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COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE PORTRAYAL OF THE GODS IN VIRGIL'S *AENEID* AND OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*.

There is a significant difference in the treatment of the gods in the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*, even though both authors were writing in the epic tradition.

Virgil wrote his *Aeneid* in the last ten years of his life, between 29BC and 19BC, after the Battle of Actium, in 31BC, which was significant, as it established Octavian as the sole emperor, Augustus, of Rome. The *Aeneid* is a celebration of Augustus' achievements and rejoices in the development of Rome. There is a great sense of political propaganda, as well as an historical element, as it illustrates the origins of the Roman people.

In contrast, Ovid conceived a different purpose for his epic. He wrote fifteen books, compared to Virgil's twelve, with many of his stories originating from Greek and Roman myth, concerned with the transformations of shapes, from the creation of the world to Julius Caesar's death and deification. He focuses on entertaining the reader in a humorous fashion, and rather than establishing Rome's origins in history, he is more concerned with establishing his own fame, for the future ages.

These different backgrounds of the two authors illustrate that they each had contrasting agendas for their books. Thus, the portrayal of the gods differs greatly- Virgil's are austere and purposeful, whereas, Ovid's are humorous, reflecting his neoteric style, and intentionally different from the Virgilian gods.

Firstly, we must take into consideration that Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, were the only main models of epic for Virgil and Ovid.

There is a strong element of Homeric influence on the Virgilian gods, for example, Juno has been likened to the Homeric Hera, as she portrays many of her characteristics. That is, Juno displays a deep hatred for the Trojans, due to the judgement of Paris, and her husband's high regard for the Trojan youth, Ganymede; more significantly, she dislikes the Trojans because they will destroy her beloved Carthage. Virgil highlights this resentment, when he describes Juno hounding Aeneas and his men:

*'Aeneas, fugitive, this captain, buffeted cruelly on land as on the sea by blows from powers of the air-behind them baleful Juno in her sleepless rage.'*¹

Likewise, Hera despised the Trojans, for example, both she and Poseidon openly supported the Greek camp, while Zeus had been distracted from the battlefield; she even seduced the king of the gods, so that Poseidon could give strength and support to the Greeks, thus ensuring their victory over the Trojans.²

Furthermore, Virgil highlights the Homeric power and dark feeling of hatred in Juno, when he likens her to Poseidon, when he features in the *Odyssey*. That is, Poseidon avidly pursued Odysseus, throughout his journey back to Ithaca, as he had blinded his son, Polyphemus; for example, in *Book 5*, he creates a storm and shipwrecks Odysseus. Likewise, Juno persuades Aeolus, king of the winds, to create a storm that is consequently stopped by Neptune:

¹ Virgil's *Aeneid*: book: 1.5 ff.

² Homer's *Iliad*: books 13 & 14.

*'...A howling gust from due north took the sail aback and lifted wavetops to heaven...'*³

These two comparisons of Juno with Hera and Poseidon, depict the Virgilian goddess as being hateful, resentful and vengeful. The fact that Virgil links Juno with the Homeric gods also gives her character an element of seriousness and austerity. However, there is also a sense of injustice, as Juno's actions seem unwarranted towards Aeneas, as she acts out of personal hatred towards him. It is also significant that Neptune only calms the storm, as it threatens the peace of his seas, and not because he pities the wretched Aeneas:

*'Power over the sea and the cruel trident were never his (Aeolus), but mine.'*⁴

This emphasises that the gods can be cruel, illustrated by the misuse of Juno's power to influence Aeolus, to start a storm; as well as, selfish and unjust.

In contrast, the Ovidian gods do not display the same amount of Homeric austerity and seriousness, as they act similarly, or worse than humans, which portrays them in a humorous manner. For example, Ovid describes Apollo chasing after Daphne, stating that:

*'No rough forester, am I, no unkempt shepherd...I am the lord of Delphi.'*⁵

Apollo is like a love struck youth, and the fact that he cannot persuade Daphne to sleep with him, undermines his divine authority; that is, he is a powerful Olympian god, yet he has to resort to the human method of chasing, to get the woman he loves.

Likewise, when Mercury descends to earth to court Aglauros, he smoothes down his hair and arranges his robe, so that the gold hem shows-all to impress the girl. Ovid focuses on their human characteristics. He also draws a fine line between the mortals and the divinities, so much so, that there appears to be no difference between the human and divine spheres. Galinsky highlights this, when he states that Ovid has:

*'Virtually limited the deities to human behaviour, without restoring the compensatory aspect of their majestic or ideal role.'*⁶

The council of the gods can illustrate this, where Jupiter's palace is compared to the Palatine hill, and Jupiter himself, is characterised in a pompous and arrogant manner. For example, he boasts about his defeat over Lycaon, who attempted to feed him human flesh and he highlights his own power and important status, when he says:

*'Can you suppose them (demi-gods) safe, when against me, me whom the lightnings, whom yourselves obey, Lycaon plots his treacherous devilry?'*⁷

³ *Aeneid*: book: 1.144 ff.

