Mezentius vs Aeneas in the *Aeneid*

It is an established fact that Aeneas is the main protagonist of the *Aeneid*, but whether this protagonist is a positive or a negative one is a question scholars hardly ever dare ask themselves, as if frightened at the idea of committing a crime of lèse-majesté against Augustus, the imperial sponsor of the epos and a ruler who wished to be recognized and admired through this “pious” son of Anchises and Venus. Prisoners of this mental scheme, they often tend to idealize his character and systematically ignore his dark side. How could they bear to acknowledge, for instance, that their untouchable model cannot compare with Turnus, his main adversary in the Latium war, whom he may have defeated on the battlefield yet who largely surpasses him in terms of human and moral qualities¹? And yet, this conclusion is undeniable if we stick to the facts. Admitting this much is already difficult for the supporters of the official *Aeneid*, and it only gets worse if one proves that the “pious” man in question is no better - and that's an understatement - than a character seemingly as nefarious as that of Mezentius, that *contemptor diuom”*², whose dreadful reputation is well-established among the average readers.

At his introduction, Mezentius is proudly walking at the head of the great military parade Italian people have united around Turnus and against the Trojan invader (7.647-48):

*Primus init bellum Tyrrhenis asper ab oris
Contemptor diuom Mezentius agminaque armat.*

“First to enlist in the war is a tough man from Tuscan dominions,
“God-despising Mezentius, who arms and now leads out his forces.”³

He is accompanied by his son, Lausus, a handsome youth for whom the poet cannot help but express compassion in these terms (v. 653-54):

³ F. Ahl (2007). The bias against Mezentius is already perceptible through Fagles’ translation of *asper* as “brutal”.

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3 F. Ahl (2007). The bias against Mezentius is already perceptible through Fagles’ translation of *asper* as “brutal”.

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...dignus patriis qui laetior esset

Imperiis et cui pater haud Mezentius esset.

“He deserved more cheer than he got from his service

Under his father, deserved that his father should not be Mezentius.”

These are enigmatic words that may sound like a condemnation, but readers can only comprehend their full meaning once they assemble all the pieces of the puzzle.

As early as the next book, old Evander, king of Pallanteum, presents a particularly repellent portrait to Aeneas: the portrait of a loathed neighbor who used to reign over Agylla (Haud procul hinc, 8.478: finitimo, 569) and for whom he entertains nothing but impotent hatred (v. 484). According to him, Mezentius is a monster who tyrannized his subjects in the worst ways imaginable until they rebelled and drove him shamefully from his palace. Worse yet, we are told this despot was also an abominable torturer, capable of inventing the most refined tortures such as tying his living victims against corpses, “hands against hands, mouth to mouth”\(^5\), in order to inflict a death that was as slow as it was agonizing.

Naturally, such atrocities inspire indignation, but it would be naive to take the old monarch’s allegation for granted, considering that he is little more than a Virgilian Nestor with fragile nerves (he collapses in verse 584, and his servants must carry him inside) and that his intellectual faculties seem rather weak. An inexhaustible talker, he delights himself in endless narrations, whether it is to evoke his early youth in Arcadia and his meeting with Priam and Anchises (v. 154-74), to describe in the smallest detail the epic struggle between Hercules and Cacus (v. 185-275), to fulfill the role of a tourist guide on the site of future Rome (see 314 ff.), or to expose his own version of the events that led to the formation of the Etruscan league, which is now ready to march under Aeneas’ guidance (v. 470-519)\(^6\). And what to think of his interminable farewells (v. 470-519), in which this senile man dissolves in tearful regrets over his long-gone youth (that’s certainly the right moment!) and, without fear

\(^4\) F. Ahl; compare R. Fagles: “a son who deserved more joy in a father’s rule, / anyone but Mezentius for a father.”

\(^5\) Componens manibusque manus atque oribus ora, 486.

\(^6\) He makes himself prominent by portraying himself as the mastermind behind the alliance between Trojans and Etruscans (“I will put you at their head”, 496) while in truth, he has no impact on the conclusion of this alliance whatsoever: cf. 10.148-56.
of ridicule, implores the gods to kill him on the spot \textit{(Nunc, nunc, 479)}, should his son die in battle, otherwise declaring himself ready to endure all the trials of life \textit{(patior quemuis durare laborem, 577)}! This is a convenient way of transferring his responsibilities upon the divinities when it is up to him to keep his beloved son near him instead of sacrificing him to his resentment towards Mezentius and entrusting him without hesitation to a foreigner he barely knows but for whom he already nourishes boundless admiration (v. 511-17).

Such blindness is nothing short of criminal, and this father has only himself to blame when his son's lifeless body is brought back to him. But no, first he pins the blame on the deceased youth—who, according to him, is guilty of not having listened to his counsel of caution (11.152-53)—and then he attacks Turnus (11.173 ff.), even though the latter has nothing to blame himself for, having defeated Pallas in an inevitable and perfectly fair combat\textsuperscript{7}. But Turnus knows the old man well \textit{(Qualem meruit, Pallanta remitto, 10.492)}\textsuperscript{8}, and it is in all justice that he utters the following words at the time of the duel; words that have been held against him for so long (10.443):

\begin{quote}
\textit{Cuperem ipse pares spectator adesset.}
\end{quote}

But unable to face the truth and shamelessly ignoring the war laws, Evander considers the winner over his son to be a mere assassin, and he therefore demands that Aeneas bring back his head. He declares he now lives only for that purpose (v. 177-78):

\begin{quote}
\textit{Quod uitam moror inuisam...}
\end{quote}

Evander's outrageous unfairness toward Turnus should lead us to question the validity of his accusations against Mezentius. In an unending sentence consisting of twelve whole verses (8.560-71), he complains that his enemy's only strength derives from Evander's elderly weakness, just as he will later accuse Turnus (11.173-75) of having taken advantage of his superiority as an adult to kill the teenage Pallas, as if the fault did not rest with the father who had let him go in the first place. He now claims that it is because of his old age that he is

