



PROJECT MUSE®

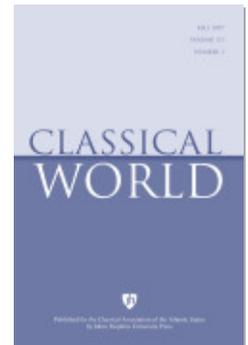
Virgil the Homerist

Michael C. J. Putnam

Classical World, Volume 111, Number 1, Fall 2017, pp. 101-103 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2017.0079>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676947>

effect of consolidating Harvardian wishfulness, and cementing the romantic idea of Virgil as an independent spirit defying, and ultimately falling victim to, the oppression of his own times.

CLASSICAL PRESS OF WALES

Virgil the Homerist

MICHAEL C. J. PUTNAM

Besides the often-cited work of Bernard Knox and Viktor Pöschl, the scholarly writing and the pedagogical distinction of three people, Reuben Brower, J. P. Elder, and Cedric Whitman, were of paramount importance to me as background for writing *The Poetry of the Aeneid*. I was privileged to count them also as close friends, as well as continuing mentors, for the remainder of their lives.

Brower, teacher of teachers par excellence, educated me and my peers in how to analyze great literature, especially through his first book, *The Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading* (1951). And the result of our “close reading,” he instructed us, would be an appreciation of the moral value of our chosen texts.

Beginning in the decade after the conclusion of World War II, Elder was a leader in applying the principles of New Criticism to Latin literature through a series of masterful interpretations of the great Roman poets for his students to emulate. Both Brower and Elder illustrated that the honest appraisal of words and their richness of meaning was the surest avenue toward appropriate critical evaluation.

But it was Whitman’s monumental *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (1958), especially the chapters entitled “Fire and Other Elements” and “Achilles: The Evolution of a Hero,” that most helped me toward my own understanding of Virgil’s great epic and especially of its conclusion where the infuriate Aeneas dispatches Turnus, his suppliant foe.

The wrath of the Greek hero permeates the *Iliad* from its opening line, and Whitman’s work confirmed my own view of the *Aeneid* as a parallel text formed by a cycle that commences with the anger of Juno, rousing up a destructive tempest against her hated Trojan exiles, and

ends with Aeneas' vindictive sword thrust and with the victim's life resentfully departing to the shades below. Virgil is as ruthless toward his reader's peace of mind as is his victorious champion, adamant in the face of his victim's redoubled pleas for mercy.

Whitman's analysis of Achilles also urged a specific comparison with Aeneas, especially between the latter's final deed and its Homeric counterpart, as the Greek hero takes food with Priam, whose son he has earlier done to death, and the poet urges us to honor their common humanity.

At its finale Virgil chooses not to contextualize his work, either in its contemporary historical setting or in the evolution of the epic genre, as Statius, say, does a century later at the end of his *Thebaid*. But the earlier poet may in fact be actually doing so, with no less force for his indirection. If we can judge from an anecdote recounted by Plutarch (*Moralia* 207c7), Augustus, Rome's absolute ruler at the time of the *Aeneid*'s composition, was no stranger to anger, the emotion that dominates the poem's conclusion. As the Greek author tells it, when the philosopher Athenodorus was attempting to retire from the emperor's court and return to Tarsus, his parting advice to his sovereign was: "Remember, whenever you are angry, to say and do nothing before you have repeated the four and twenty letters to yourself." When his employer heard these words, according to Plutarch, he caught the would-be leave-taker by the hand and insisted that he remain for one further year.

Though I have done so since, I made no attempt at the end of my book to give the epic's climactic event an ethical setting, which is to say to place the poem's enraged protagonist in a position that would seem to be in negative dialogue with the preceding narrative. Yet not only does the concluding scenario appear to challenge the primacy of clemency in the actions of those in authority, a *modus vivendi* that Anchises proposes to Aeneas during his meeting in the underworld with the ghosts of future Roman greats. It also could be understood to cast a shadow on the glory of Augustus himself, glory that receives several laudatory places of prominence in the course of the poem.

Whitman's final lesson to me was to watch the difference between how Homer and Virgil choose to delineate the anger of their heroes. Both poets tell us that power and anger are universal complements. But the wrath of Achilles is gradually dissipated as his poem is rounded out. Not only does the aged king of Troy sup with the killer of his son Hector. The *Iliad* itself ends fittingly with ritual mourning for the latter's death.

Virgil, by contrast, offers no relief from Aeneas' final, and finalizing, act of fury. The poet's language would presumably evoke for Augustus, as it does for us, a vision of the damage individual passion can wreak, especially in the hands of someone omnipotent. The theme takes us from the brilliant beginnings of Greek literature to a masterpiece of Latin letters. It remains a constant in much transcendent writing to follow.

BROWN UNIVERSITY

Solvuntur Frigore

JAY REED

Twice shaken to my intellectual core, I have lost any confidence about what the “optimism–pessimism” debate means or where I stand within it. In 2007 I published a book-length interpretive study of the construction of Roman identity in the *Aeneid*. A reviewer for *The Claremont Review of Books*, understanding my argument as “deny[ing] all meaning to Roman identity,” turned halfway through to a corrective illustration (“But consider, for example, the poem’s terrible climax . . .”) and took me to task for not addressing the complexities of what amounts to a Put-namesque reading of Aeneas’ slaying of Turnus (Esolen 2007). Several years later, the author of the article on “Critical Theory” for the *Virgil Encyclopedia*, allowing that the “traditional imperialist (pro-Augustan, optimist, code-affirming, etc.) reading [of the *Aeneid*] remains prominent,” cited my book, together with Cairns 1989 and Galinsky 1996, as a specimen of that approach, which she contrasts with the one holding that “two (or more) ‘voices’ (authorially controlled or not) can be detected within Virgil’s texts,” noting that the latter view “seems a fact of his poetics” (Perkell 2014: 317).

It would seem that not only can my reading of the *Aeneid* be understood both as “code-affirming” and as radically anti-determinist (“a deconstructing critic, learned and cold to the end”—so *The Claremont Review*), but, even more surprisingly, that the “Harvard,” “pessimist,” “two-voices” interpretation can actually serve as orthodoxy for scholars coming from quite different critical directions, both of whom can find