

No Arms and the Man? Virgil's *Aeneid* in Modern Popular Culture¹

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Abstract: Perhaps more than any other text, Virgil's *Aeneid* has had an impact on Western literature and society. The reasons for this popularity seem obvious, for it contains all the elements one would want in an enduring tale: a brave hero, an arduous yet eventually successful journey and quest, a tragic love plot, a people searching for a homeland. Taken on such a level, it would appear to be perfect material for a Hollywood blockbuster and multiple spin-offs. Yet to date, there have been remarkably few receptions of the work in modern popular culture, although Troy and the Trojan War continue to thrive, with receptions multiplying across genres and for all age groups. If Greece was, until recently, in the words of Gideon Nesbit, the neglected 'dog in the nighttime' in terms of classical reception and popular culture, Aeneas is the invisible hero, rarely glimpsed at all. This paper provides a brief overview of the reception of Virgil's *Aeneid* in modern popular culture, considering popular fiction, children's literature, poetry, screen and stage, before making some suggestions about why Virgil's epic poem has failed to take hold in this culture in the way that Homer's have, and what this suggests about both the *Aeneid* and contemporary society.

Keywords: Virgil; Aeneid; Aeneas; epic; classical reception; popular culture; ancient world on film; Trojan War; children's literature; popular fiction; drama; stage; television; opera; warfare; hero; heroine; Dido; Lavinia; women poets; Hollywood

Perhaps more than any other text, Virgil's *Aeneid* has had an impact on Western literature and society, with medieval societies claiming descent from Aeneas, and the hero's prominent role in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, to give just two examples. The reasons for this popularity seem obvious, for it contains all the elements one would want in an enduring tale: a brave hero, an arduous yet eventually successful journey and quest, a tragic love plot, a people searching for a homeland. Taken on such a level, it would appear to be perfect material for a Hollywood blockbuster and multiple spin-offs. Yet to date, although Troy and the Trojan War continue to thrive, with receptions multiplying across genres and for all age groups, there have been remarkably few versions of the *Aeneid* in modern popular culture. It has never been made into a blockbuster epic movie, and although it has featured in recent popular culture, it has done so far less frequently than either of the Homeric epics, despite the fact that Rome has a much stronger cinematic tradition than that of Greece. While Achilles, with all the complicated attendant issues of Greek sexuality, presents no problem for modern artists,

¹ I would like to thank the editors of this journal, and the anonymous reviewer, for their very helpful comments and suggestions on this article.

Aeneas, with his doomed love and fervent patriotism, is not, apparently, a hero who attracts interest. If Greece was, until recently, in the words of Gideon Nisbet, the neglected ‘dog in the nighttime’ in terms of classical reception and popular culture, Aeneas is the invisible hero, rarely glimpsed at all.²

As Nisbet points out, the lack of presence in itself has meaning. This paper aims to investigate the reception of Virgil’s *Aeneid* in modern popular culture, considering the genres of poetry, popular fiction, children’s literature, and drama. Through this examination, it will attempt to analyse why Virgil’s epic poem has failed to take hold in this culture in the way that Homer’s has, and what this suggests about both the *Aeneid* and contemporary society.

1. The Centrality of the *Aeneid*

Virgil’s *Aeneid* was described by T.S. Eliot in 1944, in his presidential address to the newly founded Virgil Society, as, ‘the classic of all Europe ... at the centre of European civilization, in a position which no other poet can share or usurp’.³ It is no coincidence that the society was founded at a time when a large part of Europe was in ashes, and European civilization under a seemingly overwhelming threat; for the purpose of the Society ‘was and remains to unite all those who cherish the central educational tradition of Western Europe’, of which ‘Virgil is the symbol’.⁴ The supremacy of Virgil was, it seems, unchallenged, and the essential role of the *Aeneid* unquestioned.

Nor is this a surprising fact, when the themes and earlier reception of the *Aeneid* are considered. As a tale of kingship and settlement, it provided a foundation myth that provided a model for many later European works in the medieval period that glorified rulers or endowed them and their kingdoms with legendary roots. The *Aeneid* was the central classic and school-text, from the time of Virgil’s death in 19 BCE right up to the twentieth century. Although it is true that Classical scholars in the nineteenth century devoted little time to the epic, focusing on Homer instead, Virgil came to prominence in the twentieth century as a result of German, and then British, American and Italian scholarship.⁵ In the second half of the century, scholars proposed a reading of the work that saw in the poem two ‘voices’, one that was a ‘public voice’ of triumph, and the other a ‘private voice’, reflecting the dark side of political success and imperialism.⁶ Hardie describes this most recent reading as an attempt:

on the part of the tender liberal consciences of modern scholars to make Virgil ‘one of us’ by saving the *Aeneid* from the ‘taint of supporting an autocratic regime’.⁷

Changing attitudes towards the Virgilian epic are not restricted to academic scholarship, however. As ideologies altered in wider society, attitudes towards values previously lauded and thought to be represented in the *Aeneid*, also underwent a transformation. As Philip Hardie emphasizes:

² Nisbet (2008) vii-x.

³ See Hardie (2014) 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Harrison (1990) 2-4.

⁶ Hardie *ibid.* 16. See also Porges Watson (1986) 115.

⁷ Hardie 14.

