Rumor, called “the swiftest of all evils,” plays a disturbing role in Virgil’s epic poem, *The Aeneid*, providing some chilling lessons about human nature. Virgil portrays Rumor as a “filthy goddess,” born of mother Earth, spreading a mixture of fact and fiction to cities. Rumor conveys word of highly sensitive, personal news—such as the romantic affair of Queen Dido of Carthage and Aeneas, leader of Trojan refugees and the poem’s hero. Her words are devastating. In *The Aeneid*, Rumor sets in motion events that lead to burning cities, suicides, and wars. Rumor even riles up the gods.

Why does Virgil use this ominous character and what is he trying to say about human nature and how we communicate? Rumor, in many cases, incites rage, a central theme throughout the *The Aeneid*. Rage drives humans in war. Rage defines turning points in history and relationships between nations. But what causes that rage? Virgil shows several accounts where goddesses such as Rumor cause or inflame the rage in otherwise peace-loving people. What’s perhaps most frightening is Rumor doesn’t seem to have a particular agenda, so the grief she causes to humans appears random. There are few things more frightening than random violence. As such, Virgil uses Rumor to provide a perspective on evil and how it operates in society.

Like evil, Rumor is a force in the world, one far beyond control of humans. Further, this evil fulfills a basic need in human communications. Rumor fills a void of information, providing human beings with an explanation and a sense of order in the world around them, even if it is a false or distorted version. Human beings have an innate curiosity about the world around them, one that separates them from other animals. Aristotle, in *Metaphysics*, suggests the quest for philosophy was a human response to seek order in a disorderly world (Aristotle, 982 b20). Rumor can satiate that thirst for information, and her distortions can provide an explanation. Rumor also panders to an aspect of human nature: it’s easy to believe the first thing you hear, and it is much harder to investigate the veracity of a rumor.

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Through Rumor, Virgil offers a universal insight into human communication, one that resonates in today’s Digital Age. The goddess Rumor helps us see how false information can devastate lives, and in the case of leaders, contribute to their personal destruction and the downfall of societies. As such, Virgil’s poem, some 2,000 years old, remains highly relevant. Rumor’s speed and omniscience also appear similar to today’s instantaneous news delivery systems, such as Twitter or cable television. Virgil’s epic poetry provides an unsettling reminder for today’s journalists, policy makers, and leaders about the consequences of basing decisions on mere rumors and the need to diligently sift fact from fiction.

Virgil provides little information about Ru-
rum's origins and motivations, which in some respects seems entirely appropriate. The nature of a rumor is ambiguous; Webster's dictionary defines rumor as "general talk not based on definite knowledge." Sometimes you can't figure out a rumor's origin or motivation, and this is the case with Virgil's goddess of Rumor. So, in a sense, her form fits her duty.

Virgil describes Rumor as a goddess of the Earth, not one from Olympus or on high. We see the most extensive description of Rumor in Book IV—a dark story about the growing insatiable appetite of Queen Dido of Carthage, her unrequited love for Aeneas, and the fall of her prosperous city. The portrait of Rumor is vivid and ugly: "Fast-footed and lute of wing, she is a terrifying and enormous monster with as many feathers as she has sleepless eyes beneath each feather (amazingly), as many sounding tongues and mouths, and raises up as many ears" (Virgil, IV.256). Despite this elaborate visual description, the human characters in The Aeneid do not see Rumor, but instead learn of her reports through unspecified means. She seems everywhere and nowhere at the same time—a presence without a physical substance.

Also known as Fama (Latin for "fame" or "reputation"), Rumor is the sister of Coeus (son of Earth, one of the Titans) and Enceladus (son of Earth, a giant). The references to Earth are significant since Rumor is from Olympus, the realm of the heavens, but instead closer to the gods of the underworld, such as the Furies or Harpies, which I discuss below. Further, it seems Rumor may be on bad terms with the king of the gods, Jupiter. The appendix to the Mandelbaum translation of The Aeneid provides some important family history. The brother of Rumor, Enceladus, attempted to dethrone Jupiter, and was punished and buried under Mt. Etna. As a result, we might suspect Jupiter would distrust or dislike another member of Enceladus' family, Rumor.

Despite her ambiguous origins and motivations, Rumor makes her first appearance in The Aeneid in a forceful manner by spreading a report of a love affair between Dido and Aeneas:

She sang of what was done and what was fiction, chanting that Aeneas, one born of Trojan blood, had come, that lovely Dido has deigned to join herself to him, that now, in lust, forgetful of their kingdom, they take long pleasure, fondling through the winter, slaves of squallid craving," he writes. "Such reports the filthy goddess scatters everywhere upon the lips of men (IV.251).

