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Vengeance: The Twisted Justice in the *Iliad*, *Medea*, and the *Aeneid*

What does it mean to be just? This question has plagued the human mind for thousands of years yet the concept is still as relevant today as it was then. Over the many years, ancient civilizations developed their own views on adhering to what is just or their views on justice itself. Had it not been for the great writers and poets of the ancient world such as Homer, Euripides, and Virgil, the views and beliefs of these ancient civilizations on justice, would have been lost in time. In the ancient world however, specifically that of ancient Greece, the concept of justice was closely tied to that revenge, almost to the point where they became one and the same. In his famous book *The Essays*, Francis Bacon writes that “Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out” (Bacon 19). Bacon, like the ancient Greeks, believed that revenge and justice were correlated though as he notes, the more revenge takes over, the more justice should suppose itself. Therefore, by identifying the instances in which individuals used vengeance in the *Iliad*, *Medea*, and the *Aeneid*, as opposed to true justice, one can better understand how, though inherently different by definition, for the ancient Greeks, vengeance and justice were interchangeable terms.

Throughout Homer’s *Iliad*, upon first glance, there are no true instances in which justice is displayed. In his book entitled *The Greek Concept of Justice from Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato*, Eric Havelock states that “those in search of justice in the *Iliad* must take a different track, focusing their inquiry on the political and social context” (Havelock 127). This

context is made apparent by the actions committed by Achilles towards the latter portion of the epic. In book 18, upon discovering that Hector has killed his good friend Patroclus, Achilles swears to kill Hector even if it costs him his life. He states: "I'll go and meet that murderer head-on, that Hector who destroyed the dearest life I know" (*Iliad* 18.134-135). Achilles' view on justice is not only personal, but it is also seeking out justice for someone else; in this case, his friend Patroclus. In his book entitled *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay writes that the main obsession of the avenger is not only to gratify rage, but he notes that "spilling enemy blood is an effort to bring the dead back to life" (Shay 89). Achilles' rage is not only geared towards Hector, but it also, partially geared towards himself as Patroclus' death is, in a way, Achilles' fault. Had he agreed to fight the Trojans, Patroclus would not have had to disguise himself as Achilles himself and charge into battle. In addition, being that Patroclus has not been buried, Achilles is also seeking to avenge his soul as the ancient Greeks believed that one's soul would not enter the gates of Hades until properly buried. Thus, Achilles' search for vengeance, is not only for himself, but also for that of Patroclus. Though Patroclus was murdered in battle, Achilles makes it his personal vendetta to fight and kill Hector, thereby, bringing justice to Patroclus as well. In his article entitled "Administration of Justice in the Age of Homer", Robert J. Bonner writes that the public of the ancient world would have "even demanded that men should avenge the death of their kinsmen" (Bonner 16). Bonner later mentioned how it would have been seen shameful or even disgraceful if the individual did not avenge the life of their brethren (Bonner 16). Havelock also states a similar concept as he argues that justice in the *Iliad*, is demonstrated via what society has deemed it to be, which in the case of Homer's epic, seems to be that of vengeance (Havelock 124). Though this concept of an "eye for an eye" society, can be fairly confusing to the modern reader, it is important to remember that the sense of honor was closely tied to that of

justice and vengeance. By killing Hector, Achilles is not only avenging his friend but he is also maintaining social balance and restoring honor to his dead friend. Vengeful justice is not solely exclusive to the Homeric epics however, it can also be seen in other ancient Greek texts.

