3.3: The Aeneid

I am including a few pages here on Virgil's Aeneid because I know that readers who have finished The Iliad and The Odyssey will want to read this third great poem of adventure from antiquity. That last sentence can be a bit misleading, however. It is easy for us to think of these three poems dating from antiquity as being almost contemporaneous, but we must remember that the Aeneid was written, that is, it was composed with pen and ink, between seven and eight hundred years after the other two were finally written down. Eight hundred years is a relatively long time. Imagine if someone today wrote a series of laws to accompany the Magna Carta, which was written in 1215. So many things about our world have changed that it would seem silly to do so. Between about 800 BCE and Virgil’s death in 19 BCE, many things had also changed. Greece was no longer a major power (though it was still a major influence), but Rome was in the process of becoming an empire. Greek ideals had been transformed into Roman ideals. Oral culture had largely been replaced by written culture in many areas. Ideas about heroism had changed. Even ideas about Troy had changed, since the Romans considered themselves descendants of Trojan warriors and could hardly be expected to feel sympathy for the Greeks, whom they were still in the process of displacing. So The Aeneid is a very different poem from its two most famous predecessors, even though in so many ways it is based on those earlier poems.

Before we get to The Aeneid itself, a bit of history is in order. In the third century BCE, a struggle began for control of the Mediterranean. The city that won this struggle would have the opportunity to develop great wealth and power. The contestants were Rome, a city that had developed prominence and power in Italy, and Carthage, a city in that part of North Africa that is now Tunisia. In the three Punic Wars (which took place over a span of one hundred twenty years) Rome soundly defeated Carthage and was launched on its way toward become the empire that we know.

But the road toward empire was not smooth, and the history of Rome in the first century BCE is the history of external conquests and internal power struggles. After the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, civil war broke out, with Marc Antony and Caesar’s nephew Octavius on one side and the assassins, led by Brutus, on the other. After Brutus was defeated, there was further war between Antony and Octavian, until finally Octavian was victorious and established
himself as Augustus, the sole ruler over what had become a vast empire. Under Augustus, relative peace broke out, order was restored to everyday life, and the arts flourished. Among the poets who wrote during the reign of Augustus were Horace, Ovid (who was eventually exiled from Rome for having somehow offended the emperor), and, perhaps the greatest of all, Virgil.

Virgil’s earliest poems are The Eclogues, a series of poems that describe the lives, conversations, and poetry of a group of ostensible shepherds. I hope I am not insulting shepherds when I say that real shepherds have never behaved the way Virgil’s shepherds do (though Virgil helped to set the example that pastoral poetry would follow even into our own time). These shepherds are eloquent, philosophical, and deeply concerned with issues that were vital to the developing empire. Actually, Virgil was using isolated country settings to confront important issues that concerned him throughout his life. The same is true, though even less directly, about his next work, The Georgics. But his greatest achievement was The Aeneid, on which he was still working when he died. In fact, on his deathbed he is reputed to have asked that the manuscript be destroyed, though no one is quite sure why. One theory is that the poem was not finished—we can tell that it is unfinished because there are a number of lines that are metrically incorrect and it is likely that Virgil would have corrected them had he lived. Some readers also think that the poem stops without a conclusion, that it seems to end in the middle of an episode. Supposedly Virgil would have supplied a more appropriate conclusion had he lived. As I will show, I agree with those who think that the poem ends exactly as it is supposed to end. Yet another possibility is that Virgil realized that the poem is not the unalloyed praise of the new empire that Augustus and other Romans expected. Certainly the poem does praise Rome and its emperor, but it also contains pointed warnings about what the empire could become. Virgil could see clearly enough that in the greatness of Rome lay the seeds of its destruction, and he tried to warn his contemporaries so that they could emphasize the good and guard against the flaws that were inherent in Rome. Perhaps on his deathbed he worried about how that approach would be viewed. We simply do not know what he was thinking. We can only be thankful that his wishes were not carried out and the poem survived.

Until relatively recently, when Latin ceased to be a required language for virtually anyone who claimed to be educated, The Aeneid was one of the most extensively read and influential poems in history. Even if students did not love it, they read it. The Latin is relatively easy and the story is good. In the Middle Ages, the poem was given Christian readings (though Virgil had died in 19 BCE). At times it was even a custom that when a person had a problem or an important decision to make, he (it was usually a he) would open The Aeneid at random and point to a line at random and then interpret that line as an answer to the problem. In the early fourteenth century, Dante used Virgil as his guide through Hell and most of Purgatory in The Divine Comedy. Virgil continued to influence authors of epics (or mock epics or near epics) well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Henry Fielding’s novel Amelia is heavily indebted to The Aeneid, as are scenes from numerous other works. There are also operas based on the poem, like Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas and Berlioz’ Les Troyens.

