

2026 Meetup Summary - Virgil: The Aeneid



October 4, 2026, 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. PDT

Key Takeaways

- The group held its first session of a new reading of Virgil's *Aeneid*, covering Books 1–3, as part of a long-running classics reading group that originated reading Marcel Proust in 2011.
- Participants compared the *Aeneid* extensively to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, noting structural parallels, borrowed episodes, and key differences in tone, characterization, and purpose.
- The group discussed Virgil's political context, exploring whether the *Aeneid* is genuine pro-imperial propaganda or a more nuanced work reflecting Republican values alongside imperial destiny.
- Multiple translations were introduced and compared, with discussion of how hexameter versus iambic pentameter affects line count, fidelity, and tone.
- The role of prophecy, divine intervention, fate versus the gods, and the function of epithets were recurring analytical themes.
- The next session will cover Books 4, 5, and 6 in two weeks.

Discussed Topics

Group Introduction and Background

David opened the session by welcoming new and returning members, asking participants to share their location, prior experience with Virgil, and current reading in the Zoom chat. Peregrine was made co-host. The group's history was briefly recounted.

- **Details**

- David: The group started as a Proust group in 2011, then branched into Classics and Philosophy.
- Peregrine: Described it as "a 15-year recreation of our college degrees."
- Anthony: Recalled attending one or two sessions of the Proust (en français) group previously.
- Jason Peng: Confirmed he participated in the group's first reading of the *Aeneid* in May 2021 and was happy to read it again, noting it makes more sense after reading the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

- **Conclusion**

- The group has a long-standing tradition of reading major works of Western literature and is now revisiting the *Aeneid* in the context of a broader Classics series that included the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer.

Meetup Logistics and Session Structure

David explained the organizational structure for the reading series and how participants should register.

- **Details**

- David: Announced that only the first session is listed on multiple Meetup feeds; subsequent sessions (Parts 2–4) will only appear on the ["Let's Read Classics" Meetup page](#) based in Los Angeles. Toronto and East Coast participants were asked to migrate to that page.
- David: Mentioned that resources on the Meetup page include a topic guide, session summaries (starting after this session), and a translation comparison matrix.

Translation Comparison and Overview

David presented nine English verse translations of the *Aeneid* and discussed their differences in approach, line count, and fidelity to the Latin original.

- **Details**

- David: Presented translations including Fagles, Fitzgerald, Ferry, Rudin, Bartlett, and the newest (2025) edition introduced by Emily Wilson but translated by Scott McGill and Susan

Wright, which he is currently reading. Also noted Frederick Ahl's Oxford translation (2007), which attempts the Latin dactylic hexameter rather than iambic pentameter.

- David: Explained that Latin hexameter allows up to 17 syllables per line versus 10–11 in iambic pentameter, meaning translators must expand the text. Book 1 in Latin is 756 lines; Fagles and McGill render it in ~907–908 lines; Fitzgerald exceeds 1,000.
- Peregrine: Is reading Fagles and also has Fitzgerald. Noted Fitzgerald's iambic pentameter is stricter, while Fagles takes a "prosy poem" approach.
- Peregrine: Recommended [video] [Elizabeth Vandiver's Great Courses](#) / [audio] [Audible lecture series on the *Aeneid*](#),
- Anthony: Noted that both Ovid and Virgil use epithets, questioning whether they are less frequent in Latin than in Homer.
- Peregrine: Cited Vandiver's point that in Homer, epithets often serve as metrical filler (e.g., "swift-footed Achilles" even when sitting), whereas in Virgil they are more intentional and meaningful.
- David: Confirmed this distinction is also noted in the McGill translation's introduction, attributing it to oral versus literary tradition.

- **Conclusion**

- Participants were encouraged to use whichever translation they have and to consult the comparison matrix sent by David to identify their preferred rendering of a key passage.
- The newest McGill/Wright translation was highlighted for its 16-page translator's note, four maps, extensive commentary, and glossary.

