

Roman Epic Poetry

FOCUSING ON THE WORKS AND LIVES OF
VIRGIL AND LUCAN

Welcome

Welcome to our session dedicated to Roman Epic Poetry! In this session you can expect to learn all about:

- The timeline of Epic poetry
- The life of Virgil
- The Aeneid
- The life of Lucan
- Pharsalia
- The comparisons of the Sibyl and Erichtho
- The comparisons of the political contexts of the epics

At the end of the session, you will also have a chance to ask any questions or queries you may have! Enjoy!



Epic poetry tradition

Epic: A long, narrative poem that explores a hero's adventures

Epic Hero: A figure, like Achilles, who exhibits the ideals, values and beliefs of the contemporary audience

Heroes are given larger than life personalities that ascend human qualities – they are human, but they possess the attitudes and qualities of the gods (they are also normally half-divine)

Events are on an enormous scale: battle scenes and adventures are used to prove heroism

Lots of supernatural elements: gods, goddesses, magical creatures (such as the Sirens), monsters

Events are set in a distant and magnificent past

Characteristics and Style of an Epic

The style comes from both oral tradition and writers

Main literary devices are Epithets and Epic Similes



Epic poetry timeline

The timeline includes many key works, both from Greek and Roman poets, created from the 8th century – 1st century AD

Greek poets are shown in **GREEN**
Roman poets are shown in **BLUE**

c. 8th century BCE:
Homer's Iliad

c. 8th century
BCE: Homer's
Odyssey

700 BCE Hesiod's
Theogony

c. 3rd century BCE:
Apollonius'
Argonautica

c. 2nd century BCE:
Ennius' Annals

Seen as
the Father
of Greek
Poetry

37–30 BCE:
Virgil's
Georgics

30–19 BCE:
Virgil's Aeneid

8 CE: Ovid's
Metamorphoses

Seen as
the Father
of Roman
Poetry

65 CE: Lucan's
Pharsalia

1st century CE:
Flaccus'
Argonautica

28–103 CE:
Italicus'
Punica

90–96 CE: Statius'
Thebaid and Achilleid



The Life of Virgil

Virgil was an ancient Roman poet whose work thrived within the Augustan period. His epic poem, *The Aeneid*, is considered the national epic of Ancient Rome. Throughout history, his work has influenced Western literature – most notably Dante's *Inferno*.

- Born: 70 BCE, Cisalpine Gaul, into an Equestrian family
- Died: 19 BCE, Brindisi
- Financially supported by Maecenas, who was patron to many poets at the time
- Wrote three of the most famous poems in Latin literature: *The Eclogues* (39–38 BCE), *The Georgics* (37–30 BCE) and *The Aeneid* (30–19 BCE) – he died before finishing *The Aeneid* and reportedly wanted to burn it. It is well known as a piece of Augustan propaganda

The Aeneid, Books 1-6

Book 1

- Introduction to The Muses
- Juno tries to hinder Aeneas' journey by getting Aeolus to send a great storm; however, Neptune calms it
- Venus begs Jupiter to end the suffering of the Trojans, to which he replies that their fate will soon be fulfilled
- Dido and Aeneas meet and he tells

Book 4

- Dido falls in love with Aeneas
- After finding shelter in a cave when Juno causes a storm, the pair partake in a sort of marriage ceremony - news spreads and Jupiter sends Mercury to remind Aeneas of his duties
- Aeneas gets ready to leave Carthage but is berated by Dido
- Due to her not being able to contain her heartbreak, Dido curses Aeneas and his men and then kills herself on top of a pyre

Book 2

- The retelling of the Fall of Troy
- Aeneas flees, carrying his father, Anchises, on his back, alongside his wife and son; however, his wife Creusa is lost within the crowds and when they try to find her, he is greeted by her shade (ghost)



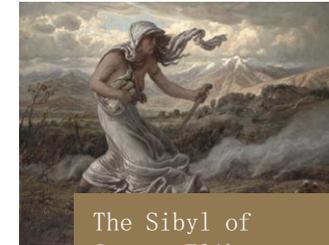
Aeneas fleeing from Troy, Pompeo Batoni - 1753