Why has this poem exercised such power for so long? As I already mentioned, it tells a good story, full of romance, adventure, and memorable scenes and characters. It also raises a number of questions that have continued to engage people’s minds over the two thousand years since it was written. Virgil may have used The Iliad and The Odyssey, but he gave them his own stamp. Even in the poem’s first words, Virgil announces his debt to Homer: “Arma virumque cano,” I sing of arms and of a man (in Allen Mandelbaum’s translation). The first six of the poem’s twelve books are about Aeneas and his adventures as he sets out from Troy and ultimately arrives in Italy. In this section of the poem he is like Odysseus, even to the extent of repeating several of Odysseus’ adventures. In this section as well Virgil focuses on Aeneas as “a man,” referring back to the opening line of The Odyssey. In the second half of the poem, in which we
see Aeneas’ struggle to establish himself in Italy, we focus more on the “arms,” and this section of the poem recalls *The Iliad*. Thus Virgil has combined these two great poems to create his own masterpiece, but he has done so in order to explore in his own terms what it means to be a Roman, what it means to be Aeneas, what it means to be a human being.

*The Aeneid*, like *The Odyssey*, begins in the middle of the action, tells a bit of the story, and then goes back to the beginning of the story and continues to the end. After a brief introduction, we see Aeneas and his men caught in a storm at sea and shipwrecked at Carthage, where Aeneas meets Dido, tells her his story, falls in love with her, and then leaves (a point to which we will return). He visits the Underworld and then proceeds to Italy, where he becomes involved in a war to establish his right to stay there. That is the story. We have now to see what Virgil did with it.

From the very beginning, the narrator tells us that Aeneas is a remarkably good man who is being tormented by Juno. Throughout the poem, Juno, queen of the gods and goddess of marriage, stands for the irrational, the illogical, those aspects of the world that disrupt life without seeming to make any kind of sense. Her husband Jove (or Jupiter) is her opposite, but, even though he is all-powerful, he often lets her have her own way. The other important deity in the poem is Venus, goddess of love, mother of Aeneas, and of special importance to Rome. (Roma, the Latin name of Rome, spelled backwards is Amor, the Latin for love!) Unfortunately for Aeneas, Venus and Juno are deadly enemies, to the extent that goddesses can be deadly enemies. At any rate, they do not like each other. This enmity between the goddess of marriage and the goddess of love does tell us something about how the ancients regarded love and marriage: as we see in the poem, love and marriage are in no way connected.

Exactly why does Juno hate Aeneas? As we learn at the beginning of the poem, Juno feels a special affection for Carthage, and she knows that Aeneas is destined to establish Rome, which will overcome and displace Carthage. From a Roman point of view, her irrationality appears in two ways here: she irrationally favors Carthage over Rome and she irrationally believes that she can counter fate. This mixture of motives is itself proof that Juno’s hatred is basically irrational, but of course Aeneas’ innocence does nothing to ease his suffering, of which there is plenty. Thus *The Aeneid*, though it is about the triumph of Aeneas and of Rome, is ultimately a very sad work. As he moves toward his military triumph, Aeneas is forced to abandon everything that is important to him—love, family, friends, repose. He becomes increasingly isolated and tied to his sense of duty, and he becomes less rounded, more one-dimensional.

Throughout the poem, Aeneas is referred to as “pius Aeneas.” The Latin “pius” means more than we mean when we say “pious.” It does mean godfearing, but it also means something like religiously and morally upstanding. As the story progresses, Aeneas realizes that he has duties to carry out and those duties are more important than his own happiness. Those duties are presented most poignantly in two separate episodes. The first occurs in Aeneas’ description of the fall of Troy. Having been surprised by the ruse of the Trojan horse, the Trojans are being routed by the Greek forces. In the chaos created by the fire, fighting, and panic, Aeneas, who knows that the battle has been lost, becomes separated from his wife Creusa. When he tries to find her, he finds only her ghost, who briefly predicts his future and disappears. And when Aeneas finally does escape from Troy, he does so leading his young son by the hand and carrying his aged father on his back. In this sequence, we see first the beginning of the process by which Aeneas is gradually cut off from Troy and from family affection. There is little from his past in Troy that he can take with him into this future. This point is emphasized by the image of him with his father and his son. He bears his father, symbol of the past, on his back, and leads his son, symbol of the future, by the hand. In a sense, he offers simply a connection between the past, Troy, and the future, Rome, and in that role he must continually become depersonalized, especially after the death of his father, when he himself becomes the symbol of both the past and the present. Furthermore, his
love for his wife, whom he seeks frantically in the falling city, shows him to be a passionate man who cares deeply for those around him, and his sorrow at losing her is quite moving.

