• Vergil’s Life and Career
• An Introduction to *The Aeneid*
• Overview of *The Aeneid*, Book 1
• *The Aeneid*, Book 2
Vergil’s Life and Career

- we know a great deal about Vergil because he was very famous during his lifetime
- *The Aeneid* achieved textbook status almost immediately upon publication
- since then, most people have considered Vergil the best poet who ever wrote in Latin
Vergil’s Life and Career

• his full name is Publius Vergilius Maro
• he was born (10/15/70 BCE) in a small town in northern Italy
• his father spent much money on the young Vergil’s education
• after first trying a career in law and rhetoric, Vergil turned to poetry
Vergil’s Life and Career

• when Vergil was in his twenties, civil war erupted between Julius Caesar and Pompey

• at the Battle of Pharsalus (48 BCE), Caesar defeated Pompey and took sole control of the Roman state

• many Roman aristocrats died in this conflict which shattered the Republic
Vergil’s Life and Career

• as a young man, Vergil suffered from poor health and was not involved in the fighting of this civil war

• instead, he focused on writing neoteric (Hellenistic-style) poetry

• but Vergil’s style was less flamboyant than Catullus’
Vergil’s Life and Career

• instead, Vergil created polished, quietly impressive Latin verses

• his first published work was *The Eclogues* (“The Selections”)
  – ten short “idylls” about the pleasures of life in the country
  – these were very well received by the Roman public and allowed Vergil to continue writing poetry
Vergil’s Life and Career

• Vergil’s second work is entitled The Georgics ("Farming")
  – another work about country life
  – four books dedicated to how to farm, raise cattle, keep bees, etc.

• The Georgics is a "scientific" treatise in verse, a part of the Hellenistic scholarly tradition
Vergil’s Life and Career

• farming + poetry = a perfect blend of Roman and Greek tastes
• but agriculture is really only an excuse for narrating myths
• e.g., Book 4 (on bee-keeping) is, in fact, a new way of telling an old story: the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice
Vergil’s Life and Career

- by the time he was forty, Vergil had published only two works and done little else
  - no marriages or love affairs
  - no political offices
- an ancient biography of Vergil says he was a meticulous and slow writer who “licked his poems into shape”
Vergil’s Life and Career

• as Vergil was carefully composing *The Georgics*, the world around him was exploding in war and political turmoil

• finally, Caesar’s heir **Octavian** (later renamed Augustus) defeated Caesar’s right-hand man **Mark Antony** and **Cleopatra** in a naval battle near the city of **Actium** (31 BCE)
Vergil’s Life and Career

- Octavian, now Augustus, became the sole ruler of Rome
- Augustus’ reign inaugurated the Pax Romana (“Roman peace”), two centuries of stable Roman control over the Mediterranean basin
- through all this, writing poetry is Vergil’s “garden wall”
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- after Actium, Augustus sought a poet willing to write a national poem glorifying Rome—and Augustus!
- many poets refused, not wanting to be seen as a puppet of the new administration
- moreover, political poetry is usually uninspired and very dull
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- Vergil had just finished *The Georgics*, so Augustus commissioned him to compose an epic poem about Rome.
- Augustus knew Vergil’s slow work habits and was willing to be patient.
- And that’s how Rome’s premier country-western singer became Augustus’ “Homer.”
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- now on the emperor’s payroll, Vergil worked quietly by himself for several years (29-23 BCE)
- finally in 23 BCE, Augustus demanded a public reading of Vergil’s epic, even if it wasn’t complete
- *The Aeneid* was a hit and heralded as a “classic” even before it was finished
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- Vergil continued to work on *The Aeneid* for several more years.
- In 19 BCE, he decided to go to Greece in order to do more research.
- But shortly upon his return to Italy, he fell ill and died.
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- at the time of his death, Vergil had not yet finished *The Aeneid*
- on this death bed, he asked that it be burnt because he felt it was not up to his usual standard of excellence
- there are fifty or more gaps in the text, witnessing its “imperfection”
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

• Augustus vetoed Vergil’s last wishes
• Augustus ordered his secretaries to gather up Vergil’s manuscript of *The Aeneid* and put it into the best form they could for publication
• with “gaps” and all, *The Aeneid* was published, to almost instantaneous and universal acclaim
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- The character of the hero Aeneas is one of Vergil's greatest achievements.
- The son of Venus and a mortal man named Anchises, Aeneas is modeled on a character in *The Iliad*.
- Homer depicts Aeneas as a braggart and poor fighter whom at one point Poseidon has to rescue in battle.
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- this is *not* the way most Romans saw themselves!
- but Vergil had to use this figure from Homer because, according to Greco-Roman myth, Aeneas was the founder of the Roman race
- Vergil had no choice but to make the most of a bad situation
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- Vergil turned Aeneas into a positive character by reinterpreting Homer:
  - being a “son of god” makes him “beloved of the gods”
  - “poor in battle” becomes “unwilling to fight”
- with this, Vergil created a humane “thinking” man who would rather not fight, if possible
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- Aeneas deplores violence and sees it as a last resort
- but he fights when it is necessary because he is *pius* ("loyal"), i.e. dutiful to his state and his family
- moreover, Aeneas’ position of privilege with the gods exposes him to their brutality which horrifies him
An Introduction to *The Aeneid*

- all in all, Vergil transforms the traditional swash-buckling megalomaniac heroes of early epic and creates a new type of hero
- a pious and peaceable “anti-hero”
- in this way, *The Aeneid* marks the birth of the modern psychological novel
The Aeneid, Book 1

- the story of *The Aeneid* spans Aeneas’ life from the destruction of Troy until his settlement of Italy
- but like Homer, Vergil leaps *in medias res*
- the epic begins many years after the Greeks used the trick of the Trojan Horse to demolish Aeneas’ hometown
The Aeneid, Book 1

• Vergil begins the narrative as Aeneas and the Trojans are sailing west across the Mediterranean Sea.