A soft-focus Tennysonian indulgence in the melancholy of things could not survive the horrors of World War I. A far more bitter response to the dehumanizing effects of war is registered in Wilfred Owen's 'Arms and the Boy', whose title satirizes the Virgilian heroic 'Arms and the man'.⁸

This process only intensified with the loss of the British Empire, as the ideologies of nation and empire with which the *Aeneid* is associated, became deeply unfashionable. With this process accompanied by the decline in Latin as a school subject in the twentieth century, resulting in unfamiliarity with the classical world in general and Virgil in particular, his earlier preeminence slipped, and by the second millennium, his work had 'comprehensively lost' its earlier status.⁹

2. The Reception of the *Aeneid* in Contemporary Popular Culture

Despite this fall from favour, it would be unfair to say that the *Aeneid* has been totally ignored in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, for adaptations have appeared in a number of genres and media. These include poetry, both adults' and children's fiction, stage productions and film. Clearly, despite Ziolkowski's statement that 'we do not live in Virgilian times',¹⁰ the *Aeneid* is actually still very much part of the modern western consciousness.

Poetry

One of the genres in which classical texts live on is that of poetry, as Stephen Harrison's edited work on the subject, *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*, reflects. While poetry is not perhaps 'popular culture' in its most common sense, it is nevertheless aimed at a wider audience than the academic circles already familiar with the *Aeneid*. A full discussion of this subject lies outside the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting some pertinent points. Firstly, as Harrison points out, poets writing in English have, since 1960, displayed a big surge in interest in the classical world; as he says, paradoxically, 'classical texts have achieved a high profile in contemporary literature at a time when fewer people than ever can read these works in the original languages'.¹¹ This modern 'small Latin and less Greek' has caused classical scholars to engage in outreach, proactively taking classics to areas they had previously rarely permeated and had often even scorned, and enabled a 'democratisation' of classical studies. This in turn has led to phenomenon whereby:

many of the most striking engagements with classical texts since 1960 in Anglophone poetry have come from writers who are in some sense on the periphery of the 'traditional' English metropolitan cultural world.¹²

Thus the second half of the twentieth century has seen works by figures who 'might previously have been deterred by the canonical and establishment status of Latin and

⁸ Hardie *ibid.* 16. Porges Watson (1986) 115.

⁹ Hardie (2014) 2.

¹⁰ Ziolkowski (1993) 285.

¹¹ Harrison (2009) 1.

¹² *Ibid.* 9.

Greek', in Harrison's words;¹³ he cites Tony Harrison, Margaret Atwood and Derek Walcott as examples of those on the margins of traditional Anglophone literary culture.

Despite this interest, Virgil remains peripheral, apart from a small group of poets discussed by Rowena Fowler. Strikingly, most of these fall into the marginal category argued for by Harrison. A large proportion, for example, are Anglo-Irish. Most famously, Seamus Heaney had a fascination with the poetry of Virgil, and the poem 'Route 110' in *Human Chain* (2010), his last collection, is, as Philip Hardie has pointed out, 'a virtuoso transposition of *Aeneid* 6, Aeneas' journey through the Underworld, into Heaney's journey through his own past and future'.¹⁴ Heaney also revisited the sixth book of the *Aeneid* in a translation published only posthumously in 2016.¹⁵ Eavan Boland's use of Virgil's epic is even more personal, as she uses the poem to articulate her own experience of displacement and loss, which she situates within a wider context of geographical and political exclusion. As Fiona Cox explains,

Her relationship with Virgil allows her not only to voice her experience of being exiled from the canon of Western literature on account of her gender, but also to explore her position as an Irish writer, attempting to establish an identity within the wider Anglophone world. Her work strengthens a wider trend of contemporary Irish writers turning to the Classics as a means of exploring their own national identity, and yet, the exclusion entailed by her gender means that her experience of any negotiations of her position within such a trend are highly fraught and tenuous.¹⁶

Fleur Adcock, a female New Zealander of Irish extraction, and thus thrice removed from the traditional cultural ownership of Virgil, provides another example. She even provides a hint of rejection of traditional classical studies and a bid to appreciate the beauty of the Latin text in her *Purple Shining Lilies*, where she highlights the riot of colour that she sees within the *Aeneid*, in such contrast to the dull black and white of the Oxford text. Her poetry is also influenced by her own migratory childhood as she examines roots and rootlessness, perhaps another reason for her attraction to the *Aeneid*, the ultimate migratory tale.¹⁷ Other poets, U.A. Fanthorpe and Stevie Smith, have also turned to Virgil, as Fowler discusses, examining how a range of modern poets invoke Virgil in their work, particularly in order to 'illuminate the ambiguities of speaking and silence, attachment and loss'.¹⁸ Perhaps the most striking factor, however, is that all of these poets make use of Virgil's *Aeneid* as a result of their identification with the suffering of the hero as an outsider, an identification that stems from the poets' own sense of alienation caused by nationality or gender.¹⁹ Recent years have even seen the

¹³ Ibid. 3.

¹⁴ <http://theibtaurisblog.com/2014/06/19/the-cultural-legacy-of-virgils-aeneid/> <accessed 27/1/16>. See also Putnam (2012) 79-107.

¹⁵ Heaney (2016). See also below p. 124.

