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Agency and Heroism in the African and Classical Epic: A Comparative Analysis of *The Aeneid* and *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*

In her article "Heroism and the Supernatural in the African Epic: Toward a Critical Analysis," Mariam Deme argues against the idea that the epic genre does not exist in African literature, or that it is invalidated because of its emphasis on supernatural intervention. To illustrate this point, Deme draws a distinction between African literature and Western literature, claiming that supernatural intervention is inherent in the African idea of heroism, whereas natural human strength is inherent in the Western idea of heroism. There may be a difference in the cultural significance of the Western and African ideas of the supernatural; however, comparing the African epic *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* with European epics, namely Virgil's *The Aeneid*, reveals that the distinction Deme delineates does not necessarily exist, or at least is not so starkly defined. Deme argues against a comparative analysis of African and Western epics, and advocates for simply focusing on the societal contexts behind a singular epic; however, this essay does not intend to "use European classical epic poems to validate African heroic epics" (Deme 413). Rather, implementing a comparative analysis may prove to present a better argument for Deme's own viewpoint: that the African epic is not invalidated because of its reliance on the supernatural, and Eurocentric scholars who claim otherwise are ill-founded. In fact, when comparing *Sundiata* as the representative African epic and *The Aeneid* as the classical epic, the African hero may prove to be even more heroic according to the Western standards laid

out in Deme's article compared to Western heroes, as the African hero has more character agency in relation to supernatural forces.

Divine intervention is a defining aspect of the epic genre, and its prominence often raises the question of how much agency the characters actually have, which begs the question of the protagonist's heroism. Fate and destiny is often portrayed as an impenetrable deity who always gets its way, which may decrease or erase the characters' free will. A reduction in character agency may lead to ambiguities surrounding the character's heroic qualifications. According to Eurocentric scholars, African epic heroes rely too heavily on the supernatural, and thus are unheroic. Bowra states, "This art embodies not a heroic outlook, which admires man for doing his utmost with his actual, human gifts, but a more primitive outlook which admires any attempt to pass beyond man's proper state by magical, non-human means" (Bowra 1964, cited from Deme 409). Both Bowra and Deme seem to imply that a strong supernatural presence is unique to the African epic, as Deme writes, "it is exactly the strong emphasis put on the supernatural that makes the African epic so particular!" (Deme 410). Bowra and Deme do not stand alone in this idea that strong supernatural intervention is relatively unique to the African epic. James Tar Tsaaior says that supernatural elements are a "common feature of all epics even though this distinction is most prominent and particular to African epics" (Tsaaior 1311). However, although the supernatural may present itself in various ways, supernatural intervention is crucial to understanding both Western and African epics, and how the hero may or may not stand independent of the supernatural.

Both Sundiata of the African epic and Aeneas of the Western classical epic *The Aeneid* rely on supernatural forces for support and both have a fate or destiny. However, comparing the two epics reveal an important distinction between taking action towards destiny (like in

Sundiata), and having Fate intervene (like in *The Aeneid*). One requires more independent thought and the ability to make one's own decisions, whereas the other presents a diminished character agency, as ultimately Fate/the gods make decisions for the hero. In *The Aeneid*, the Fates seem to be the ultimate power—even a higher power than the gods. In the beginning of the epic, Juno is said to be afraid of the Fate's power: "So the Fates were spinning out the future... / This was Juno's fear" (Virgil 1.27-8). Even Jupiter is overcome by the Fates when Turnus and Aeneas go to battle after Jupiter had explicitly told them not to: "I ordered Italy not to fight with Troy. / What's this conflict flouting my command?" (10.10-11). Later, he says: "The Fates will find the way" (10.138). Throughout the epic, the gods are involved in nearly every human interaction or event. The gods are even shown to govern human emotions, particularly to turn the tide of a battle: "Here, Mars, power of war, injected new heart and force in the Latins [...] and loosing Flight and dark Fear at the Trojan ranks" (9.812-14). The only time the epic explicitly states that the gods are not involved is when Aeneas sees Palinurus in the underworld, who stresses that his death happened "by chance" (6.398), which stands out as the only event that was not under the Fate's control. Destiny in *Sundiata* also seems to be the highest power and is unalterable: "God has his mysteries which none can fathom. You, perhaps, will be a king. You can do nothing about it. [...] Each man finds his way already marked out for him and he can change nothing of it" (Niane 15); "Man, under the influence of certain illusions, thinks he can alter the course which God has mapped out, but everything he does falls into a higher order which he barely understands" (22). In fact, the griot who delivers this oral epic seems to deny free will when he says, "Our action is not us for it is commanded of us" (28). However, when everyday actions are described, it is Sundiata's agency rather than a supernatural force guiding his hand; he is actively making decisions toward this unalterable destiny.

