Teaching *Pietas* and Ritual Purity in Vergil's *Aeneid*

Many Latin nouns weave together threads that break into sharply distinct strands in English language and thought, but few are as pivotal as *pietas* in high school and college language/literature curricula, and few are so much distorted when approached piecemeal through English. *Pietas* has conventionally been translated with words like "loyalty," "duty," "affection," "kindness," simple "goodness," or even "piety." In the cluster of ideas and values evoked by the vocabulary of *pietas*, standard dictionaries and handbooks underemphasize or omit three closely related elements that are especially important for the *Aeneid*: remembrance, reciprocity, and ritual purity.

How to redress the balance? One technique is to invest classroom sessions in close reading dictionary entries alongside passages chosen for their verbal and thematic connections, taking a break from the usual sequential narrative order. The goal is to invite students to think critically about what dictionaries do and do not offer. This can be done without undermining students' confidence in the resources they need for comprehension, and without deterring them from memorizing basic English equivalents to Latin vocabulary, which is a risk if students become discouraged by undue skepticism about what dictionaries do offer. Probing carefully into the areas of the Roman imagination that dictionary entries leave inexplicit, however, can help students use dictionaries as starting points, instead of finding in them closed lexical keys that shut down thought about the language. For example Chambers Murray, a dictionary often used in high schools and colleges, gives an inclusive definition of *pietas* as "*dutiful conduct* towards (and from) gods, country, parents, brothers and sisters, etc." which extends to the idea of "*fatherly kindness, tenderness, pity*" (Smith and Lockwood, 1933, 1976). Many North American students assume that "dutiful conduct" would be determined by the expectations that they themselves

experience in a Western society with ethical systems dominated largely by Christian traditions. But students can challenge their own earlier assumptions when they explore the dictionary entry's gaps as well as the information so succinctly provided.

Many teachers already ask students to consider whether Roman readers in the Augustan era and listeners would agree with one other – let alone with modern Americans – about what counts as "dutiful." Students may explore problems posed by tensions between the obligations of guest-friendship and dutiful remembrance of divine commands (in Book 4), and the relationship between a temporally specific political crisis (Octavian/Augustus commemorating his adoptive father dutifully by avenging his murder) and abiding philosophical anxieties about the social and ethical functions of punishment (Quint 1993; Putnam 2011). We can increase students' awareness of precisely how language-learning expands their broader critical thinking skills, while empowering them with historically sensitive approaches to the poem's potentially baffling assertions that Aeneas is *pius* just when he is in the midst of abandoning Dido (4.393) or killing young allies of Turnus (10.591, 10.783).

It is important to clarify for students the underlying preoccupations shaping Roman perceptions of duty towards gods and towards human communities: above all, the maintenance and restoration of ritual purity. Problems of pollution and purity in classical Rome were neglected by Anglo-American scholars for decades, perhaps because many took for granted the role of ritual cleanliness in *pietas*, but this immense topic is now (e.g. Bradley 2012; Lennon 2014) starting to receive the kind of systematic attention that Greek *miasma* commanded in the second half of the twentieth century. The advantage of long neglect, however, is that students at almost all levels can take part in a freshly developing conversation, and discover the excitement of participating in new research.

Close reading even a pedagogical text like that very short introduction to *pietas* in Chambers Murray can also help students explore uncertainties within Roman thought about the relationship between the divine realm and mortal obligations. The hope of *pietas* as "dutiful conduct *from* gods" as well as towards gods tends to be expressed conditionally by characters in the poem's story world (2.536, 4.382), so it is striking to find such doubtful prayers incorporated into the confident assertions of a brief dictionary entry.

Fundamentally, though, the issue at stake here is how to integrate fully into language teaching the breaking down of boundaries set by pre-existing cultural knowledge or ethical assumptions. These approaches may be applied equally effectively to many other Latin words of comparable literary and socio-political importance, such as *fama*, *libertas*, *virtus*, and the chameleon *res*.

Bibliography

Bradley, Mark (ed.). 2012. *Rome, Pollution and Propriety: Dirt, Disease and Hygiene in the Eternal City from Antiquity to Modernity*. Cambridge.

Lennon, Jack J. 2014. *Pollution and Religion in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge.

Putnam, Michael C. J. 2011. *The Humanness of Heroes: Studies in the Conclusion of Vergil's* Aeneid. Amsterdam.

Quint, David. 1993. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton, NJ.