¹⁶ Cox (2011) 69.

¹⁷ Ibid. 6. See also Fowler (2009).

¹⁸ <http://rowenafowler.simplesite.com/362750980> <accessed 11/12/17>.

¹⁹ For some discussions of substantial and new receptions of classical texts by contemporary female writers, see the special issue of *Classical Receptions Journal* 4.2 (2012), entitled *Translation, Transgression, Transformation: Contemporary Women Authors and Classical Reception*.

first translation of the *Aeneid* by a woman, with the publication of Sarah Ruden's in 2008.²⁰ Despite not having been naturally attracted to the text initially (it was a commissioned work), perhaps because of its connotations of imperialism and 'dead white males', Ruden became passionate about it as she worked, and also emphasises the particular strengths a female translator may bring to a text. Cox and Theodorakopoulos summarise this, quoting from an interview with Ruden: 'women are not used to being over-appreciated in the academic environment'; as a result of this 'women don't have the status to keep them delusional about their abilities'. Women, Ruden argues, tend to be more meticulous, more afraid of making a mistake and incurring disapproval: 'Do I just assume,' she asks 'that I know what this word means, or am I going to do the work and look it up? You could even say that that's built into the gender'.²¹

Despite rejecting ideology, or the concept of 'appropriating Virgil for women', Ruden feels that the classical world is accessible to what she describes as 'someone marginal like me'; as Cox and Theodorakopoulos conclude, 'Far from silencing her voice and reminding her of her insignificance through gender, the *Aeneid* has honed her imagination and enabled her to extend it to speak to a new generation'.²²

Popular Fiction

This trend continues with regard to literature, where, in the twenty-first century, not only are Virgilian works now appearing once more, but as Fiona Cox has highlighted, 'it is women writers who are creating and defining this new *aetas Vergiliana*'. She provides a detailed study of this phenomenon, which is worth summarising briefly here.²³ Thus Margaret Drabble, in her *The Seven Sisters* (2002), explicitly writes herself into the Virgilian tradition. In Cox's words:

Though Virgil surfaces in several of Drabble's novels, it is in the novel *The Seven Sisters* that the Virgilian imagery and references are most sustained. ... She is the heiress of T. S. Eliot.²⁴

In this novel, the heroine, Candida Wilton, a middle-aged recent divorcee, moves to a London that represents exile, and echoes both Aeneas' journeys in exile and T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. In London she attends a class on the *Aeneid*, stimulating herself and six other women to take a trip to Carthage, Naples and Cumae, following in the footsteps of Aeneas. The book itself is a post-modern somewhat pessimistic view of the world, filled with conscious echoes of the Virgilian epic.

Similarly, Drabble's sister, A.S. Byatt, draws on Virgil in *The Little Black Book of Stories* (2003), as she portrays the loneliness of a husband whose wife is suffering from Alzheimer's, in the final story of the collection, entitled, 'The Pink Ribbon'. This features a man named James Ennis who is reading book six of the *Aeneid*, when he is visited by a mysterious woman called Dido, who seems to know in depth all the secrets of his wife's past. Although James wishes that Dido was a phantasm, she is very much

²⁰ Discussed by Cox and Theodorakopoulos, *ibid.* 224-234.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Cox (2011) 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 120.

present, even while his wife, Mado, is now merely ‘the presence of absence’. As Cox describes,

The Virgilian imagery is horribly well suited to evoke an existence that is being progressively eroded by broken memories and by a past that has come untethered from the moorings or stability and reason.²⁵

Joyce Carol Oates in her *The Tattooed Girl* (2004) uses the *Aeneid* to explore antisemitism, cultural rifts and the national identity in post-9/11 America. Her book depicts Joshua Seigl, a wealthy writer of Holocaust fiction engaged on a translation of the *Aeneid*, who is suffering from a fatal degenerative disease, and his relationship with Alma, a tattooed, abused, homeless young girl, led on by her virulently anti-Semitic boyfriend to undertake a campaign of hate against Seigl, her employer. Oates uses the *Aeneid* in a variety of ways to echo and interpret the characters and their psychology, but again, it is the negative that is the link between modern America and Aeneas, to the extent that the novel ends with an act of brutal violence, which mirrors the violent ending of the Roman epic that in itself ‘celebrates the founding of the heart of Western civilization’.²⁶

Even Ursula Le Guin’s *Lavinia* is more a critique of the modern world than it is a literary fantasy; like Margaret Atwood’s depiction of Penelope in *The Penelopiad*, this work breathes life into a seemingly pivotal but actually shadowy female character of ancient epic.²⁷ In this case, as Deirde Byrne emphasizes, ‘Le Guin’s Lavinia reverses the relationships between presence and non-presence, voice and silence in the *Aeneid*’.²⁸ Lavinia is able to show up Virgil’s lack of understanding of her character, as she is recast from the perspective of a world in which women do have voices. In this novel, the implied criticism is not limited to the role of women, however; the pastoral ideal and simple life extolled here also evoke the stereotype of rural America, now under threat from human-inspired global warming. This modern feminist reading of the *Aeneid* is also a meditation on mortality and the limits of human life, but remains within the confines of traditional readings of the epic as well, for even the character of Lavinia herself, given the depth and body by Le Guin that she was denied by Virgil himself, remains constrained by the facts of history.

