THE ABRUPTNESS OF THE END OF THE AENEID

This article attempts to show that the abruptness of the end of the Aeneid contributes to its being, at least in part, an attack on Rome and the Augustan settlement, because it must have been very shocking to a Roman reader and seemed much more brutal to him than it does to us. In order to prove this it is necessary to demonstrate a basic point about ancient Greek and Roman plot structure, which is very interesting and important in itself. It is that ancient literary works do not end with a violent or emphatic action. Instead, the climactic event is followed by episodes that resolve various problems, usually in a conciliatory manner, and often point forward to new events or considerations. Thus the impact of the climax of ancient literary works is diminished or dissolved and their endings are anti-climactic by modern standards.

The combat between Aeneas and Turnus is modelled on that between Achilles and Hector in Iliad 22. That is also a climactic event. It is the last fight in the Iliad and the fulfilment of Achilles' furious desire for revenge on Hector. This theme is developed with much more consistency and prominence in the last part of the Iliad than Aeneas' desire for revenge against Turnus is developed in the last part of the Aeneid. But after it are the lamentations of Hector's family, the funeral of Patroclus, including the elaborately described contests, Priam's visit to Achilles, and finally Hector's funeral. In the last sentence, 'Thus they held the funeral of Hector', the particle 

Thus they held the funeral of Hector', the particle γς before the pronominal subject creates the impression that something antithetical should follow.

In the Odyssey, Odysseus kills the suitors in Book 22 and is reunited with Penelope in Book 23. A modern author would have ended there. However, Homer then describes the suitors' souls in Hades, Odysseus' reunion with Laertes, and his reconciliation with the suitors' relatives. Thus he ties up every conceivable loose end.

As for the Argonautica, the only extant epic between the Odyssey and the Aeneid, Apollonius announces in the first four lines that its subject is the quest for the golden fleece. Jason's acquisition of the fleece forms the emotional high point of the poem. He sails away with it in 4, 211. The remaining 1570 lines deal with various adventures on his way back, ending with a short statement that he arrived home safely.

Two complete Latin epics are extant besides the Aeneid: Silius Italicus' Punica and Statius' Thebaid. Both authors literally worshipped Vergil as a god. In the last four lines of the Thebaid, Statius tells his poem: 'Follow the divine Aeneid at a distance and always worship its tracks.' They were willing to follow the Aeneid even to the point of absurdity. For instance, in Punica 17, 524–553 Silius imitates Aeneid 10, 636–660 by having Juno fashion an image of Scipio to draw Hannibal away from battle. But it serves no purpose since he soon finds out what is happening. The actual way in which Juno keeps him from the battle is by giving him false directions while in disguise.

The Punica and Thebaid do not, however, imitate the end of the Aeneid. That
is especially striking since their exordia are much more limited in scope than that of the *Aeneid*. They announce that their subjects will be only violent activity. But the war of the *Punica* ends in 17,596. Hannibal leaves in 617. In 618 Silius states: 'This was the end of the war.' However, this is followed by the citizens of Carthage willingly (*sponte*) opening their gates, Scipio depriving them of the opportunity for further aggression, and Scipio's triumph at Rome.

In the *Thebaid*, the war between the brothers ends in 11, 573 with their deaths in an elaborately described duel. That provides an exact parallel with the end of the *Aeneid*. But Statius obviously thought that the end of the *Aeneid* was too radical for him to imitate. So he has a normal type of ending. He devoted the last 188 lines of Book 11 and all of Book 12 to resolving the problems of what will happen to Oedipus and the invaders' corpses. The ending was aptly described by C.S. Lewis as 'awakening from nightmare, sudden quiet after storm'.

It is also instructive to compare the end of the *Theogony*, which is at least a quasi-epic in subject and style. Twice in the beginning, Hesiod proclaims that his subject will culminate when Zeus and the other gods take control of Olympus and distribute among themselves their honours and privileges (73–74, 112–114). The Titans are defeated in 719. A modern author would regard that as the climax and end as closely as possible to it. But Hesiod composed over 300 lines after it. The last 60 lines deal with the mortal offspring of divinities. These have absolutely no relationship with the divine economy. But again the need was felt to tie up every possible loose end and point ahead to the future significance of the action.