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\textsuperscript{7} Cf. “L’\'Énéide sous l’\'Énéide dans le livre X”, \textit{RBPh} 70 (1992), pp. 86-87 and 91-92 for the fighting between Turnus and Pallas; between Aeneas and Lausus, pp. 87-91; and cf. \url{http://www.virgilmurder.org/images/pdf/larmes.pdf}, pp. 6 sqq.; see also pp. 9-14 of the article referred to \textit{supra} N. 1.
\end{flushleft}

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\textsuperscript{8} On the three possible meanings of \textit{meruit}, cf. p. 13 of the article referred to \textit{supra} N. 1. Through the son, it is the father who fought by delegation \textit{(telis.../ Evandri, 10.419-20)}. 
\end{flushleft}
forced to separate from his son: “Oh! if only Jupiter gave me back my years, as I was when I triumphed over the monstrous Erulus, who had three lives and three sets of weapons…” Let us try not to laugh. Nobody knows where this Erulus has come from, except he closely resembles famous Geryon defeated by Hercules, as this same Evander reminded us a short while ago (8.202). In short, what we have here is pure fabulation. In fact, this ridiculous bragging masks the very real cowardice of a man who, under the pretext of being too old to go to war, does not hesitate to send out his own son, undeterred by the latter’s young age. In the same vein—and in the same sentence—he rejects all the blame on his former neighbor, Mezentius. The lines 569-72 transmit an outburst of hatred:

\[ neque finitimo Mezentius umquam \]

\[ Huic capiti insultans tam ferro saeua dedisset \]

\[ Funera, tam multis uduasset ciuibus urbem. \]

“and then on this his neighbor’s head the tyrant Mezentius never would have heaped his insults or dealt so many savage deaths by sword, deprived his city of so many sons.”

His voice literally catches in his throat [iik-itii] as he evokes the name of his hated enemy, whom he accuses once again of the worst crimes; but ironically, all he achieves is turning his accusations against himself. Indeed, had his grievances really been justified, he would have expressed himself clearly and precisely instead of losing himself in ambiguities and vagueness. Scholars do not agree, and for good a reason, on the referent of the word \textit{urbem}, which can be either Agylla—the city from which Mezentius was driven out—or Pallanteum, where Evander reigns. In the first hypothesis, one must assume Evander

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9 J. Perret (translation of the \textit{Aeneid}, C.U.F., Paris, 1978) rightly wonders: “comment imaginer un être de cette sorte régnant dans une ville italienne et à peu près contemporain d’Énée!” But, as observes R. D. Williams in his commentary (St Martins Press, 1963), this story “is known only from this passage.”

10 Translation by A. Mandelbaum (Bantam Books, 1961).

11 For example, for P. Lejay (Paris, 1913), A. Bellessort (Paris, 1936), M. Rat (Paris, 1955), J. Perret, as well as for W. F. Jackson Knight (1956), A. Mandelbaum (1961), it is Agylla (so already Servius); for R. D. Williams, R. Fagles (2006), F. Ahl (2007), it is Pallanteum.
considered himself legitimate in intervening in the internal affairs of a foreign State and that it was not Mezentius who was waging war on him but the opposite. In the second case, Mezentius would be the aggressor, but the accusation comes out of nowhere, and its very extravagance ("he walks on my head", "he depopulated my city") makes it lose all credibility.¹²

One wonders in short if, in the eyes of this man, who shelters his cowardice under the cloak of old age, the real fault of Mezentius might have been his strength and courage despite his mature age, which had turned his hair white (canitiem, 10.844): a living reproach. In any case, let us not expect to hear the truth from this malicious storyteller, his archenemy; instead, let’s go to the battlefield, where men do not lie, for the poet did not leave us without clues.

In the tenth book, Mezentius is at the center of the battlefield for more than two hundred verses (689-908), and a comparison between him and Aeneas, who has just distinguished himself in the fray by an impressive series of massacres, is inevitable. Here, as we find out, it becomes difficult to disagree with the verdict pronounced a century ago by Augustin Cartault: “Ce qui frappe dans tout ceci, c’est la supériorité morale de Mézence sur Énée et la façon dont il le domine.”¹⁴ First of all, it is notable that out of the four images the poet—whose admiration pierces through the repetition omnibus uni / Vni ... uiro—associates with Mezentius (that is to say a rock fearlessly jutting into the raging waves, v. 693 ff.; an indomitable boar, v. 707 ff.; a hungry lion, v. 723ff., uesana fames, 724; and, finally, the giant Orion, v. 763 ff.), the first two are rather flattering while the negative element of the third (uesana) is equally an excuse (fames), and as for Orion, he has none of the infernal

¹² C. J. Fordyce (commentary of Books 7 and 8, Oxford 1977) shows the improbability of the king’s accusations: “urbem must refer to Evander’s city: attacks from Mezentius on his own subjects at Caere could not be thought to concern Evander directly enough to justify insultans. But in that case uiduasset is a surprisingly strong expression: there has been nothing to suggest that Evander’s people have been decimated by attacks from Etruria.” Note that the phrase capitii insultare (literally: “walking on someone’s head”) is the one Julius Caesar used to threaten his fellow citizens by predicting that one day "he would walk on their heads" (insultaturum omnium capitis), Suet. Div. Iul. 22.

