

The Aeneid (ca. 29-19 B.C.E.)

Virgil's final work was the Aeneid (in Latin Aeneis), an account in twelve books of hexameter verse of the flight of Aeneas from Troy and his battles in Italy against Turnus to found a new home, the origin of Rome. As an epic, the Aeneid occupies the summit of ancient generic classification. Epic was the sustained narration of great events ('kings and heroes') by an inspired, omniscient, but distanced narrator; it was also the genre in which the anxiety of influence was greatest, since any epic was inevitably read against Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, by common consent the greatest poems of antiquity. The basic armature is that of the Odyssey: the first half of each epic describes the wanderings of the hero, the second his fight for victory in his home, and Aeneas is harried by Juno as Odysseus is by Poseidon, but the anger of Juno (cf. 1. 4, 11) also corresponds to the anger of Achilles (and Apollo) in the Iliad, and the end of the poem is more like the battle between Achilles and Hector in Iliad 22 than the killing of the suitors in Odyssey 22. One may also contrast the first six books as 'Odyssean' with the second half as 'Iliadic.' But the correspondences with both epics go much further and much deeper. The relationship is signalled in the famous opening words of the poem, *arma virumque cano*, 'arms and the man I sing', where 'arms' points to the Iliad, 'man' to the Odyssey. But the range of material whose traces may be interpreted in the Aeneid is vast: other earlier epics like Greek 'cyclic' epic, Greek and Roman tragedy, Hellenistic poetry, lyric and elegy, and many other genres. The Aeneid thus both preserves the narrower generic norms of epic and expands the genre towards the variety that critics like M. Bakhtin have reserved for the modern novel, a process taken further by Ovid.

Although the particular version of the Aeneas legend presented in the Aeneid has become canonical, the versions of the myth in the preceding tradition were many and varied, and the reconstruction of the matrix of possibilities against which the Aeneid situates itself has always been a standard critical procedure. It is clear that many of the details offered by Virgil were by no means the standard ones in his day, that his 'sources' were multiple, and that there was no compunction against free invention. The Aeneid is not therefore a 'safe' text to use for the investigation of early Latin history and cult. The story as told by Virgil takes the reader, as in the Odyssey, in *medias res*. Aeneas on his way to Italy is blown off course to North Africa by a storm instigated by Juno (book 1). There he meets Dido, and tells her the story of the fall of Troy (book 2) and his subsequent wanderings (book 3). He and Dido become lovers, and he forgets his mission; Mercury is sent to remind him, and his departure leads to Dido's tragic suicide (book 4). In book 5, the threat of another storm forces Aeneas to put into Sicily, where funeral games are celebrated for his dead father Anchises; after Juno instigates the Trojan women to burn the ships, part of the group are left behind in Sicily and Anchises appears in a dream to urge Aeneas to visit the Sibyl of Cumae (near Naples). The first half of the epic concludes with the consultation of the Sibyl and their visit to the underworld, where Aeneas meets his father and receives a vision of the future of Rome (book 6). The events of the second half are described by Vergil as a 'greater work' (7. 44, *maius opus*). Landing in Latium, Aeneas sends a successful embassy of peace to the Latin king Latinus; but Juno uses the Fury Allecto ERINYES

to stir up the young Rutulian king Turnus and Latinus' wife Amata to encourage war. Aeneas' son Iulus kills a pet stag while hunting, and from that small spark a full-blown war develops. Before battle commences we are given a catalogue of Italian forces (book 7). In book 8 Aeneas, advised by the god of the river Tiber in a dream, visits the Arcadian king Evander, who is living on the future site of Rome; Evander's young son Pallas joins the Trojan forces, and Aeneas receives a gift of armour from his mother Venus, including a shield which again depicts future events in the history of Rome, most notably the battle of Actium (book 8). In the succeeding books of fighting, emphasis falls on the terrible cost of the war, as the young lovers Nisus (2) and Euryalus die in a night expedition (book 9), Turnus kills Pallas, and Aeneas kills both the equally tragic youth Lausus and his father the evil Mezentius (book 10), and Turnus' ally the female warrior Camilla is killed by an arrow to her breast (book 11). Finally in book 12 Aeneas and Turnus meet in single combat, despite Juno's attempts to delay the duel; Aeneas is victorious, and hesitates over sparing Turnus until he sees the sword-belt that Turnus had taken from the dead Pallas. In a paroxysm of love and anger, he slaughters Turnus. Throughout the Aeneid, as this summary suggests, there is a strong narrative teleology, reaching beyond the events of the story to the future Rome. 'Fate' is a central concept; it coincides with the will of Jupiter, though the exact relationship is kept vague. Juno, pained and angry at past events (1. 25–8), attempts always to retard the progress of the story, as a sort of 'counter-fate' (7. 294, 313–16). She is always doomed to failure; at the end of the epic she is reconciled to the fate of Aeneas (12. 808–28) but we know that this is only temporary. Onto the opposition between the king and queen (1. 9) of heaven may be projected many other oppositions in the poem: heaven and hell, order and disorder, reason and emotion, success and failure, future and past, epic and tragedy. The treatment of these oppositions has been the central issue in the criticism of the Aeneid. It is clear that although many of them coincide, the contrast is never absolute: if Juno naturally turns to Allecto and the underworld (7. 312), Jupiter god of the bright sky (1. 253) also uses the infernal Dirae as the instruments of his wrath (12. 849–52); if Aeneas like Hercules (cf. 8. 299, contrast 2. 314) represents reason and self-control, he also concludes the epic with an act of passion (12. 946–7). It is possible to see these inconsistencies as 'energising contradictions' which forge a successful viewpoint on the world; or to see them as undermining or subverting the claims to dominance of Roman order; or more generally to see the oppositions (like all oppositions) as inherently unstable and liable to deconstruction.

