

## **Victorianising Vergil: The Reception of the *Aeneid* in 19C English Literature**

S.J.Harrison, Corpus Christi College, Oxford <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sjh/>

Over the Victorian period, Vergil, having been decidedly second to Homer in the Romantic period, moved slowly towards a higher profile in UK scholarly and literary reception. The Romantic taste for the 'natural', 'primitive' and 'original' was the main cause of the denigration of Vergil (seen as artificial and contrived) in favour of Homer; this general view was continued in the pro-Homer polemic of such Victorians as W.E.Gladstone.

Matthew Arnold and Alfred, Lord Tennyson generated the influential presentation of Vergil the melancholic; for Arnold this was part of Roman literature's inadequacy in matching the more concrete achievements of Rome, but for Tennyson this was part of a self-identification with Vergil, most clearly articulated in his poem 'To Virgil' ('Thou majestic in thy sadness /at the doubtful doom of humankind').

Arnold's reservations about Vergil did not prevent him from using Vergilian allusion in a number of his poems, e.g. *The Scholar-Gipsy* (1853) and *Balder Dead* (1855), in both of which he refers to the tragic story of Dido and Aeneas, and in *Sohrab and Rustum* (1853), where the tragic moment when Rustum realises that Sohrab (whom he has killed) is his son draws material from Vergil's accounts of the dead and handsome young heroes Euryalus and Pallas. His 1850 *Memorial Verses* for William Wordsworth cast Wordsworth as Lucretius, the great poet of nature, and Arnold himself as the Vergil of the *Georgics*.

Since his own times Tennyson has been cast as the English Vergil. His twelve *Idyls of the King* (published together 1872) match the *Aeneid* in number of books and in dealing with a mythological story (the popular Arthurian cycle of medieval tales) which could be seen as a story of national origins, but do not really attempt a unified epic narrative. More revealing of Tennyson's views on Vergil is his 1882 poem 'To Virgil', commissioned by the community of Mantua, the poet's birthplace, to celebrate the 1900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the poet's death.

The supreme literary form in English in the Victorian age was of course the novel. The engagement of the great Victorian novelists with the classics in general and with Vergil in particular varies a good deal. Charles Dickens, who had relatively little formal education, says very little about classics in his novels, which were designed to have a broad appeal across the social spectrum and avoided overt literary allusion of most kinds. George Eliot, who was well educated and not averse to showing it, provides a number of allusions to Homer and Greek tragedy but is less interested in Latin literature. Anthony Trollope, who at the end of his life wrote a biography of Cicero (1880), shows a decent Victorian classical education in his novels with periodic brief quotations from central

authors such as Horace and Vergil, alludes briefly but effectively to Vergil in the last sentence of his *Autobiography* (1883).

More subtle are the Vergilian allusion in the novels *Vanity Fair* (1848) and *Henry Esmond* (1852) by William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), which show a careful and interesting interpretation of the text.

This rapid survey of a few central Victorian authors in prose and poetry show that they appropriate Vergil's *Aeneid* in different ways for different literary reasons. Their knowledge of the poem is of course a demonstration of their gentlemanly education and of the expected education of their model readers. Though many rated Vergil as inferior to Homer in this period, a judgement which was to persist for much of the nineteenth century, the detailed reading of Vergil in Victorian education meant that he was well known, and we can see that some of the most able and interesting writers of the period used this knowledge in a creative and stimulating way.