

CHAPTER 19 THE AENEID: VIRGIL'S ROMAN EPIC

MAIN POINTS

1. Having experienced the disorder of the Roman civil wars, Virgil became a supporter of the empire and Emperor Augustus.
2. His works include two pastoral poems idealizing the simplicity of rural life, an appealing theme to urban Rome.
3. His epic poem, the Aeneid, was funded by Augustus. At the end of his life, Virgil had not finished his revisions; he ordered his manuscript burned at his death, but Augustus prevented its destruction.
4. Written in Latin, the Aeneid is intended to make Latin a poetic vehicle with a cultural status similar to Greek and to assert Augustus's ancestral link to Aeneas. Virgil also intended to achieve the status that Homer as a poet had among educated Romans.
5. The first six books are modeled after the Odyssey; the rest are modeled on the Iliad.
6. The main focus is the historicizing of myth, linking its characters with individual events and persons in Roman history.
7. The narration includes the reign of Aeneas and his son, the conquest of Greece, the expansion of Rome, and the reign of Julius Caesar and Augustus.
8. The Punic Wars and the Carthaginian invasion of Rome are predicted in Dido's curse on Aeneas when he leaves her.
9. The first role of the city is to create good conditions for civilized life; to establish good government; to erect buildings and monuments; and to encourage arts, theater, trade, and commerce. If the city leader neglects these tasks, the city will suffer.
10. The second role of the city is to spread its civilization, even if it entails fighting wars. While we may regard this as imperialist aggression, many lands welcomed the Roman security, technology, improved economy, and opportunities for Roman citizenship and for advancement in the Roman bureaucracy.
11. The Roman concern with boundaries (walls, ramparts, legal and national borders) is evident in the Aeneid; the "walls of Rome" symbolize not just the nation but all of Roman culture.
12. While the Iliad and the Odyssey focus on the heroes of the epics, Rome—not Aeneas—is the true subject of the Aeneid. In the Iliad, Zeus sympathized with both sides, but the Aeneid is seen from a Roman viewpoint: fighting for Rome is honorable, whereas fighting for personal glory, as Turnus did, is not.
13. The Aeneid expresses a nostalgia for the imagined simplicity of the past, a sign that the price paid for civilization may have seemed too high.
14. The Greek heroes received some kind of reward for their troubles; Aeneas will not even get to see the Rome for which he has sacrificed everything.
15. While Achilles and Odysseus had a choice of fates, Aeneas must do as the gods have predetermined: go to Italy when ordered by Venus and leave his lover, Dido, when ordered by Mercury.
16. The gods impose suffering on a good man for the good of Rome. Aeneas is aware of his burden, literally carrying the household gods of Troy—the Lares, Penates, and Vesta—to Rome.
17. Whereas Achilles was excessive and Odysseus impulsive, Aeneas exhibits self-control, responsibility, and compassion.