In *Sundiata*, the hero appeals to divine forces to help him forge his own path, which happens to be the right path. His decisions are the destined ones, but they are still his decisions. The language in Sundiata supports his character agency; he is actively "striding towards a great destiny" (Niane 29) and he "followed the very word of God" (81). These active verbs suggest that Sundiata is making the active choice to align himself with his destiny.

Sundiata's emotions also seem to be his own, and his timing seems to be his own as well. As previously mentioned, the gods in *The Aeneid* are able to govern human emotions to turn their will towards the gods. However, in *Sundiata*, the hero is often spurred to action by the humiliation of people he cares about. The prophecies that told of Sundiata's coming promised a great leader, so no one was expecting Sundiata to be crippled. His disability brought disappointment and mockery, particularly from his father's other wife, Sassouma. After Sassouma teases Sundiata's mother Sogolon, Sogolon becomes extremely upset and accuses Sundiata: "Through your fault I have just suffered the greatest affront of my life!" (19). However, there is no explanation of why this particular humiliation is more humiliating than other affronts inflicted by Sassouma. Nevertheless, Sundiata suddenly decides that he should walk that day, so he does. Notably, standing required a lot of effort, as his legs were "trembling," and "sweat ran from his brow" (21). Higher powers do not suddenly grant him the ability to walk; instead, Sundiata makes the conscious effort to walk at that moment. Another time Sundiata was spurred into action by humiliation was during his battle with Soumaoro. Sundiata was "avenging his humiliated country," which sparked "hatred towards Soumaoro" (66). Comparatively, the gods in *The Aeneid* orchestrated the fight between Turnus and Aeneas. Juno sends Allecto, and then Iris to Turnus and incites him to fight, to which Turnus replies, "I follow

a sign so clear, / whoever you are who calls me into action" (Virgil 9.24-5). While the gods call Turnus and other classical heroes into action, Sundiata's own emotions call him into action.

When Sundiata experiences doubt, the supernatural do not intervene; instead, Sundiata seeks out supernatural forces himself and initiates contact. After an encounter with Soumaoro, Sundiata discovers that Soumaoro is protected by a mysterious power, and asks himself "How can I vanquish a man capable of disappearing and reappearing where and when he likes? How can I affect a man invulnerable to iron?" (Niane 52). He realizes that he will need something more powerful than weapons to defeat Soumoaro, so he seeks out the supernatural: "Sundiata *decided* to consult the soothsayers" (56), who recommends sacrifices. However, the supernatural does not reveal to him the answer as to Soumaoro's mysterious power; Sundiata finds that out from Soumaoro's wife Nana Triban (57). Triban reveals to him that the cock's spur is Soumaoro's *tana*, or a hereditary taboo, which is "a prohibition pronounced by an ancestor and which the descendants must respect" (91). Soumaoro cannot touch the cock's spur, or his power will be taken from him, which is how Sundiata ultimately defeats Soumaoro. After his victory, Sundiata "*determined* to go into the mountain to sacrifice to the jinn and thank them for his victory over Kita" and tells the jinn "You gave me the victory but I have not destroyed Kita" (71). He thanks supernatural forces for *allowing* him victory, but the language in which he does so indicates that he *performed* the victory himself. Furthermore, he had to prove himself to the jinn: "As for Sundiata, he hunted on the mountain for he had *become* the chosen one of the jinn" (72). He only becomes the chosen one after the battle. Sundiata's griot also tells him that "I am the word and you are the deed, now your destiny begins" (58). All of Sundiata's actions performed before Balla Fasséké says this—the sudden walking, his exile, the first half of the war—supposedly happens before "destiny" steps in, indicating that those actions were, in fact,

Sundiata's doing. Destiny in *Sundiata* is unalterable, but it also seems to be belatedly active, so Sundiata is arguably more active in following his destiny than his destiny is in enacting itself.

