

The Light Touch in the *Aeneid*

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I once presented a paper on Roman humor, which was heard by several people who had to work out future programs. Since then, I have been asked to look for humor in everything. Not that I mind. No one takes his humor more seriously than I do.

When I got around to the *Aeneid* in this quest for humor, I found myself a bit baffled. Vergil obviously had sensitivity, delicacy, majestic style. But humor? Somehow I doubt that he told the jokes at Maecenas' parties. Besides, an epic by its very nature is a serious poem. Vergil, as a great Roman poet, embodies the best characteristics of classical literature. In English classes we refer to such people as Ben Jonson and Walter Savage Landor as writing "classical" style. When puzzled students ask what we mean by that term, we name characteristics like simplicity, restraint, and -- the "light touch." This last quality is what I wish to point out in the *Aeneid*.

Vergil's light touch is most evident in certain small descriptive phrases and in some of his delicate figures of speech. Twice, for instance, he gives us vivid pictures by simply describing a person's walk: when Ascanius is following his father out of Troy, he trots beside Aeneas *non passibus aequis*, and Barce, sent on an errand by Dido, bustles along with the nervous eagerness of an old woman. Again, there is an interesting repetition (with only a minor variation) in a question used by both Aeneas and Dido on vaguely similar occasions: when Aeneas is about to desert Dido, she says, "*Mene fugis?*" and later, when she will not speak to him in the underworld, he says, "*Quem fugis?*"

The similes in the *Aeneid* are a study in themselves, but some of them beautifully illustrate Vergil's light touch. The dead Pallas is compared to a flower which some girl has picked and dropped; it is fading but has not yet lost its freshness. And the mortally wounded Euryalus' head droops like a flower cut by a plow, or a poppy that has been beaten over by a heavy rain. An example of very effective personification occurs in Book 8, as Aeneas and his warriors are rowing up a quiet stream in search of Evander's city. Vergil says that the waves and the woods of this rustic, peaceful region stare in amazement at the shining armor and the ornate ships.

A person could go on indefinitely listing descriptive passages which illustrate Vergil's light touch. Actually, the only time that he completely loses his light touch and becomes obvious and heavy-handed is when he pauses in his story in order to carry out his "duty" of praising the household of Augustus. Although he was very fond of Augustus personally, these made-to-order compliments become stiff and awkward, and sound somewhat artificial. Anchises' speech to Aeneas in the underworld reminds us of Disraeli's comment that when dealing with royalty, one should spread flattery on with a trowel. Also, the books which deal primarily with battles are treated less lightly than the others. The descriptions of the fighting are vividly gory, with only occasional light touches like the picture of the delicately woven tunic spattered with a red which seems out of place, and, of course, such similes as those I have mentioned. I somehow feel that the goriness is a conscious attempt to emulate the *Iliad*; and the delicate touches are Vergil.

Vergil never allows his reader to become too involved in one situation or one character. He shifts from scene to scene frequently. His favorite transitional word is *interea* ("meanwhile, back at the ranch..."), which occurs at least thirty times. This transitional word is found in every

book of the *Aeneid*, twice in the first line. Another method that Vergil uses to keep his reader conscious of the fact that this is a “story” is that he, as the story-teller, addresses his audience directly with such side remarks as *mirabile dictu* or *miserabile visu*. By simply turning pages, I once counted sixteen occurrences of such phrases.

Although the *Aeneid* is essentially a serious work, there are three kinds of what could loosely be classified as humor in it: there are those things which Vergil and the Romans found amusing, but which we do not find so; those which Vergil meant to be amusing, and which we find so too; and those which Vergil did not intend to be funny, but which we modern readers cannot help smiling about.

The Greeks and Romans seem to have considered outwitting another person as just good clean fun. And so Vergil entertains us with various instances of this kind of skullduggery. The classic example, of course, is the wooden horse. But there are other, less drastic cases of trickery in the *Aeneid*. We are told how the Tyrians got their land for Carthage by cutting a bull's hide into strips (how clever!), and how Nisus won the foot race at the funeral games not quite according to Hoyle. We do not admire this ability to dupe others as much as the ancients did; therefore, these anecdotes do not delight us as they did the Romans.