18. In Book 10, Virgil contrasts the behavior of Turnus with that of Aeneas, a contrast between Greek and Roman heroic styles. Turnus kills Pallas (Aeneas's beloved friend) and wears his belt to boast of his victory. Aeneas treats a young enemy, Lausus, with respect and refuses to strip the armor when the youth is killed.
19. When Aeneas's anger is roused, it is terrible, but it is caused by moral outrage, not slights to his ego. In the course of the poem, Aeneas learns when to enact his anger and when not. By the end of the poem, he has adopted the gods' perspective as his own.
20. The women in the Aeneid are divided into those for and those against Rome. Pro-Roman are Creusa, Aeneas's wife, and his mother, Venus.
21. Creusa is killed by Greek soldiers; Aeneas returns and sees only her shade, an image of her insubstantial value. She instructs him to accept his fate and seek a new kingdom and wife.
22. Marriage is a sacred Roman institution, but one for which love is not essential. Aeneas weds the Latin Princess Lavinia for political reasons; Dido, whom he loves, he does not marry. Fatherhood is essential, while motherhood is subsumed in the larger affairs of state.
23. Thetis, Achilles's mother, is a messenger like Venus; while Thetis prefers a long life for her son, Venus has a political agenda for Aeneas, even if it means that he will suffer.
24. Juno and Juturna (Turnus's sister) are anti-Roman forces, interfering to prevent Aeneas's victory. Juno calls up the powers of Allecto, one of the Furies, from the Underworld.
25. Juno succeeds in delaying Aeneas but, in the process, kills those she supported.
26. Dido is portrayed sympathetically as a victim of the gods as well as of Aeneas. Abandoned by him, she kills herself. On a personal level, Virgil sympathizes with her, but he also sees her as having neglected her civic duties.
27. Juno and Venus meddle in the personal lives of Aeneas and Dido for their own political reasons. Likewise, Augustus was not afraid to impose heavy legal restrictions on marriage, remarriage, and child-bearing among Rome's upper classes—all in an attempt to improve the political resources of the state.
28. Like the rest of the Aeneid, Dido is deeply embedded in Roman history. Certainly her suicide after the loss of Aeneas would have reminded Romans of the suicide of another queen from Africa, Cleopatra. Cleopatra was associated with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony and the propaganda of Octavian portrayed her as the archetypal temptress who intended to divert the Roman man from his patriotic duty and destiny.
29. Venus removes the cloud from Aeneas's eyes so that he can see the destruction of Troy from the gods' viewpoint, but unlike the similar situation in the Iliad in which Athene lets Diomedes see the gods on the battlefield, humans in the Aeneid are merely agents in a divine plan, and their actions are insignificant.
30. Human destiny is a function of divine politics, including the love between Dido and Aeneas. The only choice is how to respond to the burdens doled out by the gods. - Aeneas's guide to the Underworld, however, is a helper-maiden: the Sibyl (priestess) of Apollo at Cumae. Cumae was an early (eighth century B.C.) Greek settlement in Italy.
31. In the Underworld, Aeneas learns the meaning of his suffering from the shade of his father, Anchises.
32. Using the Odyssey and Plato's *Phaedo*, Virgil describes the Underworld as divided into nine circles administering justice to human souls.
33. Where the highway divides, leading to Tartarus and Elysium, Anchises serves as Aeneas's moral guide and explains how the good are rewarded in eternity and how most souls are reincarnated in endless cycles, each getting what he or she deserves.

34. Anchises also explains the future of Rome; this brings Aeneas to accept his burden with a new commitment.
35. Some evidence suggests that the view of Rome triumphant is ironic; however, if that is the case, then Augustus as well as other readers have missed the irony for two millennia.
36. As a hero, Aeneas must go to the Underworld. The voyage is, however, presented by Virgil as an illusion or possibly as a reminder that every dream may turn into a nightmare. Virgil consistently presents Aeneas as a hero of history, not only of myth. His suggestion that the Underworld visit is mere illusion may be connected with that historicity of character.
37. The climax of the Aeneid, the combat between Turnus and Aeneas, parallels the combat between Hector and Achilles; however, in the Iliad the outcome was not determined beforehand, whereas in the Aeneid the gods know the outcome in advance.
38. Even Juturna, Turnus's sister, understands the situation and bows to destiny. Seeing the Fury near her brother, she abandons him. His passion continues to blind him.
39. Achilles, in his rage, refuses to listen to pleas for Hector's body to be respected; Aeneas is willing to listen to similar pleas until he sees the general wearing the belt of Pallas.
40. Some readers argue that this shows Aeneas as an agent of a corrupt, imperialist government, his humanity destroyed. From being a model Roman hero, he has become a "Greek" hero. Others see the scene as representing a gap between the public figure and the private man.
41. Others argue that Aeneas starts out as a Greek-style hero but becomes a model Roman hero over time. Some scholars have even seen in Turnus the "second self" of Aeneas. If Turnus embodies the Greek-style hero, Aeneas closes the epic by killing off the old self, which he has outgrown.
42. The death of Turnus eliminates the long and hard struggle between the private man who must make painful sacrifices and the public hero for whom only his destiny remains.
43. Differences between the Iliad and the Aeneid include the characters of Patroclus and Pallas; Patroclus was an experienced fighter, whereas Pallas was a youth, and Turnus's boast of the kill was unwarranted.
44. The Aeneid's world consists of people who are suffering losses because they are burdened with the need to serve and are deceived by gods with political agendas. However, there is no alternative: war is recognized as the ultimate horror.
45. There is a conflict between humanism and war, and perhaps a conflict between humanism and government; but if war is too high a price to pay for civilization, then humans are condemned to live in a world where the forces of libido are in control.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Virgil, Aeneid

Key names of mythological characters mentioned:

Aeneas, the sole surviving hero from Troy, son of Venus (Aphrodite)

Creusa, his wife, dead at Troy

Anchises, Aeneas's father

Turnus, the military leader of the Latins

Pallas, Aeneas's lover, killed by Turnus

Dido, the woman he loves

Mercury (Hermes)

Lavinia, Aeneas's Latin wife

King Latinus, her father

Allecto, a Fury from the Underworld

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Virgil (70–19 B.C.)