*Children’s Literature*²⁹

As noted above, the *Aeneid* was traditionally a central Latin text studied in schools, wherever the language was taught, and thus retellings of the story were also produced within the context of basic general knowledge with which children were expected to be familiar. Despite the well-publicised decline of Classics in the education system, the twenty-first century, in the wake of Percy Jackson and Harry Potter, has seen something

²⁵ Ibid. 139.

²⁶ Ibid. 229.

²⁷ Ibid. 247-262.

²⁸ Byrne (2012) 11.

²⁹ For background to contemporary scholarly interest in this genre, see Maurice (2015); Marciniak (2016).

of a revival in juvenile literature featuring classical elements and themes.³⁰ In keeping with this, there are various versions of the *Aeneid* for children that have either been published or republished, sometimes multiple times, in recent years. Thus Emily Frenkel's *Aeneas: Virgil's Epic Retold for Young Readers* was first published in 1986, but republished in 1991, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. This is the longest retelling of the *Aeneid* for children, written by an experienced classics teacher, and is clearly aimed at schoolchildren. It has individual chapters devoted to the contents of each book of the *Aeneid*, and runs to 169 pages plus nine pages of glossary, told in clear prose, with plenty of dialogue and illustrated with attractive lithographs by Simon Weller.³¹ Penelope Lively's version of the *Aeneid*, *In Search of a Homeland: The Story of the 'Aeneid'* was published in 2001, and is a detailed retelling of the *Aeneid* for elementary age school children. Described as paralleling Rosemary Sutcliff's versions of Homer's epics, it is pleasantly illustrated by Ian Andrew, and repeatedly described on the goodreads website as a good introduction to Virgil's great work, and one which will prompt children to then view the original favourably and desire to read it.³²

Perhaps one of the strangest retellings is Blackpool classics' teacher, Peter Wright's *The Adventures of Aeneas* (2012), a cartoon-style illustrated ebook in doggerel, exclamation-mark-scattered verse. It begins:

Let me introduce you to Aeneas and his poor ruined home,
if you'll listen carefully, you may hear him groan!
Some big mean soldiers came for a biff and a bash,
so now poor Aeneas must find a new place to crash,

and continues in the same vein. This is a child orientated, sanitized and comic version of the story, in which Castor joins Aeneas, along with his pet parrot, Polly, and in which Queen Dido is a 'great friend' who soon has Aeneas 'on the mend', but who, when Aeneas departs feels 'quite low'. Even more curious is Anita Wenzel's *Poems Fit For an Emperor: A Collection of Greek and Roman Myths*, which includes a poem entitled Aeneas, in scarcely better verse than Wright's, but without the accompaniment of jokey illustrations. To give an indication of its style, the first six lines run:

Aeneas was a man of Troy
Who left it when it was destroyed.
His father Anchises went with him
As well as his son Ascanius.
His mother Venus helped him go
With his Dad and his back and his son in tow.

³⁰ Ibid. For the influence of Harry Potter, see Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018)16-21; Olechowska (2016); for Percy Jackson, Maurice (2016) 330; Maurice (2018) (forthcoming).

³¹ Brazouski and Klatt (1994) 58.

³² https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/534607.In_Search_of_a_Homeland <accessed 3/1/18>.

Several collections of myth also include the stories of Aeneas. Geraldine McCaughrean's retelling of the story appears multiple times. Illustrations by Emma Chichester Clark accompany the text in *The Orchard Book Of Roman Myths* (1999, and then republished in 2003) as well as in a version entitled *Roman Myths* by McElderry in 2001. Tony Ross's illustrations enliven the same adaptation published as a standalone reader in the Orchard Myths series from 2000, an edition entitled *City of Dreams*. Diane Lamm's adaptation in the Classic Starts *Roman Myths* (2014), tells the story in two chapters, entitled 'Escape from Troy' and 'The Golden Bough'. Aimed at younger readers, it nevertheless runs to thirty pages of prose, and has only two pencil-drawn, black and white illustrations. Kathy Elgin and Fiona Sansom's *Stories From Around the World: Roman Myths* (Franklin Watts, 2012), is, on the other hand, lavishly illustrated in full colour, and includes 'The Voyages of Aeneas' and 'Aeneas in the Underworld'.

Interestingly, there is also a whole spate of recent reprints of versions from a century ago. F. Storr's *Half a Hundred Hero Tales of Ulysses and the Men of Old*, first published in 1911, was reissued in 2013, and includes sections on Aeneas from the early decades of the twentieth century by F. Storr and V.C. Turnbull. Similarly, the *Stories of Epic and Legendary Heroes*, printed by Libraries of Hope, Inc, in 2013, including 'The Perilous Voyage of Aeneas', is actually a reprint of various tales first published in the early twentieth century. Helen Guerber's *The Story of the Romans*, which contains three chapters based on the *Aeneid* ('The Escape from the Burning City', 'The Clever Trick' and 'The Boards are Eaten') was originally published in 1922, but was reissued in 2014.

All of these versions for children stem from a belief that the *Aeneid* is a worthwhile text for youngsters, who 'should' have familiarity with the story. Even those that seem to have little merit, literary or otherwise, stem from the same underlying belief in the value of the epic for juveniles. Within this overall belief, however, different emphases are placed by the various approaches.

