

AN INTRODUCTION TO VERGIL

VERGIL'S INFLUENCE

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring*, George Lucas' *Star Wars* series, and other 20th-century adventure stories reveal a debt to Vergil in their heroic journeys and cosmic scale. Vergil's influence is also seen in Robert Frost's poem written for the inauguration of John F. Kennedy. In the 14th century the Florentine Dante consciously expressed his debt to Vergil in the creation of his masterpiece the *Divine Comedy* by making Vergil his guide through hell. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* also contains many Vergilian characteristics. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, and other later Roman epics owe much of their language and structure to Vergil's epic. From the time it was written in the first century before Christ until today, Vergil's *Aeneid* has maintained a continuing influence upon other authors and on Western and world cultures.

But Vergil's influence has been felt not only by poets and authors but also by the many people who have read his epic for the past two thousand years. Students who read the *Aeneid* in school today are following in the footsteps of ancient Roman students who also studied the epic. The appeal of Vergil to such readers lies in the good adventure story well-told, the human hero Aeneas who struggles to reach his goal, and the timeless themes of fate, destiny, spurned love, and personal flaws.

As Rose Williams, author of the *Labors of Aeneas*, has written, "Vergil's *Aeneid* forms a priceless part of the cultural heritage of Western civilization. Vergil's flowing, spirited *Aeneid* remains one of the greatest literary works of all time. This multi-dimensional tapestry of Vergil's work has grandeur, tragedy, beauty, and strength. . . Vergil's poetry expresses in powerful and beautiful language the humanity that we share with *Aeneas*."

Many lines of the *Aeneid* have become proverbial. Here are a few examples:

Love

Quis fallere possit amantem? (IV, 296) Who can deceive a lover?

Agnōscō veteris vestīgia flammae. (IV, 23) I recognize the signs of an old flame.

Women

Dux fēmina factī. (I, 364) A woman was the leader of the deed.

The Gods and Rome

Tantaene animīs caelestibus irae? (I, 11) Do divine minds have such great angers?

Tantae mōlis erat Rōmānam condere gentem. (I, 33) So huge a task was it to found the Roman state.

Ō passi graviōra, dabit deus hīs quoque finem (I, 99) O you having suffered more grievous things, god will give an end to these also.

War

Timeō Danaōs et dōna ferentīs. (II, 48) I fear the Greeks even bearing gifts.

Ūna salūs victīs nūllam spērāre salūtem. (II, 354) The one refuge for the conquered is to hope for no refuge.

Human Suffering and Endurance

Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvābit. (I, 202) Perhaps it will be pleasing to remember even these things some day.

Sunt lacrimae rerum. (I, 462) These are the tears of things.

Possunt, quia posse videntur. (V, 231) They are able because they seem to be able.

Facilis dēscēnsus Avernō. (VI, 126) The descent to hell is easy.

Audentīs Fortūna iuvat. (X, 284) Fortune helps the daring.

The themes expressed in these quotations reflect both the subject matter and the philosophy of the *Aeneid*, in which Vergil confronts his readers with the power of love, the sufferings of war, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of hardship. How many of these quotations reflect your own experiences?

Since many English translations of the *Aeneid* are available, why read the epic in Latin? To answer this question, let's compare just one line of the *Aeneid* in five translations:

Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvābit. (I, 203)

Perhaps even these things some day it will be pleasing to remember. (a literal translation of the line)

One day—who knows? —even these will be grand things to look back on. (Lewis, 1952)

One day you may look back on these memories as pleasant memories. (Dickinson, 1961)

Some day these memories, too, will bring a smile. (Copley, 1965)

Some day, perhaps, remembering even this will be a pleasure. (Fitzgerald, 1981)

One reason to read the *Aeneid* in Latin is that no single translation captures the full meaning of Vergil's original. In this line Vergil emphasizes the uncertainty of what the future may bring by placing *forsan* (perhaps) as the first word in the line. Lewis's and Dickinson's translations place the emphasis instead on "One day" and likewise Copley and Fitzgerald emphasize "Some day." The uncertainty alluded to in "perhaps" is expressed by the more colloquial "who knows?" in Lewis's translation and by the word "may" in Dickinson's line. Copley's translation leaves out this word. Fitzgerald does use the word "perhaps" but places it after "Some day," and thereby reduces its impact.

