

The Frailty of Merit

It is in Vergil's world of incessant divine interference that the problem of induction becomes most acute. Here, even the most securely established regularity may be violated the next moment. This is true throughout the *Aeneid*, but nowhere is it more thoroughly shown than in Book V. At first, this book seems to fit strangely into the arc of the story: how do these exiles, still not arrived in Italy, find time or heart for a series of athletic contests? Later events in Book V more readily fit into the overarching narrative, but the games seem an awkward interlude. Not so. The book establishes the absolute dominion of divine will over merely human merit. The games show this in a relatively low-stakes context; the stakes rise rapidly as the book proceeds.

Within the first hundred lines of the book, we are given three references to the insecurity of human knowledge. First, from Aeneas' helmsman Palinurus (all quotations are from Shadi Bartsch's 2021 translation, Modern Library):

The winds have changed and roar across our path
from the dark west, the air thickens to mist.
We can't resist or hold our course. Fortune
has defeated us: let's follow where she calls.
The friendly shores and harbor of Sicilian Eryx
are close, if I remember rightly and can trace
our journey back by the same stars I charted here. (V.19-25)

And then Aeneas himself, announcing the games:

Great Dardans, noble race of divine blood,
a year has passed, the months have turned full circle,
since we put my godlike father's bones in earth
and offered sacrifice on his sad altars. Unless
I'm wrong, that day is here. I'll always count it bitter,
but I'll always honor it (as the gods wished). (V.45-50)

And a few lines later:

If the ninth's days dawn brings gentle weather
and the sun's rays light our mortal earth,
I'll hold Trojan contests... (V.64-66)

Even the rising of the sun in the morning, that most dependable of regularities, comes into question.

As it happens, each of these expectations is met: Palinurus successfully guides the crew to Eryx; it is indeed the anniversary of Anchises' death, and the sun does "light our mortal earth" nine successive times (and brings gentle weather, at least on the ninth day). The stage, however, is set: the security of our expectations is in jeopardy.

Then come the games themselves. The very idea of such athletic competitions – at least to my contemporary sensibilities – is to test one's merit, that mix of innate ability and deliberate training. It is predicated on induction, on the predictable fact that (allowing for some fluctuation) the more talented athlete will emerge victorious more often than not. Yet in each of the games, with one possible exception, something other than merit determines the outcome.

In the ship race, Mnestheus is set to pull off a thrilling, come-from-behind victory over Cloanthus:

The others were encouraged by success. Belief in
victory spurred them on. And perhaps they'd have
pulled ahead and won, but Cloanthus stretched
both hands to the waves and poured out prayers... (V.231-34)

The gods listened: "Father Portunus himself propelled the boat / ahead" (V.241-42). Now perhaps Cloanthus merited the victory – he successfully pulled off a risky maneuver earlier in the race, and Mnestheus had not yet overtaken him – but it was not his merit that decided it.

In the footrace, merit would clearly award the victory to Nisus, who far outstrips the other runners. However:

And now,
almost at the very end, they were closing
on the goal, exhausted, when unlucky
Nisus skidded in a pool of slippery blood
where bulls slaughtered for a sacrifice
had soaked the ground and lush green grass with gore. (V.326-31)

Thus the best runner fails to win. Perhaps, though, we hold his slipping against him – a better runner would have avoided the slippery patch. In that case, Salius deserves the victory, but Nisus trips him:

He lay there in the filthy dung and sacred gore.
Even so, he remembered his love for
Euryalus. Rising from the slime, he tripped
Salius, who went tumbling to the earth. (V.334-37)

While divine intervention is not the obvious culprit for the failure of merit in this case, it is noteworthy that it is blood from sacrifices that causes Nisus' fall. And even if we do not attribute his fall to the gods, it is in any event not merit that decides the race.

The boxing match is the possible exception to the pattern: Entellus defeats Dares without any foul play, obvious accidents, or other interventions. Entellus is, moreover, a famed fighter. And yet he is also old and sluggish, and initially refuses to fight on those grounds. Dares is clearly favored to win. However, after Dares knocks Entellus to the ground, Entellus rises and, inspired by a mix of rage and shame, furiously attacks Dares, winning the match. It seems fair enough, yet here is how Aeneas comforts Dares:

He stopped the match, pulling out exhausted
Dares, and soothed him with these words. "Poor man,
have you lost your mind? Don't you see
his strength is not his own, but backed by gods?
Give in to their power." (V.463-67)

Whether there was divine intervention or not, the deviation from expectation is attributed to such interference.