Book 1 Summary: Storm and Refuge

The group discussed the plot and themes of Book 1, including Juno's wrath, Venus's intervention, and Dido's introduction.

- **Details**

- David: Summarized Book 1 — Juno incites a storm scattering Aeneas's fleet near Carthage; Venus intervenes; Dido welcomes the Trojans and is made to fall in love with Aeneas through divine manipulation.
- David: Raised the question of whether divine manipulation of Dido's love undercuts the tragedy of Book 4.
- David: Noted an important theological point — the gods are subservient to the Fates (three women: the spinner, the one who measures life's duration, and the one who cuts the thread).

- **Conclusion**

- The divine framework of the *Aeneid* — gods subordinate to fate — is a key structural element that shapes how readers interpret agency, tragedy, and destiny throughout the poem.

Similarities and Differences with Homer

Participants compared the *Aeneid* to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in structure, narrative technique, and characterization.

- **Details**

- Jason Peng: Noted similarities to the *Odyssey* — invocation of the Muse, first-person omniscient narration, a hero recounting his journey, and the seven-year wandering parallel. Also pointed out that Aeneas nearly crosses paths with Odysseus (a rescued sailor had been stranded three months after Odysseus passed by the Cyclops's island), and that both pass through Scylla and Charybdis.
- Anthony: Observed that the *Aeneid* appears to "recycle" the *Odyssey*, referencing the same places and episodes, almost as a rewrite from a Trojan perspective.
- Peregrine: Noted the *Aeneid* begins in medias res, like both Homeric epics, and that the first-person flashback narration (Aeneas telling his story at Dido's banquet) mirrors Odysseus recounting his journey to the Phaeacians.
- David: Highlighted that Homer was an oral tradition while Virgil's work is literary — written to be read — and that Virgil used Homer as a skeleton, but the challenge is to identify differences in characterization, psychology, and introspection.
- Geneva: Suggested Virgil wanted to "outshine Homer" by presenting the Latin/Roman side of the epic tradition and establishing Rome's own origin myth.
- Peregrine: Agreed, citing Vandiver's point that Romans had relatively little surviving mythology of their own and largely adopted Greek mythology, renaming the gods (e.g., Zeus became Jupiter).
- Nick: Observed that Poseidon in the *Odyssey* is motivated by propriety (Odysseus' blinding of his son), whereas Juno in the *Aeneid* is driven by uncontrolled rage, suggesting a contrast between controlled masculine order and destructive feminine rage — a theme he proposed tracking through the poem.
- Jason Peng: Added that the *Aeneid* explicitly frames Greeks negatively — calling Ulysses a "ruffian" and referencing "Greek deceptive arts" — in contrast to Homer's "godlike Odysseus."
- Peregrine: Referenced a Fagles footnote explaining how Ulysses' reputation deteriorated in the 600 years between Homer and Virgil, citing lost epic poems that portrayed him as treacherous.
- David: Noted that the key epithet for Aeneas is "pious" (pius), and cultural value of piety reflecting Roman values of duty to gods and society, in contrast to Homer's "godlike" for human heroes.

- **Conclusion**

- The *Aeneid* is deeply indebted to Homer structurally and episodically but deliberately reframes the Greek tradition from a Roman perspective, elevating Roman virtues (piety, duty, paternal authority) over Greek ones (cunning, individual glory).

Virgil's Political Context: Pro-Empire or Ambivalent?

The group debated whether the *Aeneid* is straightforward Augustan propaganda or a more complex work.

