

AENEID

Virgil

Story

This long epic poem, 29-19 B.C.E., is a brilliant tribute to the Emperor Augustus, who at just this time was founding, in Rome, a new empire—the Roman Empire—which was to emulate the great empire founded, in the *Aeneid*, by the legendary hero Aeneas, one of the many great refugees of the Trojan War.

At the outset of the epic, Aeneas and his men are sailing toward Italy, which is to be their new home, but are thrown off course by a violent storm which deposits them in the royal domain of Queen Dido of Carthage. Aeneas tells her the long story of his group's wandering, and before it the destruction of Troy and the wile of the Trojan Horse, which did so much to bring about the Trojans' downfall. Aeneas goes on to tell Dido of his own escape from the burning city, carrying his father Anchises on his shoulders, and taking with them both Anchises, Aeneas' father, and the hearth gods which would be foundational for any new home the Trojans were to found. Aeneas further recounts the previous efforts the group had made, to make landfall, and settle, though in each case they were driven onward by foul storms and the hatred of the goddess Juno.

Dido, who has been looking for a royal consort, and who has liked Aeneas from the start, falls heavily in love with him, and urges him to stay with her in Carthage. His destiny, however, is to found a new city—it will be in Italy—and he informs Dido that he must be going. Devastated, Dido has a huge funeral pyre constructed outside of Carthage, and there, having stabbed herself with Aeneas' sword, she has herself immolated.

The Trojans make their way across the Mediterranean, but are blown ashore in Sicily, and while there proceed to hold delayed funeral games for Aeneas' father, Anchises. Some of the travelers are at this point exhausted, and remain behind, but Aeneas and many of his men proceed. Finally they reach Italy, and Aeneas is taken down into the underworld by the Cumaean Sybil, on a spiritual adventure destined to bring him together with his father, and to show Aeneas scenes of the greatness of the Empire he is about to establish, as his band of men continues up the shore of Latium.

The arrival of the Trojans in their destined homeland begins peacefully, but is soon sidetracked by marital issues. King Latinus hopes that Aeneas is the foreigner destined to be the husband of his daughter, but Latinus' wife, and the suitor Turnus, turn against Aeneas, and before long a full-fledged war has broken out on the Italian peninsula. The two sides agree to a truce, then settle on the idea of a hand to hand combat between Aeneas and Turnus, as a way to close down the bloodshed. When the two leaders square off, the warriors on both sides grow restless, and begin to fight again. Aeneas is wounded in the thigh, but eventually the Trojans begin to turn the tide. Aeneas finally engages mano a mano with Turnus, and, despite a momentary hesitation for compassion, kills him.

Themes

Destiny. In itself destiny is the ruling theme of this long epic. Deeply embedded in Greek mythology lies the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans, each favored and directed by one faction of the gods—the Trojans forever bitterly hated by Juno, who was spurned by Paris in the famous beauty pageant that gave the golden apple of beauty to Helen.

Duty Aeneas was not only a willing vehicle of destiny, but consummately dutiful in his carrying out of destiny. No Dido or Turnus could eventually redirect him from his appointed course.

Homer. The thematic development of the *Aeneid* links into that of both of Homer's two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Warfare, sea voyaging, and return to a kind of homeland—all these are thematic elements which interlink the *Aeneid* with Homer.

Characters

Aeneas is an upright and honorable hero, faithful to his mission—which is to found a new Troy—and ultimately able to overcome all obstacles, whether in the form of a furious fighter, like Turnus, or of a *femme fatale*, like Dido.

Dido is a passionate and lonely regent, who is faced with the difficult challenge of establishing a kingdom by herself. She is ultimately destroyed by sexual desire and self-hatred.

Turnus is the hard fighting and rather faceless hero of the resistance to Aeneas, in Latium. He is not only a warrior antagonist to Aeneas, but a rival for the same girl, Lavinia.

MAIN CHARACTERS

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.

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.

Illustrative moments

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.'

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?

