

Poesia Eroica: Mussolini's Ugly Aeneas

A quiet piazza in Mantua hosts the *Monument to Vergil*, built for the bimillennial anniversary of his birth. Among the set of bronze and marble statue groups, our familiar Aeneas, triumphant over Turnus, stands with an unsettling visage: the statue depicts the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini.

To understand how Aeneas came to wear the face of Mussolini, I build upon existing artistic critique and situate the piece within a broader weaponization of classics by Mussolini and the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) – which still shapes today's understanding of Roman identity. This paper critically examines the statue and its corresponding scene (*Aen.* 12.919-952); interrogates the imperial inscription on the statue's base (*Aen.* 6.851-853); and assesses the textual parallels the statue and its inscription evoke.

Earlier scholarship on the statue has focused on facets of its visual depiction: the implication of violence, the characteristic stance of Mussolini, and racial caricature in the face of Turnus (Harrison 2001; Rotiroti 2020). I propose a new approach foregrounding the themes of *Romanità* pushed by Mussolini and the PNF. To understand the visual language of the piece, scholars must consider the passages of the *Aeneid* from which this nationalist and racialized rhetoric draws. The passage on this statue's base, Anchises' vision of Roman duty (*Aen.* 6.851-853), is central in navigating this rhetoric. These lines elicit intratextual connections to the poem's final moments and extratextual connections to the two thousand years of reception and rhetoric that has followed.

Consequently, I analyze multiple manipulated translations of the period compiled by Scafoglio (2022) and compare the treatment of these two scenes to other artistic depictions in the fascist period. As a particularly explicit depiction, this paper considers Giuseppe Menozzi's *Poesia eroica* an exemplar of classical reception used as an ideological weapon, whose destructive legacy can reveal much about the etiological and rhetorical connections between Italian fascism and the classics.

Works Cited

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