

PIUS AENEAS OR AENEAS THE WIMP?¹

Alan H.F. Griffin, University of Exeter

I wonder if you agree with me that Aeneas, at least in the first half of the *Aeneid*, appears to be something of a *Wimp*? We're programmed, of course, to think of heroes as butch, fighting types. Many books about the *Aeneid* have a section on Aeneas' character, describing him in fairly *Macho* terms and forgetting, conveniently, that Aeneas' reaction to the problems he faces in the early part of the *Aeneid* is often to *weep*. We don't like heroes who weep - General Colin Powell or General Oliver North don't seem to be blubberers. The Sibyl's brisk reminder to Aeneas has a point, "Night is coming, Aeneas: yet we waste hours in weeping" (*A.* 6.539): Aeneas weeps a good deal.

Early in the poem, when Aeneas gets lost on the coast of Africa and asks directions from a passing girl, he introduces himself with the smug and sickly words, "I am Aeneas the good", or perhaps "I am Aeneas the goody-goody" (*A.* 1.378). It's hardly the way a five star general would introduce himself.

The real-life heroes of Roman history, Camillus and Decius, Fabius and Marius tended to be men of mature years, administrative experience and proven ability. They were often short and bald and warty as anyone could see from their death masks or infer from their names: they're not young men of great beauty and superhuman gifts like Homer's heroes. Historical Greeks have names like "Strength of the people" (Demosthenes) or "Glorious Victor" (Callinicus). Roman surnames, by contrast, tend to mean things like "Stammerer" (Balbus), "Pug-nose" (Silus), "Stupid" (Brutus), "Bald-head" (Calvus), "Bandy-legs" (Varus), "Lisper" (Blaesus), "Squint-eye" (Strabo), "Chick-pea" (Cicero), "Big-nose" (Naso) and "Flat-foot" (Plautus). They sound like a crowd of physical and mental wrecks. Judging by their surnames the Romans didn't mind cutting themselves and each other down to size.

So when you read the first books of the *Aeneid* you don't have to picture Aeneas as a handsome, youthful *Hunk* - but perhaps a bit the worse for wear after spending ten years fighting at Troy (where he wasn't one of the top class fighters and was on the losing side) and seven more years drifting aimlessly about the Mediterranean. And since leaving Troy he hasn't achieved very much as he drifted about. The only achievements Virgil records are (1) laying an ambush for the Harpies (*A.* 3.225) - that was futile since the Harpies were invulnerable - and (2) shooting seven stags (*A.* 1.192-193). So we're probably not too far wrong if we imagine a somewhat bedraggled Aeneas in his late thirties. We may remember that the real-life hero of Virgil's day, bringer of peace to a war-torn world, was not a very glamorous figure with his sandy hair, his bad teeth and home-made woollen underwear. He certainly cut no dash as a warrior or general. But this man, known to us as Augustus, was master of the Roman world at the age of thirty-three.

That Aeneas came from Troy and founded the settlement (Lavinium) from which Rome was later colonised had been accepted as historical fact for hundreds of years before Virgil wrote, but there were different opinions about how Aeneas got from Troy to Italy. It was agreed that Aeneas did get away from Troy and that he was the only Trojan leader to do so. Various stories were found to account for this and a number of them were reviewed by a learned Greek called Dionysius (*Roman Antiquities* 1.46) a few years after the *Aeneid*

¹ This is the text of a talk given in 1992 to teachers and pupils at the University of Cape Town.

appeared. Virgil will have known them all, and probably knew Dionysius who lived in Rome.

One account said simply that Aeneas escaped because he was away from Troy on business when the city fell (Arctinus *Iliu Persis*). A second version said that Aeneas, having a grudge against Priam's family, betrayed the city. Neither of these versions suited Virgil - an absent Aeneas or Aeneas as a Trojan traitor were not what Virgil wanted in his description of Troy's fall. A third version, giving Aeneas credit for intelligence, if not heroism, suggested that Aeneas grasped the true significance of Laocoon's fate - namely that Troy was doomed - and that Aeneas got out of Troy while the going was good. A fourth version, which Dionysius liked best, said that Aeneas seized and held the citadel at Troy while the rest of the city was sacked, that he sent the women and children away under guard, that he evacuated the citadel in good order, taking the best chariots and most of his valuables as well as his father, wife and children and that he negotiated an honourable truce. This account must have appealed to the Roman aristocracy, some of whose ancestors found themselves in similar circumstances when Rome was sacked by the Gauls. This version - preferred by Dionysius - presents Aeneas as an effective commander and a clear-headed negotiator. Virgil's story about Troy's fatal last night, with a much less effective Aeneas, must have caused some raised eyebrows among Rome's noblest families.

And indeed elsewhere in the *Aeneid* elements of Dionysius' favourite version seem to be in the back of Virgil's mind. In Books 1, 3, 5 and 7 Aeneas produces all sorts of bulky valuables by way of presents or prizes. He produces bronze cauldrons, golden bowls, diadems and necklaces, a Greek helmet and a quiver won from the Amazons, a gold-worked breast-plate requiring two men to lift it. He produces Priam's state regalia and, strangest of all, Helen's elaborate going-away clothes that she wore when she eloped with Paris. It was these clothes which Aeneas, surprisingly, selected as a suitable present for Dido. It's all a bit odd - one is almost tempted to wonder what Aeneas was up to when he crept into Priam's palace by the side door (*A.* 2.453-457). In fact there's no way that Aeneas, as described in Book 2, could have brought all these items out of Troy with him: he barely managed to escape with his life, carrying his father on his shoulders and pulling along his son by the hand. He couldn't have carried the bulky valuables as well. Of course a poet isn't obliged to put in everything, but this is not just omission, but inconsistency.

For whatever reason - I hope we'll discover later - in Book 2 Virgil didn't want the Aeneas that Dionysius regarded as the most probable one - one with a cool head, a sharp eye, one who was a quick thinker and an effective organiser. In the second half of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas is just such a man. In the second half he acts like a general when he leaves the defence of his camp to a subordinate and goes off to secure allies. But by then he is a man changed by his descent into the Underworld and what he learns there. Assured at that stage of divine support and the glorious future of his family and race, he is able to co-operate effectively with the decrees of destiny. But in Troy, on the city's fatal last night, he knows nothing of his destiny and there is no question of him organising anything.

Like everyone else (except for Laocoon) he's taken in by the Wooden Horse and doesn't even express an opinion in the debate about what to do with it. Later Aeneas helps to open up Troy's walls and drag the fatal horse inside. When the Greeks leap out of the horse and begin the sack of Troy, Aeneas is fast asleep. He awakes only when the house next door is on fire, then stands stupefied on his roof gazing and forgets that Hector has just told him in a dream to get out of the doomed city quickly. Then Aeneas gets his armour on and, encountering a terrified priest in full flight, asks "What *is* to be done, where *are* our defences?" (*A.* 2.322). And learning from the priest that there are *none*, he goes belting off into the flames and the fighting with no thought of a plan.

Brooks Otis in his book on Virgil finds in this Aeneas "a picture of the old Homeric hero, the man of *dolor* and *furor*, the man of Achillean wrath" who is to be slowly changed by harsh experience and suffering into a new type of Roman hero who understands the need for discipline if his people's destiny is to be fulfilled (Otis, *Virgil* 1964:243-244). I can't go all the way with this. I'm not convinced that Aeneas is all that Homeric in Book 2 and in the final book Aeneas is as violent as ever he was in Troy, savagely and Homerically mocking his unfortunate foe Turnus (A. 12.946), who stands betrayed, deserted and disabled by the Fury flapping in his face. The real difference is that in Book 12 the gods are now on Aeneas' side and he knows it. In Book 2, in Troy, they were against him, but he didn't know it.

Aeneas tells us, more than once, how he *felt* that night in Troy. "Frantic I seize weapons" (A. 2.314), "Rage and anger drive me headlong" (A. 2.316-317), "O ashes of Troy ... I call you to witness that ... I earned the death which fate denied me" (A. 2.431-434). But his actions hardly bear this out. When Aeneas' father refuses to leave Troy, Aeneas tells us "Again, I rush to arms, longing for death in my utter misery" (A. 2.655). But again it's only a *feeling*. In fact, what he actually does is to deliver another speech petulantly reprimanding his father (A. 2.657-670). For a hero Aeneas protests rather too much and does too little.

Homer's heroes talk, but most of the time they fight and their duels are described in clinical detail. We know just where the spear went in and where it came out, just what limbs or organs are severed and how the man falls. There is none of this in *Aeneid* Book 2, though plenty later in the poem. It may be said that a burning city at night offers little scope for individual combat. But in Book 9 Nisus fights in the dark and Turnus engages in a vivid struggle when penned inside the Trojan camp: so why not Aeneas in Troy? What heroic spirit there is in Troy is shown by others: by Laocoon at the horse, by Coroebus in the battle, by Priam at the altar.

The fiercest fighting is at Priam's palace. Aeneas on the roof lends a hand in the futile defence: he then watches the slaughter first of Polites, the son, and then of Priam, the father. Aeneas is standing on the roof of a single-storeyed building, near enough to hear what Hecuba says to her husband Priam through the din of fire, fighting and falling masonry. And what does he do? Just watch. Turnus in Book 9, exhausted with killing and overwhelmed with stones and spears, hardly able to support his shield, could still scramble up the wall and jump into the river below. Aeneas, it seems, is not a good jumper. Even so he could surely have heaved a brick at Pyrrhus who was, after all, murdering Aeneas' relations. But no. He watches Polites and Priam butchered and then, not before he assures us (A. 2.559), he stands paralysed, as he pictures the same thing happening to his own close family members. When eventually he recovers the power of movement his instinct is not to rush home to save them, but to murder Helen who is also, it happens, seeking refuge at what to a Roman is surely the most sacred of altars, that of Vesta.

When Aeneas gets back home, his father refuses to budge, but there is no question of Aeneas staying to defend his family to the last. "Was it for this, *kind* mother" he cries in a bitter jibe (A. 2.665-667) "that you saved me ... to *see* my son, father and wife lying in each other's blood" - to *see* them, note, that is to *survive* them. And his only thought is to leave them again and rush off into battle, "Not *all* of us" he says "are going to be killed without a fight" a remark which, addressed to his paralysed and elderly father seems, to say the least, churlish and insensitive.

Aeneas' final inadequacy is losing his wife Creusa. His excuse that she might have sat down to take a rest as the family fled from the city is feeble and implausible (A. 2.739). In fact, he tells us that already frightened, he panicked and lost his head, or as he puts it

"Some unkind power took away my already confused wits" (A. 2.735-736). In that state of mind he lost his wife. Hardly very creditable or heroic.

Aeneas, then, tells Dido a good deal more about his feelings than about his actions on that fatal night. Possibly when he looked back seven years later, feelings were what he remembered best. But his account does not arouse admiration. He does not conceal his own inadequacy in the fight. We can understand and sympathise with his predicament and emotions, but he does *not* behave like a Homeric hero.

At the end of Book 1 Dido had asked Aeneas to tell her two things, firstly "the trap laid by the Greeks and the downfall of your people" and secondly "your own wanderings" (A. 1.754-755). The bare facts she already knew: indeed much of the Trojan war was already depicted on Dido's temple doors. What she didn't know in detail is the end of the city: and this is what she gets.

This posed a problem for Virgil. Aeneas couldn't plausibly give an eyewitness account of what happened, if he had been busy all night organising the defence of Troy and fighting. It's worth noting that in presenting Aeneas as the eyewitness of Troy's fall, Virgil has divided Book 2 into approximately two equal parts: in the first part Aeneas uses the plural "we" ("we did this or that"), in the second part he says "I" ("I saw or did this or that").

We can see how useful the anonymous "we" was to Virgil. It allows him to tell the story more or less straight, distanced from Aeneas. When all the talk is of "we", Aeneas is simply one of the crowd, and we are less inclined than we would otherwise be to think it odd that Aeneas expresses absolutely no opinion about what to do with the Wooden Horse. And in the night battle where the talk is also of "we", it does not strike us too forcefully that Aeneas doesn't exercise much leadership or do very much at all.

But when Aeneas is on the roof of Priam's palace he becomes more of a problem. He begins to talk as "I". How, we wonder, can he just look on and listen as Polites and Priam are murdered? My own explanation of Aeneas' behaviour is simple. Virgil was determined to have Priam's death in detail and in isolation and from Aeneas as eyewitness. And in doing so he took a chance that his audience would not notice that Aeneas was thereby presented in a poor light. There stands Aeneas watching the grisly murders as he himself insistently repeats: "*I myself saw* Pyrrhus mad with slaughter ... *I saw* Hecuba and her hundred daughters, and amid the altars Priam, polluting with his blood the fires he himself had consecrated." Why this insistence (note the repeated "*I saw*") on a fact which, if he had any consideration for his hero's courage or even decency, Virgil might have been expected to blur or tone down?

Again there is a straightforward explanation of the repeated "I saw". In these lines Virgil is borrowing from a tragedy by Ennius in which there was a very popular song describing Priam's palace in all its splendour: "Ah my father, home of my fathers, house of Priam, O holy place enclosed by the great turning door that resounds on high. You *I saw* standing in foreign splendour, with your carved and coffered roof, built royally in ivory and gold. All this *I saw* in flames, Priam cruelly deprived of his life, Jupiter's altar befouled with blood" (Ennius, *Andromache (Remains of Old Latin I*, ed. E.H. Warrington, Tragedies, fragments 101-108), my own italics). The repeated "I saw" in Ennius' song, Virgil was determined to keep. But in the play it was spoken, appropriately, by Andromache, Hector's widow, a participant in the terrible events. Her reputation suffers no damage when she tells us that she "saw" the destruction of Priam's palace and his slaughter. But this "seeing" was transferred by Virgil, less appropriately, to Aeneas, whose reputation does suffer as a result. Aeneas meets Andromache again in Book 3 of the *Aeneid*. Had Virgil so wished, she could at that point, have described Priam's death, borrowing from Ennius' song. But

Virgil did not want that. He wanted Dido to learn of Priam's death directly from Aeneas. Dido's husband too had suffered a similar fate to Priam's.

Another small but interesting indication that Virgil is not too concerned with the circumstances of Aeneas during the taking of Troy, can be found when the Greeks finally succeed in breaking open a panel in the great door of Priam's palace (A. 2.481-485). For a moment there is silence as the Greeks stand peering in through the gap, down the long receding colonnades, past the armed Trojan guards drawn up ready for a last forlorn stand. It's a vivid picture and a dramatic moment: "Open to view is the house within and the long halls are bared; open to view are the inner chambers of Priam and the kings of old, and armed men are seen standing at the very threshold." But Aeneas, up on the roof, couldn't have reported this scene. He wasn't looking from the necessary angle. It's Virgil's imagination presenting the scene to us from the viewpoint of the Greeks outside looking into the palace.

We've been looking at some details of how Virgil tells his story. Let's try and draw some conclusions. Well, it's clear that Virgil would have made a great film director. It was a brilliant idea to put Aeneas on the roof, the only position from which he could see both Pyrrhus and the Greeks outside the gate with axe and battering ram, and also the women inside clinging to the pillars or huddled at the altar. But something had to be sacrificed and it is Aeneas' character, his heroic stature.

It is clear that Aeneas is not a hero in Book 2: he is a *Camcorder*. Virgil has used him skilfully as a *Camera* to record the sights and events of that fatal last night and as a *Tape Recorder* to preserve the sounds and words of the occasion.

As a result Aeneas does very little that you or I might not have done in his place. My feeling is that Virgil is very little concerned in Book 2 with his hero's character at all. What matters is that Troy shall be utterly destroyed, and that not so much by the Greeks as by the will of heaven. The climax of the book comes when Aeneas' mother lifts the veil that clouds her son's mortal sight and he sees, above the smoke and dust, what is really going on: Neptune digging up with his trident the foundations of Troy that he himself had laid, Juno armed in fury at Troy's gates, Pallas seated on a tall tower with the Gorgon's head flashing, Jupiter urging the Greeks on against Troy. Against such odds as these, human valour, even that of Aeneas, is neither here nor there. It is not the Greeks but, as Virgil says, "the gods, the unpitiful gods" who "are overturning this empire and toppling Troy to the ground" (A. 2.602-603).

And then, at last, Aeneas, who has missed the meaning of the snakes that killed Laocoon, who failed to detect anything fishy in Sinon's self-contradictory tale about the Wooden Horse, who disregarded Hector's plain and urgent command to leave Troy, who behaved more like a journalist and a photographer than a warrior as the Greeks pour into the doomed city - at last Aeneas gets the message that it's time to go. Exhausted, panicky, punch-drunk, he becomes a real thinking person: prone to error, prone to terror, but capable of thought:

cessi et sublato montis genitore petivi (A. 2.804)

I gave in: and, taking up my father, headed for the mountains.