



PROJECT MUSE®

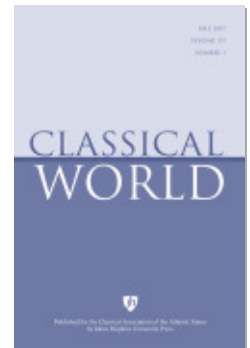
Circle Games from Pharr to Stahl

Richard F. Thomas

Classical World, Volume 111, Number 1, Fall 2017, pp. 115-120 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2017.0083>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676951>

Dear Professor Hejduk, you can now see (and I think you will now understand) why, when accepting your invitation, I warned that the title of my contribution would be something like “Memoir of *The Black Sheep*.”⁸

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH, EMERITUS

Circle Games from Pharr to Stahl

RICHARD F. THOMAS

Unlike Tennyson—“I who loved thee since my day began”—I came to Virgil relatively late in life. I think we read bits of the *Aeneid* in school in New Zealand, but frankly don’t remember having done so. For better or worse, I did not share the experience of countless U.S. schoolchildren, and generations of their teachers, who read selections from *Aeneid* 1–6 in the innovative school commentary of Clyde Pharr, first published in 1930, the preface stating that “the author is much pleased to offer this little volume in homage to the spirit of the bard of Mantua at a time when all the world is uniting to pay him tribute” (1998: xii).¹ Pharr, a specialist in Roman law, wrote nothing on Virgil beyond a preface, which has been read and absorbed for the past eighty-five years by many schoolteachers of Virgil, and presumably passed on to their charges. This textbook was later used, and in some cases still is, in the teaching of the AP Latin syllabus (“Vergil” until 2012, “Vergil and Caesar” since the 2012–13 school year). Pharr’s anachronistic introduction sees all through the eyes of Augustus, reflecting the Servian and Suetonian focus that seems to be the ultimate source (2):

The poem was undertaken at the request of Augustus. . . . Vergil and Augustus were both interested in thus giving divine sanction and the

⁸ Should I perhaps brace myself now for a new name (“*the wolf in <black> sheep’s clothing*”)?

¹ See Thomas 2001: 235–36 for a similar reaction from the President of the American Classical League, who wrote to Mussolini, congratulating him on the bimillennium, and received the *Duce’s* response to the effect that Virgil’s love of country and countrymen is the “basis of that spiritual movement that we have called *Fascismo*.”

weight of hoary antiquity to the measures which Augustus had undertaken for establishing the empire. Thus Augustus appears as the restorer of the good old days and good old ways of the fathers. He is the promised ruler of divine descent who is to bring peace and a return of the Golden Age to the whole world.

On Virgil himself the ancient *Life of Vergil* is even more to the fore in Pharr's opining (3):

As a piece of literature, the *Aeneid* has both the strengths and weaknesses of its author and subject matter. Vergil was a weakling, usually in poor health, shy to the point of painfulness, a sentimental idealist, and little acquainted with the hard and practical ways of the stern old Roman world. He was never married and seems to have cared little or nothing for feminine society. His one great ideal of life can be summed up in the word **pietās**, *devotion, loyalty*, and he equips his hero (**pius Aenēās**) with a full and overflowing measure of this quality, which finds its best expression in an unquestioned obedience to the will of the gods and to their more or less contradictory commands no matter how much human suffering may be entailed nor how much apparent wrong may result.

Fortunately I missed out on all of this in school, so remained something of a *tabula rasa* on what the *Aeneid* was "about." As an undergraduate in New Zealand I took a course with W. R. Barnes on the *Georgics*, mostly book 4, I think it was, probably. That poem has always for me been the perfect poem; likewise it is a poem that came in my mind to sit easily and well with Harvard School readings of the epic that followed. Both poems deal in shadows as much as in light, and both—like the *Eclogues*—focus on losers as much as on winners: it is Meliboeus, Moeris, Lycidas, Orpheus and Eurydice, Dido and Turnus who get much of the music and whose fates linger along with the victories and successes of Tityrus, Aristaeus, and Aeneas.