Comparatively, in *The Aeneid*, Aeneas also makes his own decisions, but they usually take him away from his destiny, and gods then have to intervene to place him back on the path they fated for him. The gods have to appeal to him to make the correct decisions, ultimately making the correct decisions in his place. As Aeneas recounts the Greek and Trojan War to Dido, he says he told his comrades to rashly fight what he knew was a lost battle:

> 'You race to defend a city already lost in flames.
> But let us die, go plunging into the thick of battle.
> On hope saves the defeated: they know they can't be saved!'
> That fired their hearts with the fury of despair. (Virgil 2.442-7)

His mother Venus then has to intervene and correct his rash decision, ultimately telling him to run away: "Run for your life, my son" (2.765). Consequently, Aeneas makes a seemingly cowardly action—running away from a fight—seem honorable by having Venus lead him away, it being Venus' decision. Aeneas also decides to stay with Dido, and the gods again have to intervene and point him on the path of his destiny. Jupiter seems to question Aeneas' character: "If such a glorious destiny cannot fire his spirit, / if he will not shoulder the task for his own fame [...]" (4.290-1), and sends Mercury to intervene, who accuses Aeneas of being "oblivious to [his] fate" (4.333). Whenever Aeneas makes a big decision, gods and goddesses have to intervene, and Aeneas ends up following the gods' direction.

Some critics argue that Aeneas' rash decisions prove his character agency; however, whatever agency Aeneas displays is quickly overturned by the gods' decisions. George E. Duckworth argues for Aeneas' character agency and his validity as a hero. He uses the same

evidence as this essay does—Aeneas' delays in following his destiny—but he uses it to support a nearly opposite argument. He presents Aeneas' failures and distractions as the ultimate argument of "divine intervention conflicting with the desire of a character." This conflict does exist, but Aeneas ultimately lets the gods make the decisions for him.

Peter Toohey also confronts the implication of Aeneas' rashness, claiming that heroism is at conflict with destiny in the epic. He calls it the "conflict between the heroic impulse and the demands of destiny" (Toohey 131). He defines the "heroic impulse" as the hero's urge to fight and tendency towards violence—often due to the hero's rage. Toohey highlights instances where Aeneas is ruled by his wrath, which undermines his virtues of *pietas* and *clementia*. The epic ends with Aeneas killing Turnus in a fit of rage, which Toohey argues indicates that the "claims of the heroic impulse have overwhelmed a hero more normally subject to the demands of empire and pietas" (132). This is further indication that Aeneas needs the gods (particularly Venus, who most often intervenes when Aeneas makes rash decisions) in order to follow his destiny—otherwise, he is distracted by what Toohey calls his "heroic impulse."

Comparatively, Sundiata also feels wrath, but is never controlled by it. Instead, he wants to "take Soumaoro alive" (Niane 67), and he spares Noumounkeba when he is defeated and vulnerable (69). Siendou Konate argues that violence is inherent in the African ideal of an epic hero, claiming that Sundiata displays "vindictive rage" and the "gigantic display of violence is relayed with joy by griots who term it "jugufaga," i.e. the ruthless and pitiless extermination of the enemy" (Konate 7). Konate cites examples such as "The Sossos, trampled under the hooves of [Sundiata's] fiery charger, cried out. When he turned to the right the smiths of Soumaoro fell in their tens, and when he turned to the left his sword made heads fall as when someone shakes a tree of ripe fruit" (Niane 49-50, cited by Konate 7), and "Then began the massacre. Women and

children in the midst of fleeing Sossos implored mercy of the victors" (Niane 69, cited by Konate 8). However, the former example of wrath during battle does not compare to Aeneas' wrath, who twice kills men who have already surrendered to him: Magus (Virgil 10.634) and Liger (10.708). As for the latter example, the word "massacre" does connote a graphic image, but Sundiata immediately spares Noumounkeba (Niane 69), and is shown to take prisoners, whose only reported punishment is public humiliation (76). While Sundiata does feel wrath, he never unjustly takes it out on others, and does not need supernatural intervention to keep his emotions in check.