As might be expected, in most of the juvenile versions of the *Aeneid*, especially those for younger readers, the last six books are dealt with very cursorily, often in a matter of a few lines, and the emphasis is very much on the trip to the Underworld and on Dido.³³ The issue of how to deal with the romantic element is obviously one that writers for children must face, and the stories reveal a range of approaches to this question. Although all devote time to Dido and Aeneas, they interpret the love between them in different ways. In Geraldine McCaughrean's retellings, it is Aeneas, as the son of Venus, who falls madly in love with Dido, and begs his mother to make her love him back. Venus duly obliges, until Jupiter, drumming his fingers impatiently on Mount Olympus, recalls the hero to his duty and stirs his conscience to an awareness of his selfishness in putting love before the task set him by destiny. With no confrontation between the two, Aeneas slips off immediately, despite the love tugging at his heart strings. Diane Lamm, by contrast, has Dido falling for Aeneas as a result of Venus' interference, in order to ensure that he receives the help he needs, but in this version Dido's love is not reciprocated by the hero. His dilemma when ordered by Mercury to leave Carthage is how to say goodbye to Dido, because 'she loved him and he had come to rely on her for everything', rather than a feeling of equal passion on his part; in his

³³ Again this reflects the traditional school syllabi, as these are the books generally studied by pupils.

mind, as he states, they are not, after all, married. In *Stories From Around the World: Roman Myths* however, their love is mutual ('They were very happy together') and they are married, with Dido being referred to, when spotted by Aeneas in the underworld, as the hero's wife.

Screen and Stage

Although Petersen's *Troy* (2006) featured a few scenes from the *Aeneid*,³⁴ this was by no means the main emphasis and the epic has so far appeared on the big screen in any serious way in only one production, the 1962 Italian sword-and-sandal movie *La leggenda di Enea*, released in the USA, rather incomprehensibly, as *The Avenger*, directed by Giorgio Venturini and starring Steve Reeves as Aeneas.³⁵ Based on the second half of the *Aeneid*, it follows the epic poem quite closely with regard to plot, but, as *Troy* would do forty years later, removes the gods entirely from the action.³⁶

The only other screen version of the *Aeneid* is Rossi's *Eneide*, a TV mini-series from 1971, made after the success of his *L'Odisea* (1968).³⁷ This was a full retelling of the *Aeneid*, in seven episodes, with a screen play described as 'moderna ed efficace, che tratteggiava un eroe con problemi esistenziali' ('modern and effective, and sketched a hero with existential problems').³⁸ It is no coincidence that the *Eneide* was a product of Italian television, for, as the tale of its own founding and history, Italy is naturally the place where the *Aeneid* sits most comfortably. The production was then re-edited and released as a full length movie entitled *Le avventure di Enea* in 1974.³⁹

With regard to the stage, a multimedia production was performed in Rome in 2000, as part of the ENZIMI Festival, entitled, *The Return of Aeneas to Rome: An Inner Journey Where Antiquity and the Modern World Co-Exist*. The advertising blurb accompanying the production runs, 'Tormented by the Demons of his own identity, Aeneas explores the world he left behind and a world evolving a new spiritual DNA, a changing consciousness and awareness ...'.⁴⁰ In this version, it is the clash of cultures and ideologies in the modern world that is the focus, with Aeneas wandering the modern world and taking time out in a simple Korean peasant hut, in order to confront the chaos of world surrounding him through meditation. It is not Dido, or Creusa, who is his great love, but Cassandra, whom he abandoned when he left Troy after its destruction in his quest for a new world. He remains tortured by guilt at this abandonment, and suffers from not knowing the fate of his beloved.

Despite his great journeys and adventures, he is possessed of a feeling of a void and decides that he must return to Rome, where his journey in the modern world began. 'Somehow returning to Rome may help him find the part of himself that was lost when he lost Cassandra ... when the ancient world was destroyed ... when he began mapping

³⁴ See Winkler (2006) 78, 112, 171-2, 184.

³⁵ See Castagnoli (1982). The film is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nySGHc9DOA>.

³⁶ See Solomon (2007) 97-98; Winkler (2015) 115-142.

³⁷ See Winkler (2013) 133-154. See Pomeroy (2017) for a comparison of Francesco Rossi's and Venturini's treatments.

³⁸ [http://dictionnaire.sensagent.leparisien.fr/Eneide%20\(sceneggiato\)/it-it/](http://dictionnaire.sensagent.leparisien.fr/Eneide%20(sceneggiato)/it-it/) <accessed 31/10/17>.

³⁹ Elley (2014) 170.

⁴⁰ <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/gilbert/rome/> <accessed 31/10/17>.

the world within himself through discoveries of cultures and peoples'.⁴¹ When he does finally achieve this and return to Rome, he finds Cassandra waiting for him there, but she is now the epitome of modern woman. Just as Aeneas had founded the beginning of the modern world with the establishment of Rome, he now calls upon modern society to help build the new one of the future. This production, therefore, which was also performed as a joint multimedia Internet2 collaboration between the University of California at Irvine and New York University in 2002, sees Aeneas as an archetypal founding figure of Western society, and uses this figure to explore the new post-modern society and its challenges.