We can see this point being carried further in the most famous episode of the poem, the story of Dido and Aeneas in Book IV. At first glance, Dido and Aeneas would seem to be a nearly perfect couple. Both are powerful leaders, both have been exiled from their native lands, both have been widowed. Moreover, they like each other. Unfortunately, there are a number of obstacles in their way, primarily fate—Dido is fated to found Carthage and Aeneas to found Rome. Juno and Venus, patron goddesses of those cities, try to outmaneuver each other in defense of their cities, and Dido and Aeneas are their victims. These two tragic figures are allowed to fall in love because Juno hopes to keep Aeneas in Carthage, away from Rome, but the status of their love is highly ambiguous. When they go out hunting, they are trapped in a cave during a thunderstorm. There they consummate their love. Such love is the realm of Venus. The problem that will arise is whether this lovemaking constitutes an actual marriage, the realm of Juno. Dido thinks it does, but the narrator implies that she thinks so only in order to justify the lovemaking. Clearly Virgil has made this situation intentionally ambiguous: Dido and Aeneas are in love, but Dido considers them married and Aeneas does not. I can hear readers, at least some of them, muttering, “How typical!” but Aeneas is not simply ignoring his responsibility or commitment. He actually loves Dido and he sees in Carthage a chance to put his life back together. Consequently, when Jove sends Mercury to tell him that he must leave Carthage, that he has a duty to fulfill in founding Rome, he is reluctant to go, though he eventually does. But he leaves not on a whim, not because he lacks commitment to Dido. He leaves because the gods order him to. If Aeneas errs in this situation, he does so only in not telling Dido that he must leave until she confronts him, at which point he is honest with her, expressing his view that they are not married and telling her that he is leaving against his will.

Opinions about Aeneas' behavior at this point have varied considerably over the centuries. Many readers have taken Dido’s part and been highly critical of Aeneas. (See Dido’s letter to Aeneas in Ovid’s Heroides for an example.) For these readers, Aeneas is the epitome of the unfaithful lover, the seducer who abandons his helpless lover. Other readers have accepted Aeneas’ explanation that he is powerless, since he must follow the orders of the gods. I side with the latter argument, not because Aeneas’ behavior is admirable but because he does it so clearly against his own wishes. Having lost his beloved wife, his city, his father, and many of his companions, Aeneas would like nothing better than to settle down with Dido, to live in peace. Of course, as a result of their love, work on building Carthage has stopped, so their love is not an unalloyed blessing for either side. Aeneas, however, must fulfill his destiny, regardless of how painful that destiny may be. His duty to Rome must take precedence over everything else in his life.

Virgil is here talking about what it means to be a Roman: it means responsibility rather than privilege, self-sacrifice rather than self-aggrandizement. Personal happiness cannot be as important as the welfare of the empire. Or can it? For Virgil is not merely declaring that Romans must sacrifice all for the empire. Perhaps he is also questioning whether that is the case. Not only must Aeneas abandon Dido, but he must also, when he arrives in Italy, marry Lavinia, who may, for all we know, be a delightful young woman but who is presented in the poem as virtually without a personality. Aeneas' marriage will be based not on passion but on the needs of Rome.

This picture of what it means to be a Roman is ambivalent, as, I suspect, Virgil meant it to be. On the one hand it demonstrates the importance of the empire and the virtue of duty to the empire. Being responsible for an empire, being a Roman, requires a particular kind of selflessness. On the other hand, that duty to the empire hurts people: in this situation it hurts Dido, it hurts Aeneas, and in the course of the poem it hurts numerous other characters. What is the solution? Virgil offers no solution, since one purpose of literature is to raise questions at least as much as it is to offer
answers. Clearly the empire is vitally important to Virgil. He sees it as a means of civilizing the world by bringing law and order. In Book VI, when Aeneas visits the Underworld, his father shows him a vision of Rome's future. Aeneas sees Augustus, the emperor who will restore the golden age to Rome. A golden age—this is the promise of Rome. But are people willing, and should they be willing, to pay the price for that promise? After all, Aeneas sacrifices almost everything and in return receives only the prediction of Roman glory. As a character, as an individual human being, he gradually disappears from the poem. If that is what Rome demands, it is a heavy price, but not to pay it is to go against the gods. It is to dally with Dido while neither city is being built.