By making the Latin word *iuvābit* the last word in the line, Vergil also stresses the idea that remembering these troubles will be pleasurable in the future. The idea of this pleasure is lost in Lewis' translation. Dickinson uses the word "pleasant" to convey this idea but stresses instead "memories." Fitzgerald uses the word "pleasure," places it last in the line of poetry, and thus comes closest to Vergil's meaning. Copley, like Vergil, stresses the idea of pleasure in his line but translates *iuvābit* as "bring a smile," which is a much more colloquial phrase, and thus the grandeur of Vergil's line is lost.

There are also other reasons to read the *Aeneid* in Latin. No translation can produce the beauty of the sound and rhythm of Vergil's Latin. The flow of the dactylic hexameter meter can only be hinted at in English. Nuances, allusions, word play, and figures of speech are usually lost in translation. In sum, by reading Vergil's *Aeneid* in Latin, the reader gains a greater depth of understanding what Rome's greatest poet wrote.

VERGIL'S LIFE

Vergil (Publius Vergilius Maro) was born on October 15, 70 BC near the Italian town of Mantua. Thus, like many other Latin authors, he was not Roman but Italian. Many of the details of the poet's life are uncertain. The ancient biographical tradition suggests that his father was rich enough to give his son an excellent education, first in Cremona and Milan and then in Rome. In the capital Vergil probably studied rhetoric and early Roman literature, including the works of the early 2nd-century BC Latin poet Ennius. While in Rome he also met the poet Catullus (c. 97–57 BC). Vergil appeared only once as a lawyer in a legal trial before he abandoned the law and moved to Naples, where he studied philosophy under the Epicurean Siro.

The tumultuous years following the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC were difficult ones for all Romans, and Vergil was no exception. His father probably lost his property in the land confiscated for war veterans in 41 BC (The tradition that this property was later restored to the poet is unlikely.)

Vergil himself refers to the loss of this farm in his first major book of poems, the short pastoral poems called *Eclogues*, published in 37 BC. During this period, Vergil gained the attention of the wealthy Maecenas who became the poet's patron and introduced him to his powerful friend Octavian, later the emperor Augustus. Vergil, in turn, introduced his good friend, the poet Horace (65–8 BC), to Maecenas and Octavian. The trip to Brundisium by Vergil, Horace, and Maecenas, celebrated in Horace's Satire I.5, probably took place in 37 BC.

The *Eclogues* were followed by the longer *Georgics*, usually described as didactic farming poems, published in 30 BC. However, there is little practical advice in the *Georgics*, which are really a celebration of the joys of the rural life. In these poems, dedicated to Maecenas, Vergil tells the sad story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

After completing the *Eclogues*, Vergil may have taken a trip to Greece before beginning work on his masterpiece, the *Aeneid*, on which he worked for the rest of his life. In 19 BC Vergil began a tour of Greece and Asia, but, while in Athens, the poet was persuaded by the emperor Augustus to return to Italy with him. Vergil fell ill on the return voyage and died on September 20, 19 BC in the Italian city of Brundisium. He was buried in Naples in a tomb with the following inscription, which he himself is said to have composed on his deathbed:

Mantua mē genuit, Calabrī rapuēre, tenet nunc
Parthenopē; cecinī pascua rūra ducēs.

Mantua bore me, the Calabrian verses [of Ennius] seized me, and now
Naples holds me; I sang of shepherds, fields, leaders.

Vergil never married and left instructions that if the *Aeneid* remained unfinished at his death, the epic should be burned. Augustus did not allow the poet's wishes to be carried out.

VERGIL'S TIMES

Although the events described in Vergil's *Aeneid* take place in the distant, mythic times of the Trojan War and its aftermath, Vergil expected his audience to interpret these events through Roman eyes and through contemporary events. The hero of Vergil's epic, the Trojan Aeneas, is destined to found a city in Italy from which the Roman people will descend. The success of Aeneas means the success of Rome. Aeneas' son Ascanius, also known as Ilus or Iulus, is seen as the founder of the famous Julius gens ("clan"), which includes Julius Caesar and his adopted son the emperor Augustus. Thus, the Julians could claim descent from the goddess Venus, Aeneas' mother. (See Aeneas' Family Tree on p. xxi)

The events described in the *Aeneid*, then, look ahead to later events in the history of Rome, including the founding of the city by Romulus, the city's prolonged rivalry with Dido's city of Carthage in the Punic Wars (264–146 BC), and events during the Civil Wars that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, including the naval battle of Actium (31 BC) in which the forces of Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra. The Dido depicted in the *Aeneid* is, in fact, not only the queen of Carthage, Rome's arch enemy. She also prefigures the dangerous Egyptian queen Cleopatra, whom Vergil and his contemporaries feared.

