**The Aeneid:** In A Nutshell

Today, when we think of ancient epic poems (OK, maybe *if* we think of ancient epic poems), we tend to think of the big three: the *Iliad* and [the *Odyssey*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/homer/the-odyssey.html) by [Homer](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/homer.shtml), and the ***Aeneid*** by [Virgil](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/virgil.shtml). There are some obvious reasons why we group these three poems together. One reason is because Homer is Greek and Virgil is Roman, so this trio of poems represents the two major ancient civilizations from which modern European culture traces its origins. Another, more concrete, reason is that all three poems are centered on the famous [Trojan War](http://www.stanford.edu/~plomio/history.html) and its aftermath. If you want to get even more precise, you could say that the three epics are connected because the first half of Virgil's poem (Books I-VI) is modeled on the *Odyssey*, because it deals with the hero's travels, while the second half (Books VII-XII), which deals with warfare, is modeled on the *Iliad*. Makes sense, right?

Well, yes and no. Does that sound like a paradox? How about this: what makes Virgil's *Aeneid* connected to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is also what makes it different from them. What? Let's put it this way. As you may or may not know, Homer's epics are really, really, really old. In fact, they're so old that many scholars now believe that they were composed orally, before the invention of writing, and only later committed to paper (papyrus, that is). Now, there's no doubt that Homer's poems contain a lot of material that was handed down for generations before them. That said, we don't really know what, because we don't have any older literature to use as evidence: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are as far back as our records of written literature go.

Now here's the funny thing: the same holds true for the Greeks and Romans – their records didn't go any further back either. As a result, the basic fact that Virgil's *Aeneid* clearly, overtly, explicitly, and obviously (you can use your imagination to expand this list of adverbs) alludes to its precursor, Homer, also makes it fundamentally different from Homer, who, as far as we and the ancients are concerned, has no precursors at all. Pretty neat, huh?

But the differences go further than that. For one thing, if the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are oral poems, or at least seriously influenced by the oral tradition, then the *Aeneid* is a *seriously* written poem. According to one account, Virgil first plotted out the whole story in prose, and then very methodically went back and put it into lines of verse, which he then methodically revised. This whole process took something like 12 years, but even then Virgil wasn't satisfied, and, on his deathbed, he commanded that his manuscript be burned. According to legend, it was only saved from the flames by order of the emperor, [Caesar Augustus](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/augustus.shtml).

So, Augustus must have been a pretty big poetry fan, right? Maybe, but that probably wasn't the main reason why he wanted Virgil's manuscript saved. A better reason is that, on the surface at least, the *Aeneid* is an account of how the Trojan prince Aeneas joined his people with the Italians to form the basis for the later city of Rome. It's a pretty straightforward endorsement of Augustus's own consolidation of power after many years of brutal civil war.

But wait, why did we say that the *Aeneid* is only an endorsement of Augustus "on the surface"? That's because many scholars have come to believe that the *Aeneid* also contains many subtle (and some not-so-subtle) criticisms of Roman imperial power. Come on – if you were working on a poem for that long, you're telling us you *wouldn't* sneak some nasty remarks about your boss in here and there? Just as importantly, though, Virgil also used that time to craft some of the most meticulously beautiful poetry ever seen. Even if a translation can only capture a faint shadow of the original, it will still help you experience one of the most influential works of European literature.

**Why Should I Care?**

The *Aeneid* is the Tourist Information Bureau for all subsequent European literature. You won't find better maps, brochures, or phrase-books anywhere else. The story of the Trojan Horse and the Fall of Troy? That comes straight out of the *Aeneid*. How about the idea of unrequited love driving the sufferer to suicide? Maybe Virgil didn't outright invent this idea, but he sure gave it its first big break, through his depiction of Dido, the ill-fated Carthaginian queen. What about the notion of historical progress, and the possibility that there might be a utopian "end of history" that will bring eternal peace and prosperity for all humankind? Look no further than [Virgil](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/virgil.shtml)'s predictions for the future Roman Empire, the *Aeneid*. Scholars may still argue back and forth about the ultimate meaning of Virgil's elusive masterpiece, but no one disputes the power of his artistry. So what are you waiting for? Go knock on his door: you won't regret it.