¹³ His hatred goes so far as to wish not only Mezentius’s death but also that of "all his race" (generi, 484), starting with his son Lausus.

¹⁴ “What strikes in all this is the moral superiority of Mezentius on Aeneas and the way he dominates him”, A. Cartault, L’art de Virgile dans l’Énéide, Paris, 1926, p. 748.
characteristics peculiar to Aegon, a symbol of Aeneas in 565 ff. (not to mention Sirius and the sinister comets in v.272-75!).

There is no comparison between the alacrity of a lion in battle (alacer, 729) and the evil joy of the slaughterer Aeneas, who enjoys sarcasms and delights in gratuitous cruelty, closing his ears to all prayer and only taking prisoners for human sacrifices (v.517-20)\textsuperscript{15}. Indeed, while Acron becomes a victim of this “leonine” alacrity and is called infelix, 730 ("unfortunate"), this word does not have the same impact here as it does in the line 596, where it denotes an unarmed victim of Aeneas\textsuperscript{16}—a much more emotionally charged circumstance, for we know Acron was actively engaged in combat (v. 721). And is Mezentius truly to blame when his spear ricochets off Aeneas’ shield to hit "the unfortunate" Antores (infelix, 781)? Some criticize his irony towards Orodes, whom he has just struck down (v. 737):

\textit{Pars belli haud temnenda, uiri, iacet altus Orodes.}

“Here, men, lies no mean part of their battle strength,

Orodes, once so tall!”\textsuperscript{17}

However, if there is irony here\textsuperscript{18}, it is devoid of insult, and it is not the man on the ground Mezentius is addressing but his comrades; not to mock the victim but to state his victory, for they interpret it by "singing a joyful paean" (v. 738). Orodes has been struck to death (exspirans, 739), and Mezentius, eager to shorten his agony, is about to remove his weapon from the man’s wound (736: for that, he must press on the body with his foot, posito pede, while pulling out the spear, nixus et hasta = et hasta nixus)\textsuperscript{19}, but the dying man, hateful and vindictive, cannot refrain from threatening him: “Do not rejoice too quickly: your turn is


\textsuperscript{16} Likewise, in v. 425, Halaesus, a Pallas’ victim, is called infelix because, while he is busy protecting Imaon with his shield, he presents to the enemy his unarmed chest.

\textsuperscript{17} Translation by R. Fagles.

\textsuperscript{18} Mezentius can play indeed on the antithesis between altus and iacet, as well as on the etymological pun on the name of Orodes, which means in Greek "mountainous" (see J. S. Harrison, Oxford, 1991).

\textsuperscript{19} This postposition generally goes unnoticed: cf. for instance J. S. Harrison : “\textit{nixus} is ἀπὸ κοινοῦ with \textit{pede} and \textit{hasta}.”
coming”. Dominating his anger, Mezentius replies with a smile (subridens mixta Mezentius ira, 742) and, once again, without the slightest insult (v. 743-44):

*Nunc morere ; ast de me diuom pater atque hominum rex / Viderit.*

“Die now. In my case, the Father of Gods and the Ruler of Mortals Handles the details, I think.”

Admittedly, this *Nunc morere* takes up the terrible *Nunc morere* uttered by Pyrrhus against Priam in 2.550, but what a difference it makes! Pyrrhus is slaughtering a weak old man on the altar while Mezentius merely ends the suffering of a foeman wounded to death. In the same way, the *Morere* of Aeneas (v. 600) is addressed to an imploring man and accompanied by a cruel sarcasm. Moreover, the poet shows his sympathy for the Etruscan when he specifies that he could have killed Orodes in the back because the latter was fleeing but that it was contrary to his code of honor (*haud est dignatus*, 732). He wanted to “measure himself against him head to head, man to man, and prevail not by cunning, but loyally” (v. 734-35):

*Obuius aduersoque occurrit seque uiro uir
Contulit, haud furto melior sed fortibus armis.*

As we can see, the real Mezentius is nothing like the grim caricature the hateful Evander hoped to sell us. For this proud soldier, military value goes hand in hand with respect for human dignity and a keen sense of honor that forbids all cowardice such as useless cruelty.

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20 Translation by F. Ahl.

21 The usual translations of *haud est dignatus* may unfortunately make this nobleness look like a form of arrogance: compare, for instance, the “did not even deign” by W. F. Jackson Knight or the “did not condescend” by A. Mandelbaum, with the “would not stoop to” by R. Fagles, or the “disdaining the thought of” by F. Ahl.

