

The Connotation of Flight in Virgil's *Aeneid*.

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Many years ago Winfried Schleiner argued for a negative, even cowardly interpretation of Aeneas' departure from Troy for Carthage (Schleiner CL 27 (1975) 98). According to Schleiner, Virgil overemphasizes Aeneas' relationship with Ascanius and shows less than due diligence toward Creusa. The prologue's opening phrase, *fato profugus*, represents a new identity for Aeneas that looks toward the future of Rome (See Smith, *Primacy of Vision* (2005) 91-2). His flight from Troy does not reveal a man broken and corrupt, but rather yields an epic hero. Admittedly, such a positive connotation of the use of *fugio* is not monolithic, as the word shifts from positive to negative in the poem. In this paper I will consider Virgil's employment of the word in the *Aeneid*, a poem that begins with Aeneas' epic flight and ends with the flight of Turnus' soul to the shades.

As Aeneas reveals the story of his departure from Troy to queen Dido in book two, the reader can infer that the flight of Aeneas from burning Troy has a positive moral connotation. Aeneas is going beyond his duty to his family and is an "exemplum of piety" (Schleiner 98) by carrying his father on his back and his son in his hand. According to Schleiner, this displays a certain morality, but does not assume complete moral goodness—he still prefers his father to his son, and seemingly does not care for Creusa, letting her linger behind alone. Yet as all are included in the escape, Aeneas' flight represents his tenderness toward his father and his affection for his family. This in no way suggests that he abandoned his wife – this is seen most evidently when he returns to the city to search for her out of the fear that she is lost, or worse, dead (*Aen.* 2.768-773). In 2.790-5 (*haec ubi dicta ... nocte reviso*) Virgil's use of *effugit* suggests that Aeneas is bound by love to those he loves; thus he is fairly depicted as a hero. As Morwood once aptly suggested, "Aeneas' triumph is that he has gone beyond grim persistence, from negative long-suffering to dynamic self-assertion" (Morwood, JRS [1985] 59). Despite the death of his wife, his travels to Carthage and the eventual vision he receives during his visit to the Underworld provide him this self-assertion.

Classical art depicts this same positive reading of the scene. In one example from Greek pottery, Aeneas is depicted as a muscular figure wearing a general's helmet, but is carrying his father on his back and Ascanius in his hand ("Aineias 69" LIMC 1.Vol 2 [1981] 301). This picture portrays Aeneas fulfilling both the role of a prototypical successful war general and loving father/son. This same positive reading can be seen in the Etruscan statue "Aineias 96" (LIMC 1.2 [1981] 303). In this statue Aeneas' eyes appear to be closed, and Anchises is caressing his shoulders; this is a beautiful image of a father-son relationship, and it suggests the importance of their relationship. Both of these examples suggest that Aeneas is not the villain but the victor.

The second major instance of flight in the epic, namely Dido's death scene, does not yield the same results as the first. During his time at Carthage, Aeneas becomes emotionally attached to Dido with the help of Cupid posing as Ascanius, and thus his decision to leave becomes much more catastrophic for the Carthaginian widow. W.R. Johnson argues that, "Dido is, of course, in motion, but that motion (*vagatur*) is not directed to a goal; her aimless physical motion is expressive of disordered movement in a soul deprived of volition and action" (Johnson *Darkness Visible* [1976]80). When Aeneas announces his revelation to her and his decision to leave, she immediately loses her temper and expresses her disgust (4.305-361). Virgil's shift from the verb *fugio* to the verb *relinquo* (4.281) suggests that his flight is not a flight of love but a flight of duty. His love remains with Dido; his duty lies in Latium. This verb changes back again, as Dido herself attacks Aeneas' departure with "*mene fugis*" in line 314. The distinction between these two different verbs lies in their intention: Aeneas' *relinquo* reveals that his

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intention is not to abandon Dido but to fulfill a righteous retreat on a journey to destiny. He infers that, by leaving Dido, his love is not lost but remains with her. Dido's *fugis* suggests permanence, namely that Aeneas is fleeing because he never loved her all along. The verb implies that Aeneas will regret what he left behind. This is not the case: Aeneas is merely bound by a greater will than his own, and cannot stay with Dido. Farron suggests, "First, the actual wound with which she kills herself is a culmination of the metaphorical 'wound of love' Aeneas earlier inflicted on her" (Farron *V. 's Aen: A Poem of Grief and Love* (1993) 71). If by fleeing Aeneas becomes the villain, it is only because he does not realize the consequence of his flight.

A third example which eases the progression from positive to negative can be found in 9.735-51. In this scene Pandarus witnesses Turnus murder his brother Bitias. Pandarus flies into a rage, eager to take Turnus' life, and hurls a spear toward the general. When the spear misses, Turnus says to Pandarus, "*at non hoc telum, mea quod ui dextera uersat, effigies, neque enim is teli nec uulneris auctor*" (*Aen.* 9.747-8). Virgil uses *effigies* to establish Turnus as the ruthless villain in this instance, offering Pandarus no hope for escape. He further proves this as he mercilessly drives his sword through Pandarus' forehead. I will expound further examples of this gradual darkness of flight in more detail in this paper.

Virgil concludes his epic poem with "*ast illi soluuntur frigore membra vitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras*" (12.951-2). Here we see Virgil's final use of *fugio*, with an explicit negative connotation. This is the scene describing Turnus' soul's descent (lit. "flight") into the Underworld. This scene presents a dramatic contrast from any flight of Aeneas. Because Aeneas is the epic hero, his flight never is able to reach its full negative potential. Virgil thus brings in Turnus, the ultimate nemesis, to facilitate this morose reading of the verb. From the *fugio* of Aeneas in book two to the *fugio* of 12.952, Virgil's definition of flight shifts from an event producing an epic hero to the ultimate shame and dishonor of an enemy. This final definition is the definition Virgil wishes to leave with the reader, finishing his extensive shift from positive flight to shameful descent.

A handout will accompany the presentation.