Generally speaking, however, it is not Aeneas' voyages and founding of the Roman people that have attracted the world of drama, but rather the specific episode of Dido and Aeneas. The National Theatre revived Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* in 2009, and the Royal Shakespeare Company did so in 2017.⁴² Most frequently, however, Aeneas is found on the stage in Purcell's opera, with a production by the English National Opera in 2000, and at Sadler's Wells in 2007.⁴³ With the growth in interest in baroque music, the opera has found great popularity throughout the twenty-first century. As well as a performance in Denmark in 2008, several new productions appeared the following year, which was the 350th anniversary of Purcell's birth. These included stagings by the De Nederlandse Opera, one by the Royal Opera, London, choreographed by Wayne McGregor, and another by the Divertimento Baroque Opera Company. A new Opera North production opened at Leeds Grand Theatre in February in 2013. In March 2015, another production was staged at the New York City Center by the MasterVoices company, which was a sell-out hit. In the summer of 2018, the Israeli National Opera will also put on the opera.⁴⁴

Many modern productions attempt to update the piece; the Glimmerglass Opera in Cooperstown, New York in 2009 set it in a contemporary teenage world. Another adaptation called *After Dido* was also produced at the Young Vic, directed by Katie Mitchell, in which:

While English National Opera's singers and orchestra render Purcell's Dido and Aeneas, live actors perform three stories of urban love and loss projected on to an overhanging screen. Add in poems by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton and you have a serious case of sensory overload.⁴⁵

The Royal Opera production was revived by City Wall Productions in 2011, set on this occasion during World War II. In the same year, Opera Up Close performed a truncated version, but set it in an American high school in the 1950s. Clearly, not only is the

⁴¹ <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/gilbert/rome/return.html/> <accessed 31/10/17>.

⁴² See <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/apr/07/dido-queen-carthage-virgil>;
<https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/reviews/dido-queen-of-carthage-national-theatre-2009>;
<https://www.marlowe-society.org/marlowe/work/dido/downloads/MarloweSocietyDidoOverview.pdf>;
<https://www.rsc.org.uk/dido-queen-of-carthage/> <all accessed 1/11/17>.

⁴³ On modern productions of the opera see Harris (2018) 186-213.

⁴⁴ <http://www.israel-opera.co.il/eng/?CategoryID=845&ArticleID=2568> <accessed 10/1/18>.

⁴⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/apr/17/theatre-review-after-dido-young-vic>
 <accessed 19/6/16>.

Aeneid not dead beyond the walls of classrooms and lecture halls, it has contemporary relevance.

3. Why no Arms and the Man?

Despite these receptions, the frequency of appearance of Virgil's epic in wider culture cannot compare with either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Why is this? Perhaps the famous first two words of the *Aeneid* already supply a clue as to a lack of enthusiasm for adapting the work in the contemporary world. *Arma virumque*, 'arms and the man', provide us with two central themes of the *Aeneid*, namely warfare and the male hero.

Warfare

War, a central element of the *Aeneid*, pervasive throughout the whole work, but dominant particularly in the second 'Iliadic' half of the *Aeneid*, has inspired interpretations of different kinds throughout history. In particular, as Ziolkowski has argued, the epic was utilized from the period between the two world wars until the 1950s as a prism through which to express hopes and fears resulting from this age of devastating conflict:

In an effort to bring meaning into the world of the 1920s and 1930s, the Roman poet was invoked, who two thousand years earlier had succeeded in distilling beauty and order from the political and social horror of his own age.⁴⁶

Although this invocation encompassed a wide range of responses, a common motivator can be seen, as Ziolkowski stresses:

Although the political readings range from conservative to totalitarian, the religious views from pagan to Christian, and the ethnic stamp from narrowly national to broadly occidental, the response was triggered in every case by the powerful conviction that Virgil in his works offers a message of compelling relevance for the morally chaotic and socially anarchic present *entre deux guerres* — a view that strikes us, in retrospect, as particularly poignant because we know today what followed those hopeful bimillennial appeals to Virgilian *ordo, pietas* and *humanitas*.⁴⁷

In the aftermath of the Second World War, meanwhile, the *Aeneid* was read as another example of the triumph of light over dark, and of civilization against barbarism.⁴⁸ T.S. Eliot presented the work as the finest example of civilized Western values. W.R. Johnson saw Virgil in this role as 'the maker of the myth of Europe'. Yet there is no consensus as to whether the *Aeneid* is a piece of pro-Augustan propaganda to be taken at face value, or a subversive undermining of that regime, and the attitude to warfare is far more complex than that of the Homeric epics.

Unlike the Homeric attitude towards conflict, which sees war as an inevitable part of life, Virgil portrays it with more pathos and as destructive and wasteful, but a perhaps avoidable, feature of the world. Warfare affects both sides equally, and both Latins and

⁴⁶ Ziolkowski (1993) 26.

⁴⁷ Ibid. also cited by Kennedy (1997) 39.