22 In alliterative contrast (“effective jingle”, S. J. Harrison) to *furto*, “by cheating”, this *fortibus armis* is a beautiful compliment, too often blurred in the translations of the type “by force of arms”, while the poet wants above all to pay tribute to Mezentius’ uprightness (“Mezentius applies the proud ideals of heroism, as 735 confirms”, S. J. Harrison). Rightly or wrongly, D. Gillis, *Eros and Death in the Aeneid*, Rome, 1983, p. 136, sees in this portrait of Mezentius the reflection of Virgil's sympathy for Mark Antony.
We are far from the inhuman savagery of the "pious Aeneas" that should repulse any unprejudiced reader and which is given free rein in this tenth book.23

At last—it was inevitable—Aeneas and Mezentius meet face to face. The spear of the Etruscan bounces off the Trojan’s magic shield; the spear of the Trojan, on the other hand, seriously wounds his opponent in the thigh. Quickly pulling his sword from the sheath, Aeneas is about to carry out the final blow when young Lausus intervenes and allows his father to escape. So all the rage of the “pious man” (pius Aeneas, 783!) turns against this son too heroic for his taste, and, taking advantage of the fact that Lausus is using his shield to shelter his retreating father (genitor nati parma protectus, 800) instead of protecting himself (incautum, 812), he pierces him through and through.24

Mezentius has been able to take refuge behind the lines. Leaning against a tree, he is washing his wound with some water from the Tiber. Terribly anxious about Lausus, he has sent emissaries “to call him back and bring him the messages of his afflicted father” (v. 840). Alas! Before he can even see them, he has heard the moans of the men who are bringing back the young man’s lifeless body, sprawled on his armor. Mad with pain, he covers his hair with dust, stretches his arms towards the sky, embraces the corpse and utters heartrending words (v. 846-56) which, to be appreciated at their fair value, should be compared to the discourse held by Evander in similar circumstances (11.152-81).25 As we have seen above, the old king exonerates himself from any responsibility for the death of his son, preferring to violently tackle Turnus and going so far as to accuse the deceased himself on the grounds that the latter did not keep his promise of being prudent.26 Most ironically, he condemns himself by

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23 “There is no particular cruelty in this scene (pace Heinze 214), and Aeneas says and does much worse things in 510-605.”, observes S. J. Harrison about the duel between Mezentius and Orodes.

24 Cf. the articles referred to supra N. 7. The et of et parmam does not make sense apart from etiam. In the sense of "both" ("both the shield and the tunic"), it is inept. See the illustration (a painting by Louis-Léon Cugnot) in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mezentius.

25 The comparison is imposed by the parallelism of situations, and suggested by several verbal echoes, starting from inhaeret, 10.845 – haeret, 11.150.

26 At 152-53 (Non haec, Palla, dederas promissa parenti, / Cautius ut saeuo uelles te credere Marti : note the rhyme effect that tightly ties the two lines), some editors prefer the lesson petenti to parenti, under the pretext that the construction of ut with promissa would be "strange" (thus R. D. Williams). But it is less so if we understand the opposite of what the speaker is supposed to say. Instead of "It's not what you promised me, that is to say, to remain cautious", we would understand: "You did not promise me to be cautious". In both cases, Evander means he was expecting it ("I knew where it would lead you"), but instead of blaming himself for it, he
admitting that he knew the risks perfectly well and “was not unaware” that this promise of the young man would not be kept (*Haud ignarus eram*, 154). Then he blames the gods for not having fulfilled his vows (v 157-58), as though the gods were obliged to help us avoid the consequences of our actions. He only has pity for himself and congratulates his wife for being already dead while he is suffering martyrdom. How gladly he would have given his life (or so he claims) by going to war himself instead of sending his son there (v. 161-63)! But in the end, he says, Pallas does not have too much to complain about since he was treated to a splendid funeral (v. 166-72), and "pious Aeneas" (*pius Aeneas*, 170) will surely be able to avenge him (v. 175-81)…

Mezentius takes us very far from this despicable pathos\(^\text{27}\) with the sober conciseness of his language (ten lines or even rather eight, as we will see), which strongly contrasts with the Arcadian’s indecent logorrhea of thirty lines. While the latter wallows in shameful jeremiads, self-pity, dishonesty, denial, and sluggishness, Mezentius moves us with his poignant sincerity and his exacerbated feeling of guilt for the death of his son, although we, readers, know very well that it is by an irrepressible impulse of filial love that Lausus came to his aid. But like Queen Dido, Mezentius is endowed with an ultra-sensitive moral conscience that makes the slightest hint of harm to his honor intolerable for him. Dido was unworthily betrayed by Aeneas, but she does not forgive herself for having believed in him: in the same way, Mezentius knows Lausus was killed for defending him, and it’s enough for him to feel responsible for his death (“I live by your death”, *Morte tua uiuens*, 849). What is more, this unbearable remorse awakens another, older sense of guilt for not having been able to preserve his ancestral kingdom for his son (v. 851-52):

\[
\text{Idem ego, nate, tuum maculaui crimine nomen,}
\]

\[
\text{Pulsus ob inuidiam solio sceptrisque paternis.}
\]

__brags about his lucidity. At least Aeneas recognizes, even cynically, his responsibility (v. 45-46): a comparison imposed by the resumption of the same terms (*Non haec Euandro de te promissa parenti / Discedens dederam*).__

\(^\text{27}\) K. Quinn’s lucidity on this point (*Virgil’s Aeneid*, London, 1968) is unjustly mocked by N. Horsfall (*Virgil, Aeneid 11. A Commentary*, Brill 2003, ad loc.) as “a singular lapse on the part of a sometimes acute critic”.

\[\]
“And besides, Son, it is I who have defiled your name by being charged with crimes, for through the hatred which I earned was I exiled from my throne and the sceptre which my father bore.”

