

Approaching the *Aeneid* through Art

When taking a Latin course on Vergil's *Aeneid* for the first time in a college, students often are so focused on dissecting each line in order to arrive at a correct translation that they miss the significance and beauty of the epic as a whole. If they are expected to produce a research paper as part of the class, as they are in my department, it is often difficult for students to learn to use the Latin text they translate as evidence for larger assertions about the poem. In an attempt to help students arrive at a deeper understanding of the Latin text and also to help them develop skills in textual analysis as they work on translating, I recently organized my intermediate-level, gateway course on the *Aeneid* thematically: the course now concentrates specifically on art and ekphrasis in the poem. The importance of visual art in Augustan Age Latin poetry has been a major scholarly interest for some time, so students are introduced to this area of scholarship at an early level and engage with it as they make their way through the Latin.

Rather than translating a single book of the poem during the semester (which is a common approach in my department), in addition to reading the beginning and ending lines of the epic, students read five of the poem's well-known ekphrases as well as several passages which resonate with art narrated in the epic, including the description of the temple of Juno in Book One, the description of the cloak of Cloanthus in Book Five, the narrative about the *lusus Troiae* in Book Five, the description of the doors of the temple of Apollo in Book Six, Anchises' ghostly delineation of Rome's future leaders to Aeneas in Book Six, the description of Aeneas' shield in Book Eight, and the description of Pallas' belt in Book Ten. Early in the term, students read the entire poem in translation so that they understand how the Latin passages they translate fit into the global structure. By concentrating on selections which are thematically linked,

students are better able to pick out linguistic parallels and allusions, and they start to understand how one narratological moment informs the overall text.

Four writing assignments enhance students' experience with the Latin text. After translating the ekphrasis in Book One about the temple to Juno, students write an informal, in-class analysis of the specific images. This exercise introduces students to detailed textual analysis and motivates them to think about how the individual images work with the surrounding narrative. Students also write an original ekphrastic poem in English describing a work of art on their own college campus, which allows them to better understand the complex relationship between poetic word and image. Throughout the semester, students keep an informal journal in which they record their own reactions to the visually stimulating passages which they translate. They are encouraged not only to write about how they themselves envision the work of art or scene but also to make note of specific language and images which connect the passages to each other and also to the larger narrative. For each passage covered in the journal, students must also find and summarize scholarly articles and book chapters. Finally, students write a formal term paper, drawing from the bibliography they have created in the journal. For this assignment, they may write about anything having to do with ekphrasis, art, or vivid narration within the epic or, if they prefer, the reception of the poem in later art.

I will use this format during fall semester, 2015, and I will conduct a formal qualitative study of students' own reactions to the thematic approach. The study seeks to determine whether students feel that the focused approach helps them better comprehend the historical and literary significance of the poem, whether it helps them develop their skills in textual analysis, whether it promotes the development of research skills, and, most importantly, whether it

facilitates their ability to read the Latin itself. This paper will describe my thematic approach as well as present the results of the study.