Barnes also introduced me to Steele Commager's 1966 edition, *Virgil: A Collection of Critical Essays*, which contained the articles of Brooks, Clausen, and Parry, with other now-classic offerings such as Bernard Knox's "The Serpent and the Flame." It was one of the few books I brought with me to the U.S., though I seem to have lost it at some point. In graduate school at Michigan (1974–77) I read the *Aeneid*, or much of it, since it was on the reading list, and I did a *Georgics* seminar with D. O. Ross, Clausen's student at Harvard and Parry's colleague at Yale at the time of Parry's death. Ross also supervised not only my dissertation,

but before that my special exam on Horace, in 1975–76. I had been close to Horace since my undergraduate days, and this predilection led me via the ethnographical sketch of Horace's farm at *Epistles* 1.16.1–16 to the ethnographical material of the *Georgics* and *Aeneid*, and to a dissertation mostly on Horace and Virgil.

In these years I was generally occupied with the *Georgics*, New Comedy, Callimachus and other Hellenistic poets, and Catullus and the neoterics. But Clausen and Putnam did appear in the fourth chapter, on the *Aeneid*, of my 1977 dissertation, the latter with G. Binder on the “temporal levels and historical parallels in the eighth book” (162n15), the former on the end of *Aeneid* 6: “see, for an uneasiness about the end of the sixth book, W. V. Clausen [1964] . . .” (165n33). Returning to the 1982 publication of the revised thesis, *Lands and Peoples in Roman Poetry*, I now see I opened the chapter with a footnote on readings of the Harvard School, but not naming it as such, nor confined to the canonical players (103–104n1):

Perhaps the main general work in this “movement” is that of M. C. J. Putnam [1965] . . . *passim*. With a more specific focus, see A. Parry [1963] . . . and particularly W. V. Clausen [1964] . . . J. K. Newman, *Augustus and the New Poetry*, Coll. Latomus 88 (1967) 262–264. It is erroneous to see these works as representing a “school” of any sort; rather they constitute separate reactions (of differing intensity) to the traditional and totally positive view of previous critics.

By then I had read W. R. Johnson's *Darkness Visible*, the source, partly playful, of the term Harvard School. In the text of the same chapter I approvingly quoted Johnson's reference to the uneasiness the reader feels upon reaching the end of the poem (93, quoting Johnson 1976, 115–16):

One may try to rationalize the dissatisfaction by proving the villainy of Turnus or by showing that the death of Turnus, the manner of his death, symbolizes the defeat of Juno; for those who are content to read the poem as an ethical melodrama, such solutions are apparently adequate—once we have separated the good guys from the bad guys and the bad guys get what is coming to them, the beauty of the poem is found to be intact. Thus, a solution we would find banal in any ephemeral movie of our choice is found to be adequate in the hands of an acknowledged master of Western epic. By the same token it does no good to make Aeneas a monster, for that is to do little more than play the same game in a slightly more fashionable way: find the villain but call him anti-hero. But in writing this poem, Vergil sought to imagine a

world—or, rather, a complexity of worlds—that one or another kind of villain could not account for.

This has always seemed to me essentially correct. When I did come to write on the topic, Johnson's premise was my own and it still is (see Thomas 1998 and 2001).

I. "Cruel, unheroic Turnus"

Nor have my convictions been shaken by a new book in which the effort to shove this dangerous genie back into its bottle attains a feverish pitch. Even the title of H. P. Stahl's book attempts to persuade, needing three colons to make sure we get the point right from the start: *Poetry Underpinning Power: Virgil's Aeneid: The Epic for Emperor Augustus: A Recovery Study* (2016). This work is a cartoon of the position of those (not least the current author) not joyous or at ease with the death of Turnus, but rather seeing in that death, along with that of Dido, and other parts of the poem, essential elements of ambivalence and melancholy that interact with the public and Augustan elements of the *Aeneid*.

Given "the necessity of Recovery Studies for (re)gaining access to the *Aeneid* of Vergil" (77), Turnus does not do well in these pages. In a screed stretching over 75 pages, chapter 2, "The Death of King Turnus," defiantly draws attention to the "criminal" Turnus with his "crafty plea for mercy" (53), utter bad guy in a world whose Manichean simplicity will convince few contemporary readers of Virgil. We are in a world of villains and heroes: "pious King Latinus" (36); "less-than-pious Messapus" (36); "the monster Mezentius" (62), with all directed against the "compassionate Vergil School." In case we forgot those pages, at the beginning of chapter 4, "Winning the Reader's Assent through Subliminal Guidance," we are reminded that the reader "is being filled with sympathy for Pallas' noble courage and impregnated with abhorrence and antipathy against cruel, unheroic Turnus" (163). Readers who make it to p. 347 will be treated to another 88 pages, again with overloaded titling: "Part III Testing a Critical Method by Repeat Application: The Ancient Author Guides his Reader. Chapter 7 Allocating Guilt and Innocence, II: Turnus, the Impious Opponent." Such readers may want to save themselves some trouble by skipping right to the conclusion on p. 430, so as to learn that Turnus, "besides being a treaty-breaker [wasn't that Tolumnius?] and a less than heroic killer on the battlefield," as shown