- **Details**

- Nick: Cited the famous line (Fitzgerald, line 374): "For the Roman people, I set no limits, world or time, but make the gift of empire without end" (*Imperium sine fine*), noting its invocation by modern American right-wing academics promoting executive power and natural law theory. Asked whether Virgil is genuinely pro-empire or simply dealing with historical inevitability.
- David: Suggested the work's greatness lies in how fairly it treats both sides of the question, while also serving Augustus's desire to link Rome to mythological origins — analogous to how new religions or nations create origin myths by attaching themselves to older ones.
- Anthony: Noted Virgil was on good terms with Augustus (unlike Ovid, who was banished for subversion), and argued one of Virgil's purposes is to justify the pyramidal power structure of empire. Also raised the Roman concept of *patria potestas* — the father's legal authority over his household, including the right to kill — as a cultural foundation for imperial authority.
- Nick: Pointed out that Virgil was born into a republic and drew on Republican figures like Cicero, making it unclear whether his pro-imperial stance reflects genuine belief or opportunism.
- Peregrine: Noted that Virgil had lived through Julius Caesar's extension of the dictatorship and cited Vandiver's emphasis on Roman *virtus* (literally "manliness") and Romans' ambivalent relationship with Greeks — admiring their culture while viewing them as untrustworthy and effeminate.
- Peter: Drew a parallel to the British modeling their army on Spartan ideals and British universities using Classics as a marker of superiority, mirroring Rome's appropriation of Greek culture.
- David: Noted the repeated epithet "Father Aeneas" in his translation and raised the possibility that it links Aeneas to Augustus as a paternal figure for Rome.

- **Conclusion**

- The question of Virgil's sincerity versus opportunism remains open. The group agreed to keep tracking how the poem treats both pro-imperial and humanistic perspectives as the reading continues.

Book 2 Summary: The Fall of Troy

The group discussed Aeneas's first-person account of Troy's destruction, including the Trojan Horse, the death of Priam, the disputed Helen episode, and the loss of Creusa.

- **Details**

- Anthony: Was struck by the power of first-person narration compared to Homer's third-person omniscient approach, finding it more vivid and cinematic.
 - Peregrine: Noted that Virgil switches between past and present tense in narration — a technique that increases immediacy — and that this is likely faithful to the Latin. Drew a parallel to documentary TV editing, where present-tense storytelling is considered more engaging.
 - Peregrine: Raised the question of whether Virgil had access to lost epic poems covering the Trojan War cycle that are no longer available to us.
 - David: Highlighted the "false flag" episode (Book 2, line ~460 Latin) where a goddess instructs Aeneas's group to don Greek armor and insignia to escape — noting the irony of the "pious" hero using deception.
 - David: Discussed the disputed Helen episode (~lines 570–575 Latin), where Aeneas nearly kills Helen in rage but is stopped by Venus. Noted this passage is considered an interpolation by a later editor, not Virgil himself, but it reveals Aeneas's capacity for vengeance before divine intervention redirects him.
 - Nick: Observed that Pyrrhus serves as a foil to Aeneas — he does sully himself by slaughtering Priam — and that Priam's rebuke of Pyrrhus invokes the absent father Achilles, reinforcing the theme of paternal lineage as a moral anchor.
 - David: Compared Aeneas's losses to those of Odysseus and Gilgamesh: Odysseus loses all his men; Aeneas recovers everyone except Creusa. The image of Aeneas carrying Anchises and leading Ascanius is one of antiquity's most famous images of pietas.
 - David: Read the ghost of Creusa passage (Book 2, ~line 793 Latin), noting it directly parallels Odysseus's failed attempt to embrace his mother's shade in the underworld — three attempts, three failures, the shade escaping "like a weightless breath of wind."
 - Jason Peng: Noted a difference between Roman and Greek ghosts — the Roman ghost of Creusa is described as "larger than life," causing physical reactions (hair standing on end, voice cracking), suggesting a more tangible presence than the Greek concept of a shade.
 - Peregrine: Confirmed via a quick search that Virgil uses the Latin word *umbra* (shadow/shade), and that "ghost" is a Low Germanic word that may not fully capture the original.
 - **Conclusion**
 - Book 2's first-person narration creates a more intimate and psychologically immediate account of Troy's fall than Homer's third-person approach. The loss of Creusa is narratively convenient (clearing the way for Dido) but handled with genuine pathos. The pietas theme — duty to gods, family, and destiny over personal passion — is established as Aeneas's defining characteristic.
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Book 3 Summary: Wanderings and Prophecies

The group discussed Aeneas's account of the Trojans' failed settlement attempts and the role of prophecy in the narrative.