In the final game, archery, things are quite straightforward: the archers must shoot a dove tethered to the top of a mast. The first archer, Hippocoön, hits the mast. The second, Mnestheus, comes close, but ends up merely severing the cord without hitting the dove itself. The dove is now flying freely, making it even more impressive that the third archer, Eurytion, successfully shoots it down, as Vergil describes in this gorgeous passage:

The dove, released, flew southward to dark clouds.
Eurytion had long since held his arrow taut
and his bow drawn. Praying to his brother,
he peered for the dove as she beat her wings
in joy in the empty sky, rising to the night,
and shot her. She fell lifeless, leaving her soul
in the stars, returning the lodged arrow. (V.512-18)

So far, so good. But Acestes remains, and though "the prize was gone[,] / He shot his arrow to the heavens anyhow" (V.519-20). The outcome:

Soaring through the empty sky, the arrow
blazed a flaming path, then vanished in the breeze,
like a shooting star falling from the heavens
that draws its shining tail across the sky. (V.525-28)

This is taken as a sign from the gods, and Acestes is awarded the prize. Merit has, once again, failed to decide the match.

I have gone through the games in such detail because they foreshadow the more momentous happenings of the second half of the book. After the games, as the youth are performing a mock battle on horseback, Juno sends her messenger, Iris, to perform some mischief among the Trojan women:

Iris mixed among them, no novice in the art
of harm. She shed her goddess's clothes and face
and became Beroë, Doryclus' old wife,
who'd once had a family and famous sons. (V.618-21)

So disguised, Iris urges the women to burn the ships. Have they not had enough of traveling, of the uncertainty of exile? They have found a friendly shore. Why not stop there. But one of the women, Pyrgo, has good sense, saying:

Women, this is not Doryclus' wife,
Beroë. Note the signs of divine beauty,
her burning eyes, her bravery. Look at
her face, how she sounds and how she walks.
I myself just left Beroë. She was sick,
and sad that she alone would miss the rites
and could not pay Anchises his due honors." (V.646-52)

At this, the women look toward the ships,

torn between
fierce longing for their present spot
and the lands to which Fate called. (V.654-56)

They are undecided, not knowing who to follow. What decides the matter is this:

Iris rose up
through the sky on level wings, and as she left,
she drew a massive rainbow in the clouds. (V.656-58)

Despite confirming Pyrgo's warning, this sets the women into a frenzy, and they burn the ships. It is this act of divine interference that the games foreshadowed. It is the ultimate disrupting of merit: Pyrgo's warning, which had helped create the women's indecision, is proven wholly correct, yet precisely in being shown to be correct it loses its power. A further irony: Iris invokes a made-up prophecy by Cassandra; this false prophecy is heard, while Pyrgo slides into the role of the actual Cassandra, speaking an unheard truth. Truth cannot compete with divine caprice. Merit, however evident, decides nothing.

The book ends with one final assault on merit. Venus, worried, turns to Neptune, beseeching him to look kindly on Aeneas' crew and see them safely to Italy. Neptune placates her:

"I haven't changed my mind; let go your fear.
He'll reach Avernus' harbor safely, as you wish.
There'll only be one man to mourn for, lost at sea.
One life will pay for many." (V.812-15)

He gives no reason why a life must be lost. Nor is any given later. It is a wholly arbitrary sacrifice. And, once again, it involves a mockery of merit. At night, Sleep (disguised as Phorbas) visits Palinurus as he guides the ship, trying to tempt him to abandon his post. Palinurus resists, as he ought:

Palinurus barely glanced at him: "You ask
me of all men to trust the sea's calm face
and quiet waves, to have faith in this monster?
As if I'd leave Aeneas to the lying breezes!
The clear skies' treachery has fooled me many times."
He held the tiller tight, not letting go,
and fixed his eyes upon the stars above. (V.847-53)

Palinurus is wholly guiltless, wholly admirable, and yet:

Then the god shook over him a branch that dripped
with Lethe's dew and drugs of Stygian strength.
It shut his swimming eyes against his will.
He'd hardly slumped in unexpected rest
when Sleep bent over him and pitched him in the sea.
As he fell, he ripped the rudder from the stern,
calling often on his friends, but unheard. (V.854-60)

There is no cause for this, nothing that justifies it. It is simply one more awful proof of the frailty of merit in the face of the divine will.

I began this post with a remark on the problem of induction. Against this backdrop, Aeneas' lament for Palinurus takes on especially poignancy:

"Ah, Palinurus, rashly trusting in calm winds
and sky, you'll lie unburied on an unknown shore." (V.870-71)