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### **“Know Thyself”**

Although Homer explored some character development in his epics, later Classical literature would delve even further into the use of dynamic characters. In Virgil’s Aeneid, Aeneas must psychologically overcome the loss of the life he knew in Troy and push on through wars, temptations, and trials in his quest to establish a new Trojan citadel. Euripides’ character Pentheus struggles with finding balance between religion and reason, faith and fact, but because he is a static character, he is destroyed by his inability to change or grow as a person. The Greek aphorism “know thyself” represents the Classical admiration of people who govern their lives through wisdom and deep introspection. While Aeneas is successful in “knowing himself” (by recognizing the importance of duty and destiny), Pentheus is stubborn and unyielding; accordingly, Aeneas is successful in life’s journey while Pentheus falls victim to the gods’ wrath.

Dante’s paradoxical wisdom—“I found myself lost”—reflects Aeneas’ character development through his odyssey. Aeneas loses nearly everything in the Trojan war: he loses his king, his city, his friends, his home, and even his wife. He finds himself alone. The ghost of his wife Creusa appeared to Aeneas, though, to tell him of his destiny: “You shall make landfall on Hesperia where Lydian Tiber flows...and the years will bear glad peace, a kingdom, and a queen for you” (Virgil 2.1014-1017). Fresh off of weeping for his lost wife, Aeneas finds the great responsibility ahead of him: “...I rejoined my company./ And there to my astonishment, I found/ new refugees in a great crowd: men and women/ gathered for exile, young—pitiful people/ coming from every quarter, minds made up,/ with their belongings for whatever lands/ I’d lead them to by sea” (Virgil

2.1035-1040). With his followers, his father, and his son, Aeneas hoisted his sails to “the winds of destiny” (Virgil 3.13); his fate was in the hands of the gods.

While Aeneas was eager to establish his new kingdom and find peace and respite for his people, he was initially too impatient to accept his destiny of a kingdom in Italy—which Creusa had prophesied. Only after the warning of the dead Polydorus at Thrace and a devastating plague on Crete was Aeneas ready to completely fulfill his destiny. Apollo’s priest warned of the long trek ahead: “The Italy you think so near, with ports/ you think to enter, ignorant as you are,/ lies far, past far lands, by untraveled lands” (Virgil 3.520-523).

Aeneas’ growth as a character is evident by the time his fleet is shipwrecked on the African shores near Carthage. His landfall speech shows his strong leadership in the midst of personal struggle and questioning. “Through diversities/ of luck, and through so many challenges,/ we hold our course for Latium, where the Fates/ hold out a settlement and rest for us./ Troy’s kingdom there shall rise again....So ran the speech. Burdened and sick at heart, he feigned hope in his look, and inwardly contained his anguish” (Virgil 1.278-286). However, when Aeneas meets Dido, it is evident that Aeneas truly “knows himself”—showing a firm grasp on who he is and what his duty and destiny are:

I am Aeneas, duty-bound, and known/ above high air of heaven by my fame,/ carrying with me in my ships our gods/ of hearth and home, saved from the enemy./ I look for Italy to be my fatherland,/ and my descent is from all-highest Jove. (Virgil 1.519-524)

Perhaps the best demonstration of Aeneas maturity and *pietas*—his commitment to duty over personal interest—is in abandoning Dido and Carthage. In Carthage, Aeneas

had found a friendly reception and a queen who was prepared to unite their two peoples. Aeneas made the difficult decision, though, to leave his love interest and a ready-made kingdom to fulfill his destiny and his duty to his people and his posterity. Mercury, Zeus's messenger, admonishes Aeneas, saying, "What have you in mind? What hope, wasting your days/ in Libya? If future history's glories/ do not affect you, if you will not strive/ for your own honor, think of Ascanius..." (Virgil 4.369-372). Aeneas immediately moved to remove his people from Carthage and continue their journey. When Dido confronted him in tears, Aeneas "fought down the emotions in his heart" (Virgil 4.457), remembering his duty. Aeneas recognizes that he has let his passions blind him. In talking about Italy, he says, "There is my love; there is my country" (Virgil 4. 478-479). He then offers one of the most important lines of the novel: "I sail for Italy not of my own free will" (Virgil 4.499). Leaving was by no means an easy task for him, but it was the right thing to do. "Duty-bound,/ Aeneas, though he struggled with desire/ to calm and comfort [Dido] in all her pain/ to speak to her and turn her mind from grief,/ and though he sighed his heart out, shaken still/ with love of her, yet took the course heaven gave him..." (Virgil 4.545-550). In essence, Aeneas not only had to suffer losing the relationship, but he had to endure knowing that he was the cause of her suicide; but he had to keep his focus on his destiny—a destiny that was greater than himself.

