

Aeneids in English

This talk's title refers to "*Aeneids*" in the plural because my central goal in the classroom is to make space for a plurality of readings to emerge. Each student can find her or his own *Aeneid* by devoting attention simultaneously to big questions and small verbal details. A simple method is often surprisingly effective for this purpose. Students track central characters, ideas, and socio-political categories, and look with special attentiveness for the various forces that seem to drive the poem's narrative through polarized conflicts. We then draw charts on the blackboard together, mapping out implied alignments and oppositions between these forces. I present brief lectures and prompt-questions to alert students to those thematic continuities that are less apparent in varied English translations than in the webs of meaning woven by repetitive yet flexible Latin vocabulary (e.g. *pietas* and *furor*; *fama* and *fata*). The analysis is cumulative. As students make their way through the narrative, we repeat our charting; we keep adding new categories, and notice shifts in the relationships between characters and ideas observed earlier in the poem. Students soon begin to discover independently further ideas and categories to explore in our tables of shifting alignments, and move beyond prompt questions and material from lectures.

By laying out visually shifting verbal and conceptual patterns, we see how many alignments overlap in ways that call into question seemingly polarized conflicts, including gender. For instance, after the opening of Book 1, we would most likely draw a sharp line. Juno, fiery passions of anger and grief, and frenzied storm-winds go on one side; Aeneas, *labores*, *fata*, and *pietas* show up on the other half of the blackboard. But even at that stage we might add a third column for the unfolding of poetic remembrance (1.8), as well as linking memory with Juno's anger (1.4, 1.36). When students have read Book 2, our three columns begin to share

increasing proportions of their ingredients: e.g. the unfolding of poetic remembrance and the fiery passions of anger and grief join Aeneas' column, even while physical flames are added to Juno's.

Gradually destabilizing apparently simple oppositions can address several difficulties posed by teaching the *Aeneid* in introductory literature and culture courses with readings in English. When some students are more familiar with the material than others, there is a risk that they will block further exploration, but this format encourages the more experienced students to stand back from their presuppositions. They are invited to share their previous impressions, which become critical questions, not answers to shut down enquiry. Students gain confidence in using their own analytic judgment instead of following interpretive lines that may have been fed to them (e.g. the *Aeneid* as Augustan "propaganda"; the *Aeneid* as imitation of the Homeric epics). Students who have read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Athenian tragedies (for example) can be encouraged to weave intertextual connections into the larger canvas we are shaping collaboratively, instead of merely intimidating other students who are new to classical literature. Students who have read selections in Latin language courses can help open up discussions of *pietas*, *pudor*, and *furor*, instead of resting too comfortably cushioned by their greater familiarity with the text. Students with a prior notion of Virgil as little more than a PR-man for Augustus may enrich their understanding of the political impact of the epic when they gradually trace "Augustan" motifs and layers of historical experience, and begin to see how these fit into a far more dynamic mode of communication.

Practical advantages also result from this straightforward activity. The visible organizing of specific evidence around large-scale observations and questions helps manage classroom time. We synthesize the accumulated results of extensive reading, and we probe short passages. A give

and take arises between simple observations and complex interpretive maneuvers, drawing participation from a full range of students even in large classes. Anyone who is keeping up with the work can spot some prominent themes, characters, and conflicts; more experienced or observant readers show others how to enrich these starting points with more nuanced details. Students grasp vividly the intellectual payoff of their own independent thought, and are motivated to ask questions about the language, politics, history, and religious culture of the period.

Public discussions of teaching often emphasize "innovative" pedagogy (grant money feeds novelty, and there is less emphasis on sheer effectiveness). The method I describe here is hardly new, and the approach is indebted to '80s style (loosely) deconstructive approaches. Yet for undergraduate student-readers it makes no difference whether their teacher brings new methods to the classroom. What counts is whether students themselves innovate by questioning their own assumptions, and whether they discover qualities in the poetry and thought that feel fresh to them – worth reveling in, and worth thinking deeply about.