

Contagion, Displacement, and Leadership in Vergil's *Aeneid* 3

The response to the pandemic caused by COVID-19 brought the issue of leadership at the front and center of public debate. World leaders adopted widely differing policies in order to handle a pandemic that deeply affected humanity on every level: economic, social, personal. As many authors, journalists, and bloggers turned to Classical antiquity for paradigms, Aeneas' first speech after the storm in *Aeneid* 1 (198-207) has been frequently cited as an exemplar for desired leadership in times of crisis, providing empathy and modeling resilience (Carroll 2020).

In this paper I argue that pestilential descriptions, literal and metaphorical, form a pattern of 'disease-displacement-foundation' over the course of the narrative of *Aeneid* 3, indicating that Aeneas' foundational quest and his role as a leader are linked to the bodily integrity of his people. Furthermore, Aeneas' leadership abilities, as seen in his responses to the various pestilences and pollution his people incur, evolve as the book progresses. As a result, the close link between pestilence and leadership, already familiar from Greek narratives, emerges as an important theme in the foundation narrative of the *Aeneid*.

Discussion of pestilence and pollution in *Aeneid* 3 is not new (Hejduk 2004, Panoussi 2009). Most recently, Hunter Gardner has argued that both in *Aeneid* 3 and in the *Georgics*, Vergil uses the plague narrative to indicate the limitations and possibilities of a new order (Gardner 2019: 143-47). Concomitant with the concept of pestilence is the concept of contagion, which collapses the distinctions between the religious and the political. In this light, each attempt at a new foundation is followed by a pestilence that causes displacement, followed by a renewed attempt at a foundation, and so on. In each case, the need for political action arises, and the decisions are made first by the group as a whole, then Anchises, and eventually Aeneas.

More specifically, the theme of pollution opens the narrative of Book 3. During the first foundation attempt in Thrace, Aeneas unwittingly violates the tomb of Polydorus. Not only does black blood repeatedly emanate from the tree (3.28-29), but also the ghost of the slain hero appears to Aeneas and points to the contagious nature of pollution (*parce pias scelerare manus*, 3.42). Although Aeneas was the recipient of the warning, the decision to leave this settlement is a group one (*omnibus idem animus, scelerata excidere terra*, 3.60). The second effort at a foundation occurs in Crete, where a pestilence ensues affecting humans and livestock and a drought ruins the crops (3.137-42). In this case, although Aeneas is the recipient of a prophecy indicating the necessary course of action, it is Anchises who makes the actual decision as to the next step (3. 178-91). At Strophades, the concepts of pollution and contagion are at once literal and metaphorical, with the Harpies described as polluting, diseased entities. The vocabulary of contagious disease runs throughout the episode (215-18; 227; 234; 241; 244). Lastly, the vocabulary of disease and pollution accompanies the narrative of the Cyclops (*domus sanie dapibusque cruentis*, 3.618; *di talem avertisse pestem*, 3.620; *sanieque aspesa natarent / lumina*, 3.625-6; *saniem eructans*, 3.632). As the Trojans' displacement continues, Anchises dies, and Aeneas becomes the sole leader of the exiles. His speech in Book 1, although precedes this narrative, chronologically follows the events of the *Aeneid* 3, thus providing an explanation for his remarkable ability to handle a crisis that affects the bodily integrity of his people.

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