VERGIL'S SOURCES

In addition to Roman history and contemporary events, Vergil was influenced by many earlier Latin and Greek authors. The depiction of Medea in Apollonius of Rhodes' third-century BC epic *Argonautica* is probably a source for the Vergilian Dido. The influence of Greek tragedy, especially dramas like Euripides' *Medea*, can also be seen in the *Aeneid*. The tragedies and epic (now lost) of the early 2nd-century BC Latin poet Ennius probably played a similar role in Vergil's poetic development. The poet owes his greatest debt, however, to the Greek epic poet Homer. The first half of the *Aeneid*, which

deals with the wanderings of Aeneas from the time he leaves Troy until he arrives in Italy, resembles Homer's *Odyssey* with its focus on the wanderings of Odysseus after the Trojan War. The last half of the *Aeneid*, with accounts of the many battles fought by Aeneas and his men to found a home in Latium, resembles the *Iliad*. Although the *Aeneid* uses Homer's poems as a model, the epic is thoroughly Roman in thought, mood, and message. Such imitation was common in the past. Such copying was not considered plagiarism but a compliment to the model.

EPIC

The *Aeneid* is an epic, a long narrative poem centered around a hero. Vergil includes in his epic many of the following characteristics found in earlier classical epics, especially the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*:

In medias res, i.e., beginning in the middle of the story. Vergil begins the *Aeneid* not at the beginning of the story, i.e., in the Trojan War, but with a storm which drives Aeneas' fleet onto the coast of Africa, near Carthage.

Flashback. If the story begins *in medias res*, then the poet must, at some point, tell the story up to that point. Vergil does this in *Aeneid* II–III, in which Aeneas tells Dido and her court everything that happened to him from the fall of Troy until his arrival in Carthage.

Invocation. A prayer to the Muse, the goddess of inspiration. When the poet prays for poetic inspiration, he usually summarizes the plot of the epic. Invocations can also appear at important points in the plot, such as Aeneas' entry into the Underworld in Book VI.

Catalogues or lists, such as the list of heroes and historical figures Aeneas meets in *Aeneid* VI.

Divine machinery or the involvement of the gods in the plot. The roles of the goddesses Venus and Juno are particularly important in the *Aeneid*.

Epithets or descriptive phrases used with the name of a hero, place, etc.; e.g. *pious Aenēās* ("loyal Aeneas") and *miserrima Dīdō* ("very unhappy Dido").

Similes or comparisons. Some of these are brief while others are longer and take on a life of their own.

Descent into the underworld. In *Aeneid* VI Aeneas descends into the Underworld to see the ghost of his dead father Anchises. His father will show Aeneas the future city of Rome and reveal a moral code sanctioned by the gods.

Dactylic Hexameter. This meter used by Homer and other Greek poets was introduced to Latin by the poet Ennius and became the standard meter for Roman epic poets. The meter is based on six feet (hexameter) consisting of dactyls (– ∪ ∪) or spondees (– –). While meter is not discussed in this transitional reader, it is important to be aware from the beginning that Vergil is using this complex rhythm in his poetry.

Many important cultural practices of the ancient world also appear in the *Aeneid*:

Speech-making. Characters in the *Aeneid* tend to speak longer and more formally than we might expect them to do today.

Elaborate descriptions. Detailed descriptions of people and things. The more important the object, the longer the description, like the extended description of Aeneas' new armor in *Aeneid* VIII.

Xenia or the Law of Hospitality, which encourages Dido to welcome Aeneas and the Trojans into her kingdom.

