

*Virgil's Introduction of Mezentius:  
Aeneid 7.647–8*

Primus init bellum Tyrrhenis asper ab oris  
contemptor diuum Mezentius, agminaque armat.

There have been different suggestions as to why Virgil chose Mezentius, *contemptor diuum*, to head the Italian forces ranged against Aeneas:<sup>1</sup> but in the spirit of Servius' comment on these lines (*non mirum si sacrilegus et contemptor deum contra piam gentem prior arma corripuit*) most critics note that such a placing emphasizes his role as a foil to the hero who will in due course dispose of him, *pius Aeneas*.<sup>2</sup> Although this point will no doubt prove to be relevant later, if we look at the structure of Book 7 we find that *pius Aeneas* is in fact contrasted, not with Mezentius, but with his chief adversary, Turnus. Our attention is drawn to this by the outer frame of the book, which begins and ends, quite exceptionally, with passages dedicated to two women, Caieta and Camilla: Caieta, a Trojan nurse who has just died peacefully, full of years, and Camilla, a Volscian warrior-maiden, doomed to die violently in battle while still in her prime. And once we see these two as a contrasting pair, we also see next to them, on the one hand, *pius Aeneas*, quietly discharging the last sad duty owed to his former nurse, and on the other the restless Turnus, bustling about in the vanguard of the Italian forces, his helmet topped with the figure of a Chimera belching forth volcanic fire. As for Mezentius, the only comparable formal arrangement brings in Camilla once more and involves the catalogue, which opens with this Etruscan despiser of gods, a formidable figure disposed of in two curt lines, and closes with the radiant picture of the Volscian princess, devotee of Diana, on whom the poet lavishes no less than fifteen brilliantly descriptive lines.<sup>3</sup>

Here we ought surely to pause and take a closer look at the paradox we have just touched upon. For if Mezentius is indeed a figure of such importance as to be put at the head of this review of Italian forces, why is he allotted no more than two lines on this, his first appearance, when

his son, Lausus, is then given six (649–54), and Aventinus, who will play no part in the subsequent action, receives sixteen (655–69)? The answer, I believe, has a crucial bearing on our whole approach to the lines in question, and above all casts doubt on the habit commentators tend to adopt of assuming on the reader's behalf knowledge which, strictly speaking, he has still to acquire at this stage in the epic's developing action. Fordyce for example comments (*ad* 647): '*ab oris* is to be taken closely with *Mezentius* and not with the verbs: for Mezentius has not come directly from Etruria—his Etruscan subjects had revolted and dethroned him, and he had taken refuge with the Rutulians.' But the reader cannot be expected to know all these facts at this stage, any more than Aeneas, and several considerations suggest that Virgil deliberately prolongs the ignorance of both to suit his own dramatic purpose. Above all there is the astonishing brevity of this opening reference to Mezentius, inevitable, I would suggest, because it was impossible to say more without telling the whole story. And coupled with the brevity is the ambiguity: for although the word-order supports Fordyce's view that *Tyrrhenis ab oris* refers to Mezentius' origin, in the absence of any other information the reader is still left to assume that, like his son (652), Mezentius actually proceeds from there, too. As for previous revelations, Creusa's ghost, Apollo, the Penates, Celaeno, Helenus, Anchises' ghost, and, most recently, the Sibyl, have all had their say about Aeneas' future in Italy, yet from none of them comes the faintest hint of what will in fact prove to be the key to Aeneas' survival when he arrives there, namely the Etruscan command, available because of Mezentius' expulsion. Of course in retrospect the Sibyl's enigmatic '*uia prima salutis, / quod minime reris, Graia pandetur ab urbe*' (6.96 f.) will prove to have had this support in mind, since Evander in Pallanteum will at last explain the situation (8.478 ff.) But in the meantime the reader can only share Aeneas' anxiety about the constantly worsening state of affairs (8.18 ff.), especially if he is familiar with the tradition, according to which there was no question of any separation of Mezentius from his people, and the Etruscans under his leadership supported Turnus.<sup>4</sup> Finally it should be noted how Virgil seems to maintain the tension thus generated for as long as he can. When the Tiber-god, for example, welcomes Aeneas and professes to explain how he can emerge victorious from his present plight (8.36 ff.), he makes no reference to Etruria even though the Tiber is an Etruscan river (cf. 8.473), but instead somewhat misleadingly

