

The Muses' Playground 5

Approaching Vergil

Between the *Annales* and the *Aeneid*

- Several epics written on Roman historical topics in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC
- Only (about) three found noteworthy by later poets and literary critics (e.g. Quintilian)
 - Cicero *De Consulato Suo / On His Consulship*
 - Cf. the praise speech element of Greek epic
 - Lucretius *De Rerum Natura / On the Nature of the Universe*
 - Diversity of the genre, cf. Hesiod
 - Interacts explicitly with Homeric and Ennian tradition – but philosophy, not battles and armies, is the highest topic to be sought
 - This latter attitude shows that epic is by now firmly established as the ‘highest’ genre
 - Catullus: the epyllion of Cat. 64

Rising expectations

- **On the appropriation of Greek forms by Roman poets**

- *Imitatio* and *aemulatio*
- E.g. Catullus, Horace *Odes*

- **On poetic ambition**

In the first place, I will except myself out of the number of those I would allow to be poets: for one must not call it sufficient to tag a verse: nor if any person, like me, writes in a style bordering on conversation, must you esteem him to be a poet. To him who has genius, who has a soul of a diviner cast, and a greatness of expression, give the honor of this appellation. (Hor. *Serm.* 4.39-43)

My Muse first deigned to sport in Sicilian strains, and blushed not to dwell in the woods. When I was fain to sing of kings and battles, the Cynthian plucked my ear and warned me: “A shepherd, Tityrus, should feed sheep that are fat, but sing a lay fine-spun.” And now – bards in plenty will you find eager to sing your praises. Varus, and build the story of grim war – now will I woo the rustic Muse on slender reed. (Verg. *Ecl.* 6.1-8)

Vergil approaching epic

- Vergil's *Georgics*
 - published in 29 BC (immediately before work on the *Aeneid* began)
 - Didactic hexameter on farming, but incorporating long narrative passages of epyllion style (4.315 onwards)
 - Proem of Book 3 suggests that a higher topic is to follow?
 - *Recusatio*

Needs must a path be tried, / By which I too may lift me
from the dust, / And float triumphant through the
mouths of men. / Yea, I shall be the first, so life endure,
/ To lead the Muses with me, as I pass / To mine own
country from the Aonian height; / I, Mantua, first will
bring thee back the palms / Of Idumaea, and raise a
marble shrine [...] Amid my shrine shall Caesar's godhead
dwell. / To him will I, as victor, bravely dight / In Tyrian
purple, drive along the bank / A hundred four-horse cars.
[...] I'll trace the battle of the Gangarides, / And our
Quirinus' conquering arms, and there / Surging with war,
and hugely flowing, the Nile, / And columns heaped on
high with naval brass. / And Asia's vanquished cities I will
add, / And quelled Niphates, and the Parthian foe, / Who
trusts in flight and backward-volleying darts, / And
trophies torn with twice triumphant hand / From empires
twain on ocean's either shore. / And breathing forms of
Parian marble there / Shall stand, the offspring of
Assaracus, / And great names of the Jove- descended
folk, / And father Tros, and Troy's first founder, lord / Of
Cynthus. And accursed Envy there / Shall dread the
Furies, and thy ruthless flood, / Cocytus, and Ixion's
twisted snakes, / And that vast wheel and ever-baffling
stone. / Meanwhile the Dryad-haunted woods and lawns
/ Unsullied seek we;

Rising expectations

You ask where the passion comes from I write so much about, and this book, so gentle on the tongue. Neither Apollo nor Calliope sang them to me. The girl herself fires my wit. If you would have her move in a gleam of Cos, this whole book will be Coan silk: if ever I saw straying hair cloud her forehead, she joys to walk, pride in her worshipped tresses: or if ivory fingers draw songs from the lyre, I marvel what fingering sweeps the strings: or if she closes eyelids, calling on sleep, I come to a thousand reasons for verse: or if naked she wrestles me, free of our clothes, then in truth we make whole Iliads: whatever she does or says, a great tale's born from nothing. Maecenas, even if fate had given me the strength to lead crowds of heroes to war, I'd not sing Titans; Ossa on Olympus, with Pelion a road to Heaven; or ancient Thebes; or Troy that made Homer's name;

or split seas meeting at Xerxes's order; Remus's first kingdom, or the spirit of proud Carthage, or the German threat and Marius's service. I'd remember the wars of your Caesar, his doings, and you, under mighty Caesar, my next concern. (Prop. 2.1.1-26)