Perhaps one of the most evident examples of revenge in the ancient Greek texts is that of Euripides' *Medea*. In his article entitled "Medea's Wounds: Euripides on Justice and Compassion", Devrim Sezer writes that "*Medea* is a vivid and tragic representation of Euripides' lifelong interest in the question of justice" (Sezer 215). Sezer's comment is made apparent in the manner in which Euripides seems to heavily dive into the concept of vengeance in his overall plot for the drama. *Medea* tells the story of the titular character, who having been betrayed and wronged by her husband Jason, decides to take matters into her own hands and formulate a vengeful plan against her husband. It could be argued that the entirety of the narrative of the play, is founded on the concept of revenge. The play opens with the commentary and introduction to the scene by the nurse who has observed the sequence of events up until the present time of the play (*Medea* 17-28). From the beginning of the play, as Sezer points out, Medea continually states that Jason has betrayed the vows and broken the promises made to her in addition to neglecting his duties as both a father and a husband (Sezer 217). Sezer notes that "Trust, it now becomes clear, is the foundation of Medea's conception of justice" (Sezer 217). As opposed to Achilles in the *Iliad*, Medea does not kill the source of her injustice, Jason, but rather decides to go through with an even more horrid act; killing her children. With her plan now set in motion following her conversation with Aegeus, Medea then proclaims her plan to the chorus saying "It makes me groan to think what deed I must do next. For I shall kill my own children; no one shall take them from me" (*Medea* 790-793). This scene depicts Medea's rationale for her horrid act as instead of killing Jason and thereby fulfilling the more Homeric portrayal of

vengeance, she decides to break the mold in her acts of revenge towards Jason. According to Marianne Hopman, in her article entitled “Revenge and Mythopoiesis in Euripides' ‘Medea’”, Medea views Jason’s new marriage as a betrayal of not only their marriage but as a destruction of the equal bond they once had and thus by extracting her revenge, particularly that of killing her children, she demonstrates this view (Hopman 161). Medea’s plot is solely instigated because of the actions caused by Jason. In a way, he is the one responsible for her evilness. In her article entitled “Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge”, Anna Burnett writes that Jason is the “center of the pollution” in *Medea* (Burnett 12). She goes on to state that not only is Jason an adulterer but he possesses another far more important trait in regards to the play; a man of injustice (Burnett 13). Herein lies the biggest demonstration of the manner in which justice is portrayed in *Medea*. Upon first glance, one might not see how justice is depicted throughout the play but in reality, the entire narrative is fueled by a, albeit twisted, view of justice. Being that, particularly in Medea’s eyes, Jason is a man of injustice, her actions throughout the play are her manner of dealing with injustice, in other words, she has created her own version of what justice entails. Medea, however, is not the only female in ancient Greek texts, to fulfill her own view of justice.

In Virgil’s Homeric based epic the *Aeneid*, Virgil, like Euripides, portrays vengeful justice in yet another different light. This can be seen in the life and death of Dido. When the reader is first introduced to Dido, Virgil portrays her as a powerful and fair leader who rules over Carthage. Virgil, in book 1, wrote how Dido ruled from her lofty seat “handing down decrees and laws to her people, sharing labors fairly” (*Aeneid* I. 606-610). It isn’t until Venus, tinkers with the lives of Dido and subsequently Aeneas, that we begin to see a change in the queen of Carthage. Having been struck madly in love with Aeneas by Cupid, Dido proceeds to become