Vergil seems to have thoroughly enjoyed writing Book 5 with its funeral games. The events are described with all the gusto of a TV sports announcer; and just like the sports announcer, Vergil likes to give entertaining little sidelights, such as how Menoetes got angry during the boat race and dived overboard in his frustration, and how the arguments arose after the handsome Nisus won the foot race unfairly. Vergil observes that the crowd as a whole favored Nisus because, as he slyly remarks, merit is so much more satisfying when it comes in a handsome boy. This is like saying, "Of course I'll marry for love, but there's no harm in falling in love with a rich girl."

In addition to being like a modern sports review, this book also takes on many of the characteristics of another type of show -- the give-away program. In all the contests both winners and losers get prizes. Everybody entering the foot race, for instance, gets a Cretan spear and a silver-embossed ax, instead of a year's supply of shaving cream. Then, in addition, there are first, second, and third prizes for win, place, and show.

As I have said, some things in the *Aeneid* are funny only from the point of view of the modern reader. Three remarks amuse me every time I read them, although I am quite sure that not one of them was intended to be funny. First, Dido's remark in Book 1, "I wish your leader Aeneas were here," is the cue for Aeneas to burst from the mist surrounding him with the naively egotistical pronouncement: "*Coram, quem quaeritis, adsum*" (Here I am -- in person!). Next, when Aeneas leaves Actium, he inscribes on the entrance to Apollo's temple: *AENEAS HAEC DE DANAIS VICTORIBUS ARMA*. That always reminds me of a tree in Frankfort, Kentucky, on which is carved the profound statement: "Dan'l Boone killed a bar on this tree." And last, Turnus says to the Trojan Pandarus, whom he is about to kill: "I have a message for Priam. Tell him Achilles was here." Could this be the origin of "Kilroy was here"?

To me the most amusing part of Vergil is his conception of women. Most of Vergil's human females are either foolish, colorless, or dangerous; or they make nice prizes and bribes. As evidence of the bargaining value of a pretty woman, we find Juno very early in Book 1 bribing Aeolus by promising him a pretty wife, and in Book 9 Ascanius promises Nisus twelve "*lectissima matrum corpora*" if he successfully carries a message to Aeneas.

Among the women who have a name and an individuality, Camilla is an interesting person, a Penthesilea in Italian costume. But some of my admiration for her disappears when she

loses her life by attacking a man just to plunder his expensive equipment. As Vergil says, she is overcome with the feminine love of acquiring material possessions. I have difficulty believing this of Camilla; but Vergil, since he created her, ought to know.

Vergil doesn't come right out and say so, but he implies that the love of women is the root of all evil. Helen caused the Trojan War. The Sibyl prophesies to Aeneas that he will wage war in Italy, and that the cause will "again" be a woman. Dido almost deters him from his destiny. And Venus convinces Mars how deserving the Trojans are in their fight with the Latins, not by reasoning with him, but by making love to him. Vergil seems to warn that you should never underestimate the power of a woman; she is a dangerous toy. Mercury, at any rate, minces no words when he comes to tell Aeneas to leave Carthage. He doesn't even bother to say hello. His first statement is to sting Aeneas with the insulting epithet *uxorius* ("henpecked"). Mercury arrives, delivers his message, and departs before Aeneas has time to go through his usual reaction of having his hair stand on end and his voice stick in his throat. His next conversation with Aeneas ends with the generalization: "*Varium et mutabile semper femina.*" This is the favorite line of the entire Aeneid for ninety-five per cent of my male students, and it invariably brings a smile to the face of every student. Mercury's message was complete without this sentiment; I feel that Vergil simply "threw it in" with the knowledge that it would arouse the masculine reaction of "Ain't it the truth!" The only three sensible women in the entire poem are the aged Hecuba, the dead Creusa, and Dido's sister Anna. Anna could have collaborated with Ovid on the *Art of Love*. After telling Dido all the practical reasons for which she needs a man around the house, she turns to the question of just how to "hook" Aeneas. She says, "Just keep him amused until winter comes, when "nobody" would want to start a sea voyage. Then, by the time spring rolls around, he won't "want to go."

Dido's actions "must" be explained as Cupid's work, for sometimes her behavior is that of a bobby-soxer with a "crush." Throughout Book 1 she is a very real woman to me, a woman who is falling in love and who simply doesn't want to say goodnight after the banquet. So she searches desperately for questions to keep the conversation going, and she comes up with such feminine queries as "What were the horses of Diomedes like?" and "How large a man was Achilles?" But the Dido of Book 4 bothers me. I am not convinced that this sophisticated lady would ask Aeneas to tell the same story of his adventures two nights in succession. Surely she had more ingenuity than that. Also, she goes on a hunting party dressed in purple and gold as if she were going to a formal dinner. Perhaps this is the appropriate costume for what she is hunting, but it is as out of place for a real hunt as high-heeled shoes are for a woman who is weeding her vegetable garden.