- **Details**

- David: Summarized Book 3 — false starts at Thrace, Delos, and Crete; the Harpies' curse at Strophades; the prophet Helenus's guidance at Buthrotum; and the death of Anchises in Sicily.
- David: Noted that Book 3 functions as a catalog of failed settlements, each one moving the Trojans closer to their true destination (Italy), and that Anchises' death just before Carthage removes the paternal guide at the moment Dido enters Aeneas's life.
- Nick: Observed that the Trojans' inability to recognize their Italian origins (they are originally Italian, not Trojan) drives the trial-and-error pattern, and suggested Virgil may be constructing a workaround to claim Roman antiquity predates Greece — making Rome "older" than the Greek tradition he is imitating.
- David: Agreed, noting Virgil wants to "leapfrog" the Greek playwrights and establish Roman precedence.
- Nick: Discussed the Harpy Celaeno's prophecy (Fitzgerald, ~lines 233–263), noting the significance of a monstrous female figure serving as Apollo's messenger, and the ambiguity of whether her words are a warning or a curse.
- David: Read the prophecy of the white sow (Book 3, ~line 390 Latin) — Helenus tells Aeneas he will found his city where he sees a huge white sow with 30 nursing piglets under an oak — as an example of long-range foreshadowing that will not be fulfilled until the poem's later books.
- David: Pointed out several metrically incomplete lines in the *Aeneid* (e.g., Book 1, line 640; Book 3, line 314), explaining that Virgil died before completing his planned revisions and had instructed his executors to burn the manuscript.
- Anthony: Used the Loeb bilingual edition and engaged in detailed discussion about which lines are incomplete and how different editions mark them (ellipsis vs. em-dash vs. no special punctuation).
- Peregrine: Confirmed via Gemini search that Virgil uses *umbra* for shade/ghost, and noted the incomplete lines are a known feature of the unfinished poem.
- Jason Peng: Highlighted that when passing through Scylla and Charybdis, Aeneas chooses Charybdis (unlike Odysseus, who chose Scylla and sacrificed six men), and all Trojans pass through safely — framing Romans as wiser and more virtuous than Greeks.
- Anthony: Raised the broader question of whether prophecy in ancient literature is a precursor to modern literary symbolism and foreshadowing, and whether the absence of suspense (since outcomes are pre-announced) is a fundamental difference between ancient and modern narrative.

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- David: Argued that the purpose of prophecy is to reinforce the authority of the gods for the audience, and that the original storytelling context (hunters returning to the campfire) meant the audience already knew the outcome — the interest lay in how it was achieved, not what happened.
- Jason Peng: Added that ancient audiences read texts many times, so surprise was less important than the richness of re-reading.
- David: Suggested suspense as a literary device is relatively recent (detective fiction is only ~150 years old) and that awe and wonder, not surprise, were the primary emotional goals of ancient epic.
- Nick: Synthesized the discussion by suggesting the distinction is less temporal (not knowing what happens) than hermeneutic (knowing the story but needing it retold to make sense in a new way).

The Role of Epithets in Virgil vs. Homer

A focused discussion on how epithets function differently in the *Aeneid* compared to the Homeric epics.

- **Details**

- Peregrine: Cited Vandiver's argument that Homeric epithets often serve as metrical filler in oral composition (e.g., "swift-footed Achilles" even when seated), whereas Virgil's epithets are deliberate and meaningful because dactylic hexameter in Latin does not require them as padding.
- Anthony: Noted that "Goddess-born" is another frequent epithet for Aeneas, and asked for the source of the claim about Latin epithets being less metrically necessary.
- Peregrine: Confirmed it came from Vandiver's lecture and offered to look into it further.

Roman vs. Greek Cultural Values and the Appropriation of Greek Culture

A broader discussion on how Rome related to Greece culturally, politically, and literarily.