implies that an alliance with Evander will ensure of itself this outcome. Moreover even when Aeneas reaches Pallanteum the vital information is still withheld. The position is that the Etruscans have driven out Mezentius because of his monstrous cruelty, and he has joined Turnus, a long-standing enemy of the Pallanteans, in Ardea. Meanwhile a punitive expedition has been assembled by the Etruscans, but a *haruspex* has indicated that it can proceed against Mezentius only when it has acquired a foreign leader. Evander himself is too old for such an undertaking, and his son, Pallas, is disqualified through having a Sabine mother: so that when Aeneas arrives on the scene it quickly dawns on the Greek king that he is the longed-for foreign leader 'called for by the fates.'<sup>5</sup> This no doubt explains Evander's remarkable reaction as he listens attentively to Aeneas' speech proposing an alliance:

ille os oculosque loquentis  
iamdudum et totum lustrabat lumine corpus.

(8.152–3)

Indeed, that this is the implication of Evander's reaction seems confirmed by the equally remarkable demeanour of Latinus in the previous book, when he receives from Ilioneus an account of Aeneas' arrival in Latium after a divinely ordained and guided voyage. For Latinus, too, is under oracular instructions to await the arrival of a foreigner, in this case to marry his daughter and establish a dynasty with a glorious destiny. And when Ilioneus finishes speaking the poet continues:

talibus Ilionei dictis defixa Latinus  
obtutu tenet ora soloque immobilis haeret,  
intentos uoluens oculos.

(7.249 ff.)

Naturally the details differ considerably, since on this earlier occasion Aeneas is in fact absent: but the similar emphasis on each king's demeanour in such similar circumstances makes the passages an unmistakable pair.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that although Latinus proceeds at once to acknowledge Aeneas as his daughter's destined bridegroom (7.268 ff.), Evander keeps his conviction to himself, and makes no reference yet to the Etruscan command. In fact Aeneas spends

the first day of his mission to Pallanteum listening to Evander's account of Hercules' deliverance of the region from the monstrous Cacus, joining in the cult of Hercules, and touring the site of the future Rome under the king's guidance. Only on the following day does Aeneas at last learn the truth about Mezentius and the Etruscan command awaiting an *externus*, as Evander urges him to answer the call of fate, and progresses in the course of his speech from the opening '*maxime Teucrorum ductor*' to the closing '*o Teucrum atque Italum fortissime ductor*' (8.470, 513).<sup>7</sup> However, since Latinus' recent message suggesting that he should, as the required *externus*, answer a similar call and marry his daughter, was quickly followed by such disastrous consequences, it is hardly surprising that Aeneas now reacts with gloomy hesitation, unsure whether this new type of less specific guidance really does dovetail with the clearer sort he received in the past.<sup>8</sup> But then the tension which the poet has carefully maintained for so long is suddenly dissolved as Venus fulfils an earlier promise to provide a sign and weapons made by Vulcan should war threaten (cf. 8.535: *si bellum ingrueret*). One might have expected this intervention earlier, perhaps: but the fact that the goddess has waited until this precise moment is a clear indication that the Etruscan cause is indeed part of the coming war: and the point is confirmed when the complex prodigy involved (thunder and lightning in a clear sky, accompanied by a noisy celestial display of the promised weapons) includes the loud blare of an Etruscan trumpet (8.523 ff.). No wonder Aeneas reacts with such enthusiasm:

'ne uero hospes, ne quaere profecto  
quem casum portenta ferant: ego poscor Olympo.'

(8.532-3)

For, like the reader, he has had to wait long enough for the Etruscan situation to be cleared up at last.

So much, then, for the brevity of Mezentius' introduction, and a possible explanation of it. I want to turn now to the epithet *contemptor diuum* (7.468) and approach it in a similar spirit. Naturally the implications of the phrase become clearer as the epic progresses. Thus when, in order to motivate the detachment of Mezentius from his subjects, Virgil attributes to him, through Evander's account,<sup>9</sup> the unspeakable practice of binding the living to the dead, a form of torture ascribed

elsewhere to Etruscan pirates, we are reminded of the poet's view that grave maltreatment of one's fellow-men itself constitutes a form of *contemptio deum*, and merits for those guilty of it a place in Tartarus, listening for ever to Phlegyas' now pointless cry:

'discite iustitiam moniti, et non temnere diuos'

(6.620)

Later, when Mezentius rejects the dying Orodes' warning of his own impending death with a sardonic reference to the power of Jupiter (10.742–4), and proceeds to deify and invoke in prayer his right hand and his spear (10.773–4),<sup>10</sup> we see him as the heir to an established literary tradition of agnostic defiance.<sup>11</sup> As for the already mentioned contrast with *pious Aeneas*, although it is perhaps premature to press it in discussing 7.647–8, such a contrast certainly emerges later, for example when we find Aeneas praying to Jupiter and Apollo to grant him a duel with Turnus (10.875–6), and the Etruscan responding with a characteristic rejection of such pieties: '*nec mortem horremus nec diuum parcimus ulli*' (10.880). So too, while Mezentius is prepared to violate the established code regarding booty<sup>12</sup> by decking his son, Lausus, in the armour he hopes to strip from Aeneas' corpse, and even proposes to perform a sacrilegious parody of the trophy ritual<sup>13</sup> by turning his son into a living trophy over Aeneas (10.774 ff.), Aeneas himself is scrupulous in such matters, retaining Mezentius' arms for dedication to Mars, and countering his blasphemy by establishing in orthodox fashion a trophy in the god's honour (11.5 ff.). Moreover by letting Aeneas refer to that same booty as *primitiae* (11.16) Virgil leaves us to infer, if we so choose, that the hero is well aware of Mezentius' traditional association with an impious demand for first-fruits, and here indicates, with appropriate irony, that his sacrilegious hubris has finally come home to roost.<sup>14</sup>

But however interesting and complex a character Mezentius may turn out to be<sup>15</sup> (and I omit here Virgil's development of the father-son relationship in this context), that all lies in the future when we first read the catalogue's opening lines: and the question is, what kind of impact is the phrase *contemptor diuum Mezentius* meant to make when we first encounter it? An answer can perhaps be found by considering the problem facing the poet at this stage in the development of the epic action. For the truth had to be faced that the war on which the Italians

were now embarking was an unholy undertaking, contrary to fate. In the first half of the epic the Trojans have been guided to Italy by a stream of oracles emanating ultimately from Jupiter, and their reception on arrival there has been similarly if less elaborately provided for. Above all, Latinus has correctly identified Aeneas as the one referred to in the already mentioned oracle of Faunus:

'ne pete conubiis natam sociare Latinis,  
o mea progenies, thalamis neu crede paratis:  
externi uenient generi qui sanguine nostrum  
nomen in astra ferant, quorumque a stirpe nepotes  
omnia sub pedibus qua sol utrumque recurrens  
aspicit Oceanum, uertique regique uidebunt.'

(7.96 ff.)

But before Aeneas can respond to Latinus' overtures, Juno intervenes through Allecto to give a supernatural dimension to the natural disaffection of the local people, headed by the rejected suitor, the Rutulian king, Turnus; and when the ineffective Latinus is confronted by an anti-Trojan uprising the poet's verdict is unequivocal:

ilicet infandum cuncti contra omina bellum  
contra fata deum peruerso numine poscunt.

(7.583-4)<sup>16</sup>

So too is that of Latinus himself as he gives up the struggle to control his subjects:

' ipsi has sacrilego pendetis sanguine poenas,  
o miseri. te, Turne, nefas, te triste manebit  
supplicium, uotisque deos uenerabere seris.'

(7.595 ff.)

Virgil, then, found himself saddled with the task of reviewing the forces of his fellow-countrymen as they gathered to champion a cause which was in fact beyond the pale. So just as pride in his own region may have helped to inspire him to transfer the Etruscans as a nation to the better cause, so now he lets the tyrannical king they have rejected appear at the

head of the parade, conveying, as *contemptor diuum*, an emphatic but at the same time fleeting acknowledgement of the sacrilegious nature of the war. For although, as we have seen, the epithet will later prove to carry its own distinctive implications for Mezentius as an individual, its very lack of clarity on its first appearance means that we can only fall back on the context at this point and interpret it in the way suggested. Moreover the skill with which Virgil quickly leaves behind the negative aspect of such an opening deserves to be noted. For the terse reference to Mezentius at once gives way to the fuller and more positive description of his very different son (7.649–54): and in the course of it the poet even contrives as it were to jettison Mezentius for the time being with the phrase *dignus patriis qui laetior esset / imperiis et cui pater haud Mezentius esset* (7.653–4). With the Italian guilt thus briefly acknowledged and then speedily left behind, Virgil could now concentrate on what he loved most, Italy and its peoples, and take a joyful pride in the rest of their cavalcade.

