

Virgil's Aeneid

Exercise 1: What is this epic *about*?

Aen. 1.1-11, transl. F. Ahl: the first proem

Arms and the man I sing of Troy, who first from its seashores,
Italy-bound, fate's refugee (*profugus*), arrived at Lavinia's
Coastlands. How he was battered about over land, over high deep
Seas by the powers above! Savage Juno's anger remembered
Him, and he suffered profoundly in war to establish a city,
Settle his gods into Latium, making this land of the Latins
Future home to the Elders of Alba and Rome's might ramparts.
Muse, let the memories spill through me. What divine will was wounded,
What deep hurt made the queen of the gods thrust a famously righteous
Man into so many spirals of chance to face so many labours?
Anger so great: can it really reside in the spirits of heaven?

Aen. 7.37-45: the second proem

Come now, Erato! Who were the kings? What happened at which time?
What kind of state was the Latium of old when that immigrant (*advena*) army
First drove its vessels to land on the shores of Ausonia? All this
I will explain, I'll recall what led to the start of the fighting.
You, goddess, prompt your seer. I'll speak about hideous warfare (*horrida bella*),
I'll speak of battles, of kings who were driven to death by their courage,
What part Etruscans played, how Hesperia's whole land was bullied
Into the fight. As the worldview birthing within me is great,
My labour's greater too.

Q. What tone does Virgil take in these opening lines (known as proems)?

Q. Why does Virgil describe himself as 'singing'?

Q. What do we learn of the Trojans in these two sections?

Exercise 2: What are Aeneas' weapons for?

Aen. 4: Dido's death

[Dido] unsheathes the Dardanian swordblade.

This was the special gift she'd requested, but not for this purpose...

Dido attempted to lift heavy eyes once again, but her body

Failed her. The wounding sword, jammed deep, rasped hard on her ribcage.

Three times she rose up and she propped herself up on her forearm,

Three times she slumped back on the couch as her eyes, in their wandering,
Searched for the light high up in the sky; then she moaned when they found it.
Juno Almighty pitied her difficult death with its painful
Anguish long drawn out, and dispatched to her, down from Olympus,
Iris, to unmoor her struggling soul from the limbs' web of bondage.
Dido was dying a death that was neither deserved nor predestined,
But premature: a poor woman, swept up by the quick fire of madness.

Aen. 8: Aeneas' shield

[Aeneas], in delight at the gifts and the singular honour accorded,
Just couldn't sate his eyes as he scanned each item in detail,
Awed as he held in his hands, or put over his arms, or rotated
First the grim helmet, the shock of its plumes, eruptions of fire;
Next, the sword, agent of death...

... lastly the shield's indescribable texture and context.

There the Igniter of Fire, who was neither unversed in the seers'
Prophecies nor uninformed about future events, had expounded
Italy's history, the triumphs of Roman achievement: Ascanius'
Future line of descendants, and battles they fought, set in order...

...

Centrally placed, fleets depicted in bronze, the whole conflict at Actium
Opened to view. You could see, as decks cleared for battle, all Leucas
Seething with action and churning with waves flashing white against gold-plate.
Caesar Augustus, on this side, is leading Italians to combat,
Backed by the senate and people, the household spirits and great gods,
Stationed high on the aft-deck, his joyful temples erupting
Twin flame-plumes. His paternal star is the badge on his helmet.

...

Such is the tale upon Vulcan's shield, on the gift of his parent.
Ignorant as to its substance, yet awed by the artwork, Aeneas
Shoulders with joy fame's rumours and fate's vows for his descendants.

Aen. 10, Aeneas returning to the Trojan camp:

Since he's already in sight of the Teucrians and his encampment,
He, standing high on the aft-deck, hoists in his left hand, the blazing
Menace of his Sky Shield. On the walls, in reply, the Dardanians
Raise up a cheer to the stars...

But the Rutulian king and the other Ausonian leaders
Find this reaction bizarre – until, looking behind them, they notice
Ships backing onto the beach, the whole sea rolling in with a navy.
There is Aeneas, helmet ablaze, crest vomiting fire,
Golden shield-boss erupting with searing flames of destruction.

