Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil
History and Literature

• if histories like Herodotus’ encompass “story” along with “history,” does literature then do the same?

• historians benefit from the study of fictional works in at least two ways:
  – literature often includes much “history”
  – the process of writing literature overlaps with its historical cousin in many respects

• all in all, good history is often good “story”
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil
History and Literature

- two of the best creators of fiction in western literature are Homer and Vergil
- let’s examine their works from a historian’s perspective and see what they teach us about what-really-happened-in-the-past
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer

• Quintilian: “Homer is the river from which all literature flows.”

• High quality of poetry: flashbacks, character development, pathos

• To many, he’s both the first and the best Western author
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer

• *The Iliad*
  – the earliest preserved epic in Western literature
    • an epic is a long narrative poem involving heroic struggle, gods, and often the conquest of death
  – set entirely at the walled city of Troy (Ilium)
  – Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector, Priam
  – centers around Achilles’ anger and his refusal to fight after Agamemnon shames him in public
  – does *not* tell the story of the Trojan Horse or the Sack of Troy!
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer

• *The Odyssey*
  – in the aftermath of the Trojan War, Odysseus (Ulysses) returns home
    • Odysseus makes it home safely to Penelope
    • unlike Agamemnon who is killed by his wife Clytemnestra
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer

• the gods are major players in both epics
  – e.g. **Zeus** and **Hera**, the King and Queen of Olympus
    • equated with the Roman deities **Jupiter** and **Juno**
  – but unlike God in the Old Testament, these divinities are sometimes treated comically
    – e.g. “*The Seduction of Zeus*” (*Iliad*, Book 14)

• Homer also explores the tragic side of life
  – e.g. “*Odysseus and Argus*” (*Odyssey*, Book 17)
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer

• Who is Homer?
  – little is known: birthplace? date of birth?
  – he probably was blind

• Milman Parry: Homer was an oral bard
  – explains repetitive formulas (oral formulas)
  – and also the frequency of weak joins

• So how was Homer’s text preserved?
  – through rhapsodes (“stitchers of song”)?
  – but do we have Homer’s actual text?
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer and History

• does Homer’s work preserve “history”?  
  – Unlikely, because Homer:
    • was probably blind
    • lived three dark and illiterate centuries after the fact
    • made a living as an entertainer, not a historian
  – on the other hand, there could be echoes of what-really-happened historically in his work
    • he records accurately the armor of that day
      – cf. Medieval bards who got many things right historically
    • epic was all Homer’s society had as a means of remembering their past, which made it valuable
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer and History

• The question then is which details are “what-really-happened” and which are “invented history”
  – Troy itself may even have been a real place, as we’ll see in the next Section of the class
  – but exactly the way Homer describes the city?

• Finally, even if it is an invented history, Homer’s work preserves the desires and values of a society, and those *per se* are important historical truths
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil

• **Vergil** is Rome’s greatest poet
• much reliable biographical information
  – 70-19 BCE; cf. Julius Caesar
  – e.g. middle-class but well educated
  – slow and meticulous perfectionist
• however, very little reliable evidence is preserved about his private life, suggesting he probably didn’t have much of one
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*

- early in his career, Vergil wrote pastoral poetry (about life in the country)
- in the early 20’s BCE, the Roman emperor *Augustus* commissioned Vergil to write an epic poem glorifying Rome
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*

• the result was *The Aeneid*
  – published only ten years later
  – Vergil died leaving it unfinished
  – nevertheless, it became an instant classic
  – yet it was not about Augustus
  – instead, it is set in the distant (mythological) past
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*

• the central character is *Aeneas*
  – problem for Vergil: Aeneas in Homer’s *Iliad* is a braggart and a coward
    • at one point, his mother *Venus* has to save him from being killed in battle
  – Vergil’s solution: *pius Aeneas*

• twelve “books” of *The Aeneid*
  – vs. 48 (24 + 24) of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*
  – thus, *The Aeneid* is a “miniaturized” Homeric epic
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Book 1

• Vergil leaps *in medias res* (“in the middle of things”)
  – Aeneas is caught in a storm sent by Juno to destroy him (*Book 1*)
    • n.b. Aeneas is depressed and suicidal
  – he and his ragged band of Trojan refugees wash up on the shores of North Africa where he meets Dido, the Queen of Carthage
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Book 2

• Dido hosts Aeneas and his men at a banquet and then asks him to tell the assembled crowd how Troy fell
  – again, Vergil’s focus is psychological as Aeneas “relives” the Sack of Troy
  – at the climax of *Book 2*, Aeneas recalls having seen Priam killed by Pyrrhus
  – Priam’s death recalls Pompey’s murder
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Book 3-5

• Aeneas and Dido have an intense love affair but duty calls and the gods order Aeneas to serve a higher calling, the founding of Rome

• Dido begs him to stay in Carthage but he refuses and leaves

• Dido commits suicide
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Book 6

• in Book 6, Aeneas goes to the Underworld and sees the ghost of Dido who scorns him
• at the climax of Book 6, he watches a triumphal pageant of Rome-yet-to-come
• at the end, Aeneas leaves through the “Gate of Ivory” (*Book 6*)

– is Vergil saying Rome a “false dream”?
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Books 7-12

• Aeneas arrives in Italy and has to battle for a new homeland for his Trojan comrades
• He fights a local hero **Turnus** over the hand in marriage of the king’s daughter
• *The Aeneid* ends with Aeneas killing Turnus in a one-on-one duel (**Book 12**)


Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*: Conclusion

• what does Vergil mean with all these confusing suggestions?
  – it seems clear *The Aeneid* is not only a story about the deep mythological past
  – but what is the key to cracking this code?
  – Aeneas clearly begins as a depressed and disturbed “hero” and evolves into a ruthless murderer
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil’s *Aeneid*: Conclusion

- what does Vergil mean with all these confusing suggestions?
  - what is the learned poet’s diagnosis of Rome’s tormented psychology?
  - is this epic what Augustus was paying for?
  - is that why Vergil on his deathbed asked that *The Aeneid* be burned? Because in writing it he had pointed to greater truths than he originally meant to — or had been paid to?
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Conclusion: History and Literature

• great questions are what great literature brings to the feast of history
  – fiction can reveal very real facets of the past abstracted as myth and fantasy
• for instance, Homer shows how early the human heart formed, where a noble dog’s death is worth a “salt tear”
  – and those at the top don’t always comport themselves with the dignity of their position
  – so, is this Homer’s version of “chaos theory”? 
Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Conclusion: History and Literature

• in a very different way, Vergil gives voice to the murmurs of discontented “slaves” who work for the regime oppressing them

• if literature cannot stand alone as a gateway to the past, it enriches and brings a healthy confusion to our assessment of history

– and even if that doesn’t actually take us nearer to what-*literally*-happened, it shows the psychological complexity underlying the ways in which the past has unfolded