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#### NOTES

1. E.g. both Paratore and Perret (*ad loc.*) ignore *contemptor diuum*, but while Paratore sees Mezentius' position as a tribute to the Etruscan contribution to the Italian cause, inspired by the poet's pride in his own roots, Perret puts it down to the hero's courage and military experience. G. Thome on the other hand sees Mezentius as thus given the status of a representative figure whose harshness in battle (cf. *asper*) and impiety reflect badly on the Italian cause right from the start (*Gestalt und Funktion des Mezentius bei Vergil*, Frankfurt am Main (1978) 16.
2. Cf. e.g. E. Fraenkel, *JRS* 35 (1945) 11: 'In the case of Mezentius it is obvious that he heads the list because he, the *contemptor deum*, is in every respect the opposite of *pious Aeneas*.' Cf. also C.F. Saylor, *CP* 69 (1974) 250; J.W. Jones, *Vergilius* 23 (1977) 52; H.C. Gotoff, *TAPA* 114 (1984) 193.
3. On the other hand, in spite of this contrast, these two belong closely together, too: as A.G. McKay puts it, *Vergil's Italy*, Bath (1971) 35, they are 'characters of the authentic epic, obsolete and foredoomed in the new environment and the new literary form.'

4. For a summary see W.A. Camps, *An Introduction to Virgil's Aeneid*, Oxford (1969) 78 f.; in greater detail, G. Thome, *op. cit.* 186 ff. Only Lycophron makes a brief reference to Etruscan support for Aeneas (*Alexandra* 1245 ff.), and he nowhere mentions Mezentius. See N. Horsfall, *Vergilius* 32 (1986) 13.
5. For this motif see F. Bömer, *RhM* 92 (1944) 327 ff.
6. W. Heilmann, *Gymnasium* 78 (1971) 81 notes the significance of Evander's reaction, but does not link the two passages.
7. Cf. Heilmann, *ibid.*
8. For other approaches to this passage see V. Pöschl, *Hermeneia: Festschrift Otto Regenbogen*, Heidelberg (1952) 134 ff.; Heilmann *op. cit.* 86 ff.
9. W.P. Basson, *AC* 27 (1984) 66, refers in this context to 'the mouth of the ill-disposed Evander', as if thereby to undermine the validity of the report. Cf. also P.F. Burke, *CJ* 69 (1973-4) 209: 'Evander, Mezentius' enemy, gives the blackest possible impression of the man.' But the expulsion of the tyrant by his own people, their astonishing determination to seek him out for punishment (10.691-2), Mezentius' own uncomplaining acknowledgement of their hatred (10.904-5), and finally Virgil's own verdict on the man (7.653-4), all suggest that Evander simply told the truth. For a sensitive treatment cf. E.W. Leach, *Arethusa* 4 (1971) 86.
10. As P.T. Eden notes, *PVS* 4 (1964-5) 32, Mezentius' 'god' at once fails him in his hour of need, since his spear misses Aeneas and strikes Antores instead.
11. See e.g. F.A. Sullivan, *CP* 64 (1969) 219 ff.; J. Glenn, *Vergilius* 18 (1972) 10; H.C. Gotoff, *TAPA* 114 (1984) 199 f.
12. Cf. R. Hornsby, *PhQ* 45 (1966) 347 ff.
13. Cf. K.P. Nielson, *Vergilius* 29 (1983) 28.
14. For different approaches to this topic see J. Glenn, *Vergilius* 17 (1971) 7-8; P.F. Burke, *Vergilius* 20 (1974) 28-9; G. Dumézil, *Mélanges Jacques Heurgon* Vol. 1, Rome (1976) 233 ff.
15. For a full discussion see H.C. Gotoff, *TAPA* 114 (1984) 191 ff.
16. G. Williams, *Technique and Ideas in the Aeneid*, New Haven & London (1983) 72, takes too narrow a view of what lies behind these lines when he writes: 'The immorality of the war rests on the exchange of hospitality and pledges between Latinus and Aeneas, symbolising the union of the two peoples.'