⁴⁸ Putnam (1995) 46

Trojans bring death upon their enemies. Although the Trojans are the heroes, founders of the later race of Romans, their enemies are not evil, and the cause not one that appeals easily to the modern reader. Even Aeneas himself is far from eager to fight. It is Juno who works to bring about the war, by creating the situation whereby Lavinia is betrothed to Turnus, and even mustering the fury Alecto to guarantee that the conflict actually takes place. Aeneas, unlike Turnus:

does not manifest any eagerness for fighting, except when dominated by a special emotion, such as his affection for Pallas. Unlike them, he regrets and sorrows over the war. He alone thinks throughout of the peace to be gained.⁴⁹

While war is frequently depicted, indeed is often the central theme, of modern movies and plays, either in the form of bloodthirsty action movies, or works exploring the horrors of war, the conquering of Latium, unlike the Trojan War, the Persian Wars or even the conquests of Alexander, has rarely been featured. This is, in part at least, due to the nature of the war, which is not one with which the modern audience can easily identify. It is not a war against oppression, or even in order to avenge or repair an injustice or theft, but one of conquest in which the principal player is motivated only by the commands of the gods rather than his own passionate beliefs. It is striking that in modern screen portrayals of the Trojan War, clear attempts are made to villainise the 'imperialist' Agamemnon.⁵⁰ In the *Aeneid*, the causes and events of the war are neither black and white, nor strong enough, for the traditional blockbuster epic movie, where a clear good and evil are needed.

Nor does the *Aeneid* sit more comfortably with more recent movies of the twenty-first millennium. Technological advances in the film industry, along with post-modern sensibilities, have led to a new genre of war film that was intended to be more realistic, depicting war in all its horror. *Saving Private Ryan*, *Blackhawk Down* and others showed conflict in a far more graphic and authentic way than had previously figured on screen, which might have made the war of Aeneas a more attractive prospect; yet the descriptions of the fighting, such a large element of the second half of the epic, are not really negative enough to appeal to anti-war driven agendas. As Slocum explains:

A central concern about Hollywood films is the motivations, attitudes and behavior of individuals preparing for or immersed in combat. ... The motivations ... range broadly from the personal to the social, from the pursuit of excitement or heroism, duty, faith and revenge, to love, friendship, camaraderie and belonging.⁵¹

The war in the *Aeneid*, although it could be adapted readily enough, does not, at first glance, lend itself easily to any of these themes.

The Man

Aeneas as hero is also somewhat problematic for modern sensibilities. His duty-bound restraint has less attraction for contemporary society than Achilles' passion. This is not

⁴⁹ Otis (1963) 315.

⁵⁰ See both *Troy* (2002) and *Helen of Troy* (2003), in both of which Agamemnon is no hero and his invented death serves as a form of poetic justice.

⁵¹ Slocum (2006) 8.

the place for a detailed examination of Aeneas' character, a subject which has been debated for two millennia, but it is worth making a few, albeit necessarily superficial, points.⁵² Most notably Aeneas is forced to make the difficult choice of duty over love, something for which he clearly has remorse, if not regret, as his encounter with Dido in the Underworld reflects. Such a choice, championing of duty over love, if indeed Aeneas really has any free will in the matter, sits uneasily with Hollywood influenced ideals.

This sense of duty and self-denial, at the very root of Aeneas, makes him an unlikely modern hero; Achilles' passion, while needing some modern spin to prevent him seeming childish and unbearably sulky, is still perhaps more attractive and comprehensible to a current audience than Aeneas' steely sense of duty before all. Dido's emotion is so much more powerful, to contemporary eye, than Aeneas' reasoned fatalistic acceptance. While classical scholars may feel the tragedy and depth of Aeneas' pain at leaving her, I have yet to find modern readers, and in particular students, sensing this in the same way, at least on first reading.

It is clear that Aeneas has strong passions; not only does he require a theophany to push him to leave Dido, but in Aeneas' last battle with Turnus, where Turnus pleads with Aeneas to return his dead body to his father Daunus for a proper burial, the hero, on seeing his fallen comrade's sword belt on Turnus' shoulder, is overcome by rage and kills Turnus on the spot, without even answering. Yet he ultimately subsumes his personal feelings for 'the greater good', putting duty before pleasure. While such an attitude would have won him approbation at various points throughout history, it is dubious whether the current thinking — especially among younger people — would view this as anything more than wrong-headed foolishness. Nor is his driving force likely to find favour in such eyes. Aeneas' overwhelming concern is for his fellow Trojans and their futures. He takes his destiny as the founder of a great future empire very seriously. Not only is the very concept of imperialism problematic for contemporary ideology, the idea that he is driven by such values, rather than ideals such as love, or justice, would perhaps seem alien to modern eyes.

Another problem with the second half of the 'arms and the man' concept, is that Aeneas is, indeed, a man. Perhaps the most obvious difficulty with the *Aeneid* for a modern adapter is the lack of a strong female lead, even one in the form of a sex object. Although powerful female figures do exist — Camilla, Dido, even Juno — they do not play a central role in extended books of the work.⁵³ The *Aeneid* has no Helen of Troy, no Clytemnestra, no Antigone, with whom to identify or revile. It is no surprise that the Dido and Aeneas episode is one of only two parts of the *Aeneid* to have any real afterlife in popular culture, or that the events of book four are often isolated from the rest of the epic. For if Dido is just an episode within the greater tale, how does the modern audience reconcile themselves to Aeneas' abandonment of Dido? Dido could be villainized in some way, but then she loses power as the wronged lover and runs in danger of becoming a *Fatal Attraction* stalker type figure. But if she is not demonized,

⁵² The Bibliography on Aeneas is of course vast, but for one recent overview and interpretation, see Putnam (2011).

