

Characters in Virgil

AENEAS

 (Conscientious)

Overview In 23 B.C. the Roman poet Virgil read selected books of his great epic of the history of the Italian people, the *Aeneid*, to the Emperor Augustus and his first lady, Octavia. This was an appropriate occasion, because the epic celebrated the pageant of historical development, on the Italian peninsula, and ultimately its expression in the new imperial reign of Octavian, proclaimed emperor in 29 B.C. This immediately popular achievement played a role in bringing the Italic peoples to a new sense of national unity, though later, to our day, the *Aeneid* has imposed itself as a masterpiece of world literature.

Character 'Pius Aeneas' was the stock term for the main character of the *Aeneid*, and in the interpretation of this term lies the effort to understand the point of the work. 'Pious' is not the word for us, although Aeneas was one part of 'pious,' 'dutiful.' Neither is 'self-important' the right word for 'pius,' though one part of self-important goes with Aeneas, who was carrying out a divine mission. Aeneas was a vehicle of high duty, yet on one occasion, his love dalliance with Dido, he showed himself as a lover, and in conflict with Turnus, the prior master of the Italian peninsula, whom Aeneas had to replace, he showed himself military and brutal.

Noble Aeneas is first described for us by the poet as 'a fugitive, this captain, buffeted cruelly on land as on the sea, by blows from powers of the air...' So indeed he is, for Aeneas comes into this drama as the victim of the anger of the goddess Juno, whose personal vendetta has taken this form, to drive Aeneas and his men loose on the oceans. Terrible storms batter them, Aeneas doing his best to inspire and direct his men. 'A man apart, devoted to his mission,' he perseveres despite divine wrath, awaiting developments.

Adventurous After a night of storm, Aeneas finds himself on the destined shores of Libya. His first instincts are typical: 'the dedicated man, Aeneas, made up his mind, as kindly daylight came, to go out and explore the strange new places...and, who were living there, men or wild creatures...' Aeneas could have remained on the shoreline, but quickly decided to investigate the interior. The mission of nation-founding, which lay ahead of him, demanded an heroically inquisitive temper. Through his adventurous daring we recoup the elemental images of the Greek Odysseus, who is literary prototype for everything we learn about Aeneas.

Faithful Aeneas finds a vast city and is introduced to its queen, Dido. She is aware of his prophesied coming, and initiates a vast banquet for him. While gifts and feasting are exchanged, Aeneas is called to tell the assembled hosts who he was and why. He recounts the development and aftermath of the War at Troy. Among the horrors of the war, for him, was the uncertainty about his father's fate: 'did you suppose, my father, that I could tear myself away and leave you?' Aeneas remained faithful to his family, as we know from the aftermath—the scene of son carrying dad out of the burning citadel.

Self-important Aeneas manages, in speaking of his wanderings to the guests at Dido's banquet, to redescribe the kinds of sea-wonder adventures the Greek hero Odysseus carried out, in returning to his home and family. Aeneas, however, is following his star to a new national foundation, while Odysseus was on a personal quest. Thus Aeneas, the 'pius,' keeps as part of his adventure story—which is good and fascinating—the implication of his own grandeur in mission. Is he humble? On the 'human level' he is common clay, and narrates it, but on another plane, inside the clay, he carries out an 'immortal mission.'

Destined Aeneas and Dido are love-driven, by their respective god forces, and fall deeply in love, making it in a cave in a rainstorm. But love-bitten as he is, history it is that has brought him there, and yet he stumbles in making this point clear to a very furious Dido, who has just learned (from Rumor in a dream) that Aeneas is readying his ships for sail, down at the shore. His final words prove the best he can finally manage, as an escape speech: 'please, no more of these appeals that set us both afire. I sail for Italy not of my own free will.'

Parallels Virgil's shadow falls over all subsequent literature of the western tradition. In fact it takes its own impulse from Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus (like Aeneas) travels dangerously through a postwar world, in search of a haven. So widely read and popular was Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the tale of Aeneas, that Saint Augustine himself is forced to confess, in his *Confessions* (397 A.D.) that he took illicit pleasure in snatching a read, whenever possible, from Vergil's epic. Dante, in the *Divine Comedy* (completed 1320) takes Virgil as his guide through the Underworld, leaving him only at the point where pagan understanding would no longer be sufficient for the journey. Milton, in *Paradise Lost* (1667) goes so far as to juxtapose Adam and Even with Aeneas and Dido, on the crucial issue of parting from the loved one.

Discussion questions

We speak of Aeneas as determined. At what point does he know his destiny? Does he ever swerve from the destined path? Does he lose hope or lose momentum?

What qualifications does he bring to the founding of a new nation? Has he a vision of the new world he wants to establish? Does he want to found a new Troy? Or has he some previously unknown model in mind?

Does Aeneas' sense of mission successfully override his passion for Dido? Do we feel sympathy for Aeneas as he leaves her? Or does he seem like a cold-hearted jerk?