

OF AENEAS, PIETAS, AND CHRISTIANITY: *The Reception of Pietas in Christian Literature*

JOHN MARSHALL

ABSTRACT

If Aeneas is known for one thing in the *Aeneid*, it is his *pietas*. Renowned for it throughout the story, it guides him throughout all that he faces. But what happens to *pietas* once we enter the Christian literary tradition? Christian literature draws significantly upon its classical past in many ways, and there is good evidence that the concept of *pietas* is not lost. This paper first examines the story of Aeneas leaving Dido in Book 4 of *The Aeneid* to gain an understanding of classical *pietas*. It then traces *pietas* in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, specifically in the characters of Emperor Rudolph of Germany and Rahab, and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, specifically through Gawain's decision to live up to his end of the bargain he had made with the Green Knight and face him again, knowing that he likely would not walk away. The purpose of this is to see how *pietas* is treated in Christian literature. While Christian *pietas* keeps the positive characteristics of classical *pietas* and also continues to guide the actions of those who are *pious*, Christian literature expands *pietas* from being something that one either does or does not show to something that one can be in an incomplete way and whose positive characteristics are focused on God.

The *pietas* of Aeneas is clearly visible throughout the *Aeneid*. A man marked for *pietas* and arms, his *pietas* guides him throughout his life.¹ (Though there were particular instances in which he fails to meet the demands of *pietas*, it soon reasserts its grasp on him and begins to guide him again in each of those cases.) But what happens to *pietas* after the era of pagan literature? Using a discussion of the *pietas* of Aeneas as a foundation, this paper examines the treatment of *pietas* in Christian literature. Christian literature takes the positive characteristics of pagan *pietas*, refocuses it toward God, in whom those characteristics are fulfilled, and brings in the

notion of incomplete *pietas*.

Understanding the practice of *pietas* presupposes an understanding of *pietas* itself. In his article “*Pietas* in Virgil and Statius,” J.F. Burgess writes, “*Pietas* for a Roman consisted in the fulfillment of obligations to family, country and gods, to one’s leader or those who rely upon one as a leader and to those who had done one a service.”¹ In his book, *Pietas: Selected Studies in Roman Religion*, Hendrik Wagenvoort describes it as “Faith in the divine calling, from that sense of duty which silences every human voice before the voice of the deity.”³ Synthesizing these two definitions, *pietas* is the fulfillment of one’s obligations to others without regard for one’s personal cost or personal feelings.

Situations that force Aeneas to make a difficult choice can reveal more about his character and *pietas* than situations in which the right choice was clear. One such time was when Aeneas leaves Dido and Carthage in Book 4 of the *Aeneid*. His stop in Carthage with Dido seems as though it will continue indefinitely, but Mercury comes to recall Aeneas’s mind to his duty, founding what would become the Roman state. After some intervening activity and an urgent warning from Mercury to leave, Aeneas and his men finally do leave Carthage. But has Aeneas made the right decision? Should he have left Carthage, or should he have stayed there and remained with Dido?

Four key pieces of evidence make it clear that Aeneas was right to leave Carthage and Dido. First, Aeneas was responsible to follow the gods’ will. Venus’s question for Jupiter over whether his will for Aeneas had changed and Jupiter’s resulting prophecy to her in Book 1 of the future glory of Rome, along with Mercury’s visits to Aeneas in Book 4 to remind him to focus on his mission and leave Carthage, make the gods’ will for him quite clear.

Part of the gods’s will for Aeneas involved him carrying out his duty to his son Ascanius (later Iulus). Before sending Mercury to Aeneas for the first time, Jupiter says, “If no glory of such great things kindles him and he does not undertake the task for his own glory, would a father begrudge Ascanius the Roman walls?”⁴ Aeneas’s future kingdom was also Iulus’s, so Aeneas had a responsibility to him. Failing to follow that responsibility would have been a failure of his *pietas*.

Aeneas also had a duty to his companions, who were counting on him to lead them. "From all around they assembled, prepared in spirit and with their possessions, to lead them across the sea through whatever lands I might wish," Aeneas tells Dido at her banquet.⁵ Clearly, these men depended on him.

Given these pieces of information, it is clear that Aeneas had a duty to his family and other companions, although he did not have a duty to Dido of equal weight to those duties mentioned above. While marrying Dido would have placed an important duty upon Aeneas, what Dido considered a marriage was in fact not a marriage. The *Aeneid* states this explicitly "[Dido] calls it marriage, and with that name she covers over her fault."⁶ Her relationship with Aeneas did not even have the elements of a marriage; it merely mimicked the marriage rite. Thus, Aeneas did not have a husband's duty toward Dido.

Kenneth McLeish notes in his article "Dido, Aeneas, and the Concept of '*Pietas*'" that, in all of Book 4, only when Aeneas leaves Dido is Aeneas called *pious*. He concludes that "The whole point of Book IV is there, emphatically and clearly made."⁷ He also says, "It is *pietas* that is urged on Aeneas: *pietas* to the will of the gods, to his followers, and above all to Iulus."⁸ He left Dido and Carthage and continued to do his duty to the gods, his son, and his followers, even though he cared for Dido.⁹ Some scholars argue that Aeneas should not have left Carthage, but when the evidence is considered, it seems clear that *pietas* required that he leave.