Naturally, simple appeal to the text or its historical setting cannot settle which of these approaches is adopted. Three particular aspects of the debate may, however, be mentioned. First, the opposition between Jupiter and Juno is a gendered one, and many of the other contrasts drawn relate to ancient (and modern) conceptions of typically male or female characteristics, such as reason and emotion. Women in the Aeneid feature predominantly as suffering victims opposed to the progress of history (Juno, Dido, Amata, Camilla, Juturna), and this may be read either as an affront to the values of martial epic or as reinforcing them. At any rate, Virgil's treatment of gender is distinctive and central to the interpretation of the poem, though it is idle to use it to speculate about his own sexuality. Second, the political aspects of the oppositions are

more than implicit. The hero of the epic is pious Aeneas, a man marked out by attachment to communal values who at the fall of Troy turns away from individual heroism to save his father and in Carthage rejects personal happiness for the sake of his son's future and the destiny of Rome (4. 267–76). This subordination of the individual to the collective is often seen as a prime component of Roman ideology, and its embodiment in Aeneas a central feature of the epic. At the same time, as in Virgil's earlier work, the pain and loss suffered by individuals are at least equally as prominent in the poem. The question of the relationship between individual and community is raised in a different form by the question of the poem's relationship to the new autocratic rule of Augustus. The purpose of the Aeneid was commonly seen in antiquity as to praise Augustus (Servius, *Aen.* pref.), who receives explicit eulogy from Jupiter (1. 286–96, though Caesar in 286 is ambiguous), Anchises (6. 791–805), and the primary narrator in the description of Aeneas' divine shield (8. 671–728). Much of the imagery of the Aeneid can be related to Augustan symbolic discourse and there are many typological links between Augustus and Aeneas and other figures such as Hercules. On the other hand, many have again seen the poem's tragic elements as incompatible with a celebration of power. It is impossible to separate the question of the Aeneid's political tendency--in its crudest form, whether we make it pro- or anti-Augustan--from the wider ideological issues mentioned above, and again the debate cannot be resolved by an appeal to text or history. Finally, these same issues have also surfaced in relation to the philosophical aspects of the Aeneid. Just as the *Georgics* may be read as a reply to the *De rerum natura*, so the Aeneid may be seen as again 're-mythologizing' Lucretian rationalism. Several passages of the Aeneid are explicitly philosophical in their language, most notably Anchises' account of the soul in 6. 724–51; this contains both Stoic and Platonic elements. But the debates over the philosophy of the Aeneid have concentrated on ethics and the theory of the passions, especially anger. Is the Aeneid essentially a Stoic text, which deprecates emotion? Any decision on these matters involves a consideration of the poem's imagery, as well as explicit statement by characters and the narrator; and once again the evaluation of these images is not a simple one. A similar ambivalence attends the depiction of the gods: although they may at times function as metaphors for psychological activity on the human plane, they cannot simply be reduced to allegory. The classic status of the Aeneid is at once apparent from the parody of its opening line (and 7. 41) as the epitome of epic openings in the first of Ovid's *Amores* (date uncertain, but perhaps before 7 BC). Intertextuality with the Aeneid is the central way in which Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucan's *De bello civili*, and especially the works of the Flavian epicists generate meaning: the Aeneid is figured as the official voice of the empire, to be subverted or recuperated. But just as all Greek literature everywhere of necessity situates itself against Homer, so traces of the Aeneid can be seen in every genre of verse and prose, Christian as well as pagan. Inevitably, this role as a machine for generating meaning in others, a stable backdrop for new dramas, may lead to a simplification of the possibilities of the original text, but equally the links between parts of the Aeneid established by imitations often offer the possibility of new critical insights into the Aeneid itself.

Source: Oxford Classical Dictionary (adapted)