

A Study of *indignus* in the *Aeneid*: Undeserved Fate and Just Indignation

In carmen 101, when Catullus laments the death of his brother, *heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi* (6), his profound sense of loss poignantly conveys the notion that this death was untimely and undeserved. This paper will examine occurrences of *indignus* (and its cognates) in Vergil's *Aeneid* with the aim of understanding Vergil's use of the adjective and the ramifications of its deployment. *Indignus* and its cognates appear a mere 19 times in the poem; strikingly, five of those instances (more than 25%), occur in book 12, a fact which seems to emphasize the indignities suffered and perpetrated before the poem's close. The final line of the poem *vitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras* (12.952) expresses the undeserved nature of Turnus' death, and echoes, like an epitaph, the death of Camilla (11.831), thus closing the epic on a note of indignation as well lament. (Tarrant interprets *indignata* "to show how Turnus views his own death – as premature and unnecessary" (ad 12.952), the same way that Catullus viewed his brother's death.) Indeed, many occurrences of the term indicate more than Vergilian ambivalence; they voice his understanding of the myriad injustices that lead to Rome's founding, an understanding that imbues Rome's greatness with an underlying lament for those who died an early death as Aeneas forged the path to Rome. Of particular interest are the expressions Vergil employs to convey the undeserved and untimely nature of those deaths, including that of Misenus (*indigna morte*, 6.163), the deaths of Aeneas' comrades that the grieving Dido prophesies (*indigna... / funera*, 4.617-8), even the reasons for Hector's wounds (*causa indigna*, 2.285). Aeneas himself refers to the *fortuna indigna* (11.108) of the war in Italy, through which the poet voices sympathy for the many whose lives were affected by the coming of Rome. Venus, echoing her son's sentiment, is struck by his *indigno...dolore* (12.411) and finds herself *indignata* (12.786) at Juturna's interference in his combat with Turnus. Juno, having already addressed the injustice

experienced by Turnus (*indignum*, 10.74), finally recants her resistance to Rome but maintains that she has also suffered *digna indigna* (12.811). (Tarrant observes that her expression *digna indigna* is an “asyndetic polar expression, in which opposites are juxtaposed to express a totality,” (ad 12.811) and thus explains that she is not admitting having suffered anything deserved at all.) Vergil thus portrays injustices as experienced by individuals both human and divine, and encompasses various moments in Rome’s history by including scenes where injustice was perceived on Aeneas’ shield (Porsenna, 8.649) and during the Trojans’ invasion of Italy (Numanus, 9.595); in both cases, the *indigna* are suffered by those who are on the defeated side. These expressions of indignation form Vergil’s lament for the undeserved suffering of so many individuals, mortal and divine, so that Rome could emerge.

Vergil adroitly includes in his narrative definitions of how *indigna* are meant to be understood. By portraying the *venti* as *indignant*es at 1.55, the poet underscores, from the very beginning of the poem, the justifiable anger of natural forces at divine attempts to restrain and control them. These forces, tellingly, represent the wrath of Juno. At 7.770, Vergil defines *indignus* through Jupiter’s sense of injustice by referencing the story of Aesculapius restoring Hippolytus to life – an event which elicited Jupiter’s just indignation because it overturned what he deemed right. That this reference occurs during the catalog of warriors suggests not only that none of those who fall in the battles to come will be restored to life, but also that it is Jupiter’s sense of what is acceptable and what is not that determines final outcomes. It matters not that both the goddesses Juno and Venus experience such indignation; they must suffer, along with so many mortals, the various wrongs that the Trojans’ arrival in Italy instigates. The irony inherent in Jupiter’s sense of wrong persists, however, for while he deems the restoration of life to a single individual (Hippolytus) unacceptable and intolerable, he foists the same aggrievement upon

various individuals when he allows the fallen remnant of Troy to rise to life again in the form of Rome.

Indignus, normally defined as “unworthy” or “undeserving,” truly elicits a sense not only of “suffering undeservedly” but also of “being disrespected.” Ultimately, it is the male divine forces (Neptune and Jupiter) who successfully exert control over events to come, while nature, females, and humans at large – even Aeneas himself and his goddess mother – must unjustly suffer and endure the order imposed on them. By depicting injustices in this fashion, Vergil, in yet another manner, manifests his ambivalence about the glory of Rome.

Bibliography

Tarrant, Richard. *Virgil: Aeneid XII*. Cambridge UP. 2012.