⁴ *Aeneid*: book: 1.88-89.

⁵ Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: translated by A.D.Melville: p.16.

⁶ Galinsky: *Ovid's Metamorphoses*: p.168.

⁷ *Metamorphoses*: p.7.

Moreover, when Jupiter contemplates the destruction of the world, he recalls several methods, such as burning the earth with his lightning, however he dismisses this idea, as he might set the heavens alight. This ambiguous nature seems unnatural for a god, as it is more of a human characteristic, as Ovid mocks the seriousness of the gods.

It is also significant that there appears to be a hierarchy within Olympos, as the lesser gods throng to the palace of Jupiter, as in the Roman custom of patronage. Ovid portrays the gods not only acting like humans, but also living as them, which makes them seem ridiculous:

*'The mansion of the aristocracy are thronged, their doors flung wide, the common sort live in the scattered suburbs, here reside the great and famous; this majestic place (to speak so bold) is heaven's Palatine.'*⁸

In contrast, the Virgilian gods may act like humans occasionally, but they still retain their divine aspect. For example, when Venus goes to Jupiter for reassurance about Aeneas' future, she acts like a little girl, and Jupiter, behaves as any father would do towards his daughter-with comfort and kindness. Virgil does not debase or mock their actions, as Ovid would do, so that their divine status is kept intact and never jeopardised:

*'He smiled at her, the father of gods and men, with that serenity that calms the weather and lightly kissed his daughter.'*⁹

In consideration, to the theme of the tenuous divide between the divine and mortal realms, we can note that Ovid frequently depicts his gods in the human world. That is, the gods do not always stay in Olympos, but they frequent the earth, for example, Venus is depicted, lying on Adonis' chest, on the grass and shaded by a poplar tree.¹⁰ There is an intimacy between the mortals and the immortals, as there is informality between the two realms. However, in the *Aeneid*, the gods are portrayed as being more aloof, as they generally stay in heaven and socialise with their own. For example, Juno and Venus plot the marriage of Dido and Aeneas together, from heaven. The gods make decisions and view mortal actions from the comfort of heaven, which illustrates the strong divide between the gods and mortals. This also portrays them in a more formal light, as they remain mysterious and awesome.

Furthermore, it can be noted that the gods, in the *Aeneid*, rarely appear to the mortal characters. For example, Venus disguises herself as a huntress, when she approaches Aeneas, to tell him that he is in Carthage, and only afterwards does he realise that she is his mother:

*'You! Cruel too! Why tease your son so often with disguises?'*¹¹

In comparison, the Ovidian gods generally appear as themselves, illustrated by the examples of Apollo, Mercury and Venus, which highlights the informality surrounding the gods.

⁸ *Metamorphoses*: p.6

⁹ *Aeneid*: book 1.344 ff.

¹⁰ *Metamorphoses*: p.243.

¹¹ *Aeneid*: book 1.558.

However, if they do not appear in their human forms, they are then presented in animal forms. For example, Jupiter is depicted as a bull, firstly, to Io and then to Europa, in order to rape them. This illustrates his animal characteristics-his raw and wild instincts. In this way, Ovid can highlight the gods immorality, so that they appear worse behaved than humans.

The gods in the *Metamorphoses* are portrayed as being immoral and acting only with '*licentia*', freedom. For example, Byblis, who wants to commit an incestuous act with her brother, Caunus, cites the gods as a positive example, as they sleep with their relatives, without feelings of guilt or shame:

*'Yet gods have loved their sisters; yes indeed! Why Saturn married Ops, his kin by blood, and Ocean Tethys and Olympus' lord, Jove, married Juno. But the gods above are laws unto themselves. Why try to fit the different rules of heaven to the modes of man?'*¹²

This emphasises that not only are the gods immoral, but they also live by different rules that exempt them from being judged, thus allowing them to behave with complete '*licentia*'. Ovid highlights this further, when he depicts Jupiter as a bull, who rapes Io and consequently has to transform her into a cow, after he has been caught out by his angry wife, Juno. After her transformation she undergoes the traumatic realisation of her new self, and Ovid emphasises the pathos around her:

*'Would she complain, a moo came from her throat, a startling sound -her own voice frightened her...in the water, mirrored she saw her muzzle and the horns and fled in terror from the self she saw.'*¹³

This emphasises the callousness of the Ovidian gods towards humanity, that is, Jupiter uses Io to satisfy his divine desire and he does not consider the consequences of his actions, which will affect Io. However, at the end of her traumatic ordeal, he changes her back to a human; but perhaps his actions have occurred too late, as our sympathy already lies with Io, thus perceiving Jupiter in a negative light.