Nor does Aeneas show to great advantage in his relationship with Dido. After he determines to leave Carthage, I am fascinated by watching the male mind at work on the dilemma of how to escape from a passionate woman who loves him. He tries to figure out what kind of explanation he can use to *ambire* (quite literally "get around") Dido. He seeks the "*mollissima fandi tempora*" -- the psychological moment for breaking the news to her. No wonder Vergil never married. The flimsiest speech in the entire Aeneid is Aeneas' answer to Dido's question of "What do you think you are doing?" His first comment is: "You've been awfully good to me, Dear, and I'll never forget you." That is no answer to anything, and is the best way I can think of to make Dido furious. Next he says: "I want to say a few things in my defense." This is a simple declaration of war. Then he makes his first frontal attack: "I never married you, nor did I ever promise to marry you." After he has said that, I wonder how he could think that Dido would even be listening to the more reasonable arguments that follow. But he is not through saying the wrong things even yet. After his explanation of his action,

he says that he must do what the gods will. Then he adds: "So stop upsetting yourself and me with your complaints!" In other words, "Stop nagging!" This man who has been trying to figure out the best way of talking over the situation with Dido has just succeeded in delivering the most inept farewell speech I have ever heard. It forms, incidentally, the last words, so far as we are told, that Aeneas addressed to Dido while she lived. I am not sure whether Vergil intended Aeneas to look ridiculous in this interview or whether he simply lacked insight into the intricacies of feminine psychology. But to me the great hero who is completely ineffectual in the presence of an angry woman is amusing -- and human.

There is another angle to my subject which I wish to mention briefly. I find the *Aeneid* delightful reading, but I am not sure that I did when I was a student. I wonder whether as teachers we don't sometimes approach the *Aeneid* with too much seriousness. The result is that our students turn the story into dignified but stuffy English. How would you want your students to translate the words of Latinus when he is trying to get Turnus to give up Lavinia? He says: "*Sunt aliae innuptae.*" In my estimation, "There are other fish in the sea" is a much better translation than "There are other unmarried girls."

Rolfe Humphries' poetic version of the *Aeneid* does an admirable job of maintaining the original vitality. One line that especially delights me is Juno's comment in Book 7, when she has failed to get Jupiter's co-operation and is planning to seek Pluto's help. She says to herself (in Humphries' translation): "If I cannot bend Heaven, I can raise Hell."

I encourage my students to use modern terminology. When I first translate a line by a slang expression, I notice a look of disbelief and consternation on the faces in the class. But the students soon catch on, and enjoy it. Such a thing can, of course, be carried too far, but I have no objection to their writing "Creusa got lost in the shuffle" and "Aeneas is his own public-relations man." The student must interpret Vergil in terms that have meaning for him. Perhaps the *Aeneid* does lose some of its majesty and dignity by being translated into current adolescent language; but unless the student can feel that Aeneas and Dido are "alive", they have no more appeal than figures on a billboard. I cannot (and my students cannot) imagine Venus, disguised as a huntress, meeting a couple of men in the woods and saying, "Greetings, young men." I think that she would have said something like, "Hi, fellows." And when Dido is raking Aeneas over the coals for what she considers his attempt to sneak away from her, I doubt seriously that in her intense anger she addresses him as "O faithless one." Vergil uses *perfide*. I would classify the literal translation of this among the *New Yorker*'s file of "exclamations we doubt ever got exclaimed." I suspect that Dido would have searched frantically in her mind for the most insulting epithet she could possibly think of. Since she was certainly a lady, there are words she would just as certainly not have thought of or, if she had, would have discarded. But I believe that in her anger and frustration, she finally spit out at him the Roman equivalent of "You -- you cad!" It is the people who make out the vocabulary lists for Latin textbooks who are responsible for many of the student's awkward and unnatural translations. *Perfidus* is defined in the book I use as "unfaithful, treacherous, perfidious." But none of these words fits the situation here. Since students have a fear of ad-libbing and a dearth of imagination, they will invariably choose one of the meanings listed. The result is often a translation without color or -- worse still -- with the wrong color.

The *Aeneid* is to me a vivid and lively book. The fact that it is one of the most highly respected pieces of world literature should not awe us into approaching it with uncomfortable solemnity.