Moving into the Christian literary tradition, the concept of *pietas* remains but is expanded and refocused. It is refocused in that the *pietas* showed to the divine is moved away from the Roman pantheon and directed toward God. It is often also expanded, with vertical elements (between God and man) and horizontal elements (between fellow men) becoming apparent. There also seems to be a distinction between what one might call "complete *pietas*" and "incomplete *pietas*." In Vergil, Aeneas is either *pious* or is not, with no middle ground. But this does not seem necessarily true in the Christian literary tradition. What is true of the Christian literary tradition in general is true of Dante more specifically. He refocuses *pietas* toward Christianity, separates its vertical and horizontal elements, and gives examples of complete and incomplete *pietas*.

In Canto 6 of the *Purgatorio*, Vergil and Dante meet the ghost of Sordello the Mantuan, and he shows them to the Valley of the Princes in Canto 7. As they look into the valley, Sordello points out some of the ghosts there. Among them is one “who sits the highest, whose / countenance is a man’s who left undone / what was his duty, and whose jaw is set / while the rest sing, was Rudolph, emperor. / He could have healed the wounds that slew our land, / and others now come late to bring her cure.”¹⁰ This is Emperor Rudolph I of Germany.

But what did Rudolph leave undone? It seems that there were aspects both of his duty to his country and his duty to God that were incomplete. The text quoted above says that his duty to his country was incomplete. The incompleteness of his duty to God can be inferred from the fact that he still waits even to enter Purgatory, a punishment for those who put off dealing with God until late in life. Those who made God wait on them, so to speak, must now wait on Him. Esolen says that Rudolph’s “constant conflicts with hostile barons in Germany prevented him from coming to Italy to claim his crown.”¹¹ So where did Rudolph go wrong? Recall Burgess’s definition of Roman *pietas*: it “consisted in the fulfilment of obligations to family, country and gods, to . . . those who rely upon one as a leader and to those who had done one a service.”¹² Rudolph partially fulfilled his obligations to his country and those who relied on him as their leader. One might presume that he fulfilled his responsibilities to his family, though this is unclear.

But Rudolph clearly left important things undone. First, from what Dante says of Rudolph (through the mouth of Sordello), he did not totally fulfill his responsibilities to his country or those in it. If he had, the criticisms leveled against him would not have been warranted and presumably would not have been written. Second, Rudolph did not fulfill his obligation to his God and Creator like he should have, choosing instead to leave them until later in life. Third, if what Esolen has to say about Rudolph’s conflicts with German barons is correct, perhaps he was busy enough fighting them that he did not have enough time for his family. Again, this is unclear.

In contrast to Rudolph, there are also characters in the *Commedia* who show proper Christian *pietas*. For example, in Canto 9 of *Paradiso*, in the third sphere of Heaven, Cunizza da Romano

points out to Dante the soul of Rahab, the prostitute who saved the two Israelite spies that Joshua sent to Jericho.¹³ Her soul is the brightest in this sphere of Heaven.¹⁴ Cunizza says that she shines “as scintillating in her lamping fire / as rays of sunlight when the lake is clear.”¹⁵ Scripture is fairly clear about what Rahab did that was good. On the vertical level, she feared and honored the Lord. She also kept her part of her deal with the spies, which was made before the Lord and thus gave her obligations before Him. On the horizontal level, she kept the spies safe from those searching for them, thus fulfilling her commitment to them. Though this is not made explicit, she most likely did all of these things while not allowing the obvious potential cost—sovereigns do not take well to harboring spies—to make her change her mind. Rahab illustrates many of the components of *pietas* discussed above through the fulfillment of her obligations to God and the spies without regard for personal risk.

These scenes in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* reveal at least two things about *pietas* in Dante. First, proper *pietas* is focused on God. Second, all actions that should be done if one is guided by *pietas* should be completed, not left partially undone. But *pietas* in the Christian literary tradition is not unique to Dante. It also appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, specifically through Gawain’s answer to the Green Knight’s challenge and his living up to his end of the bargain, in spite of the presumed cost.

On Christmas Day, the Green Knight bursts into Arthur’s hall to offer Arthur and his knights a challenge. Whoever accepted the challenge could strike the best single blow he could at the Green Knight, who would not try to evade it, on the condition that he permit the Green Knight to strike one blow of his own against him under the same terms a year and a day later. Gawain accepts, taking the place of Arthur, who was about to accept the challenge himself when no one else would. Striking one blow, Gawain beheads the knight. But the knight picks up his head and leaves, after reminding Gawain of their bargain.