Book 5

- Funeral games for Anchises
- Juno urges the Trojan women to set the ships alight so they will have to stay in Sicily. Jupiter sends a rainstorm to calm the fires
- Anchises' shade appears to Aeneas and guides him to the Underworld
- Palinurus dies

Book 3

- Continuation of his story
- Failed attempts to reestablish Troy in places such as Thrace, Crete and Chaonia
- Mentions of Charybdis and Scylla
- Aeneas' father dies



The Sibyl of Cumae, Elihu Vedder

Book 6

- The Trojans land in Italy
- Aeneas goes to the Temple of Apollo, where he meets the Sibyl who tells him how to get into the Underworld - katabasis
- Aeneas is greeted by Palinurus, Dido (who does not show Aeneas any forgiveness), Greek heroes etc
- He witnesses the Pageant of Descendants who will found and rule Rome
- Aeneas leaves the



Dido, Henry Fusel - 1781

The Aeneid, Books 7–12

Books 7–12 of The Aeneid parallel the warfare in Homer's Iliad

Book 7

- The Trojans arrive at Latium and are greeted by King Latinus
- He offers his daughter, Lavinia, to Aeneas as a wife
- Juno rouses the Latins against the Trojans
- Turnus, who is also interested in Lavinia, leads the Latins

Book 11

- Aeneas returns Pallas' body to Evander and a truce is called enabling each side to bury their dead
- Diomedes refuses to support the Latins which leads to the decision of peace or single combat between Turnus and Aeneas
- Camilla, the Volsci warrior maiden, joins the Latins but is shortly killed
- The Latins retreat

Book 8

- Aeneas and the Etruscans unite
- He has a meeting with King Evander and his son, Pallas
- Aeneas visits the future homes of famous Roman landmarks
- Vulcan crafts Aeneas' armor and shield

Book 9

- The Latins besiege the Trojan camp
- There is a high death toll and many scenes of murder and gore
- Turnus enters the camp but is driven back quickly

Book 10

- The Gods decide to leave the outcome of the war up to fate
- Aeneas and the Etruscans unite to help the Trojan camp
- Pallas is killed



Death of Pallas, S.J. Henri – 18th Century

Book 12

- The Latins violate the truce
- Turnus and Aeneas fight in single combat
- Aeneas begins to show mercy but sees Turnus wearing Pallas' belt, which leads to his *furor* taking over and consequently the death of Turnus at the hands of Aeneas



Diomedes Killed by Hercules and Devoured by his own Horses, J.B.M. Pierre – 1752



Aeneas defeats Turnus, Giordano – 17th Century

The Life of Lucan

Lucan was an Imperial Latin poet who created his famous epic under the Emperor Nero. His epic poem, *The Pharsalia*, is considered an immaculate piece of literature due to Lucan's talent at such a young age, his account of the battle, and its ability to eschew the intervention of the gods.

- Born: 39 AD, Corduba, Hispania Baetica, Roman Empire into a wealthy family
- Died: 65 AD – forced to commit suicide because of his involvement with the Pisonian Conspiracy and bad relations with Nero
- Grandson of Seneca the Elder
- Later writer than Virgil and worked under Nero. He is regarded as an exceptional poet of the Imperial Latin period and his epic *Pharsalia* is credited in high regard.

Overview of The Pharsalia

10 book epic based the battle between Caesar and Pompey the Great. It is also known as De Bello Civili (The Civil War).

Book 1

- The narrative summarizes the backstory to the war and Caesar is introduced as being in Italy
- Caesar crosses the Rubicon and is joined by Curio on route
- The book ends with the city in a fleeting panic and visions of upcoming disasters

Book 2

- A veteran speaks of the Civil War between Marius and Sulla
- Cato the Younger is the man of heroic principle and tells Brutus, even though war is abhorrent, it is better to fight than sit back
- Caesar is delayed by Domitus' resistance
- He attempts a blockade at Brundisium but the general makes an escape to Greece