This principle of plot construction was by no means confined to the epic. The powerful beginnings and weak ending of many of Pindar's odes were strikingly compared by Gilbert Norwood to the American bison, 'whose magnificent head and shoulders are followed by a puny, dog-like structure in the rear'. Norwood notes the similarity of the *Iliad*, which 'does not end, but leaves off'. Norwood usually insists on the thematic unity of Pindar's odes; but he finds their endings a defect, which is indicative of a 'primitive genius', working in 'the archaic part of composition, preceding the Attic centralized manner'.

However, the same type of structure characterizes Greek tragedy. I will use as examples Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and Euripides' *Bacchae*, which are probably the most important and highly regarded Greek tragedies today. The basic problems of the *Oresteia* are resolved by the trial, which ends with line 753 of the *Eumenides*. In the last 270 lines (778–1047) the problems and characters of the first two plays are gone, and Aeschylus wraps up the last imaginable loose end, the Erinyes' anger against Athens. In the *Oedipus* the climactic event, Oedipus' discovery of his identity, occurs at line 1185. The audience is informed of what happened to him and Jocasta at line 1279. In the last 250 lines, Sophocles ties up all possible loose ends and allows the impact of the main action to wind down. In the *Bacchae* the culmination of the plot is the announcement of Pentheus' death, which ends at line 1147. The last 245 lines are devoted to Agaue's realization of what has happened and the future of Cadmus and Harmonia. It is, of course, normal for Euripides' plays to end with a god
resolving unanswered questions by telling the characters what they must do and/or what will happen to them. In the Bacchae the god confirms the harshness of what happened, but usually the god effects some sort of resolution and at least a relatively happy end. This type of ending, which seems so unsatisfactory to the modern reader, was attractive enough to Sophocles to use it in his Philoctetes.

Despite the tremendous amount of violence in Greek tragedies, only four end violently. They are Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound, Sophocles' Electra and Euripides' Hecuba and Heracleidae. In none of them is the ending nearly as jarring as the ending of the Aeneid. Prometheus brings on his suffering and will be freed in a later play. The Electra ends anti-climactically with the death of the relatively uninteresting Aegisthus, as opposed to the parallel plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, where Clytemnestra is killed second. Also, no cries were heard from him when he was murdered, as was the case with Clytemnestra earlier (1404-1416). Furthermore, Aegisthus evokes no sympathy and the very end is the chorus rejoicing at the delivery of the race of Atreus from suffering. Towards the end of the Hecuba, Polymestor is gagged and carried off to exile. But, like Aegisthus in the Electra, he does not inspire sympathy, and will suffer only banishment. Moreover, after he is led away there are still nine lines of the poem. Similarly in the Heracleidae, the villain, Eurystheus, is led off to be killed while the chorus rejoices that a satisfactory solution has been found. Also, it is possible, if not probable, that the end is intended as an attack on Athens. If that is true, it is the same type of attack as the end of the Aeneid: the killing of the enemy leader. But it is much milder. The Athenians do not kill Eurystheus, they merely do not prevent his murder. And he is a villain who inspires no sympathy, which Turnus is not.

A further indication of the profound difference between our view of a proper ending and the ancient Greeks' is in Aristotle's Poetics. Aristotle asserts that in a well constructed plot the incidents follow each other in accordance with probability and necessity, and that if any part is transposed or deleted the whole is destroyed (1451a). Yet on several occasions he refers to Oedipus the King as the supreme example of a well constructed plot (1452a, 1453b, 1454b, 1455a). Also, he commends the typical Euripidean deus ex machina ending. In 1454b, he criticizes the ending of the Medea because it does not come out of the plot itself; but he adds: 'The machine should be used for what is outside the action, either what came before . . . or what happened after and needs prediction . . . For we ascribe omniscience to the gods.' That is exactly the way Euripides usually uses his endings.

The profound difference between ancient Greek literary sensitivities and our own with regard to proper endings is even more obvious in the extant plays of Aristophanes. In most of them the crucial problem is solved well before the end, generally in the agon. That is usually followed by a series of episodes illustrating various results of the solution. Whatever the validity of the attempts to explain this structure from earlier fertility rituals, the significant fact is that Aristophanes regarded this structure as being satisfactory and ancient critics did not comment
on it, either to criticize or to explain it.