Let us compare these two fathers. While Evander devotes only five verses out of thirty to his son, addressing him with a frigid Palla (11.152, 169), Mezentius speaks almost entirely to his dead child, calling him nate (846, 851). Above all, and the paradox is great, the truly guilty father does not seem affected by the slightest remorse, yet the other one feels guilty in spite of his innocence.

But it is important not to overinterpret the term crime, which needs not mean "crime" but simply "grievance", "charge". Mezentius was the victim of "hatred", he says nothing more, and herein lies the difference between him and Metabus, Camilla’s father, who was driven from his kingdom “on the account of the hatred his arrogant use of his strength had drawn upon him”. By itself, the expression ob inuidiam tends to exonerate Mezentius as far as the reasons behind his exile go. He was the victim of jealousy and hatred from some of his fellow citizens, who seized power by force, fire and slaughter (Obtruncant socios, ignem ad fastigia iactant, 8.491). But his faithful have remained numerous (a thousand warriors follow him: 7.652-53), proof, if necessary, that he was not the monster described by the fiendish Evander. He accuses himself of having “sullied the name of Lausus with a stain”, but this stain is probably nothing more than the shame of having been expelled from his

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28 Translation by W. F. Jackson Knight, except that he renders crime by “by my guilt” (“sins”, A. Mandelbaum; “my own crimes”, R. Fagles; “criminal actions”, F. Ahl).

29 S. J. Harrison, in the wake of Servius, comments this way: “crime, i.e. the shameful charge of being the son of such a villainous father.”

30 Pulsus ob inuidiam regno uirisque superbas, 11.539 (transl. by W. F. Jackson Knight).
kingdom\textsuperscript{31}. So we are very surprised to hear that same Mezentius present himself as a criminal who should have long since expiated his crimes (v. 853-54)\textsuperscript{32}:

\textit{Debueram patriae poenas odiisque meorum} :

\textit{Omnis per mortis animam sontem ipse dedissem} !

“I owed a price to my land and people who despise me.

If only I’d paid in full with my one guilty life,

By any death on earth!”\textsuperscript{33}

The change in tone is complete. The man now berates himself with incredible violence: according to him, his enemies were fully justified in driving him out of his kingdom. Not only does he deserve to die, he should have given himself to his executioners to suffer the worst tortures after inflicting them on others. This is indeed the secret meaning behind \textit{omnis per mortis}, borrowed from Homer (\textit{πάντες θάνατοι}, \textit{Od.} 12.341) and meaning "all kinds of death", an undoubtful reference to the charges of torture Evander carried against him\textsuperscript{34}.

But how can we believe Mezentius degrades himself to such a point or that he is the kind of man who would surrender to his enemies—he, who decides to go back to fight within a moment, \textit{haud deiectus}, 858, "unbroken"\textsuperscript{35}, nearly certain of losing his life but at least with

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\textsuperscript{31} One could rely on \textit{iustae}, 714 to argue that Virgil judges Mezentius guilty of abuses towards his Etruscan compatriots, thus giving reason to Evander (\textit{iustis}, 8.494). But as this \textit{iustae} is here a mere padding, since the justice or the injustice of the Etruscan cause has nothing to do with the context, one can legitimately doubt its authenticity (especially since it is also highlighted by its position). This occult boost given to the official \textit{Aeneid} could go hand in hand with the reversal of verses 717-18, whose logical place is after verse 714, as Scaliger had seen, but which, thus postponed, lead to caricature Mezentius by equating him purely and simply with a wild boar (“comical”, R. D. Williams).

\textsuperscript{32} Once again, J. Perret expresses his surprise (\textit{ad} v. 854): “Il est clair que Mézence ne se reconnaît pas coupable des crimes dont naguère le bon Évandre faisait un tableau complaisant : c’est à la seule envie qu’il attribue son exil ; peut-être, par une dérision amère, adopte-t-il le langage de ses ennemis…” Unless it is his enemies, the Emperor Augustus and his henchmen, who have fraudulently attributed it to him?

\textsuperscript{33} Translation by R. Fagles.

\textsuperscript{34} Without seeing the allusion, the doxa wrongly interprets \textit{omnis mortis} as a banal intensive of a desire for death ("to die a thousand times").

\textsuperscript{35} “his spirit is unbroken”, R. Fagles ; « undismayed”, W. F. Jackson Knight; “unshaken”, A. Mandelbaum; “undeterred”, A. Ahl.
panache? Moreover, how could he designate as "his people" (meorum) the persons who forced him into exile after burning his palace and slaughtering “his henchmen” (socios, 8.491)? The authenticity of these two lines should therefore be seriously questioned, for they look rather like the work of a forger interested in destroying the image of a character potentially dangerous to the credibility of the official Aeneid.

Mezentius is preparing for his last fight. With a superhuman courage, well expressed by the powerful enjambment of the monosyllable in verse 857 (attollit in aegrum / Se femur) and greeted by the poet’s admiring haud deectus, the wounded man stands up on his painful thigh and calls for his horse, Rhaebus, "his pride, his consolation" (hoc decus ... hoc solamen, 858-59). The animal is there, in front of him, "looking afflicted" (maerentem). They have been one for years. They know today is their last day. The hour is grave, intimate and solemn at the same time. And here we discover a new aspect of the sensibility of Mezentius, this alleged monster—a "monster" perfectly in tune with Virgil’s soul by his capacity for empathy and his almost shamanic ability to commune with the invisible forces of nature. The man speaks into his horse's ear (v. 861-66):

Rhaebe, diu, res si qua diu mortalibus ulla est
Viximus. Aut hodie uictor spolia illa cruenti
Et caput Aeneae referes Lausique dolorum
Vltor eris mecum aut, aperit si nulla uiam uis,
Occumbes pariter ; neque enim, fortissime, credo,
Iussa aliena pati et dominos dignabere Teucros.