And what are Aeneas’ alternatives? He could, of course, die, as so many Trojans did, but death is hardly a solution. Or he could do what Helenus and Andromache do, in one of the saddest episodes of the poem. As Aeneas wanders around the Mediterranean looking for the land that has been promised him, he finds a city being ruled by Helenus, a son of Priam, and Andromache, the widow of Hektor. This city is a replica of Troy, with its tower, its gates, and its river. Troy may have been destroyed, but here it has been recreated, although this re-creation differs significantly from its original in being much smaller and in having a little stream instead of a great river. At first Aeneas is happy to see this little Troy. Being there is like being home again. But it is not the same as being home: this Troy is a miniature. It mimes rather than replaces the real city. Helenus and Andromache are stuck in the past. So tied are they to Troy that they are willing to dwell in this poor reproduction of Troy. Aeneas knows that he cannot go home again, that Troy is gone forever, and that he must move not in the direction of the past but of the future, even if that future is uncertain and frightening. He carried his father on his back as a burden, but he led his son by the hand into the future.

So Aeneas has no other choice. He has his duty, which has been dictated to him by the gods and by fate, and he must fulfill that duty without hesitation or complaint. It is for this reason that as the poem progresses, Aeneas becomes so much less human. He represents the philosophy of Stoicism, or that aspect of it that called on human beings to carry out their duties in the face of adversities without showing human passions. Stoicism is in many ways an admirable doctrine, but, as the end of The Aeneid shows, it is not always a doctrine that human beings can follow. Whether they should try is another question altogether.

I should note that the second half of The Aeneid, the half that is more like The Iliad, is not as well known as the first half. The first half contains more separate adventures, and though Aeneas may lack Odysseus’ panache as he experiences or recalls those adventures, the stories themselves are gripping and moving. In the second half of the poem, however, we have the fight for Italy and all the complications that accompany it. That aspect of the story is not so vital to modern readers, though the issues that Virgil confronts in the second half are vital and often relate to issues that were raised in the first six books. I will not summarize the plot except to say that many of Aeneas’ troubles continue to be the result of Juno’s enmity, which has become even stronger (if that is possible) since the death of Dido. One of Juno’s main tools for trying to thwart Aeneas is Turnus, who was the king of the Rutulians, one of the peoples who lived in Italy, and who was originally supposed to marry Lavinia. Since Aeneas is destined to rule Italy and wed Lavinia, we might be able to understand why Turnus is more than a little upset at this arrival and opposes him as much as he can, but, though Turnus is clearly the enemy in the poem, he is not presented as a thoroughly villainous person. He is, if one word can be used to describe him, outdated. His notions of heroism are old-fashioned, right out of The Iliad perhaps. He is not prepared to meet the future, which is represented by the arrival of Aeneas, and he launches a suicidal war in a fruitless attempt to preserve the values of the past. Those values, Virgil implies, may once have been admirable, but the future belongs to Rome, with its potential for good (and with its potential for abusing its power as well).

This opposition is evident throughout the poem’s last six books, but it is especially obvious in Book XII. In that book both
Turnus and Aeneas, under the influence of war, become vicious killers. Turnus is compared to a bull preparing to fight, and Aeneas becomes associated with brutal slaughter and violence (just as Rome would be). Finally, as Aeneas and Turnus face each other in the poem’s climactic battle, Jove and Juno settle the heavenly aspect of the conflict. Juno at long last recognizes that Aeneas must triumph, and she asks only that the Latin language and certain native customs be preserved. Jove grants her wishes—Rome will not be simply a re-established Troy but it will combine the finest qualities of the Trojans and the native Latins—and Juno withdraws her opposition. At this point, Turnus is doomed to lose, even though the final battle has become unnecessary. The only significant question remaining is what form his loss will take, and the answer to that question brings the poem to its conclusion in a cloud of uncertainty.

As the battle progresses, Aeneas brings Turnus to his knees with a cast of his spear. At this point, everyone knows that the battle is essentially over, and Turnus appeals to Aeneas for mercy, concluding his moving speech with a plea that Aeneas will abandon hatred. In the face of this plea, Aeneas hesitates. Why should he kill Turnus, who has admitted defeat? Aeneas has been victorious and it would make political sense to spare Turnus, to show that he can be as merciful in victory as he can be fierce in battle; but then, as he is on the verge of agreeing, he sees the belt that Turnus is wearing, the belt that Turnus took after his earlier victory over the young warrior Pallas, who was dear to Aeneas. Aeneas responds wrathfully, then stabs Turnus in the chest, and the poem ends with Turnus’ soul hastening to the Underworld.