The same principle is also applied in the writing of history. Herodotus in the beginning of his history announces his subject as 'the great deeds of the Greeks and Barbarians ... and especially why they fought each other'. He then begins with the mythical origins of the conflict. However, the battle of Mycale does not end his history, but leads to a detailed excursus on Xerxes and his brother Masistes. Then he explains what happened to the Greek fleet after Mycale. This involves him in a description of the unimportant siege of Sestus. He then tells the fate of the Persian governor of the area around Sestus, and this leads him to end with a story about his ancestor being warned by Cyrus of the danger of soft, easy living, although this moral is unrelated to any of the major themes of his history. Again this ending has been seen as an example of pre- or proto-classical composition. But the only extant complete classical history, Xenophon's *Hellenica*, ends with the battle of Mantinea, which was notable mainly for its anticlimactic ending and utter lack of decisive influence. Xenophon emphasizes this in his last three sentences: 'There was even more uncertainty and confusion in Greece after the battle than before. As for me, let this be the end of my writing. What followed will perhaps be the concern of another.'

As for Roman histories, Sallust's *Catiline* and *Jugurtha* were composed a few years before the *Aeneid*. Both treat an enemy of Roman order who is much more evil and dangerous than Turnus. In both, after describing the villain's defeat, Sallust adds a chapter which provides a wider perspective. The end of the *Catiline* demonstrates the fratricidal nature of the conflict. The end of the *Jugurtha* points ahead to the future triumphs of Marius. Similarly the Caesarean Gallic War, Civil War, Alexandrian War, and African War all end by pointing ahead to subsequent events.

I will discuss Roman drama last because of all ancient genres it comes closest to violating the compositional principle demonstrated in this article. Of course, the extant plays of Plautus and Terence all end happily with some sort of conciliation, as is natural for comedies. But Seneca's plays have the most brutal endings of any extant ancient works of literature, except the *Aeneid*. Three of his plays, the *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, and *Medea*, have violence near the end. However, even in these plays there is no real analogy to the end of the *Aeneid*. In the *Oedipus*, the last ten lines are devoted to Oedipus telling the Thebans that they should now hope for better fortune since he is taking their troubles with him. The last line, about himself, is: 'It is pleasing to have such guides.' At the end of the *Agamemnon*, Cassandra goes to her death. But that death is in the future. There is no description of it as there was a long, vivid description of the murder of Agamemnon in lines 875 to 905. Moreover, the play ends with her insisting that she is happy and eager to die. The *Medea* has the most brutal conclusion of any extant Greek or Roman work of literature. But even it is much less brutal than the end of the *Aeneid*. The children who are killed are only a means to an end. They never speak and there is no way for the audience to empathize with them as people. The very end shifts attention to Medea's miraculous chariot. So the
conclusion of the Aeneid, with the life of a very sympathetic character going down to Hades indignata, is utterly unique in ancient Greek and Latin literature.

Furthermore, from what we know about earlier Roman tragedy, Vergil and his contemporaries were not familiar with tragedies as violent as Seneca's. Vergil's contemporaries regarded Accius as the greatest Roman tragedian. Ovid described his style as "energetic" (animosus). In the one passage from a play of Accius that we can compare with a play of Seneca's, Seneca is much more gruesome. Another indication of the unique brutality of Seneca's tragedies is that whereas his Atreus constantly exults in his crime, Varrus' Atreus realizes its full horror and claims that he is forced to do it.

So the end of the Aeneid must have struck Vergil's contemporaries as extremely jarring and disturbing. Unlike Silus' Punica and Statius' Thebaid, the beginning of the Aeneid announces its subject as not only war but also the founding of Rome. The predictions of Aeneas' future in Italy made in the first half of the Aeneid, and parallel passages in contemporary literature, nearly all stress his civilizing, constructive activity there. Of course, Vergil undercut this by showing the Latins living in a perfectly civilized, indeed ideal, condition in the beginning of Book 7. Nevertheless, his Roman readers would have expected the end to resolve tensions and point ahead to the Trojans and Italiens joining in peace to build for the future. That would have been a normal ending and it is what Vergil promised in the first half of the epic. Even if, for some reason, Vergil wanted an exceptionally abrupt ending, he could have concluded with the final conversation between Jupiter and Juno. Its position in the middle of the duel between Aeneas and Turnus violates Vergil's normal practice "by interrupting, with a long episode, an action before its outcome."