The Underworld (Dis) also gives Aeneas a broader understanding of his personal insignificance in comparison to the whole of the past and the future. After seeing those of his past—including Dido and his Trojan friends—his dead father shows him his future. The line of great men (including Julius Caesar and Augustus) that will come from his line and the magnificence of the Roman Empire are sobering for Aeneas. I think that Aeneas'

almost callous response to his father's death shows his own callousness to his personal interests; again, Aeneas has become one and the same as his duty and destiny; apart from them, he has no identity.

Virgil also makes it clear that Aeneas desires a peaceful settlement; his goal is not conquest, but merely finding a new home. In speaking to King Latinus, Aeneas offers his humble, unassuming proposal:

By that storm [Trojan War] overwhelmed, and then at sea/ so long on the vast waters, now we ask/ a modest settlement of the gods of home,/ a strip of coast that will bring harm to no one,/ air and water, open and free to all. We will not shame your kingdom. You shall win/ no light and passing fame, nor from ourselves/ a passing gratitude for the kind act. Ausonians who take Troy to their hearts/ will not regret it. (Virgil 7.303-312)

However, it is Aeneas' perseverance and willingness to fight for his destiny that complete his character. Sibyl had prophesied of these struggles: "Wars, vicious wars/ I see ahead, and Tiber foaming with blood. Simois, Xanthus, Dorians encamped—You'll have them all again, with an Achilles..." (Virgil 4.133-135). Aeneas will have to relive the horrors of his past in order to secure his future.

Not only will he have to fight the Achilles-like Turnus and the Rutulians, but Aeneas has to struggle with fate itself. Although Jupiter (Zeus) proclaimed a Trojan Empire as Aeneas' destiny, he seems unwilling to enforce fate—allowing Juno (Hera) to plague the Trojans. She says, "To keep the man from rule in Italy...to drag it out, to pile delay upon delay in these great matters—that I can do: to destroy both countries' people, that I can do" (Virgil 7.428-434). Aeneas, then, has to make his destiny. Unwillingly—

out of necessity—he fights. He says to those seeking burials for the dead Latins that he only wanted peace; he did not want to war with their people, but he was forced to do so because Latinus abandoned the Trojan-Latin alliance; and Turnus was too much of a coward to settle the dispute with Aeneas one on one (Virgil 6.148-164). In the fight, however, he proves that he is still a champion; it is a paradox to Greek thinking that the man with the most *aristae* would be an advocate for peace. The war shows not only Aeneas' prowess, but his wisdom. From Aeneas struggles, he shows that, “All fortune can be mastered by endurance” (Virgil 5.923). “Learn fortitude and toil from me, my son, Ache of true toil. Good fortune learn from others” (Virgil 12.595-596). Although he was again betrayed by fate—with the treaty between Trojans and Latins again broken by the design of Juno and with his injury while trying to preserve peace—Aeneas teaches his son that without personal character, destiny is powerless. Again, Aeneas shows that he truly “knows himself”—even in the midst of adversity.

Finally, Aeneas extraordinary wisdom can be seen through his designs for his kingdom—for the fulfillment of his destiny. When Juno finally yields at the command of Jupiter, she asks one favor: that the Latin race would continue, and that the identity of Troy as an independent nation would dissolve with the merging of the two peoples once peace is established. This is a simple request for Jupiter to grant because Aeneas had already promised such a future:

“If...the day is ours, conferred by divine Victory, as I think—and may the gods confirm it by their will—I shall not make Italians underlings to Trojans. For myself I ask no kingdom. Let both nations, both unconquered, both subject to equal laws, commit themselves to an equal union. I shall give rituals and gods to

both. My father-in-law Latinus, let him keep his arms and keep his royal authority” (Virgil 12.247-262).

Aeneas shows by this promise a full knowledge of his role in the world and in the course of history. He has grown from being a war-hungry soldier and impatient leader to a wise leader whose decisions and actions are in complete accord with the will and fate of the gods.

Unlike Aeneas, Pentheus is unwilling to make personal sacrifices or personal changes for the betterment of himself or his kingdom. While Pentheus has significant reasons for being skeptical of the cult of Dionysus, his stubbornness and harsh dealings with the god Dionysus and his followers result in his death. Euripides does not argue that faith should overpower reason, but that there should be a balance between the two. In fact, Dionysus is shown to be a cruel unjust god; however, Pentheus’ unwillingness to compromise his legalistic outlook on life is his downfall.

At first, Pentheus is justified in his disbelief. In talking about the women of Thebes, Dionysus admits, “I’ve driven from their wits and from their homes: out to the mountains and out of their minds” (Euripides 397). Pentheus returns to his city to find all the women missing, out of their minds and acting like animals. Any rational king would be worried and angry. Also, Dionysus calls himself “all-conqueror” and tells that he plans to spread his cult by means of force if necessary. A religion imposed by force and “brain-washing” is not exactly what appeals to the stereotypically rational Greek king. It also appears to be a socially destructive religion—focused on drunkenness and promiscuity (Euripides 405).

