

Virgil's Aeneid

Helps & Resources



Virgil's *Aeneid*

Virgil's *Aeneid* is, without doubt, a foundational classic of the Western tradition, and in the opinion of many scholars, more influential than the Homeric epics. The early church fathers wondered whether Virgil, born almost a century before Christ, was somehow a believer in the God of the Old Testament Scriptures. By the time of Dante, theologians had decided that was unlikely, but that Virgil certainly represented the best and highest that fallen man could achieve via reason uninformed by special revelation, thus Dante honors Virgil as mentor right up to—but not inside—the gates of Paradise. In order to understand how this is so, we must understand Virgil's rhetorical situation: he writes his great epic at the behest of Augustus Caesar, who realizes the need for a national *mythos*, or "national narrative" as it might more disparagingly be called today, to unify a people weary of civil strife as the Republic fades and the Empire dawns. Thus, Virgil's Aeneas is a man who not only embodies, or at least strives toward, the four classical cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, courage, and justice, he is even more a man who embodies the Roman conception of virtue of *pietas* (*piety*). Throughout the *Aeneid*, Aeneas must follow his *fatum* (*fate*, or *destiny*) to found the city which will become Rome. This will be no easy task, as the *furor* (literally *madness* or *frenzy*) of the goddess Juno assaults Aeneas at every turn. The great virtue that Aeneas must learn in order to fulfill his destiny is *pietas*; in this context, piety requires not only embracing his *fatum*, but also striving after *patria*, the Roman ideal of honor given to one's ancestors and their traditions. From the very beginning, we see that this epic hero does, in fact, gain *pietas* by the epithet with which Virgil honors him: *pius* (*pious*) Aeneas. For Aeneas to have failed in these duties would also be *furor*.—excerpted from *Poetics & Progym II*

A Brief List of Epic Conventions

Epic Invention

- epic hero, "who embodies (despite imperfections) the ideals of the author's culture" – Ryken, *Homer's The Odyssey*
- epic feat or quest: action of great historic or mythical importance
- epic sweep: cosmic scope and setting "encompasses the whole earth, a supernatural world, and the afterlife." – Ryken, *Homer's The Odyssey*
- concerned with foundings or re-foundings of a civilization or culture
- supernatural intervention
- invocation of the Muse and a statement of purpose
- "An epic sums up what an entire age wants to say." – Ryken, *Literary Forms in the Bible*

Arrangement: *in medias res*

Style

- epic style: exalted, formal or "high" language
- epic simile: extended simile over several (or many!) lines
- epithets: repeated titles or descriptive phrases for persons, places, or things
- periphrasis or circumlocution: indirect or roundabout way of expressing something

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Aeneid Resources

- [Bulfinch's Age of Fable](#). Thomas Bulfinch provides an excellent summary of The Trojan War, along with sketches of the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome that provide the backdrop to the *Aeneid*.
- [From Achilles to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics](#), by Louis Markos. Very accessible introduction to Greek and Roman myth and epic. Markos dedicates over six chapters to Virgil's *Aeneid*.
- [The Epic Cosmos: Studies in Genre](#), by Larry Allums and Louis Cowan. More scholarly, but quite helpful overview of the genre, along with analysis of ancient and modern epics themselves, including Virgil's *Aeneid*.
- [The Romans, Unit I: The Aeneid](#) – Roman Roads Media. To accompany your reading in the *Aeneid*, we recommend this series of lectures by Wes Callihan. Find these at romanroadsmedia.com). Listen to Lectures 1 and 2 before you begin reading The *Aeneid*, and then follow the lecture sequence in the accompanying PDF
- [Arts of Liberty Study Guide for the Aeneid](#). Some thoughtful questions to consider as you are reading, or planning classroom discussion.
- [Ad Navseum Podcast \(Dr. David Noe and Dr. Jeff Winkler\)](#). At this writing, these two delightful college professors have begun a series on the *Aeneid*, with four episodes completed. Their commentary is hilarious, and Dr. Noe reads aloud significant passages in Latin, and then compares various translations. It won't stand alone as a reader's guide, but the series promises to be very enlightening and enjoyable!
- [Aeneid background by Mr. Kucks](#) Hilariously illustrated with rubber duckies

Aeneid in Latin and in Translation

- [John Dryden's classic translation of the Aeneid](#) ("Arms and the man I sing . . .")
- [Aeneid in the original Latin](#) at Project Gutenberg
- [Latintutorial has a long playlist](#) with short episodes teaching through the text, translating and explaining the original Latin
- [Morgan Freeman reading the opening lines of the Aeneid](#)