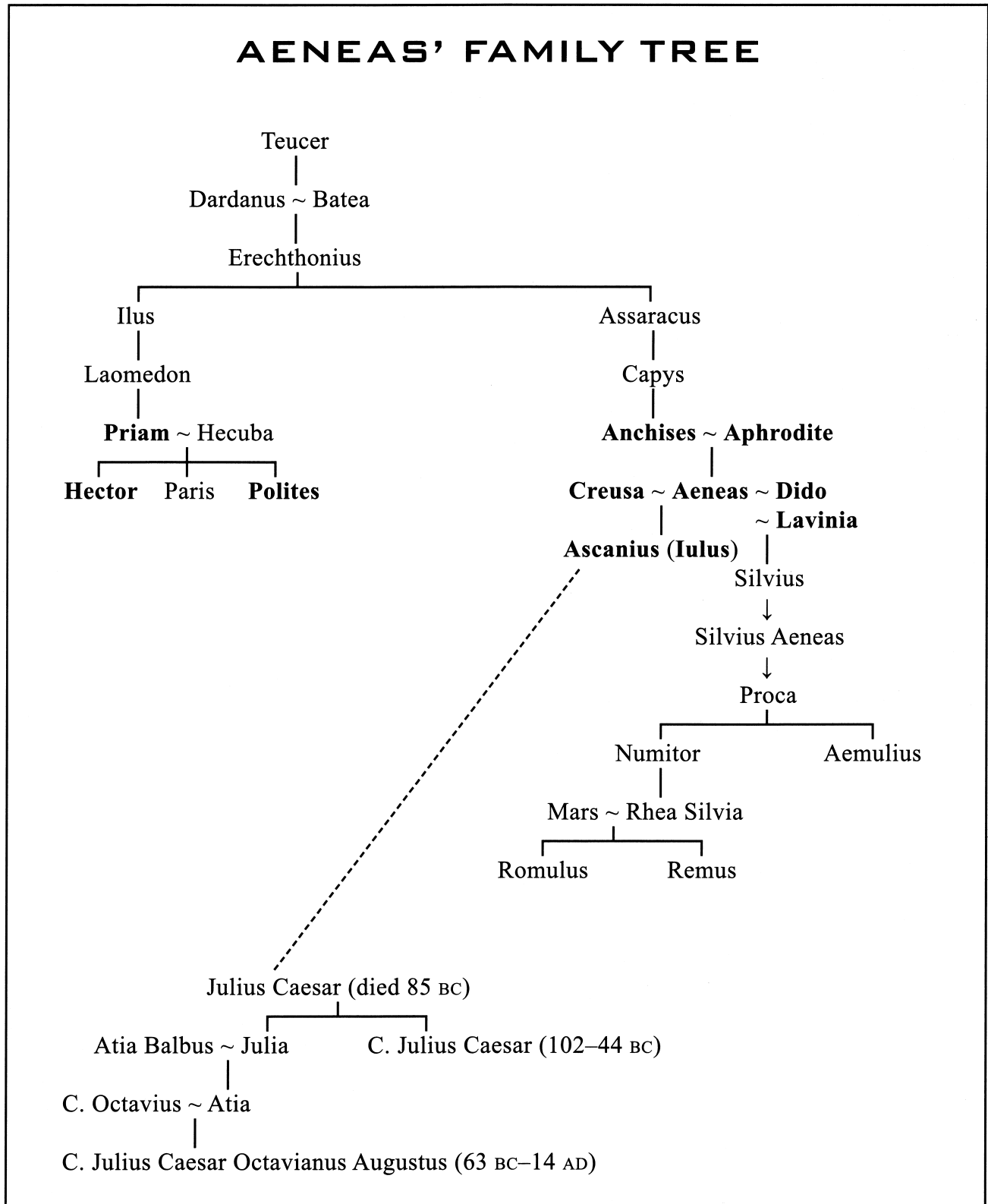


Fig. 1.
Aeneas' Family Tree.

Notes: The names in bold are mentioned in the passages read in this book.
The dashed line indicates the traditional descent of the Julian gens from Aeneas' son Iulus.

Feasting and banqueting, such as the meal Dido serves to Aeneas and his men at the end of *Aeneid* I.

Entertainment, e.g., the minstrel and his song. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas assumes this role as he tells Dido and her court about his adventures in Books II–V.

Games, especially funeral games, such as the ones Aeneas holds for his dead father Anchises in *Aeneid* V.