Book 8

- Pompey escapes to Lesbos and visits Cilicia to consider his options
- He decides to enlist aid from Egypt but as the Pharaoh fears Caesar, he plots Pompey's murder
- Pompey suspects treachery and rows alone to meet his fate in a Stoic action
- His headless body is thrown into the ocean but is given a burial by Cordus

Book 3

- Pompey is visited in a dream by Julia – his deceased wife and Caesar's daughter
- Caesar arrives in Rome
- Pompey reviews foreign allies
- Caesar heads for Spain but his troops are detained at the siege of Massilia
- The city falls into a naval battle

Book 4

- First half of the book is dominated with Caesar's campaign in Spain
- Pompey's forces intercept a raft carrying Caesarians, who prefer to kill one another than be taken prisoner
- Curio launches a campaign on Caesar's behalf, but is defeated by King Juba

Book 5

- The Senate in exile confirm Pompey as the true leader of Rome
- Appius is given a misleading prophecy from the Delphic oracle
- Caesar marches to Brundisium to meet Pompey's army
- The armies face each other at full strength
- Pompey sends his wife to the island of Lesbos

Book 7

- Pompey is reluctant to press anymore during battle until he is convinced by Cicero
- The Caesarians are victorious, and Lucan laments the loss of liberty
- Caesar mocks the dying Domitius and forbids the cremation of the deceased Pompeians
- Imagery of wild animals gnawing at the corpses and the sadness surrounding Thessaly

Book 9

- Cato plans to regroup and enlist the aid of King Juba after Pompey's death, he refuses to consult an oracle
- Caesar pays his respects to his ancestral gods in Troy
- Caesar reaches Egypt and feigns his grief over Pompey's death

Book 6

- Caesar's armies fall back to Thessaly under Pompey's force
- The remainder of the book follows Pompey's son Sextus
- Sextus finds the most powerful witch, Erichtho, who reanimates the corpse of a dead soldier in a terrifying ceremony
- The soldier predicts Pompey's defeat and Caesar's assassination

Book 10

- Caesar arrives in Egypt and becomes overwhelmed by Cleopatra
- A banquet is held
- Ponthinus (Ptolemy's chief minister) plots an assassination of Caesar but is killed in his surprise attack on the palace
- A second attack comes from Ganymede
- The epic ends with Caesar fighting for his life

Comparison of The Sibyl and Erichtho

THE SIBYL – THE AENEID

- Guide to the Underworld – says only the initial descent will be easy
- Acts as an aid in the Underworld
- Urges Aeneas to be courageous
- Sends Aeneas to the Underworld to gain knowledge
- Pious
- Insists that the unburied corpse of Misenus must be properly buried before Aeneas embarks on his journey
- Rites begin with a burial

ERICHTHO – THE PHARSALIA

- Antithetical counterpart to The Sibyl
- Guide to the Underworld – says that only necromancy is easy
- Criticizes Sextus for being cowardly
- Acts as an aid in the Underworld
- Wicked
- Uses an unburied corpse for her undertaking
- Rites conclude with a burial
- Conjures a spirit from the ground to learn the future

Political comparisons of The Aeneid and The Pharsalia

THE AENEID

- The split in the books mirror Rome's disestablishment of the Republic after the strife of a Civil War and the establishment of the Empire
- Augustan propaganda – written to praise Augustus by drawing parallels between him and Aeneas
- Criticizes the new regime too – Virgil deliberates whether the new foundation will actually be an escape from the repetitive Civil War
- Geopolitics: Virgil depicts many wars on nature throughout the epic, drawing attention to how the Empire's foundations was based on destruction

THE PHARSALIA

- Battle scenes are portraits of bloody horror – despair is emphasized in the first seven lines (like The Aeneid)
- Caesar is presented as a terrifying military leader who strikes fear, and is incredibly destructive
- Pompey is seen as a veteran who has turned soft – Susanna Braund argues that Lucan "has taken the weaker, essentially human, elements of Aeneas' character – Aeneas doubting his mission, Aeneas as husband and lover – and bestowed them upon Pompey." (Braund, 1992)
- Geopolitics: Nature is savaged to create foundations, wild animals tear away at the deceased

Recap/ Questions

PLEASE ASK ANY QUESTIONS YOU HAVE
AND THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING!