of social creatures, inherently changing over time and across cultures, influenced by their surroundings. It is through these themes that we can trace the changing conceptions of any number of varying abstractions and understand the differences between civilizations separated by generations and borders. Take, for example, the timeless theme of heroism. By modern standards, heroism is defined as “heroic conduct,” and *heroic* as “exhibiting or marked by courage and daring; supremely noble or self-sacrificing; of, relating to, resembling, or suggesting heroes, especially of antiquity” (*Merriam-Webster*). The concept of the hero is one that hearkens from antiquity, the word itself born of ancient Greek. The ancients had an arguably more finite understanding of the meaning of the word ‘hero,’ and were thus able to treat it as something more tangible and tractable than we can today. In fact, in modern English there are eight definitions of the word hero, ranging in specificity, or rather, ambiguity. As a means of measuring the differing understandings of the hero and heroism of antiquity and contemporary literature, we may look to a mainstay of the classical heroic genre, Vergil's *Aeneid*.

The *Aeneid*, a Latin epic poem commissioned by Augustus, details the founding of the city of Rome by the Trojan hero Aeneas after the Achaean victory in the Trojan war. The piece was undertaken as a means of legitimizing the Julio-Claudian dynasty during the time of civil war that followed the collapse of the Republic. It is in this context that the meaning of “hero” is shaped for the patriotic epic. Through his depictions of the Greek victory, won only through the use of the wooden horse and ultimately deception and trickery, Vergil solidifies the Roman vision of the hero as not only strong and mighty, but also virtuous and honest. This subtle twist on the definition as we know it is further cemented by the epithet given Aeneas, our hero, by Vergil: *pious Aeneas*, meaning “pious Aeneas.” The idea of Aeneas as pious rises from his purpose: a god-given mission to take the surviving Trojans through peril to Latium, the future seat of Rome. In this mission, Aeneas demonstrates overwhelming fidelity to his cause, journeying endlessly, forsaking love, and even braving grave danger in the Underworld. This mission suggests that heroism is intricately interwoven with religious overtones and general goodness that our contemporary definitions, all eight of them, lack. Such a definition was necessitated by the nation's state of disarray and abasement, when a leader such as Augustus would have liked for his people to sympathize with and view as heroic a man who would stop at nothing to see the fruition of his goals.

Today's understanding of heroism is fundamentally different. Many modern readers of Vergil's *Aeneid* comment negatively on Aeneas' brash rejection of his lover and wife, the Carthaginian queen Dido, who commits suicide after Aeneas leaves her to continue his divine journey. For the contemporary armchair critic, this blatant rejection of love and partnership is far from heroic. Although today we recognize one definition of *hero* as a literary figure in antiquity, this is not the meaning we use when we judge or measure the *heroism* of another. The contemporary definition is increasingly vague and, in stark contrast Vergil's usage, wholly secular: “an object of extreme adoration and devotion; an

idol” (*Merriam-Webster*). In the minds of modern readers, a hero could be anything or anyone. Integral to our misunderstanding of the heroic character of Aeneas is the sense of piety of antiquity, and the relationship of religion to virtue, that rendered him a hero. In our time, it is unacceptable, if not dangerous, to associate religious piety fundamentally with heroism. This unwillingness represents a marked shift in the makeup and context of western civilization, one in which the majority has adopted a philosophy of cultural and moral relativism, thus abandoning a particularly religious aspect of heroism. These differences in the parameters greatly reflect the different social compositions and values of the two societies. In Vergil’s world, there exists little diversity, much ethnocentrism, and values of patriotism and religious piety; in ours, there is greater diversity and a broader conception of one’s place in relation to one’s fellow man.

To conceive of Aeneas as anything but a hero is to perceive of the clash of two civilizations; the mind of the modern reader and that of a Roman epic poet ultimately require some form of reconciliation. The vehicle for this understanding is the consideration of historical and social contexts. These are useful not only in decoding ancient literature, but also in a world that is swiftly becoming increasingly more global. In the face of this trend, it is necessary to equip ourselves with the tools needed to interact with one another with mutual understanding—the same tools used everyday for something as simple as reading.