

How does Virgil present the character of Aeneas in books 1, 2 and 4 of the 'Aeneid'?

Virgil opens by declaring his subject: "I sing of arms and of the man." (I.1) The man is Aeneas, fleeing the ruins of his native city, Troy, with its survivors. The tale opens in a similar vein to that of Homer's *Odyssey*, which is perhaps an attempt by Virgil to immediately settle the two on the same plane. Like Homer, Virgil attempts to appeal to the audience sympathies, by declaring 'Great too were his sufferings in war' when he speaks of Aeneas.

It is impossible to continue without again mentioning Homer. The very fact that Aeneas, too, has incurred the wrath of the Gods (or, more specifically, Juno) as Odysseus had managed with Neptune again gives us reason to compare the two, which was probably Virgil's aim. He wanted the reader to take the two, Odysseus as the witty but sly hero whereas Aeneas seems to come across more as the self sacrificing, long suffering hero. Both are on journeys, but while Odysseus is simply faced with the task of returning home, Aeneas is assigned the task of building a new one. Perhaps the biggest difference is the point that while the Gods in the *Odyssey* were trying to stop Odysseus from returning home, whereas in the *Aeneid*, Aeneas is actually pushed along by the Gods to complete his quest, as he tells Dido, "It is not by / my own that I still search for Italy." (IV.361-362). This is perhaps the first stumbling block, since Aeneas is always being pulled along by fate, will it give him a chance to develop his character as Odysseus did? Dido, a supporting character, already seems to be a more prominent one despite only appealing briefly in the story. For instance, when he and Dido do fall in love, we receive a very detailed account of Dido's thoughts and feelings, whereas Aeneas' reactions seem very much dictated by the Gods "He heard but did not heed her words. The/ Fates forbade it and the Gods blocked his ears to all appeals." (IV.439-440) Dido is even used to build up Aeneas' character through her own words, "What a/ look on his face! What courage in his heart! What a warrior!" (VI. 10-13)

While in the *Odyssey*, the Gods were often blamed by Odysseus for his misfortune, it was never always proven to the reader. Odysseus was very much a flawed hero, he did make mistakes. But in the *Aeneid*, it seems that Aeneas has the very fortunate excuse that when anything does go wrong, it lies in the hands of the Gods rather than himself. Dido only dies, for example, because she kills herself. She would have never done such a thing if a) she hadn't been struck by Cupid's arrow, or b) Aeneas had been told by Jupiter that he was to leave in search of Italy.

Although the Gods were involved in the *Odyssey*, it seems a book cannot pass by in the *Aeneid* with more than its fair share of interaction from the Gods. This basically makes Aeneas an unwilling pawn of Fate, and while Virgil valiantly tries to show how this makes him suffer, we can only ever think that he is not fully committed to the quest for which the Gods have chosen for him.

Aeneas has even descended from the Gods (certainly a one over on Odysseus) and in his descriptions he is frequently likened to a God "He was like Appollo/...his streaming hair caught up and shaped into a soft garland of/ green and twined round a band of gold...and his face shone with equal radiance and grace." (VI. 143...147-149...151) by both Virgil himself and the other characters in the poem, "he is descended from the gods." (VI. 13-14)

So he certainly looks the part, but does he act the part? "Exhausted, they had all deserted/ me and thrown themselves from the roof or given their/ suffering bodies to the flames." (II.564-566) This phrase could tell us one of two things, the first being that despite his friends deserting him, Aeneas still pushes on. This notion is somewhat quashed however by his mother appearing only

a page later and telling him "Do not disobey me...escape with all haste." (II. 608...619) The other thought is a somewhat sceptical one - Aeneas describes that "They had all deserted me." What does this tell us about his leadership? His fellow Trojans did not fight to the death, but rather committed suicide. A kinder view would be that even in such a desperate situation Aeneas manages to keep his head, but even then it is implied that it is indeed his divine mother who is protecting him when she tells him, "I shall not leave your side." (II.620)

Aeneas claims that his tale of the fall of Troy is so sorrowful that it would bring tears to anyone's eyes, even those of a "soldier ... of harsh Ulysses." Here Virgil is claiming that his poem is more dramatic than Homer's, with some roundabout logic. In the *Iliad*, Homer told the story of Troy's fall from the perspective of Ulysses et al., and since Virgil's tale would even make a Greek soldier cry, it is more powerful. The view from the defeated side would naturally be more poignant, after all. On the other hand, Virgil must also make sure that his hero, Aeneas, does not appear to be less of a warrior than the Greeks, even though he lost to them. And so Virgil tries to minimize the humiliation of the Trojans. He must admit that they were duped by the Trojan Horse that the Greeks constructed; but through his hero the poet implies that they were not all fooled, or foolish. In the end they still took it into Troy, not because of their own gullibility, but because of the gods.

Thus, while Aeneas and the Trojans lost a battle they could have won, in the end they had no choice but to follow the will of the gods anyway. On the other hand, if it were not for the help of the gods no one would have escaped from Troy; again, behind all the infighting on Olympus, fate is always fulfilled. The sufferings of Aeneas in Troy will be made up, eventually, by his glory in Italy. The soul of his wife comforts him with this message, and from here forward Aeneas will always have at least one eye on his foretold destiny, far off though it may be.