We can assess Rumor's accuracy by comparing her report to the narrator's account. Some basic facts are accurate. Dido and Aeneas have sex in a cave, and Dido calls it a marriage. Time comes to a stop in her kingdom of Carthage. "Slaves of squallid craving" could be accurate, since Dido has been without her husband for several years, and Aeneas has been without his wife for at least seven years.

Yet, however, is the considerable involvement of the gods in making the rendezvous happen. The queen of the gods, Juno, arranged for the cave rendezvous, a critical part of the episode; earlier, Venus sends Cupid to charm Dido. As a result, Aeneas and Dido were not acting freely on their own free will; the deities played a significant role in arranging their tryst. Other parts of Rumor's account don't seem accurate. "Fondling through the winter" seems a stretch since the reader is told of one affair on one day. While the phrase "squallid craving" could be accurate in one basic sense, it trivializes the human feelings that underpin the affair. Dido is lovely since the murder of her husband, Sychaeus. She has had many suitors, yet none resonated with her. She feels immediate attraction to Aeneas on several levels; he, too, is a leader trying to build a society after the tragic loss of a spouse. Aeneas is a kindred spirit. Rumor includes none of this. To be fair, we don't know how Rumor obtained her information, or whether she knew of the gods' intervention. The reader assumes Rumor is aware of the gods' role given that she is the first to spread word of the secret tryst. Her account leaves the reader with a one-sided and sordid spin on the Dido-Aeneas affair, suggesting they were indulging in a mutual lust, on their own free will.

Rumor's version is distinguished by omission of key facts, which otherwise would "water down" her tale and its sordid appeal. This brings back the notion of Rumor as both form and substance. Rumor's reports contain significant omissions; her identity, and being also contain omissions. We don't know who controls her, an omission of agency. People don't see her, an omission of presence. We don't know how or why she selects her victims: an omission of intent. Seen in this light, omission expands Rumor's power and reach.

It's worth noting that Rumor "sings" her account of Dido and Aeneas, the poet is telling us her reports are a form of art rather than literal facts. Virgil is telling us Rumor is a performer and we shouldn't consider her to be a source of traditional news. In conventional terms, this would be the difference between watching a Hollywood-produced docudrama and a standard newscast in network television.

If Rumor delivers a type of performance, it is one with grave consequences. Virgil shows us how Rumor's distortions lead to rage in humans and personal tragedy. We see Dido slip into insanity following Rumor's tale; she eventually commits suicide and her prosperous Carthagian burn. This underpins an historic feud in subsequent generations between Carthage and Rome. Of course, Dido's insanity owes to several other contributing factors: she was stricken with a blind love for a man who was fated not to stay in Carthage.

We see Rumor incite rage within King Iarbas, a spawned suitor of Queen Dido. Iarbas, angry at the Dido-Aeneas affair, complains to Jupiter, and this in turn upsets the father of the Gods. Jupiter then sends a message to Aeneas: end the Dido affair and continue his voyage to fulfill his destiny and establish a new homeland for the Trojan refugees. Jupiter's order to Aeneas to leave Carthage, in turn results in that city's downfall. Rumor was able to sway heaven (Jupiter) and earth (Iarbas). Clearly, Rumor is a major force.

Virgil shows us Rumors reports can crowd out more logical explanations of events. Aeneas, ordered by Jupiter to leave Carthage, breaks the news to his lover that he must move on to fulfill his fate. Yet Rumor first gives Dido a report that Aeneas was packing up, which enrages the queen. We don't know what Rumor says but it helps trigger Dido's insanity: "Her mind is helpless; raging frantically, inflamed, she raves throughout the city" (I.407).

We see Rumor causing strong reactions elsewhere in the book. Rumor delivers word of the death of Euryalus, one of Aeneas' allies. The reader is not told exactly what Rumor says to Euryalus' mother about her son's death in battle, but we see the woman driven to a type of insanity by the account: "At once the warmth abandons her poor bones... Writhed, she runs out and, with a woman's wailing, tearing her hair and heedless of men's presence and the darts and danger, mad, she races toward the wall's front lines" (IX.628).

All of this chaos and discord is stirred up by a character with ambiguous origins and motivations. Rumor is like a "lone wolf" terrorist or a suicide bomber, a source of random
violation. This is in contrast to other gods and goddesses in the poem: Jupiter directs Mercury; Juno unleashes the Furies. These powerful forces are unleashed by some authority figure; no such authority visibly controls Rumor. Virgil portrays Rumor as a form of evil that exists in the human realm. We can't exactly pinpoint its source, but evil—like rumor—is an unpleasant and dangerous fact of our existence.