by “Jupiter, Destiny’s speaker,” “in opposing Aeneas, the proto-Julian . . . was guilty, and guilty beyond the secular sphere.” That was easy. In case you were wondering about “Allocating Guilt and Innocence, I” you can read chapter 5, subtitled “Queen Dido, The Liberated Widow.” This clocks in at 67 pages, culminating in the fact that Dido sort of deserves to die (*‘compassion and pity—yes; acquittal—no!’*, 244) because of the thinking behind the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis* of 18 BCE, issued a year after Virgil’s death.

Stahl’s project was to present Virgil as “the ideal choice for fashioning and promulgating the myth of the newly empowered dynasty, in a work that would become both the legitimizing manifesto of Augustus’ authority and a blueprint for much of occidental Europe’s hierarchically structured social order.” This mission requires not just an attack on the Harvard School, but on anyone who treats the poem as anything but such a manifesto, including, along with Kallendorf, Kronenberg, Putnam, and Thomas, and critics such as Alessandro Barchiesi, Joseph Farrell, Denis Feeney, R. D. Williams, and Peter White. Part of the bluster of the book is the labeling of all of these as “short-distance critics.” He on the other hand is a “long-distance critic.” He seems to mean by this that he sees the forest, the rest of us, the trees. That of course allows him to ignore or downplay anything (short-distance/tree) that gets in the way of his manifesto; and so (to confine myself to Turnus) you won’t find the following lines in the index: *Aen.* 7.55–56, 473–474; 12.872–886, 908–914. Look those up and ask yourself why a poet, any poet, would produce such poetry if his concern was simply to depict and applaud the extermination of a criminal enemy of the regime of Emperor Augustus or any other autocrat.

II. Back to Reality

Reading Parry’s article fifty years on, one is struck by just how unobjectionable, indeed how obvious, its essential points are. Through focalization, free indirect discourse, and other narratological devices, through the aestheticizing of depictions of violence and death, and through the ideological and political complexity that are so obviously part of its fabric when read in its entirety, Virgil’s poem is one that resists and will continue to resist attempts to reduce it to the status of a manifesto for Augustus, notwithstanding the fact that it has been so reduced over the centuries. Dryden’s translation may have Turnus die with the same line

as Mezentius, but as readers we can point to the text of Virgil, who has him share the final line of Camilla—to very different effect. Mussolini could make bimillennial claims about the shared spirit of the *Aeneid* and his own fascism, but like Italy the poem survives that gambit. Servius, situated deep into the empire of the Caesars, like Pharr knew that the aim of the *Aeneid* was to imitate Homer and to praise Augustus from his forebears (*Aen.* 1.1), but it is now an established reality that the poem’s “complexity of worlds” takes us far and away from that simplicity.

You can have your *Aeneid* lighter or darker. Mine’s darker, and that is one of the fruits of the Harvard School. Apart from some encyclopedia entries, these words are the first I’ve written much on the poem’s ideology in fifteen years, and I don’t see myself writing on it again.² Nor do I expect the question will flourish in others’ hands, if partisans of a lighter poem keep trying to recover the *Aeneid* of Clyde Pharr’s introduction and imperial bimillenary celebrations. Those interested in this game can keep playing it, but they should expect to do so before an ever smaller and ever less interested audience—some of whom may even experience “recovery.” There aren’t many around at this point who can be persuaded to see the poem simply through the lens of ruler-cult. And besides, there are newer and more interesting things to talk about in the work of this ever-surprising poet.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Present at the Founding

CLIFFORD WEBER

It must be that, as an undergraduate at Harvard College in the early 1960s, I was present at the founding of the Harvard School. At the time, though, I was quite unaware of any such thing coming into being. Indeed, the label itself I first encountered only many years later. If the putative founders of the Harvard School had in common anything beyond, in most cases, their connection with Harvard University, the bond that

² Unless new wars reactivate the issues; see Thomas 2015.