

*And cruel losses were his lot in war,  
Till he could found a city a bring home 10  
His gods to Latium, land of the Latin race,  
The Alban lords, and the high walls of Rome.  
(R. Fitzgerald, The Aeneid of Virgil.  
Random House, 1981, 3)*

“Arms and the Man”:  
The Opening of Vergil’s *Aeneid*

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Great literary works tend to have great opening lines, and Vergil’s *Aeneid* is no exception. At the beginning of this epic poem the author makes it clear what subject he will write about, how he will present it, and what major themes he will develop. In the original Latin text, these points are made in a single sentence covering seven verses in the dactylic hexameter, the meter of heroic epic. It is difficult to convert this grand opening into a single English sentence, and most translators resort to two or three. Nevertheless the impact remains much the same: in one broad sweep the poet provides the ‘programme’ for the poem: main character, main plot and main themes. In what follows I would like to make some observations about these opening lines, which are presented here in the translation of Robert Fitzgerald:

*I sing of warfare and a man at war.  
From the sea-coast of Troy in early days  
He came to Italy by destiny,  
To our Lavinian western shore,  
A fugitive, this captain, buffeted 5  
Cruelly on land as on the sea  
By blows from powers of the air - behind them  
Baleful Juno in her sleepless rage.*

The words “I sing” have a prominent first place in this translation, and they point to the important place of the poet in the epic. As a literary work, the *Aeneid* is the product of the poet’s own making, and not - as the early Greek bards would say - a work of the gods transmitted through the poet. While epic poets are always in the background and rarely intrude upon the text, Vergil reveals an intimate relation with his subject. That subject is two-fold: “warfare” and “a man at war”. Perhaps warfare is mentioned first to indicate that this subject will dominate the twelve books of the *Aeneid*; as the reader will soon discover, war is indeed prevalent throughout the poem. From Aeneas’ account of the fall of Troy in Book Two, until the bloody ending in Book Twelve, war and bloodshed abound.

War and bloodshed form the main theme also of the epic model Vergil uses most, namely Homer’s *Iliad*. The opening lines of that poem emphasize destruction and death, and in pointing to it Vergil no doubts reveals his indebtedness to that great poem. Perhaps “warfare” appears early in this line also because as the poem unfolds, battles and clashes increase. Indeed, some critics refer to the last six books of the poem as “Vergil’s *Iliad*”, suggesting thereby that the subjects and themes of Homer’s epic about Troy are adapted to the Roman context. There is good reason for this reading of the poem, for when one begins Book Seven, one gets the sense that there is a change towards a negative tone of suffering, strife, and inevitable death.

It is only following “warfare” that Vergil mentions the “man at war” or hero. He does not name the hero, however. Perhaps he is imitating Homer again, this time from the opening of the *Odyssey*, where the main character is referred to not by name but by the epithet “man of many wiles”. It is striking that whereas Homer alludes to Odysseus with a characteristic of personality, Vergil depicts Aeneas merely as “hero” (*vir*).

Lines two and three elaborate upon the hero, and so alert the reader to the coming tale of the hero’s experiences. The phrase “from the sea-coast of

Troy” serves to link the narrative of the *Aeneid* to that of the *Iliad*, by suggesting that Aeneas departed from fallen Troy towards Italy. The poet thus makes a connection between the founding of Rome and the ancient Trojans. The words “in early days” point to the mythical past, while at the same time underscoring the ancient origins of the establishing of Rome. One of the aims of the *Aeneid* is to demonstrate that contemporary Roman values have a root in the distant past.

In the third line the poet juxtaposes the words “Italy” and “destiny”, thereby suggesting that the founding of Rome by Aeneas was not accidental but part of a divine plan. It is one of the main goals of this poem to show that the origins of Rome and of the Roman people generally were fated by the will of the gods. Throughout the poem, at critical points, the god Jupiter speaks to remind both the other gods and the reader that what is about to happen occurs by his will. The poet also intimates at the outset that the actions of Aeneas are not autonomous, but propelled by a destiny over which he has no control. While this may diminish the heroism of the main character, it strengthens the sense of inevitability for the nation of Italy. Aeneas has been sent on a divine mission.

The poet depicts the main character as both “fugitive” and “captain” (line 5), and so shows that Aeneas is loser and leader. He is loser in the sense that he belongs to the people whose city was destroyed; together with fellow refugees, Aeneas abandons the burning city of Troy after it has been defeated by the allied forces of Greeks, and seeks a new homeland. The first six books of the *Aeneid* are dedicated to an account of this flight and search. At the same time Aeneas is the “captain”, that is, the leader of the fallen band; repeatedly he is called upon to show his leadership. This duty is difficult for him, however, and Vergil makes it clear in these opening lines that, like Odysseus, Aeneas must overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles erected by malicious gods. Shortly following these opening lines the poet will explain how Aeneas is “buffeted on the sea” by winds sent by the gods. Also in subsequent books, storms at sea and struggles on land beset the hero in his quest for the promised land.

Vergil refers to one god in particular: baleful Juno (line 8). Juno stands for all the forces opposing success and achievement; throughout the poem it is she who will seek to prevent Aeneas from reaching his goal. Yet she also represents particular opposition, as Juno was associated by Vergil’s readers with Rome’s arch-enemy, Carthage. In the history of Rome, this

Punic city plays no small role in the development of the empire, and on more than one occasion it was Carthage which nearly put an end to the increase of Rome’s power. Throughout the poem, and especially in the first four books, Carthage has a prominent place. Indeed, Aeneas is nearly distracted from his mission when Juno causes him to meet and stay with Dido, the queen of the Carthaginians.

The “cruel losses ... in war” (line 9) refer to the numerous deaths and sufferings that the hero must witness in his quest. These losses are recounted from the first to the last book, from the loss of Aeneas’ wife Creusa, to the loss of his young page, Pallas. Indeed, one of the themes of the *Aeneid* is that war brings nothing but death and sorrow. Some critics would say that the poet expresses the conviction that not even the achievements and successes justify the sorrow and grief that must precede them. Just as the hero is both leader and loser, so too the founding of Rome appears to be good and bad. Whether one reads the poem as marked by positive or negative tone, one cannot avoid reading the poet’s suggestion that wars and bloodshed are necessary precursors to success.

While there is some ambivalence in the tone of these opening lines, there is no doubt that they end climactically in the founding of the new nation, Rome. The poet’s allusion, in line 10, to the founding of the city, refers especially to Books 10 through 12, in which is recounted Aeneas’ effort to establish a community on the banks of the Tiber river. The references to Latium, the Latin race, and Alba (11-12) serve to reinforce the subject of the establishing of the Roman nation, and link the present to the past. Lastly, the phrase “high walls of Rome” (12) provides a fitting ending to the opening, as it concerns the successful end of Aeneas’ quest. Rome’s fortress-like walls are the remaining evidence for the establishment of a magnificent, eternal city. But at the same time there may be a hint of negativism: the high walls are ramparts for times of war, and their very height may be a sign of pride and arrogance.

This brief and selective commentary on the opening lines of the *Aeneid* is intended merely to provide the reader with some suggestions about how to read the rest of the epic. Only by a careful reading can one determine whether the subjects, themes, and tone of the opening are recalled and developed throughout the poem. It is hoped that this introduction will cause you to read, or reread, one of the greatest epics of all time.