infatuated with the Trojan prince. Eventually, the gods interfere yet again, as Jupiter, fearing that Aeneas is becoming too comfortable with his life on Carthage, sends Mercury to go and remind Aeneas of the prophecy which he must fulfill. Aeneas, knowing that he must fulfill his destiny, proceeds to abandon Dido much to her dismay. It is here, that Dido's character, despite being madly in love with Aeneas, changes for the worse. Upon realizing that Aeneas will leave, Dido decides to extract her revenge upon Aeneas and obtain justice. Though upon first glance, this seems like the only reason for her ultimate demise, upon closer inspection one can see that there is another level to rationale. According to W.A. Camps in his book entitled *An Introduction to Virgil's Aeneid*, Camps writes how Dido kills herself to remain faithful and honor her late husband Sychaeus, being that she refused to marry any of the neighboring princes (Camps 35). In this way, Dido, by committing suicide, is also bringing justice to her late husband much in the same way that Achilles brought justice to his dead friend Patroclus. Dido demonstrates this in her last words as she reflects back on her life stating "I have founded a noble city, seen my ramparts rise. I have avenged my husband, punished my blood brother, our mortal foe" (*Aeneid* IV. 813-814). In her article entitled "In Search of Dido", Janet Schmalfeldt writes on the tragic nature of Dido's suicide. Schmalfeldt states that the "irony is that is Dido never learns that a goddess has tricked her – never discovers that she has been poisoned by Love (Cupid)... this is why Dido simply cannot believe Aeneas when he tries to explain that the gods are forcing him to leave" (Schmalfeldt 589). In a way, Dido's suicide, though tragic, is a depiction of justice similar to that of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*. By avenging her late husband, Dido shows that, being that Aeneas refuses to stay with her, she chooses to remain loyal to her husband by not allowing herself to be betrothed to anyone else.

Throughout most of the ancient Greek writings, the concept of justice is shown to be heavily construed with that of revenge. The many instances in which characters throughout the Greek epics and dramas display their vengeful actions, demonstrates how in reality, though definitely pleasing to one's human nature, revenge is by no means, the same as justice. As Bacon stated "revenge is kind of wild justice", and as such, cannot be considered true justice. In addition, revenge is often cyclical in nature as the second an individual retaliates on another, the other individual will retaliate back, creating a never-ending cycle. Had the characters throughout the epics and plays, adhered to sound justice and not given in to their sinful human desire to avenge themselves or others, many of the events of the play could have been prevented. If revenge can be thought of as the denial of that which is morally sound to bring gratification to oneself, justice, can therefore, be thought of as the embracing and adherence to that which is inherently true and fair, in order better not only oneself, but one's community as well. The adhering of justice is certainly not an easy feat to accomplish as human nature is inherently corrupt and seeks to only gratify itself. If one were to view the ancient Greek texts from a Christian perspective however, one would find that revenge is never the answer. The Bible states in Romans 12:19: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." As Christians, we should strive to adhere to this teaching and not follow the example, however tempting, of the ancient Greeks for if we trust in God, "all things will work together for good" and He will pour down His own divine justice on those who wrong us.

Annotated Bibliography

Bacon, Francis. *The Essays*. New York, Independently published, 2014. Francis Bacon, also known by the title of Lord Verulam, was a famous English philosopher who is perhaps most known for his contribution and development of the scientific method. In addition, he is also known for his essays in which he touches on variety of topics. For the purposes of this paper, his essay *On Revenge*, was used to help define the concept of revenge itself and the manner in which he saw it as a “wild” form of justice.

Bonner, Robert J. “Administration of Justice in the Age of Homer.” *Classical Philology*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1911, pp. 12–36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/261287. Robert Bonner, a former professor at the University of Chicago, in his article described the manner in which justice was administered throughout ancient Greece during the age of Homer. His article provided much insight into the manner in which the concept of vengeance was seen in the ancient Greek world. Not only was it accepted, it was encouraged as vengeance was closely tied to that of one’s honor.

Burnett, Anne. “Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge.” *Classical Philology*, vol. 68, no. 1, 1973, pp. 1–24. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/268785. In Anne Burnett’s article, the former University of Chicago professor of Classics, writes how Euripides’ play *Medea* portrays the ancient Greek concept of vengeance in a new light via the manner in which the narrative is written. She also notes how Jason was the main culprit for the events of the play as had he not left his wife Medea, the actions triggered would have never occurred.

Camps, W.A. *An Introduction to Virgil’s Aeneid*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1969. In his book, W.A. Camps a British classical scholar and former Master of Pembroke College, gives readers an introduction into the world of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. His commentary

on the character of Dido offers tremendous insight into her complex and tragic character. He notes how Dido kills herself not solely because of her want of revenge towards Aeneas but also because of her wanting to bring justice to her late husband Sychaeus. Camp's insights into the rationale of Dido's suicide are tremendously helpful in analyzing both her character and her impact.