The Aeneid, our representative Western epic, seems to display more divine intervention and less character agency, which contradicts critics' claims that African epics rely on the supernatural, whereas Western epics rely on human strength. For example, James Tar Tsaaior says that

> In African epics, the wars are fought more with potent spiritual force. [...] On the other hand, in Western epics, the emphasis is quite often on physical prowess and superior military weaponry which constitute markers of authentic individual hero-ism. Spirituality and the control of the metaphysical exist but they are subsidiarized to martial artistry. (1311)

These are similar sentiments that Deme expresses in her article. However, in *The Aeneid*, Roman gods and goddesses are literally fighting on the battlefield alongside the Greeks and Trojans. During the Greek and Trojan War, Venus removes the veil from Aeneas' eyes, and Aeneas sees Neptune, Juno, Pallas, and even "Jove in person" (Virgil 2.748-65) on the battlefield. This divine intervention seems to be more "potent spiritual force" than anything supernatural that occurs in *Sundiata*, in which the hero always initiates contact with the divine.

Sundiata also demonstrates his skill at military strategy, whereas Aeneas seems to rely on a goddess' favor to get him to victory. When Sundiata gives orders before battle, the epic elaborates on those orders: "They would head south, skirting Soumaoro's kingdom. The first objective to be reached was Tabon" (Niane 48); "Sundiata adopted a very original form of deployment. He formed a tight square with all his cavalry in the front line. The archers of Wagadou and Tabon were stationed at the back" (51); "As at Neguéboria, Sundiata did not deploy all his forces. The bowmen of Wagadou and the Djallonkés stood at the rear ready to spill out on the left towards the hills as the battle spread" (64), etc. However, in *The Aeneid*, when Aeneas joins the battle against Turnus, he prays, "lead me in war, bring on the omen, goddess, / speed the Trojans home with your victor's stride!" (Virgil 10.307-8). Praying is the only strategy the epic elaborates on, as Aeneas then "commands his troops to follow orders, / brace their hearts for battle, gear for war" (10.311-2), and brandishes his shield immediately upon catching sight of the camp. Again, the representative Western epic seems to rely more on supernatural intervention, while the representative African epic displays more military prowess.

Tsaaior also mentions "superior military weaponry" as a more Western attribute, which is demonstrated in *The Aeneid*; however, that alone does not recommend a less "potent spiritual force." *The Aeneid* does place emphasis on the weapons used in battle, and indicates that the characters take pride in their weaponry. In fact, Virgil devotes 132 lines of his epic (8.727-858) to describe the details of Aeneas' shield—forged by Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and metalworking. The battles also take significantly longer page-wise to pan out, and weapons are described on nearly every page of the battles. When Pallas dies, which Aeneas later avenges, Virgil emphasizes the weapons involved:

And Pallas' shield, for all

its layers of iron and bronze, its countless layers of oxhide
rounding it out for strength—still Turnus' vibrant spear
goes shattering through the shield with stabbing impact,
piercing the breastplate's guard and Pallas' broad chest. (10.571-5)

Despite this emphasis on weapons and prolonged battles, the literal physical appearance of deities on the battlefield and their impact on the fighter's emotions presents stronger evidence towards a more significant supernatural presence in *The Aeneid*.