36 The language elements of this interpolation (in addition to Homer's translation) are drawn from Virgil himself, especially from the second book of the Aeneid (v. 572-87), where Aeneas expresses his execration of Helena (cf. poenas, patriae, meorum …); odisisque meorum is copied from meorum... odia, 904-5 (see also odiis, 10.692); as for animam ipse dedissem, it comes from 11.162, with the heavy addition of sontem (the movement of 162-63 is the same as here).

37 Or cruenta, but cruenti (which aptly keeps the genitive Aeneae from being isolated, and fits in the melodic line of [i]) seems preferable because it stigmatizes the ferocity the Trojan shows throughout this book, while cruenta would rather insist on his own blood. S. J. Harrison, who defends cruenta, takes up the argument of D.Servius, according to which cruenti would force to take the word in a meaning that Virgil did not know, but see however Hor., Od. 3.2.11-12, cruenta... ira, “a bloody rage”, in the sense of “bloodthirsty”.

12
“Rhaebus, our lives have been long – if that word can be used of anything possessed by mortal creatures. Today either you shall be joint-avenger with me of Lausus’ agonies and in victory help me carry back Aeneas’ head and spoils stained with his blood, or, if there is no force left to open up that way for us, you will die with me; for, valiant friend of mine, I know you will never deign to submit to a foreigner’s commands or a Trojan master.”

Nothing is more poignant in its simplicity than this last farewell, which is duly admired by commentators. Everything is done to ennoble the animal and elevate it to the level of humans. Thus the term *mortalibus* encompasses beasts and men in the same nostalgic compassion aroused by the brevity of their existence; the pathetic enjambment of the verb *Viximus* in its double meaning ("we have lived", but also, in filigree, "our life is behind us", "we are dead") unites Mezentius and Rhaebus in the same destiny (see also *pariter*) and, one could almost say, in the same epitaph; finally, the echo of *neque ... dignabere*, concerning the horse, to *haud est dignatus*, 732, concerning Mezentius, raises them both to the same degree of nobility, and so does the superb *fortissime*, awarded to the animal by its master but equally applicable to them both.

Virgil had three passages from the *Iliad* before his eyes. In 8.194-97, at the moment of rushing to the assault of the Achaean ships, Hector rather roughly urges his horses to pay back for the care they had received from Andromache, who would serve them wine on occasion before even serving her husband. In 17.426-56, while the fight rages around the body of Patroclus, his horses (which actually belong to Achilles) are weeping for his death. Zeus, from heaven, pities them, immortal creatures, for belonging to mortal masters. “Nothing is more miserable among all the beings that breathe and walk the earth than the man.” But at least, he says, he will not tolerate Hector seizing them. In 19.399-424, Achilles scolds his

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38 Translation by W. F. Jackson Knight, who reads *cruenta* instead of *cruenti*: “Aeneas’ head and spoils stained with his blood”. With *cruenti*, one should understand “head and spoils of the bloodthirsty Aeneas” (see previous note).

39 Heyne greets Mezentius’ first words in these terms: “grauis sententia et affectus plena”. R. D. Williams has this comment at v. 866: “This is a fine heroic sentiment, simply and splendidly expressed.” J. Delille (translation of the *Aeneid*, 1804): “Il serait difficile de ne pas trouver le discours de Mézentce vraisemblable ; il serait difficile même de n’en être pas touché… L’âme d’un poète sensible comme Virgile ne doit pas inspirer moins d’intérêt et d’admiration que son génie.”

40 And we know how much this theme is recurrent in the work of Virgil, especially in the *Georgics*.

41 Curiously, they are four, although there are no quadrigas in the *Iliad*, and it’s why Aristarchus condemned line 185.
horses, Xanthus and Balios, for "having left the dead Patroclus on the spot". This is when Xanthus, suddenly endowed with a human voice, replies that they have had nothing to do with this death, and he announces that Achilles will soon die. Achilles retorts that he already knows this much, adding that it is not up to a horse to prophesy.

In the Homeric model, we would search in vain for the slightest trace of that profound mutual attachment that unites Rhaebus and Mezentius. Hector is jealous of the care that Andromache bestows on his horses, and Achilles has only hurtful words and unjust reproaches for his own. He speaks to them as an absolute master, enjoining them to "bring him back alive" while Mezentius calmly considers the possibility of a defeat, which would not be shameful. The tears Achilles’ horses pour over Patroclus—endlessly so (Virgil is content with a simple *maerentem*)—do not meet any reciprocity, except from Zeus, but it is in the name of the solidarity between immortals. As for the "miserable human beings", they deserve only his pity mixed with a touch of contempt. We are far from Virgil’s compassion, which is not limited to human beings but extends to all the animals of the earth.