We do not see Rumor motivated to gain power or influence. In modern society, people can use rumors to gain advantage by tearing down an opponent's reputation or undermining their business. In politics, one notorious example involved the 2000 U.S. presidential primary, where an anonymous person or group spread the rumor that Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) had fathered an illegitimate black child. The rumor contributed to McCain's defeat in the South Carolina primary election (Barr, "Karl Rove denies role in John McCain rumor in South Carolina"). Rumors might be a weapon in modern politics, but Virgil's Rumor does not overtly gain power from her deeds. This aligns with the notion of evil in the world; it exists, but who benefits?

Virgil’s decision to dwell on a rumor involving two leaders—Dido and Aeneas—is significant. It plays into our perverse tendencies to reduce our leaders to human scale. Rumor’s distortions place the listener in a position of moral superiority to Dido and Aeneas. A king and queen reduced to “slaves of squalid craving” makes them just like us, mortals with lustful desires. This phrase equates our leaders to mere slaves; the highly successful Queen of Carthage and the heroic Trojan leader, a man born to a goddess mother, are mortals after all. If the rumor “knocks them down a peg,” does it lift us up? Perhaps this inversion in roles can help explain why rumors involving our leaders resonate with us. By denigrating our leaders, we feel empowered.

Rage is a theme throughout The Aeneid, and we see how other powerful and sinister female characters create rage like Rumor. The poem begins with Juno being enraged at the Trojans and the treatment of Helen. (Helen was either kidnapped by or escaped with Paris, the Trojan prince, and held in Troy; this mythical event triggered the Trojan War.) Juno appears throughout The Aeneid, and her “savage...unforgetting anger” makes her the main antagonist to Aeneas. The queen of the gods recognizes Aeneas is fated to found a new society in Italy on the banks of the Tiber River, but she vows to make the journey as bloody and painful as possible. “If I cannot bend High Ones, then I shall move hell,” Juno says (VII.412). Juno directs many of the evil female characters, such as the Harpies and Furies, monstrous female beasts that sow discord, confusion, and filth.

Juno is important since Virgil portrays rage as an external force on the humans, who by and large seem to be trusting and good-natured until the gods intervene. For example, King Latinus initially receives Aeneas’ men with great hospitality (VII.360), just as Dido shows great generosity to Aeneas and his crew when they first land at Carthage (I.805). All of that changes when external force—Juno, Allecto and the Furies—incite rage in humans and ignite destructive forces. Through this, Virgil is commenting on the nature of evil.

Examine Turnus, the king of the Rutulians and Aeneas’ rival for the Latin Princess Lavinia. Turnus initially resists the evil goddess Allecto. She is one of the Furies, guardian of the underworld, sent by Juno to push Turnus into war. Turnus tells Allecto: “Your task to guard shrines and images of gods. Let men run war and peace; war is their work” (VII.585). The goddess then casts a spell of rage over Turnus, “fixing a firebrand within his breast,” which drives him insane and leads him to war. One clear message: Turnus is wrong. Virgil tells us war is also the work of the gods.

Rumor seems similar to the Harpies, the menacing half-bird, half-female creatures that terrorize Aeneas and his men during a feast in Book III. Like Rumor, the Harpies are other-worldly, ugly, and dangerous. “No monster is more malevolent than these, no scourge of gods or pestilence more savage ever rose from the Stygian waves,” he writes (III.281). The main Harpy, Colomis, delivers a dark prophecy to Aeneas. The Trojan hero and his men will not settle into their new homeland of Italy until they experience hunger so severe that they will gnaw on their tabbies, she says. This declaration greatly upsets Aeneas’ men, much as how Rumor’s reports upset Dido, King Iarbas, and others. While the Harpies frighten Aeneas and his crew, they do not instill the same rage as does Rumor.

Allecto surfaces later, and again spreads rage and insanity. At Juno’s behest, Allecto poisons King Latinus’s wife, Queen Amata, in order to upset the planned and fated wedding between Aeneas and Lavinia, Amata’s daughter. Allecto puts Amata into an insane rage, one similar to the insanity Rumor inflicts in Queen Dido. While we don’t know who controls Rumor, Virgil draws many parallels between Rumor and these Juno-directed goddesses. As such, Virgil shows how Rumor is as powerful as Juno’s evil goddesses, but with a twist. Rumor is an aspect of evil no one seems to control or direct. Further, Rumor is a goddess of the Earth, so she is present among us. Since she doesn’t sleep, she is potentially around us at all times. Through these images, Virgil suggests Rumor can be present in our daily lives. He also shows how Rumor plays a role in human communication, perhaps a necessary role, by filling an information void.