Pentheus is also worried that people are worshipping the new god from wrong motivations. He accuses Tiresias, the seer, of being a corrupt religious leader. “This is your idea, Tiresias: another trick to squeeze some profit out of bird-watching and burnt offerings. A new god, eh? Introducing novelties to men? (Euripides 406). This shows that Pentheus wants religion to be a more established, logical thing. It seems that Tiresias has taken advantage of blind faith in the past, which is why Pentheus criticizes him.

Similarly, Cadmus (Pentheus’ father) has the wrong motivations for worshipping: “Even if this god were no god, as you insist, tell yourself he is; act out a very advantageous lie, which makes our Semele—just think of it—the mother of a god. The whole family can take credit” (Euripides 410). While Tiresias is taking advantage of religious fervor, Cadmus wants to improve his family’s power. However, this initial interaction reveals some problems in Pentheus character in that he is disrespectful to his father and a priest in the name of Reason.

One of Pentheus weaknesses is his harshness. While there are more instances than the first, Pentheus threatens to arrest and suppress the Bacchantes before he fully investigates the matter. “The ones I’ve rounded up, my police have handcuffed and safely clapped in jail. The rest I mean to harry off the hills, including Ino and Agave, my own mother, and Autonoe, mother of Actaeon: I’ll snap them up in iron straps; put a stop to this immoral rollicking” (Euripides 405).

Pentheus tragic flaw, however, is his hubris; he is unwilling to change his position even after he is presented with clear evidence of the god’s deity. First, Cadmus and Tiresias recognize that Pentheus is unreasonable. “You are a fanatic, sir, a sick fanatic. There is no cure for madness when the cure itself is mad” (Euripides 409). They offer a

wise perspective in dealing with religion and reason. Cadmus says, “I’m only a man, I don’t belittle the divine.” And in response, Tiresias says, “No, we don’t play at theologians with the gods. We stay close to the hallowed tenets of our fathers, old as time. Nothing can undo them ever. I don’t care how brilliant or abstruse the reasons are” (Euripides 404). Sometimes spirituality supersedes human reason.

Dionysus also provides his own evidence for Pentheus. After surrendering peacefully to Pentheus’ men (disguised as a leader of the cult), Dionysus goes along with his sentenced imprisonment. However, he shows Dionysus’ legitimacy by freeing himself from prison: “The fetters on their feet just fell apart, the prison doors slid back their bolts—and not a human touch. He’s chockfull of miracles, sir, this man, this stranger visiting our Thebes” (Euripides 414). Even after the miracle, Pentheus is still critical of Dionysus (still in disguise). Dionysus recognizes, “To the foolish ear the wise speak foolishly” (Euripides 415). Pentheus refuses to listen to his arguments. Dionysus points out Pentheus’ flaw: “You—you have no idea what you say, what you do, what you are” (Euripides 416). Obviously, Pentheus struggles with the concept of “know thyself”; he is too self-centered and stubborn to change.

Finally, a shepherd who saw the Bacchantes testified to the miracles he saw. Unlike Pentheus believed, the herdsman reported that the women were modest and peaceful before they were disturbed. With their thyrsus staffs, the women brought forth wells of water and wine. He said, “Oh, if you had been there, sire, and had seen, you would have come with prayers towards the god whom you now execrate” (Euripides 425). Once disturbed, they tore apart the cattle and were invincible to the herdsmen’s



spears. Again, the herdsman said, “After all this, my lord, whoever this spirit be you must receive him in our city. He is powerful in many things” (Euripides 427).

Ultimately, the Chorus recognizes Pentheus’ failings. “Slowly but surely divine power moves to annul the brutally minded man who in his wild delusions refuses to reverence the gods...Trying to know or meddle beyond the divinely established norm is wrong” (Euripides 431-432). While Euripides continues to show that Dionysus is unjust with Agave and Cadmus, and that he is cruel through the savage murder of Pentheus, he justifies his actions. While the chorus says that “beauty” is in Dionysus’ revenge and beheading of Pentheus, Dionysus says, “That is beauty which is humble obeisance to heaven” (Euripides 442).

Pentheus is not wrong for doubting the legitimacy of Dionysus; nor is he wrong for recognizing the flaws of the drunken religion. However, Euripides shows that Pentheus is a weak character because he is a static character. He does not step back and evaluate his position or the evidence against it, but instead stubbornly forces law and religion; and in doing so, supersedes his authority as a human king. Like Aeneas, the truly wise man is one who knows himself—who combines humble spirituality with an active approach to creating destiny and improving his personal character.

Bibliography

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