The two situations are also very different. Like Mezentius, Achilles and Hector prepare to go into battle, but neither is wounded, and they come out victorious. In addition, when Achilles' horses shed tears, it is over a corpse and, as Homer notes, away from the action. Virgil, on the other hand, has made every effort to bring the dramatic intensity to a climax. Mezentius is badly wounded, he has the bleeding body of his son (*Lausique dolores*) before his eyes, and he knows that the fight he is about to engage in is likely to be his last. As for Rhaebus, his figure is highly individualized whereas in the *Iliad*, the horses go by two or four; he has his own will and pride (*haud dignabere*) and one feels him inseparable from his master, sharing his unhappiness (*maerentem*) and bravery (*fortissime*). Inseparable are they in life, inseparable are they in death.

Homer wanders, dilutes and embroiders for the sake of it; he is a storyteller who amuses himself while amusing his audience, never disdaining a knowing wink towards us.

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42 To these three passages of the *Iliad*, one could add *Od*. 9.446 ff., where the Cyclops addresses his ram, but it is in a very different tone.

43 This inner feeling, which is Rhaebus’ dignity and that forbids him any dishonorable behavior, is replaced in the *Iliad* by the intervention of Zeus who, he says, will not tolerate that immortal beasts should fall into Hector’s hands.

44 Is it not piquant to see Mezentius apply to his horse the very qualifier Evander bestowed on Aeneas (*fortissime*, 8.254)?
such as Achilles telling his horse “it is not its role” to prophesy... as if the horse were not simply answering him. In Virgil’s world, animals do not speak. The admiration he has for Homer is neither blind nor servile, and we can clearly see how he proceeds in his imitation, sorting, combining, concentrating, digging and deepening, polishing and re-polishing unceasingly until, from a material of seventy verses, he obtains this dazzling jewel of only six verses—verses that have no equal.

The time of the dénouement has arrived. Too weak to get on his mount, Mezentius is helped by a squire: that is what seems to be suggested by the word exceptus in line 867:

*Dixit et exceptus tergo consueta locauit / Membra.*

“So he said, and once installed on the back of the animal, he placed his body as usual.”

This meaning of excipere is suggested indeed by the involved expression, still accentuated by a heavy enjambment, so suggestive of the rider’s invalidity. Of course, this does not exclude the fact that from Rhaebus’ point of view, the notation indicates his complacency to receive his master on his back. The two interpretations do not oppose each other, they overlap.

Mezentius has now entered the arena, much to the joy of Aeneas, for whom this diminished horseman is easy prey (aeger, 837). There will be no real fight. Mezentius exhausts himself around his opponent, who calmly receives "a forest of javelins" on his supernatural shield. It seems that the Trojan makes the pleasure last (traxisse moras, 888) until the moment when this little game begins to bore him (taedet, 888). So he targets Rhaebus with his spear, which he plants in the animal’s forehead, right between the eyes. The horse rears up, overthrowing his rider and crushing him under his weight. Fast as a bird—a vulture? (Aduolat Aeneas, 896)—Aeneas comes running with his sword in hand and a sarcasm on his lips. He feels no scruple in killing a wounded, unarmed man who lies on the ground under his horse, just as he had no scruple—him, the pious man—in taking advantage

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45 But as we have seen, he takes up with much likelihood the idea of prophesying death in the confrontation between Orodes and Mezentius.

46 Cf. R. D. Williams: “exceptus suggests the willingness of the horse to accept the weight of its well-known rider.”

47 Deceptive is the word iniqua, 889, commonly interpreted as an inequality in favor of Mezentius (because he is on horseback), whereas it is rather in favor of Aeneas (because Mezentius is wounded and severely diminished: aeger, 837): see the joy of the Trojan (laetus, 874) when he sees this moriturus rider coming towards him.
of the imprudence of a son who, in a surge of filial piety, had rushed to his father’s aid. But dominating his winner even in death, Mezentius teaches him one last lesson on honor and decency: “Strike away, everything is allowed in war, is it not? ... according to your code anyway, which neither I nor my son share”⁴⁸.

The dying Mezentius requests only one favor, and a perfectly legitimate one: that to be buried near his beloved son. But his prayer will remain in vain, for he will be given up post mortem to the fierce vengeance of the Etruscan cities (11.5-11)⁴⁹. An infamy that Aeneas even dares to justify by calling it “the fulfillment of his promises to the gods”, uota deum… uictor soluebat, 11.4⁵⁰!

We are better equipped now to understand the meaning behind the somewhat sibylline language Virgil used in introducing his character into the poem (7.647-54). It is now clear that when he described him as contemtor diuom, he did not make him an atheist: Mezentius does not deny the existence of gods, he just refuses to abdicate his freedom by submitting to their power⁵¹.

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⁴⁸ Nullum in caede nefas nec sic ad proelia ueni / Nec tecum... 901-2. For this interpretation, cf. the articles referred to supra N. 7. This caede is lightened in particular by caede, 426 (Pallas hits Halaesus by taking advantage that the latter covered Imaon with his shield, "thus offering his breast unarmed", dat pectus inermum: see supra N. 16). Caedes often means "murder" rather than "massacre", and that's for instance the word Tacitus uses Ann. 2.70 about the criminal poisoning of Germanicus: Sed non usque eo defectum Germanicum neque praemia caedis apud interfectorem mansura.