That’s it. There is no more. No wonder that people think the poem is unfinished. What kind of a conclusion is that? In fact it is a very clever conclusion, for it ends the poem by posing some of the key problems that faced Rome in Virgil’s time. Aeneas’ response to Turnus is clearly not a Stoic response. Although it might seem reasonable for him to kill Turnus, he makes his decision not on the basis of reason but out of passion. Even “pius Aeneas,” the great forefather and exemplar of Rome, cannot always act according to the dictates of Stoicism. What does that conclusion say about those lesser mortals who were Virgil’s contemporaries? If even Aeneas is overcome by his ferocity and his passions, how well will the Romans of the empire behave with the most powerful army in the world? Will they be the masters of themselves and of their power or will they lose themselves and become the slaves of their own might? I frame these points as questions because Virgil, by ending the poem as he does, raises the questions. We must account for Aeneas’ behavior not simply because we have to know about Aeneas but because we have to know about what Aeneas represents, the ideals of Rome. If Aeneas fails, what are the prospects for Rome?

These questions have been inherent in the poem from the beginning. For instance, when Neptune calms the seas after the storm that opens Book I, Virgil compares him to a righteous man who can control the passions of a rebellious, rock-throwing mob. The very oddness of that comparison calls our attention to it, to the use of reason to overcome passion, and to the existence of rebellious mobs in Virgil’s Rome. Throughout the poem Virgil draws our attention to such problems, and we know from the history of the Roman Empire that Virgil saw clearly into both the virtues and the potential failings of that empire. We should hardly be surprised that medieval readers thought of him as a prophet.

There is one more episode that I would like to comment on briefly, Aeneas’ voyage to the Underworld in Book VI. At this point in the poem, Aeneas visits the Underworld so he can receive further instructions from his father, and Virgil is clearly imitating Odysseus’ visit to the Underworld in The Odyssey. But Aeneas’ visit is quite different from Odysseus’. Aside from the more highly developed picture of an Underworld that Virgil presents, there is another significant difference. Odysseus, on his visit, learns much about himself—about his role in his mother’s death, about his ultimate fate, and about his way home to domestic bliss. Aeneas learns about the doctrine of reincarnation and is told about the future history of Rome. All that is important here is the future of Rome, and the only indication that Aeneas has any
important individuality comes when he sees the ghosts of the Greek warriors, who flee before him, and when he sees the ghost of Dido, who rejects his attempts at explanation and also flees from him. Otherwise his individuality is entirely subordinated to the cause of Rome.

Another interesting aspect of Book VI is the way it encapsulates the whole poem. It unites the human and the superhuman, and it even includes one character, the Sibyl, who entered the Roman Catholic liturgy in the hymn called the “Dies Irae.” Book VI, like the poem as a whole, focuses on Aeneas’ duty and on his fate. It proclaims the future of Rome in glorious terms, and it tempers that glory by culminating in a description of the sadness of human life. This mixture of glory and melancholy typifies The Aeneid. In Book VI, Aeneas’ father Anchises describes the great heroes of Roman history—Romulus, Numa, Caesar, Augustus (a bit of flattery there)—but then Aeneas notices one despondent spirit and Anchises explains that this is the ghost of Marcellus, Augustus’ nephew, who, despite his many natural gifts and the promise he holds for Rome, is destined to die young. As always in The Aeneid, the promise of Roman glory is suffused with an air of sadness, of promises that cannot be fulfilled.

And just as Book XII ends on a puzzling note, so does Book VI. When Aeneas leaves the Underworld, he finds two gates. One is made of horn, and through “true Shades” can enter the world. The other is made of polished ivory, and through that gate false dreams enter the world. When Aeneas leaves the Underworld, his father sends him through the ivory gate, the gate of false dreams. Why? Is Virgil casting doubt on the veracity of his vision of Roman history? No one knows for sure why Virgil took this step, though interpretations abound, but the concluding passage about Marcellus and the exit through the gate of false dreams certainly subdue the chauvinism of the rest of the book. Like the end of Book XII, the end of Book VI is an undiluted warning to Virgil’s contemporaries. And like so much in this poem, it brings in that eternal note of sadness, of potential failure, that is such an integral part of the poem.

If Virgil’s Aeneid contained only praise for Rome and the glorification of Aeneas, it would be a far lesser poem. It was part of Virgil’s genius that he could write so honestly about the city he loved. We can only be grateful that his dying wish to have his poem destroyed was not followed.

THE MIDDLE AGES

Although no works from the Middle Ages are covered in this volume, readers can find similar chapters on a number of medieval works in my earlier book Reading the Middle Ages (Jefferson, NC.: McFarland, 2003).