

## Characters in Virgil

# TURNUS

 conscientious

**Overview** After leaving Dido, at the midway point in Virgil's *Aeneid* (29-19 BC) Aeneas enters a zone of 'mythical' hazards and challenges, including a visit to the Underworld, which reminds us strongly of the journey of Ulysses (Odysseus) on his way home from the Trojan War. After this mythical transformation, from within the hero's mission, we find Aeneas emerging into the reality of Latium, the country he needs now to conquer: here it is that he encounters Turnus, the main claimant to power on the Latin peninsula, and the rival for the hand of Lavinia, daughter of Latinus, the patriarch of the Latins, and father of the maiden-key to the power struggle in Latium.

**Character** Turnus is not a whole robust character, but must be reconstructed from hints and situations. This warrior—by all seen as robust and manly, occupies a crucial position in Virgil's narrative, for it is chiefly Turnus who stands between Aeneas and the conquest of the promised land, Latium. In battle he fights steadfastly and even passionately, at peak engaging in hand to hand combat, with Aeneas, which reminds us of the struggle between Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*. In wrath, Turnus can be vicious—as in buckling on the belt of Pallas, whom he has killed—while in self-inspection, as on the rare occasion when he is saved by Juno, from the fury of Aeneas, Turnus questions his manhood with a Hamletian fury which is rare in antiquity.

**Favored** At the time of the arrival of Aeneas and his men on the shores of Latium, Turnus is the dominant marriageable warrior male on the Italian peninsula. He was the chief suitor for the hand of Lavinia, the daughter of the ruling family of Latium, and he was favored as the reigning couple as their successor to Latin power. It is thus no wonder that Turnus is outraged by the advent of powerful strangers from the east—the vanquished from Troy. When he learns that Aeneas is a suitor for Lavinia's hand, Turnus feels the bottom dropping out of his noblest life-expectations.

**Assertive** In face of the invasion of his lands and plans, Turnus works to build his home power base and to strengthen his army. 'When Turnus had assembled all his powers, his standard planted on Laurentian towers,' he was supported by the goddess Juno, who had counteracted the Trojans throughout the War at Troy, and who was preoccupied with setting up shams and mirages to frighten the Trojan war force. Hand to hand fighting ensues, between the two armies, which reminds us of the battlefield fighting in the first half of the *Iliad*. Turnus defends his homeland with the ferocity the Trojans themselves had only recently displayed, in defending (unsuccessfully) their own homeland.

**Furious** Increasingly aware of the power and determination of the Trojan forces, Turnus, 'early waking with the light' calls his troops. 'His martial men with fierce harangue he fired.' For a time he and his troops prevail, in the battle royale; 'he leads his troops without delay, advancing to the margins of the sea.' Once again Homer's narrative is reversed by Virgil. As the Trojan warriors drove the Greek forces to the sea, in the *Iliad*, in Virgil's *Aeneid* it is the Trojan forces that are driven down to the sea. The scene is a testimony to the power of Turnus at its peak.

**Weakness** *A bit like Homer's Achilles, Turnus has a 'weakness.'* In Book 10 Turnus slays the noble young warrior, Pallas, and, out of fury and against custom, he takes Pallas' armor belt and wears it as his own. This act of impious bravado infuriates Aeneas, who throws himself into headlong attack mode against Turnus. Juno, fearing for the life of her favorite, Turnus, plays a trick: she conjures up a ghostly image of Aeneas which she projects on shipboard, a lure to Turnus to leave the battle and save his skin. Once aware of this ruse, and how he has been saved by the goddess, Turnus suffers a serious loss of confidence, and in virtually Hamletian terms questions his power and manhood.

**Parallels** One might almost say that the loser can rise to heroic levels in literature, where the human condition shines in him. Literary examples abound, of figures—Don Quixote, Oblomov, Leopold Bloom—who are so human we fully recognize ourselves in them, and who thereby acquire a heroic loser status.

Bloom is mired in the daily, though he embodies Homeric narrative; Don Quixote lives the little man's inevitably fragile dream of knightly greatness; Oblomov's is the quintessential life of comfort—not luxury—and lack of conflict. Do these examples insult the manly Turnus? In his larger context Turnus is doomed to lose, while in his heart of hearts he shares the man on the street's insecurity about his fundamental manliness.

### **Discussion questions**

Is Turnus purely and simply a victim of destiny, and no match for the Trojans, who are fated to take Latium? Or has Turnus some freedom to carve out his own and his people's destiny?

Turnus and Aeneas are bitter opponents on the battlefield. Is their rivalry for the same woman's hand a spur to their mutual hostility?

Turnus, we have said, has a Hamlet side. Is that simply his 'nature,' or is it a byproduct of the inescapably loser role history has placed him in?