⁴⁹ The cogent argument, as Servius saw, is the number of the holes gouged through Mezentius’ breastplate: twelve (bis sex), which is the exact number of the Etruscan cities (Liv. 5.33.9). This same figure also appears in 10.202 about Mantua, with a probable allusion to the organization of the Etruscan world (so R. D. Williams ad 10.201-2: “Virgil refers to a group like the twelve Etruscan cities mentioned in Livy.” To consider this bis sex as a purely symbolic one (for example, K. W. Gransden, Virgil’s Aeneid, Book 11, Cambridge Univ Press, 1991, or N. Horsfall [supra N. 27]) seems highly questionable. As remarks L. Kronenberg [supra N. 15], n. 76: “There is no evidence in the text to indicate that Aeneas fulfills Mezentius’ dying wish and some evidence to indicate he does not.”

⁵⁰ As J. Perret rightly remarks, Virgil never told us about these promises before. The reason seems to be that this happens in the consciousness of Aeneas, this “pious” man who not only has premeditated such infamy but wanted to associate the gods with it!

⁵¹ Cf. S. J. Harrison (ad 743-44): “It should be remembered in general that Mezentius is not a skeptical atheist, but a proud man who defies and disobeys the gods.”
To Orodes, who pretends to predict his impending death, he replies that “it is the business of the father of the gods and the king of men”, adding he does not care (10.743-44). A little further, facing Aeneas, he meets his intimidation with these proud words (v. 880):

*Nec mortem horremus nec diuom parcimus ulli.*

We neither tremble at death nor respect any god whatsoever\(^{52}\).

This challenge towards the gods is explained classically (and already by Servius) as a reference to Aeneas’ invocation to Jupiter and Apollo, but it would be surprising if Mezentius were not referring to his opponent in the first place as the latter is the son of a goddess and already divine himself, as *diuini... capitis* at line 639 attests\(^{53}\). Could his attitude towards divinity not be born out of a feeling of revolt against the heavenly injustice, which so outrageously favors a scoundrel as Aeneas and abandons virtue? Still, unlike the reader, he does not know it was Jupiter himself who decided to engage him in this battle, where he would lose his son before losing his life (v. 689-90). It is likely that in Virgil’s opinion—for the poet is not an Epicurean—Mezentius is mistaken in amalgamating all the gods in the same rejection, but one thing is certain: he loves and admires his character, whose human qualities are in no way diminished by his formal "impiety", so much preferable to the alleged "piety" of his adversary\(^{54}\). With regard to the essential form of the fatherly *pietas*, which consists in the fulfillment of his duties towards his son, Mezentius certainly has nothing to reproach himself with, as evidenced by the affection he inspires to Lausus—an unconditional affection that leads him to sacrifice his life. So it is important to revise the usual interpretation of the verses written about the young man (7.653-54):

*dignus patriis qui laetior esset*

*Imperiis et cui pater haud Mezentius esset.*

To the doxa, it is a condemnation without appeal: Mezentius is an unworthy father, and any other father would have been better for Lausus. However, the fact is there, indisputable: for nothing in the world would Lausus have wanted to have a different father

\(^{52}\) Translation by F. Ahl.

\(^{53}\) See also 12.794-97: according to Jupiter, Aeneas is not only promised to divinity, he is already divine: *diuom.*

\(^{54}\) This point is perfectly highlighted by Leah Kronenberg [*supra* N. 15], who thus joins the conception of an anti-*Aeneid* hidden under the official *Aeneid*, except that she calls this anti-*Aeneid* "an Epicurean reading of the Aeneid", while admitting “that Epicureanism is not a dominant voice in the *Aeneid*” (p. 428).
than Mezentius, and that is enough to guide our exegesis, which will consist in recognizing the key role of the adjective *laetior*, defined by the second relative (*et cui...*)\(^{55}\). Lausus “deserved more happiness under the paternal orders; in other words, he deserved a happier father”. "Happier" does not mean "better"\(^{56}\).

It remains, however, that through his ambiguous language, Virgil put us to the test once more. He keeps teaching us that appearances are often deceptive and illusory, that the alleged camp of good is sometimes the camp of evil and vice versa, and also that truth and perhaps even poetry must be earned.

Oddly enough, commentators try to justify the monstrous (as they believe) portrait of the Etruscan Mezentius by pointing out Virgil wished to please the Etruscan Maecenas by piling all the ethnic prejudices that circulated against the Etruscans at that time onto a scapegoat\(^{57}\). Fortunately, after a full and complete rehabilitation of this character, we no longer need this fallacy\(^{58}\).

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\(^{55}\) It is probably this equivalence between the two relative propositions, one explaining the other, which is marked by the repetition of *esset*, too quickly condemned by C. J. Fordyce *ad loc.*: “the repetition is awkward and seems to serve no rhetorical point.”

\(^{56}\) “The warrior son of a princely father ‘ought’ to have had fairer prospects”, says N.), *ad loc*. But it is perhaps unfair to Lausus, this heroic and unforgettable young man, according to the poet himself (*iuuenis memorande*, 10.793), to bring him back to his princely condition, rather than to appreciate him according to his personal merits.


\(^{58}\) We should not talk anymore of a transformation, or conversion, of Mezentius, as it is usual: see for instance F. A. Sullivan, “Mezentius : A Virgilian Creation”, *CP* 64 (1969), p. 223, or H. C. Gotoff, “The transformation of Mezentius”, *TAPA* 114 (1994), pp. 191-218. Mezentius has not changed, he is equal to himself, without fear and without reproach.