About a year later, Gawain leaves Camelot to fulfill the terms of his agreement with the Green Knight: to find him, face him, and accept one blow from him. After searching for him for some time, he stops for a week or so at the castle of Bertilak, a friendly knight, where he rests and relaxes. He then goes to meet the Green Knight,

keeping his word to him, in spite of pleas and encouragement not to go from multiple people. This included Gawain's guide from Bertilak's castle to the Green Chapel, who promised that he would never tell what had happened. Gawain's reply to this is instructive and reveals much about Gawain's character. He replies:

That you would loyally keep my secret I truly believe.
But however closely you kept it, if I avoided this place,
took to my heels in fright . . . I should be a cowardly
knight, and could not be excused.

But I will go to the chapel, whatever may chance,
and discuss with that man whatever matter I please,
whether good or ill come of it, as destiny
decides.

Though an opponent grim
to deal with, club in hand,
His faithful servants God
Knows well how to defend.¹⁶

The nobility of Gawain's actions is revealed through his choice to remain true to his duty in the face of distractions. Gawain clearly had a good time at Bertilak's castle. Like Aeneas at Carthage, had the circumstances been different, it seems that Gawain would have happily remained longer. But he had a mission, and he had given his word that he would meet the Green Knight on New Year's Day. So he left Bertilak, his wife, and the other allurements of the castle to meet his destiny.

Also, Gawain did what he knew was right in spite of what it would very likely cost him. This can be seen best in Gawain's conversation with his guide to the Green Chapel. If he had snuck away, even if his guide never told anyone what had happened and no one had ever learned through other means, Gawain still would have known. He would have never forgotten what he had done that day, and what he had failed to do. He would have to face the Green Knight come what may and trust in God for his safety.

The link between these actions and *pietas* is clear. To be *pius* is to fulfill one's obligations to others without regard for personal cost or personal feelings. Gawain left Bertilak's castle to fulfill his obligation to the Green Knight in spite of any desire that he might have had to stay. He held up his end of their bargain even though

it seemed quite likely that it would cost him his life. He, unlike the Green Knight, could not pick up his head and walk away.

Whether it was intentionally written this way is unknown, but the story of Gawain at Bertilak's castle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents some parallels to that of Aeneas at Carthage. First, both were tempted by women in high positions, Aeneas by Dido and Gawain by Bertilak's wife. Giving in to the woman's advances would have caused the hero to lose a critical part of who he was. Aeneas would have lost the ability to fulfill his divine mission, and he would thus have lost his *pietas*. Gawain would have lost the ability to fulfill the bargain he had made with the Green Knight, and with that he would have lost his honor. Second, both of these heroes (Aeneas at Carthage and Gawain at Bertilak's castle) enjoyed the time that he was able to spend away from the troubles of his quest and would have stayed longer, had circumstances allowed. Third, each man had (or received) some incentive or reminder that led him to leave where he was and to continue on his mission. Aeneas needed two reminders from Mercury and Gawain's reminder was his own consciousness of his mission and that it was the right thing for him to do. Fourth, after surviving distractions, both men went on to better things. Aeneas took the surviving Trojans to Italy and founded the race that would become the Romans. Gawain faced the Green Knight, owned up to breaking his word while at Bertilak's castle, and learned from his mistakes.

In short, we see in Gawain's accepting the Green Knight's challenge and fulfilling his end of the bargain many of the positive characteristics of *pietas* seen in the *Aeneid*. Gawain, like Aeneas, faced great external distractions and stayed true to his mission. Gawain, too, put what he knew was right over personal feelings. But the *pietas* of Gawain and the *pietas* of Aeneas differ in one critical way. The "vertical *pietas*" of Gawain, unlike that of Aeneas, was oriented toward God, in whom the good characteristics that Gawain showed find their fulfillment. These works reveal two developments of *pietas* in the Christian literary tradition. First, Christian literature takes the positive characteristics of classical *pietas* and refocuses those aspects which were formerly addressed to pagan gods toward God. Second, it adds the notion of incomplete *pietas*, in which a person fulfills some of his responsibilities but leaves others undone,

thus preventing him from being totally *pius*. But the notions of *pietas* seen in *pius* Aeneas still shine through.

NOTES

1. Vergil, *P. Vergili Maronis: Opera*, ed. R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 6.403. This and all future English translations of the *Aeneid* are the author's.
2. J.F. Burgess, "Pietas in Virgil and Statius," *Proceedings of the Vergil Society* 11 (1971-72): 48.
3. Hendrik Wagenvoort, *Pietas: Selected Studies in Roman Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980), 7.
4. Vergil, *P. Vergili Maronis: Opera*, 4. 232-34.
5. *Ibid.*, 2. 799-800.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.172.
7. Kenneth McLeish, "Dido, Aeneas, and the Concept of 'Pietas'," *Greece & Rome* 19, No. 2 (Oct., 1972):134.
8. *Ibid.*, 132.
9. It is clear from Aeneas's conversations with Dido as he prepares to leave Carthage in Book 4 and when he meets her in the Underworld in Book 6 that he did care for her.
10. Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 7. 91-96.
11. Esolen, *Purgatorio*, 428.
12. Burgess, 48.
13. Joshua, 2.
14. See Esolen, *Purgatorio*, 89, in his brief summary at the beginning of Canto 9.

15. Dante, *Paradiso*, 9.113-14.

16. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. James Winny (New York: Broadview Press), 2128-39.