Euripides. *Medea and Other Plays (Penguin Classics)*. Reissue, New York, Penguin Classics, 2003. Euripides' *Medea* was the second of my three primary texts. It depicts the frightening level of wickedness the human psyche can reach as it depicts Medea and the manner in which she seeks revenge on Jason. Her horrid act of infanticide is as shocking now as it was back then to the ancient Greeks as it shows a new facet of vengeance never before seen; one that goes beyond that of the Homeric epics.

Havelock, Eric. *The Greek Concept of Justice: From Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato*. Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1978. In his book, Eric Havelock, a classicist and former professor of the University of Toronto as well as department chair of Classics at the University of Harvard and the University of Yale, writes how the Greek concept of justice is not always clearly seen in the ancient Greek texts, particularly that of Homeric texts. His insights on the manner in which justice is depicted particularly in the *Iliad*, shows how there are instances in which justice is portrayed in the epic, yet they are not as apparent as other works of literature.

Homer, and Robert Fagles. *The Iliad*. Revised ed., New York, Penguin Classics, 1998. Homer's *Iliad*, was my third and final primary text. Though upon first glance, justice seems to be absent in the epic, upon further investigation one can see that justice is in fact present in the epic. In the decisive sequence in which Achilles decides to confront Hector after

killing his friend Patroclus, the rationale of Achilles's revenge is made apparent. His belief that in killing Hector he will not only avenge Patroclus but also bring him justice, adds a different level to the climactic duel.

Schmalfeldt, Janet. "In Search of Dido." *Journal of Musicology*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2001, pp. 584–615. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jm.2001.18.4.584. In her article, Janet Schmalfeldt, a professor at Tufts University, writes how the character of Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid*, can be split into two "Dido's". The first is the historical figure and the second is the one portrayed in the *Aeneid*. She writes how Dido's character is depicted as the archetype for the "abandoned woman" in ancient literature. Schmalfeldt's insight into the tragic nature of her character demonstrates how in reality, Dido is not merely a character briefly depicted in the first couple chapters of the *Aeneid*, but rather one of the most memorable and impactful characters in ancient literature.

Sezer, Devrim. "Medea's Wounds: Euripides on Justice and Compassion." *History of Political Thought*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2015, pp. 209–33. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26228597. In his article, Devrim Sezer, an associate professor from Izmir University of Economics who holds a PhD. in Political Thought from the University of Carleton, writes how Euripides' *Medea* portrays his lifelong interest of the pursuit of justice. He touches on the rationale behind Medea's actions throughout the play. He notes that her view of justice is based solely on that of trust which was broken once Jason betrayed her and married his second wife. This insight, offers the reader a new perspective into the character of Medea which aids in the reading and understanding of the text.

Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1994. Jonathan Shay, an acclaimed clinical psychiatrist, is known primarily for his writing on the effects of

violence and post-traumatic stress induced problems veterans serve from their experiences in war, specifically that of Vietnam. In his book, Shay applies his knowledge of the psychological effects war has on individuals and applies it to Homer's *Iliad*. This, results in a profoundly deep insight into the characters of Homer's epic as one often reads Homer simply to analyze the narrative and plot but with the help of Shay's writings, one can not only better analyze the characters in the epic, but also their mind and the emotional toll that the Trojan war has on these individuals.

Virgil, and Robert Fagles. *The Aeneid*. New York, Netherlands, Penguin Group, 2008. This text was one of my three primary texts. The Aeneid tells the story of Aeneas and his journey from the desolation of Troy to being the father of the Roman empire. Virgil's depiction of Dido's suicide is one of the most impactful and tragic scenes in literature. His depiction of her death demonstrates her vengeance towards Aeneas and her avenging of her murdered husband in addition to showing how her sense of justice, is similar to that of Achilles.