Likewise, the Virgilian gods also have an immoral streak, but Virgil does not flaunt their sexuality as blatantly as Ovid. For example, Iarbus, the former suitor of Dido, prays to his father, Jupiter, complaining about the marriage of Aeneas to Dido:

*'After refusing to marry me, has taken Aeneas to be master in her realm.'*¹⁴

Firstly, Iarbus was the result of Jupiter raping a nymph, which highlights that the gods in the *Aeneid* can act in an immoral and unrestrained fashion. Furthermore, it is significant that the marriage was plotted by Juno and Venus, for their own personal benefits. That is, Juno did not want Aeneas to destroy Carthage, therefore she made the mortals fall in love, so that Aeneas would be distracted from his destiny; Venus herself, wanted to ensure the safe welcome of Aeneas into Carthage. The goddesses seem oblivious to the heartache that they will cause, through this union. This also portrays the lack of consideration that the divinities have for human feelings.

It is also significant that the immoral love, depicted by Jupiter and Iarbus' mother, the nymph, bears no consequences, whereas, the mortal love between Aeneas

¹² *Metamorphoses*: p.214-215.

¹³ *Metamorphoses*: p.70.

¹⁴ *Aeneid*: book 4.289 ff.

and Dido determines whether Aeneas will fulfil Jupiter's will and Fate. This also compliments Ovid's theme that the gods live by different rules. Lyne neatly summarises this aspect of the gods, when he states:

*'For man, life is earnest, moral, desperately serious, beset by consequences. A god-perhaps especially Jupiter, may permit himself immorality and frivolity.'*¹⁵

Despite this similarity between the Virgilian and Ovidian gods, it should be noted that the gods in the *Metamorphoses* live for lustful encounters, exemplified by Jupiter, Apollo and Mercury, and the goddesses live for revenge, illustrated by Juno. Whereas, the gods in the *Aeneid* lead a different existence. For example, the Ovidian Jupiter is dominated by frivolity, in comparison, the Virgilian Jupiter is dominated by Fate and history. That is, in his prophecy he illustrates that Aeneas will establish a new Troy, in Italy, and an empire that will flourish under his descendants, Caesar, and more specifically under the new emperor, Augustus. Jupiter's role is dominated by the course of history, for example, he sends down Mercury to Aeneas to remind him to leave Carthage and sail for Italy:

*'The man should sail: that is the whole point. Let this be what you tell him, as from me.'*¹⁶

Jupiter has a sense of responsibility to fulfil fate, this is highlighted further, when he intervenes in the battle between Turnus and Aeneas, despite stating earlier that he would remain impartial, '*isdem omnibus*'. That is, he leads Juturna away from the battle, so that she can no longer influence and support her brother, Turnus; thus making him vulnerable against Aeneas, so that he will consequently be killed by him, allowing him to establish his new home, and so, finally fulfilling fate. Jupiter has a direct influence in the turn of events.

However, Juno's role in the *Aeneid* shows signs of similarity to her Ovidian counterpart, as she is primarily interested with restoring her divine pride that had been wounded by the Trojans, and thus seeking revenge. Virgil states:

*'O muse, how galled in her divine pride, and how sore at heart from her old wound.'*¹⁷

Virgil portrays Juno in a vengeful light, as her main aim throughout the progression of the book, is to punish Aeneas and thus, restore her status as the sister of Jupiter and the Queen of the gods, which she considers to have been jeopardised by the actions of the Trojans. This is highlighted in the reconciliation scene, when Jupiter reiterates that she is his sister and his consort, which establishes the importance of her role; as well as yielding to her desires, that the new race founded by Aeneas, will not bear the Trojan name and language. Once she has fulfilled the role of satisfying her divine pride, she leaves fate to run its course:

*'To all this Juno nodded in assent and, gladdened by his promise, changed her mind. Then she withdrew from sky and cloud.'*¹⁸

¹⁵ Lyne: *Further voices in Virgil's Aeneid*: p.85.

¹⁶ *Aeneid*: book 4.323-324.

¹⁷ *Aeneid*: book 1.13.

¹⁸ *Aeneid*: book 12.1069 ff.

In conclusion, we can note that both the Virgilian and Ovidian gods have similar attributes-they are immoral, callous towards humans and they live within their divine rules, without consideration for the consequences of their actions. However Virgil and Ovid portray these aspects differently. Firstly, Virgil dismisses the gods' negative aspects and focuses on their awesome, powerful and Homeric features. This serious portrait of the gods would have reflected positively on Augustus and his growing empire, as he frequently linked himself with the gods. Moreover, the role of the Virgilian gods was to establish the history of Rome, therefore Virgil had to portray them in a respectable light. On the other hand, Ovid focuses on the humorous side of the gods, and emphasises their worst traits. Ovid's purpose for his epic was to entertain the reader, therefore he portrayed his gods less seriously. It is also significant that he has intentionally broken away from the stereotypical austere images of the gods, and has set his gods at the opposite end of the scale to the Virgilian gods.

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