

Leah KRONENBERG

Virgil's Mezentius: The Humanity of *Impietas*

Mezentius is one of the most controversial characters in the *Aeneid*. The vastly different portraits of Mezentius in the second half of the *Aeneid* have fueled scholarly debate about the interpretation of his character and especially about its relation to the character of Aeneas. Since Servius, critics have recognized that the opposition between Mezentius the *contemptor divum* and *pius Aeneas* is more than a martial one and that the two characters represent a moral opposition, as well. This opposition is complicated, however, by their final duel: although *pius* Aeneas wins the physical battle, impious Mezentius wins the reader's sympathy with a noble death scene in which his dignified behavior contrasts sharply with Aeneas' rage. In this paper, I will argue that Virgil creates this moral opposition between Mezentius and Aeneas only to reverse it at the end of Book 10 in order to challenge and redefine the concepts of *pietas* and *impietas*.

While many studies have been devoted to Mezentius in the past 35 years, most critics have avoided the problem that Mezentius poses for the interpretation of Aeneas' *pietas* by focusing instead on finding literary and historical models for Mezentius (Eden *PVS* 1965, Sullivan *CP* 1969, Leach *Areth.* 1971, Nethercut 1975 *CB*, La Penna *Maia* 1980, Glenn *AJP* 1971, Basson *Act. Class.* 1984). The few who have attempted a comprehensive thematic approach to Mezentius have found various symbolic meanings in his dichotomous character (Burke *CJ* 1974, Gotoff *TAPA* 1984, Gaskin *Latomus* 1992), but none has produced a unified understanding of Mezentius' unique personality that can reconcile the monstrous reports of Evander with the noble father and warrior presented to the reader. In other words, none has attempted to connect Mezentius' *impietas* directly to his noble behavior at the end of Book 10 because it is automatically assumed that Virgil must condemn such impiety.

I will argue that the meaning of Mezentius is found not in the contradiction between his humanity and *impietas* at the end of Book 10 but instead in the connection between them. Virgil demonstrates through Mezentius' character that *impietas* is not a synonym for moral decrepitude but is simply a rejection of the principles of order that human beings have forced on their chaotic universe. Similarly, *pietas* is not a synonym for *humanitas* but is an imposition of order on a universe that naturally opposes it. Aeneas is taught by his father to *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* (6.853); in other words, he is taught to create order by dividing the world into good and bad forces. Mezentius, in contrast, imposes no divisions on his world, which is driven only by the force of *furor*. He accepts the violence of life and resists the temptation to impose an artificial order.

The final duel between Mezentius and Aeneas shows that *pietas* and "sacrificial order" can lead to more savagery than *impietas* and the acceptance of disorder. Mezentius is endowed with two crucial characteristics that Aeneas lacks: knowledge (*haud inscius*, 907) and an ability to cope rationally with disaster. In contrast, Aeneas is *ignarus* throughout Book 10 (25, 85, 228). When the *furor* of war breaks through his ordered world, he is driven by an irrational need for vengeance in order to repair the cracks in his moral system. Aeneas' ignorance is connected to his delusions about the order of world

created by deceptive prophecies and dreams (O'Hara 1990), and these delusions in turn produce the very violence they are intended to suppress. Mezentius' world view does not eradicate violence, but because it does not suppress the true nature of the universe, it is better able to accept disaster without creating more in the process. Mezentius is a symbol of chaos and thus is a pure monster to Evander and Aeneid, whose world view he threatens. To his son Lausus and to Virgil, however, he is worth dying for.