We tend to believe rumors in cases where we aren’t getting reliable information, or any information, from other sources. Consider Aeneas and his carved, or lack thereof, when he speaks to his troops in Book I. Aeneas gives a pep talk to his men after enduring a terrible storm provoked by Juno. Aeneas withholds his true reservations about their adventure. “Though sick with heavy cares, he counterfeits hope in his face; his pain is held within, hidden,” Virgil writes (1.250). Here, Aeneas doesn’t tell his people the whole story. We see Aeneas again trying to cheer up his men but withholding his true feelings in Book VI (VI.250). Aeneas emphasizes to the Trojan refugees that they are on a fated mission to found a new society. Yet, as the crew linger in Carthage, what do they see? The men see that Carthage has stalled; construction stopped (IV.113). They see their leader wearing a purple robe, a gift from Dido, and looking to settle into new houses. What do Dido or Aeneas tell the men about their relationship? Nothing. Rumor swoops in this information void with an account of the Dido-Aeneas affair. Rumor’s account seems right since Aeneas is acting like he is preparing to stay. The image of our hero assessing new houses in a purple robe provided by the queen makes him appear to be a king in waiting—or a kept man.

Imagine the anxiety and confusion of Aeneas’ men. How do they reconcile Aeneas’ speeches describing their fate to settle in Italy with their observations of Aeneas stuck in a romantic fog? Rumor’s account of Aeneas in a worldly affair seems right and feeds this anxiety. This is why we see such a sense of relief when Aeneas commands the men to pack up and leave. We read the men were glad to receive orders to leave Carthage. “They race to carry out the orders of Aeneas, his commands” (IV.395).
Consider some of the broader questions Virgil asks us. If Rumor is a performance, why do we believe her even if she is harmful? Perhaps because we rely on rumor out of necessity, out of convenience. It takes time to investigate a rumor and one doesn’t always get to the bottom of the matter. In our busy lives, it’s easier to believe the first thing we hear, and sometimes we simply do not have any time for further investigation. Recall how King Tarsus, one of Dido’s suitors, was enraged after hearing Rumor's tale of the Dido-Aeneas affair. Without looking into the facts, Tarsus complained to Jupiter about the injustice of the trust. “Incited by that bitter rumor” (IV.270), Tarsus acts on the information as if it were true. Virgil is making a broader point about human communications: we find it cumbersome to investigate such reports. Like it or not, rumor is part of human communication.

How does Rumor differ from the legitimate stories or news reports? In several accounts, there is little distinction between the two. In Book VI, Aeneas encounters Dido in the underworld, and this is the first time he’s faced with actual evidence that she committed suicide. Earlier, the reader is told Rumor spread word of Dido’s suicide throughout Carthage (IV.915). Aeneas probably learned of Dido’s death from Rumor; he seeks to confirm what he learned when he encounters Dido. This is where the ambiguity of Rumor arises. Some parts of her reports are accurate, others not, which only emphasizes Rumor’s danger. You don’t exactly know if you are dealing with pure evil or a slight distortion.

A modern reader will see parallels to Rumor in our contemporary society. Virgil’s depiction of Rumor with her “sleepless eyes...many sounding tongues and mouths, and raises up as many ears” describes a creature that gathers information night and day. Is this a type of news-gathering organization—a tabloid newspaper, a sensationalist cable news show, or a gossip blog? Like those organizations, Rumor is omniscient and fast: “Rumor, whose life is speed, whose going gives her force,” he writes (IV.231). Rumor’s speed is an antithesis of careful, contemplative thinking. She is first with a story or an account of an event, but is not always accurate. “She holds fast to falsehood and distortion as often as to messages of truth,” he writes (IV.249). Think how similar this is to the gossip and half-truths blazed around the world on Twitter and other blogging services. The world saw the destructive force of rumors propelled on Twitter and Reddit in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing, as individuals posted messages falsely implicating innocent people of the horrific crime (Gayomali, Kang). It’s hard to see how Virgil could have anticipated such a parallel, since even the printing press would not be invented years later (1041 in China and 1450 in Germany). What Virgil did see, however, is how human beings have to navigate evils such as Rumor in their daily task of understanding the world around them.