DIDO (emotional)

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. The grandeur of the Roman drive is particularly underscored by the romantic self-discipline shown by Aeneas when he is faced with the distraction of a beautiful Libyan Queen, Dido, who longs for him to build his kingdom in her land.

Character At root, an ancient goddess, Dido became known —though barely mentioned before Vergil— as the first Queen of Libya, roughly the area of present day Tunisia. She was, according to legend, given a parcel of land, to settle her people on that shore, by the native King Iarbas, who forever after fretted that she refused his offers of marriage. It was as she was settling and starting to build up her capital, a splendid urban vision, that Aeneas and his men, thrown about by a wild storm, on their way to Italy, were driven ashore on the coast of Libya. It was there that play out the most intensely human of love affairs, that of Dido and Aeneas.

Parallels Dido, both emotional and pathetic, has proven attractive to artists of all kinds: literary, musical, and painterly. Euripides, who of course preceded Virgil by four hundred years, might almost seem to have had Virgil in mind, in creating a Medea whose jealousy and vengeance resemble those of

Dido. Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (1593) ups the passion level even higher than Virgil, and brings down the queen in a passionate blaze. Henry Purcell's opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, 1680) peaks brilliantly in the tragic Lament of Dido; while in painting Pierre-Narcisse Guerin captured (1815) the pathos of of first love, as Aeneas recounts to Dido the tales of his travels from Troy, while she reclines, enchanted.

Illustrative moments

Anguished Thanks to the ministrations of the goddess Aphrodite, Dido comes before us smitten by the passion of love for Aeneas. Thanks to this 'divine intervention' Dido is not conventionally love struck, but rather is driven mad by her passion. 'Unlucky Dido, burning, roamed through all the city, like a doe hit by an arrow shot from far away...' Like the doe she runs from side to side, but cannot free herself of the painful shaft in her side. She stings with a burning love which will burn her up before her passion has left her.

Beautiful Juno (supporting Dido) and Aphrodite (driving Aeneas' mission) adjudicate the fate of Aeneas and Dido, deciding that a compromise of marriage might keep the lady alive and Aeneas on track. Juno arranges an outing, in which Dido and Aeneas will have an opportunity to bond. Dido appeared in fashion: 'a short Sidonian cloak edged in embroidery caught about her....her hair tied up in gold.' Beautiful and natural she walked to meet Aeneas, who was walking 'with sunlit grace upon him.' One feels on the edge of a fairy story, in which love will solve all problems.

Emotional The walking party—all the retinues are accompanying—are soon caught in a violent thunderstorm, under cover of which—and by goddess-collusion—the lovers find themselves together in a single cave. 'Dido had no further qualms...she thought no longer of a secret love but called it marriage...under that name she hid her fault.' Marriage it hardly was, for it was marriage only for her, and the Rumors which immediately set it set up a buzz of real marriage preparation—which is counter to Juno's larger plan, and Aeneas' mission. The god Mercury is sent in, to remind Aeneas not to lose sight of where he is going.

Driven Dido senses a plot, to counteract her marriage plans and relation to Aeneas; it is in the air, 'for who deceives a woman in love.' 'Evil Rumor..brought word to her in her distracted state, of ships being rigged. Dido is driven insane by this rumor, and courses the streets of her city 'all aflame with rage.' She is as it were a Bacchant 'driven wild by emblems shaken, when the mountain revels of the odd year possess her.' We see Dido driving herself remorselessly into a corner of self-destruction.

Discussion questions

What is Virgil's attitude toward Dido's behavior? Does he fault her as a seductress? Does he feel compassion for her as a jilted lover?

What is Dido's attitude toward Aeneas? Is it pure passion? Is it passion mixed with geopolitical canniness, as she considers Aeneas' usefulness to her in nation building?

At what turning point does Dido began to go mad with passion and fury? Who and what is Rumor? Do you find the depiction of growing madness convincing?

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.

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.

Illustrative moments

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.

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?

Reading <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/228>