Religious practices and beliefs, including prayers, animal sacrifices, augury, omens, oracles, auspices, and magic.

THE GODS

You can expect the following gods and goddesses to be mentioned or play important roles in the *Aeneid*:

Apollō, Apollinis m. Apollo, god of prophecy and music

Cerēs, Cereris f. Ceres, goddess of grain

Cupīdō, Cupidinis m. Cupid, also known as **Amor, Amōris** m. god of love

Diāna, Diānae f. Diana, goddess of the hunt

Īris, Īr(id)is f. Iris, goddess of the rainbow

Iūnō, Iūnōnis f. Juno, queen of the gods

Iuppiter, Iovis m. Jupiter, king of the gods

Mercurius, Mercur(i)ī m. Mercury, the messenger god

Mīnerva, Mīnervae f. Minerva, goddess of wisdom

Neptūnus, Neptūnī m. Neptune, god of the sea

Plūto, Plūtōnis m. Pluto, god of the Underworld

Proserpina, Proserpinae f. Proserpina, goddess of the Underworld

Venus, Veneris f. Venus, goddess of love

Volcānus, Volcānī m. Vulcan, god of fire

A PLOT SUMMARY OF THE AENEID

The *Aeneid* is divided into twelve books. These “books” were not bound volumes as we understand them today, but rolls of papyrus. Each book of the *Aeneid* contains between 705 and 952 lines of poetry.

The poet begins with an invocation, i.e., with a prayer to the gods for inspiration. He then moves immediately into the middle of the story (*in medias res*). Aeneas and his men have already left Troy and have had many adventures on the way to Italy. Vergil uses flashback in Books II–III to enable Aeneas to retell the story of the fall of Troy and his subsequent adventures. In the remaining books (IV–XII) Vergil returns to the present and takes the hero from his ill-fated love affair with Dido, Queen of Carthage (Book IV), to the funeral games for his dead father Anchises (Book V), to the Underworld to visit the ghost of Anchises (Book VI), and to Aeneas’ efforts to establish himself in his new home in Latium (Books VII–XII).

Here is a brief summary of the three books (Books I, II, and IV) represented in this reader.

BOOK I

At the request of the goddess Juno, Aeolus, the god of the winds, sends a fierce storm which scatters Aeneas' fleet and drives him to an unknown land. Upon landing, Aeneas meets his mother Venus in disguise and learns that he is on the shore of Carthage, ruled by Queen Dido. The queen welcomes Aeneas and his men to the city and agrees to help them repair the damage from the storm. For their own reasons Juno and Venus agree to have Dido fall in love with Aeneas. For this purpose Cupid, disguised as Aeneas' son Ascanius, is sent down to Carthage. Dido's fatal passion for Aeneas begins at a banquet in honor of the Trojans, and the book closes with the queen's request that Aeneas tell the story of the fall of Troy and his own subsequent adventures.

BOOK II

In a flashback Aeneas narrates to Dido and her court the story of the fall of Troy and his escape from the burning city. Aeneas describes how the Greeks feign departure from Troy and leave behind a wooden horse filled with troops. A Greek spy named Sinon persuades the Trojans to take the fatal horse into the city. The Trojan priest Laocoon warns the Trojans not to do this and is horribly killed along with his sons by serpents sent from the sea. The capture and destruction of the city follows. Aeneas witnesses the death of Polites, son of King Priam of Troy, and then the death of the king himself. Then the hero returns home to protect his own family. He flees the city with his father Anchises on his shoulders and his son Ascanius (Iulus) at his side.

BOOK IV

Aeneas and Dido spend weeks enjoying each other's company. Dido, at least, assumes that their relationship is permanent, and Aeneas spends his time assisting in the building of Carthage. Eventually Jupiter sends his son Mercury down to remind Aeneas of his destiny to settle in Italy, and the hero reluctantly begins secret preparations for departure. Dido senses his plans but cannot change Aeneas' mind. After Aeneas leaves Carthage, the queen commits suicide on a funeral pyre piled high with all the mementos of her relationship with Aeneas.

SOME TRANSLATIONS OF THE AENEID

Before you read the *Aeneid* in Latin, it might be helpful to read it in English. Note that the poet's name is sometimes spelled "Virgil" instead of "Vergil." Many good translations are available. Here are some of them:

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SOME WORKS FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

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