Let me, whom the god has surely struck to the marrow, languish set among last night's wreaths. Virgil can sing of Actium's shores that Phoebus watches over, and of Caesar's brave ships: he, who brings to life the battles of Aeneas of Troy, and the walls that he built on Lavinium's coast. Give way you Roman authors! Give way you Greeks! Something more than the Iliad's being born. (Prop. 2.34)

Epic performance?

Augustus indeed (for it chanced that he was away his Cantabrian campaign) demanded in entreating, and even jocosely threatening letters that Vergil send him " something from the ' Aeneid ' "; to use his own words, " either the first draft of the poem or any section of it that he pleased." But it was not until long afterwards, when the material was at last in shape, that Vergil read to him three books in all, the second, fourth, and sixth. The last of these produced a remarkable effect on Octavia, who was present at the reading; for it is said that when he reached the verses about her son, " Thou shalt be Marcellus," a she fainted and was with difficulty revived. He gave readings also to various others, but never before a large company, selecting for the most part passages about which he was in doubt, in order to get the benefit of criticism. They say that Bros, his amanuensis and freedman, used to report, when he was an old man, that Vergil once completed two half-verses off-hand in the course of a reading. (Suet. Life of Vergil)

...and epic polishing

- However, the *Aeneid* is also intimately connected with text-bound polishing
 - Half-lines still remaining
 - Suetonius goes on to tell of how Vergil ordered the *Aeneid* to be burned as it was still not complete
- Vergil's career pattern, from slender poetry to didactic to epic becomes the ideal progression route, the author's genre becoming gradually higher

Inviting comparison: The Homeric *Aeneid*

Odyssey

- *Aen.* 1-6
- Travels of lone, grieving and increasingly isolated hero, including erotic episodes

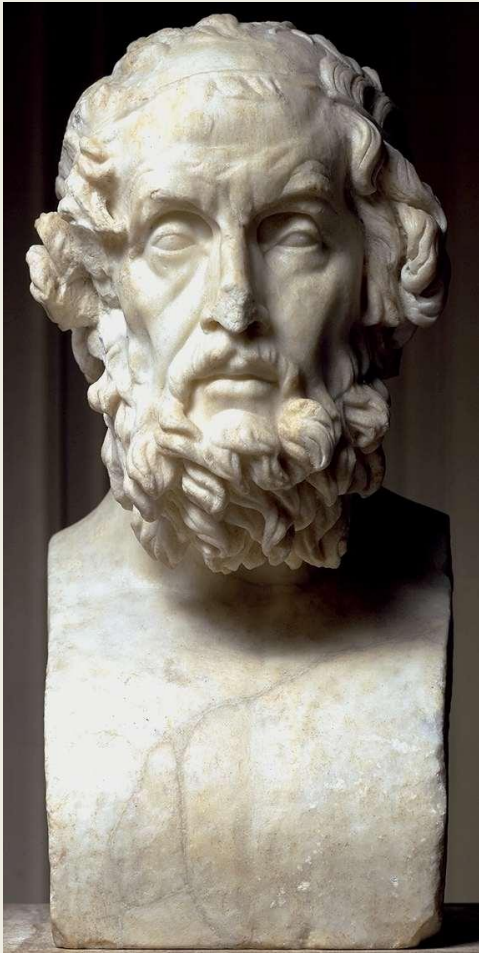
Iliad

- *Aen.* 7-12
- Siege of a city due to an invasion sparked by a quarrel over a woman

Hitting the right note

- *Arma virumque cano, Troiae
qui primus ab oris*
- *Vs*
- *Menin aeide thea Peleiadou
Achilleos*
- *Andra moi ennepe mousa os
mala polla*
- *Arms, and the man I sing,
who, forc'd by fate,
And haughty Juno's
unrelenting hate,
Expell'd and exil'd, left the
Trojan shore.*
- *VS.*
- *Sing, O goddess, the anger
of Achilles son of Peleus...*
- *Tell me, O Muse, of the man
of many devices, who
wandered full many ways...*

Homer in the Forum?



Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 7.6

In this year, owing either to an earthquake or the action of some other force, the middle of the Forum fell in to an immense depth, presenting the appearance of an enormous cavern. [2] Though all worked their hardest at throwing earth in, they were unable to fill up the [3?] gulf, until at the bidding of the gods inquiry was made as to what that was in which the strength of Rome lay. [4] For this, the seers declared, must be sacrificed on that spot if men wished the Roman republic to be eternal. The story goes on that M. Curtius, a youth distinguished in war, indignantly asked those who were in doubt what [5?] answer to give, whether anything that Rome possessed was more precious than the arms and valour of her sons (*arma virtutesque*). [6] As those around stood silent, he looked up to the Capitol and to the temples of the immortal gods which looked down on the Forum, and stretching out his hands first towards heaven and then to the yawning chasm beneath, devoted himself to the gods below. [7] Then mounting his horse, which had been caparisoned as magnificently as possible, he leaped in full armour into the cavern.

...and Vergil's first line

*Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab
oris*

Italiam fato profugus Lavinaque venit

Litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto

*Vi superum, saevae memorem Iunonis ob
iram*

*Multaquoque et bello passus, dum conderet
urbem*

Inferretque deos Latio; genus unde Latinum

*Albanique patres atque altae moenia
Romae.*

I sing of arms and a man who,
exiled by fate, first came to
Italy and the Lavinian shores
from the coast of Troy, much
tossed about on land and on
sea by the violence of the
gods, from the remembering
wrath of savage Juno, and
suffering much in war also
until he could found a city and
bring his gods to Latium,
whence came the Latin race
and the Alban fathers and the
walls of lofty Rome.

Effects

- An epic – it has the right content (*arma*) and is set in a high-and-far-off time
- An epic – it has the right meter
- However, it will be an epic about specifically Roman values
 - Man - *virtus*
 - Gods (*penates*)



Genre signals in Book 1

- Plot initially follows the *Odyssey*: Juno's wrath is the cause of Aeneas' suffering, and pursuit by Aeolus ties him closer to Odysseus
- *'There was an ancient city held by colonists from Tyre, opposite Italy and the distant mouth of the river Tiber. It was a city of great wealth and ruthless in the pursuit of war' (Aen. 1.12-20)*
 - Why can this function as a genre signal?
 - Intertextuality: Naevius and Ennius
 - Relevance to the readers: *Their* history

Genre signals in Book 1

- Description of Aeneas' journey 1.200-201:
Scylla
- Venus seeking Jupiter's advice – like Thetis in the *Iliad* – with a result like that in the *Odyssey*
- *Ecphrasis*: the Juno temple in Carthage revealing scenes from the fall of Troy

Problems on the horizon?

- *‘Those whose fate it was to die beneath the high walls of Troy with their fathers looking down on them were many, many times more fortunate than I. O Diomedes, bravest of the Greeks, why could I not have fallen to your right hand and breathed out my life on the plains of Troy, where fierce Hector fell by the sword of Achilles, where great Sarpedon lies and where the river Simois caught up so many shields and helmets and bodies of brave men and rolled them down its current?’*
- Positive: The bedraggled hero: cf. Odysseus and Nausicaa
- Negative: No focus on the future – is the hero up to it?
- The negative reading is reinforced in the ecphrasis

To take away

- Comments on the *Aeneid* when still a work in progress make clear that the perception and value of epic in Roman literary society has now definitely changed: this is the highest genre
- Book 1: Vergil carefully combines strong genre signals with
 - A specific Roman agenda...
 - ...and character-focussed tension building
 - ...watch out for these in Books 2 and 3!