⁵³ *pace* Van Nortwick (2013) 136-152.

Aeneas becomes, in modern eyes, a deserting husband. All these factors seem to make Aeneas a somewhat less than comfortable hero for the modern adapter.

Quo Vadis?

Despite these difficulties, the *Aeneid* does live on in modern culture, but, as so often, the receptions vary according to need and circumstance. The latest of these receptions reveals a possible new direction for Aeneas in the near future. Recent global developments have placed the spotlight on the plight of refugees and homeless and stateless peoples, and it is in this context that the Trojan hero has begun appearing of late. Mary Beard stressed this in a recent interview:

The Romans themselves were very conscious that inclusion rather than exclusion was key. You can see this when they start to elaborate or invent stories, such as the myth of Romulus and Remus [the legendary founders of Rome]. In his quest to found a city and gain citizens, Romulus says that Rome is an asylum and his citizens are going to be asylum seekers. That is an extraordinary message and it shows that the Romans had an awareness of what the secret of their success was.

An alternative foundation myth tells a similar story: after Troy has been wrecked by the Greeks, the Trojan Aeneas sails west to found Rome as a new Troy in Italy — he is himself a refugee.

So Rome was founded by asylum seekers and refugees.⁵⁴

But this is not just an interpretation being spread by academics. One blog for example, by David Kuyat ('Writer, Classicist, Teacher') explains,

One Trojan prince named Aeneas, who was married to one of the king's daughters, escapes with his father, son, and a group of other Trojan families. A refugee, he wanders for ten years until he reaches the place in Italy which will become his new homeland. He is forced to wage war with the indigenous tribes. Finally he establishes a new city, Lavinium named after his new wife Lavinia, a city that 300 years later will become Rome. ... Aeneas, a refugee from the losing side, wanders ten years trying to find a new homeland. This is one of the reasons why the *Aeneid* tells a story that rings true today in our world in which over 51 million people are homeless — displaced from their countries or within their countries.⁵⁵

The *Guardian* editorial on Seamus Heaney's translation of *Aeneid* VI, declares:

If poems as refulgent and generous as the *Aeneid* can pour out fresh meaning to readers in every generation, the *Aeneid* of now, Heaney's *Aeneid*, is the poem of exile, of migrants forced from a war-ruined city to seek an uncertain future, with all the loss and terror, and faintest pricklings of distant hope, that that entails.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ <http://www.historyextra.com/article/tv-radio-interviews/mary-beard%E2%80%99s-ultimate-rome-interview-about-her-new-bbc-series> <accessed 12/10/17>.

⁵⁵ <https://belluslibellus.wordpress.com/2015/06/20/after-the-trojan-war-aeneas-the-refugee/> <accessed 8/8/16>.

⁵⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/11/the-guardian-view-on-seamus-heaney-virgilian-farewell> <accessed 8/8/16>.

Similarly, Quebecois Oliver Kemeid's *The Aeneid* Written by playwright Olivier Kemeid, 'migrates Aeneas's search for a homeland into the modern world of middle-eastern revolution', in which 'we encounter tourist resorts, refugee camps, and immigration officers'. The website accompanying the Montreal English language production of this play, in March 2014 by Talisman theatre, whose mission is to bring 'the immigrant experience of ever-evolving Quebecois culture to non-Francophone audiences', states:

The Aeneid is inspired by the mythological qualities that live within Virgil's epic poem. Its message is as relevant today as when it was written: the importance of family, friends, and a place called 'home'. ... This is a universal tale that speaks not only to Quebecers, but also to the peoples of the world.⁵⁷

The play was also staged in 2016 at the Stratford festival in Canada, a production described as follows:

In a contemporary echo of Virgil's famous poem, a band of refugees flee their devastated city and embark on the perilous quest for a new country to call home.⁵⁸

Similar references abound in recent popular culture, with such ideas having even spread to social media. One photograph widely disseminated on Twitter and Facebook depicts a refugee carrying another elderly man on his shoulders; this picture is entitled Aeneas and Anchises.⁵⁹

Despite the difficulties, it seems, perhaps contrary to popular belief and even expectation, that the *Aeneid* still has significance for the modern world, and awareness of the Virgilian hero may even be increasing in light of modern political and global changes. An eternal hero is just that and can always be interpreted according to varying situations and ideologies. While Aeneas may not have yet made it to the big screen heroic status of Brad Pitt's Achilles, he is still alive and relevant in a surprising range of media outside of academia. While it remains to be seen in what ways his reception will be shaped in the coming decades, it seems likely that Aeneas remain with us in some form, and tracking that development will surely be a fascinating project.

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⁵⁷ <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/the-aeneid-by-olivier-kemeid#/> <accessed 8/8/16>.

⁵⁸ <https://www.stratfordfestival.ca/WhatsOn/PlaysAndEvents/Production/The-Aeneid> <accessed 8/8/16>.

⁵⁹ Yannis Behrakis Refugee carries old man across Greek city of Idomeni <https://twitter.com/rabihalameddine/status/703326005507665920> <accessed 8/8/16>.

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