Aen. 12: Turnus' death (the last lines of the epic)

... Aeneas, relentless in combat,
Stops; and though rolling his eyes, he holds back his hand from the death-stroke.
Slowly but surely, [Turnus'] words take effect. He's begun hesitating,
But when a harness catches his gaze, high on Turnus's shoulder,
Gleaming with amulet studs, those pleas have no chance of fulfilment:
Pallas's oh so familiar belt, which Turnus had shouldered
After defeating and killing the boy. It's the mark of a hated
Personal foe. As his eyes drink in these mementoes of savage
Pain, these so bitter spoils, Aeneas grows fearsome in anger,
Burning with fire of the Furies. 'You, dressed in the spoils of my dearest,
Think that you could escape *me*? Pallas gives you this death-stroke, yes Pallas
Makes you the sacrifice, spills your criminal blood in atonement!
And, as he speaks, he buries the steel in the heart that confronts him,
Boiling with rage. Cold shivers send Turnus' limbs into spasm.
Life flutters off on a groan, under protest, down among shadows.

Q. Why are Aeneas' weapons the focus of the end of each of these thirds of the epic?

Q. What is the difference between the shield and the sword(s)?

Q. Who / what is presented as the agent of violence in each scene?

Q. How does Virgil seem to feel about the victims of Trojan / Roman violence?

Exercise 3: modern responses

Daniel Mendelsohn: 'Is the *Aeneid* a Celebration of Empire- or a Critique?' *The New Yorker* 8/10/18

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/15/is-the-aeneid-a-celebration-of-empire-or-a-critique>

'What is the *Aeneid* about? It is about a tiny band of outcasts, the survivors of a terrible persecution. It is about how these survivors—clinging to a divine assurance that an unknown and faraway land will become their new home—arduously cross the seas, determined to refashion themselves as a new people, a nation of victors rather than victims. It is about how, when they finally get there, they find their new homeland inhabited by locals who have no intention of making way for them. It is about how this geopolitical tragedy generates new wars, wars that will, in turn, trigger further conflicts: *bella horrida bella*. It is about how such conflicts leave those involved in them morally unrecognizable, even to themselves.'

Q. Find all the words that Mendelsohn uses to describe the Trojans. What does he see as the defining features of the Trojans' status?

'... the biggest problem by far for modern audiences is the poem's subject matter. Today, the themes that made the epic required reading for generations of emperors and generals, and for the clerics and teachers who groomed them—the inevitability of imperial dominance, the responsibilities of authoritarian rule, the importance of duty and self-abnegation in the service of the state—are proving to be an embarrassment. If readers of an earlier era saw the *Aeneid* as an inspiring advertisement for the onward march of Rome's many descendants, from the Holy Roman Empire to the British one, scholars now see in it a tale of nationalistic arrogance whose plot is an all too familiar handbook for repressive violence: once Aeneas and his fellow-Trojans arrive on the coast of Italy, they find that they must fight a series of wars with an indigenous population that, eventually, they brutally subjugate.

The result is that readers today can have a very strange relationship to this classic: it's a work we feel we should embrace but often keep at arm's length. Take that quote in the 9/11 Museum: "No day shall erase you from the memory of time." Whoever came up with the idea of using it was clearly ignorant of the context: these high-minded words are addressed to a pair of nighttime marauders whose bloody ambush of a group of unsuspecting targets suggests that they have far more in common with the 9/11 terrorists than with their victims.'

Q. What are the dangers of reading an ancient epic uncritically?

Q. Why do you think Virgil allows his readers to feel so uncertain about the Trojans?

Q. Can you think of a contemporary story that mirrors the tale of the Trojans?

Classroom Debate

Based on how the Trojans travel across the Mediterranean and what happens when they arrive in Italy, which of the following words do you think best describes them:

1. Refugees?
2. Colonisers?
3. Something else?

Q. Might the Trojans be described differently by other communities within the epic (e.g. the locals in North Africa, or the Greeks in Italy)?

Q. Might they have been described differently again by Augustan readers, who were engaged in aggressive and unapologetic imperial expansion?

Q. Why does the status of the city of Troy matter so much?

Q. What does 'home' mean for the Trojans in the *Aeneid*?

Q. What kinds of acts of city foundation do we see in the epic?

Q. Whose fault is it that the Trojans and the Latins end up fighting?

Q. What kinds of integration between different peoples are attempted in the *Aeneid*?

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'A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.'

<https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>

Colony. 'A body of people living in a new territory but retaining ties with the parent state' (Merriam Webster dictionary)

Colonization. 'The action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area.'

Colonization. 'The action of appropriating a place or domain for one's own use' (Oxford English Living Dictionaries)