Supernatural intervention is arguably most poignant in the mothers in both *The Aeneid* and *Sundiata*, as both heroes have supernatural mothers; however, Aeneas seems to be more defined by his divine mother compared to Sundiata. Aeneas' mother is Venus, the Roman goddess of love and victory, which is the main recommendation for Aeneas as a leader. Aeneas' account of what happened to the Trojans in Books 2 and 3 does not explain why the Trojans chose Aeneas as their leader. Instead of demonstrating qualities that recommend him as a leader, Aeneas makes impulsive and rash decisions, like fighting a lost battle (2.442), misdirecting his overwhelming rage at Helen (2.713-4), and entirely forgetting about his wife Creusa when fleeing Troy (2.920). Each of these circumstances required Venus' intervention: Venus told him to flee the battle, Venus redirected his rage from Helen to the gods, and Venus reminded Aeneas to care for his family: "Why don't you look first / where you left your father, Anchises, spent with age? / Do your wife, Creusa, and son Ascanius still survive?" (2.737-9). Venus has mostly successful interventions, although the latter intervention was not as effective concerning Creusa, who Aeneas lost forever. These actions do not necessarily recommend Aeneas as the ideal leader, suggesting that the main reason Aeneas became the leader is because of his divine mother.

Sundiata also inherits a unique status from his supernatural mother, but he demonstrates external agency separate from his mother. Sundiata seems to be intrinsically superior to his siblings because of his supernatural mother, a wraith, or "the buffalo-woman, before whom powerless sorcerers shrank in fear" (63). When Namandje, another of Maghan's wives, gives birth to another son, Maghan hopes that the newborn is the prophesied great leader, since Sogolon's son was disabled. However, the soothsayers told Maghan that Namandje's son would be "the right hand of some mighty king" (16), not the actual king himself, because he is not the prophesied son of Sogolon. Furthermore, when people address Sundiata, it is usually as the "son of Sogolon," indicating the mother's importance in Sundiata's life. However, arguably the only instance in which Sogolon intervenes is when she attacks Sundiata after Sassouma humiliates her. Sundiata then overcomes his disability and walks to alleviate the affront to his mother. However, this is a rather negative encouragement from Sogolon, and she never intervenes into Sundiata's affairs again except to advise exile. Even then, Sogolon offers exile as a suggestion to her son, and "it was to save his brother that Djata accepted exile" (27). Whether the family went into exile was ultimately Sundiata's decision, and Sogolon was offering her advice rather than intervening.

To further demonstrate Sundiata's external agency, he aligns himself with a supernatural force when adopting the same power as his griot. The invocation of the muse is a motif of epic literature, and occurs in *The Aeneid*: "Tell me, / Muse, how it all began" (1.8-9). The Muse is a Roman goddess, daughter of Jupiter, and presides "over literature and the arts and [the nine Muses] are the sources of memory and artistic inspiration" (Fagles 463). However, there is no invocation of the muse in *Sundiata*; instead, the griot seems to have a nearly equitable authority: "we [the griots] are the memory of mankind;" "I am a griot [...] master in the art of eloquence

[...] My word is pure and free of all untruth" (Niane 1). In *Sundiata*, Maghan's griot often speaks for him (7, 13). Afterwards, "the king nod[s] his approval" (7), but does not add anything to the griot's words. Sundiata's griot also speaks for him, but Sundiata adds to his words: "Sundiata made a sign indicating that the griot had spoken well, but he added, [...]" (61). Assuming that the griot is on the same plane as the Muse, Sundiata establishes himself as an equal to the Roman goddess of art and inspiration, claiming a status alongside divine intervention, rather than a subordinate like Aeneas.

According to the Western standards of heroism laid out in Deme's article, which emphasizes natural strength and a limited supernatural influence, Sundiata would appear to be more heroic. He does not rely on supernatural intervention, but initiates contact with the supernatural himself; the supernatural does not have to interfere with his emotions, rather he is in total control of them; he exhibits strategic skill, instead of relying on a deity to provide victory; and he does not require constant help from his supernatural mother. This is not to say that in "succeeding" as a Western hero, Sundiata "fails" in any way as an African hero. According to Deme, the supernatural is important in the African idea of a hero, and Sundiata does have important interactions with divine entities or their representatives. This essay also does not claim that Aeneas is a failure as a literary hero; he is simply less of a hero *according to the Western standards in Deme's article*. This essay does, however, attempt to prove that Eurocentric critical comments that claim African epic heroes are invalidated because of their reliance on the supernatural are misplaced. Comparatively, Western heroes exhibit even more reliance on the supernatural; therefore, those critics might benefit from reevaluating their definitions of heroism.

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