NOTES

1. I have already discussed the anti-Roman and anti-Augustan nature of the contents of the Aeneid in 'The Death of Turnus viewed in the Perspective of its Historical Background', Acta Classica 24 (1981) 97–106. All translations in this article are my own.
2. Pliny, Letters 3.7.8.; Punica 8, 593–594; Silvae 4.4.54–55.
4. Of course, there has been considerable controversy over whether the end that we have was originally part of the work or a later addition. The main participants in this debate and some of the major arguments are succinctly cited by M. West in his commentary on the Theogony, Oxford 1966, 398–399. He takes the radical view that 901 ff. is a later interpolation. But even he states that 'it is obvious' that the original did not end at 900: '... the later poet received a complete Theogony, not one that broke off at 900, and ... remodelled the end in his own style, but following the outline of the original ... composing 965–1018 as a bridge passage [to the Catalogue].' Furthermore, the significant point is that even if we accept that the end is a later interpolation, which is by no means a unanimous view, nevertheless, the ancient concept of literary structure made it possible for the present ending to be added. The same point applies to the disputed end of Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes and Euripides' Phoenician Women.
5. Pindar, Berkeley 1945 (rpt. 1956), 79.
6. Actually, this last part was originally considerably longer, since at least fifty lines are lost in our manuscripts after line 1329.
7. I leave out of consideration Euripides' Iphigenia at Aulis since its end is uncertain.
9. Here again critics have made serious mistakes because they have failed to appreciate how different the ancient idea of an ending was from our own. An excellent example is A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist*, Cambridge 1951 (rpt. 1966). He notes that in the Ajax, ‘Sophocles, by prolonging the drama, allowed the tragic feeling to evaporate, let the tension ... go slack’ (p. 67). He points out that this is characteristic of Greek tragedy in general, that it is very different from Shakespeare and Racine, and that attempts by other critics to justify this type of ending are misguided. But he then attributes it to certain deficiencies in the conventions of Greek tragedy (pp. 49–67). He does not realize that this type of ending was characteristic of all ancient Greek and Latin literature, and was obviously considered to be the only legitimate type of ending.


11. Demosthenes 18, 18.


13. Amores 1, 15, 19.


15. Quintilian 3, 6, 45.

16. *Aeneid* 1, 206, 263–264; 2, 293–297, 781–784; 3, 159–160, 393; 4, 229–231, 5, 737; *Propertius* 2, 34, 63–64; *Tibullus* 2, 5, 47–50. The only exception is *Aeneid* 6, 86–97, and even that passage ends with a prediction of help from Evander.


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**CELAENO SE DOEMWOORD EN DIE VERVULLING DAARVAN**

Dis nou juis sestig jaar gelede dat ek vir die eerste keer in *Aeneis* 3, 255–7 gelees het hoe Celaeno vir Aeneas en sy metgeselle vervloek het:

\[ \text{sed non ante datam cingetis moenibus urbem,} \]
\[ \text{quam vos dira fames nostraeque inturia caedis} \]
\[ \text{ambesas subigat malis absunere mensas.} \]

Met jeugdige vrymoedigheid het ek daardie voorstelling, dat iemand om sy honger te stil aan 'n tafel gaan knaag, ondigerlik en vergesog gevind; my beskouing het ook nie verander nie toe ek later in *7*, 107–29 gelees het hoe daardie doemwoord vervul is: die 'tafels' het daar gebleek niks anders as garskoeke te wees nie. Vir my het dit maar na 'n lawwe grap, gelyk.

Met daardie kritiek op Vergilius het ek nie alleen gestaan nie. By Williams¹ lees ek dat C.G. Heyne (1729–1812) by die aangehaalde reëls aangeteken het: ‘per se inepta et epici carminis majestate indigna’. Williams self laat daarop volg: ‘it is certainly rather less dignified than most of the prophecies given. Evidently Virgil felt it had to be used, and he has done his best to solve the problem by giving it not to Apollo or the Penates or even Helenus; it fits the fabulous strange world of the Harpies, and the theme of consuming the tables in famished hunger is appropriately put in the mouth of the ever famished Harpy’.

Dit is seker waar dat Vergilius hierdie episode nie self uitgedink het nie.
Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

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