• Juno sees them and sends a storm to sink them.

• She hates the Trojans for many reasons, but especially because the Romans will one day destroy Carthage.
The Aeneid, Book 1

• the first words Aeneas speaks in the epic are a plea for death as he watches the storm sink his ships:

  O triply lucky, all you men
  To whom death came before your fathers’ eyes
  Below the walls of Troy!  (Aeneid 1.94-6)

• such feelings of depression are uncharacteristic of Homeric heroes
The Aeneid, Book 1

- Poseidon rescues Aeneas and some of his ships (shades of *The Iliad*!)
- Aeneas lands near Carthage and begins exploring the land
- he finds a new city being built by Phoenician colonists whose leader is a woman named **Dido**
The Aeneid, Book 1

- for his protection, Venus makes Aeneas invisible
- in Carthage, he sees a temple with depictions of the Trojan War on it
- Vergil has imported from Homer the idea of *ecphrasis* ("description"), using art to narrate exposition
- cf. the Shield of Achilles (*Iliad*, Book 18)
as Dido is standing in the temple, Venus removes Aeneas’ invisibility
the Queen of Carthage is overcome with love for the handsome stranger who has appeared out of the blue
she invites him and his men to dinner that evening at her palace
The Aeneid, Book 1

- Aeneas and the Trojans attend the feast where they are fed and entertained by the Carthaginians
- after dinner, Dido asks Aeneas to tell her about his adventures, in particular, the destruction of Troy
- though it is a painful memory, Aeneas can hardly refuse his gracious hostess
The Aeneid, Book 2

• almost the entirety of Books 2 and 3 are "flashback," as Aeneas recounts the Fall of Troy and his subsequent wanderings after the war

• but his narration focuses mainly on his own pathos

• it is psychological counselling of a sort, in which he "relives" these events
The Aeneid, Book 2

• the Roman vs. Greek cultural gap (Hellenism, cf. Chapter 10.II.A) is represented by Sinon vs. Laocoon

• Laocoon is an honest, plain-speaking, deeply religious priest

• “I fear Greeks even bearing gifts”

• he is a prototypical “Roman”: a hard-working, pious man of few words
The Aeneid, Book 2

- Sinon is a prototypical Greek: a clever liar who uses his victims’ naivété to lure them to their destruction
- that is, an actor who writes a play and makes the Trojans buy into his illusion
- even though he is a neoteric writer, Vergil seems to imply that Greek literature is a sort of “Trojan Horse”
Sinon’s “tragedy” is, in fact, modeled on the myth of Iphigenia:

- the winds blew in such a way that the Greeks could not leave Troy
- because Odysseus had offended Minerva when he stole the Palladium
- so Sinon was chosen as a sacrifice to appease the goddess’ anger but he ran away and was left behind
The Aeneid, Book 2

• in fact, the custom of instauratio is a Roman, not Greek ritual
• Sinon has tailored his lie to suit his audience’s expectations
  – just as Romulus and Remus “romanizes” Amphion and Zethus (cf. Chapter 11.I.B)
• thus, Troy falls because of the allure of Sinon’s lie more than the Trojan Horse
The Aeneid, Book 2

- the second Laocoon scene is full of “special effects”
- giant snakes consume Laocoon and his two young sons
- the superstitious Trojans see this as a divine warning not to trust Laocoon
- upon reflection, however, Aeneas realizes the gods wanted Troy to fall
The Aeneid, Book 2

- the center and climax of Book 2 focuses on Pyrrhus (also called Neoptolemus), the son of Achilles
- he besieges Priam in the central citadel and palace of Troy
- finally, Pyrrhus meets and brutally slaughters the helpless old man
at the conclusion of this part of Book 2 (554-558), Vergil writes:

That was the end of Priam’s age, the doom that took him off,

with Troy in flames before his eyes, his towers

Headlong fallen—he that in other days

Had ruled in pride so many lands and peoples,

the power of Asia. On the distant shore

The vast trunk headless lies without a name.
The Aeneid, Book 2

• the comparison of Priam’s death to Pompey’s beheading after the Battle of Pharsalus seems intentional

• but if so, Vergil is undercutting the “triumph” of Caesar on which Augustus’ claim to power rested

• and Augustus is paying Vergil to write The Aeneid!
The Aeneid, Book 2

• the shock of witnessing Priam’s death reminds Aeneas that his family is in grave danger
• especially his father Anchises and his wife Creusa
• he starts to run home from the palace but sees Helen hiding in the temple of Vesta
The Aeneid, Book 2

• he moves to kill her with a sword but Venus stays his hand
• his mother then rips from him “the cloud that . . . films his mortal sight” and shows him the gods uprooting Troy
• only more shocked, Aeneas hurries home to pack up his family and leave
The Aeneid, Book 2

- it takes some convincing but Anchises finally agrees to leave Troy
- Aeneas departs Troy with his father on his shoulders, his son holding his hand, and his wife running behind
- it is the classic picture of a Roman family
The Aeneid, Book 2

- somewhere amidst the confusion, Aeneas realizes Creusa is missing and goes back to look for her
- her ghost appears to him and tells him in sweet but simple words to go:

  What’s to be gained by giving way to grief
  So madly, sweet husband? Nothing here
  Has come to pass except as heaven willed.

(Aeneid, 2.776-8)
Creusa’s ghost then goes on to predict his wandering and turmoil:

For you
long exile waits, and long sea miles to plough.
You shall make landfall on Hesperia
Where Lydian Tiber flows, . . . (Aeneid 2.780-2)

• cf. a dying hero in Homer, except Creusa is hardly Hector or Patroclus