- **Details**

- Peregrine: Cited Vandiver's emphasis on Roman *virtus* (literally "manliness") and Romans' ambivalent admiration for Greek culture — studying it while viewing Greeks as untrustworthy and effeminate.
- Peter: Noted that Roman law gave the *paterfamilias* near-absolute authority, including the right to kill household members, and that Roman justice operated through public oratory in the forum rather than codified law. Also noted that Carthage was completely destroyed by Rome, leaving nothing behind.

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- Peregrine: Drew a parallel to Japan's relationship with China (adopting Confucian culture, writing systems, and city planning while asserting superiority) and to America's relationship with Britain.
 - Jason Peng: Agreed with the Japan-China parallel, noting that newly founded nations typically try to surpass the culture they inherit from.
 - Peregrine: Noted that we speak of "Greco-Roman" culture but never "Romano-Phoenician."
 - Peter: Added that British universities used Classics as a marker of elite status, mirroring Rome's appropriation of Greek learning.
 - Peregrine: Noted it was a status symbol for wealthy Roman families to have a Greek slave as a tutor for their children.
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Gendered Themes in the *Aeneid*

Nick proposed a reading of the poem's gender dynamics that the group agreed to track going forward.

- **Details**
 - Nick: Proposed that war and destructive force in the *Aeneid* are coded as feminine (Juno's uncontrolled rage, Dido's love as a destructive force), while civil order and propriety are coded as masculine — in contrast to the *Odyssey*, where Poseidon's opposition is about propriety rather than passion.
 - Nick: Noted that Pyrrhus's violence is linked to the absence of his father Achilles, suggesting that broken paternal lineage leads to uncontrolled masculine violence.
 - Peregrine: Found the observation interesting and agreed the group should keep an eye on it.
 - Anthony: Connected this to the Roman concept of *patria potestas* and the cultural inevitability of empire as a large-scale manifestation of patriarchal authority.
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Upcoming Reading and Recommendations

David and Peregrine outlined the next session and shared recommendations.

- **Details**
 - David: The next session will cover Books 4, 5, and 6 in two weeks. Warned participants to bring Kleenex, implying emotionally affecting content.
 - David: Issued a challenge for all participants to find the line "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts" (Book 2, lines 59–60 in the Latin) in their respective translations and compare renderings.
 - Peregrine: Recommended Elizabeth Vandiver's lecture series on the *Aeneid* (available on Audible; no longer on the Great Courses website directly).
 - David: Recommended the recent film *The Return* (starring Ralph Fiennes) as a companion to the *Odyssey*, noting it begins with Odysseus washing up on Ithaca.
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- Jason Peng: Mentioned a 1954 Italian film version of the *Odyssey* that includes the hanging of the unfaithful slave women — a scene omitted from most modern adaptations.
 - David: Noted the group is also considering future readings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Chinese philosophy, and possibly Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or *Heroides*.
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Action Items

- **All participants**
 - ☐ Join the "Let's Read Classics" Meetup page (meetup.com/Let's-Read-Classics) to receive announcements for Parts 2–4 of the *Aeneid* reading series.
 - ☐ Read Books 4, 5, and 6 of the *Aeneid* before the next session (in two weeks).
 - ☐ Find the "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts" passage (Book 2, lines 59–60 in the Latin) in your translation and note the wording for comparison at the next session.
 - ☐ Save the Zoom chat from this session for links and references shared during the meeting.
 - ☐ Note the epithet used for Aeneas in your translation and track how gendered themes (war as feminine, order as masculine) develop through Books 4–6.
- **Peregrine**
 - ☐ Find and share the link to Elizabeth Vandiver's *Aeneid* lecture series (Audible or Great Courses) in the group chat or Meetup page.
 - ☐ Look further into Vandiver's claim that epithets in Virgil are less metrically necessary than in Homer, and report back.
- **David**
 - ☐ Post the session summary to the Meetup resources page after this session (to join the existing topic guide and translation comparison matrix).

