

Grappling With Our American Aeneas: Harry Stillwell Edwards' *Eneas Africanus*

Harry Stillwell Edwards' *Eneas Africanus* (1919) is arguably the most famous piece of Vergilian reception in America, having sold over three million copies in its numerous reprints (Smith). It relates how, as Sherman's forces drew near, a slave named Eneas had been tasked with taking his master's silver from his stock farm to his plantation, but never arrived. In 1872, Eneas' former master, Major Tommey, begins looking for his now former slave as his daughter's wedding draws near, because among the items entrusted to Eneas was a cup used in family weddings. The novel takes the form of letters written to Tommey in response to his initial newspaper ad that detail Eneas' travels throughout the south—including a significant stop at Birmingham—and ends with a newspaper article about the wedding, at which Eneas arrives just in time with the cup.

Although the novel has received some attention in connection with Vergilian reception (e.g., Ronnick), it has largely been overlooked, in part because many feel that the story would seem to fit Odysseus better than Aeneas—as shown by later attempts to use it as the basis for a musical called *Ulysses Africanus*. The seeming mismatch with Aeneas has even led some to characterize Edwards' uses of Vergil as shallow at best (Rabel). But such a reading underestimates how essential the choice of Aeneas as a model is for Edwards' larger purpose: showing that life in the Old South was good, and that emancipation is a failure. In Edwards' own words, it is “an easy answer to that bloody libel on the South *Uncle Tom's Cabin*” (Smith).

While Odysseus returns home alone, without anything he has brought from Troy, Aeneas leads his people to their new home, and brings his household gods. Similarly, Eneas returns to the Major with a wife and numerous children in tow, as well as the mare he left with, and the colt she foaled during his wanderings. Most importantly, he also returns the silver cup, part of the

“household goods” he carries (23).

Aeneas’ *pietas* is also essential in explaining Edwards’ choice, both in its main sense of ‘dutifulness’ but also in terms of its English derivative, ‘piety.’ Eneas’ loyalty to the Major is the overriding theme of the entire novel, and the element that displays the virtues of the Old South and the failures of Reconstruction. Eneas is a free man, and yet still desires to return to his master. Similarly, Eneas’ choice to abandon sharecropping condemns that system.

Eneas also displays his *pietas* by preaching during his travels. There are numerous biblical references and allusions throughout the novel (Lowe), most importantly the story of Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt, which is Eneas’ favorite topic. This choice highlights the parallels between Eneas and both Moses and Aeneas as leaders of their people, searching for the promised land, but is also part of Edwards’ subversion of anti-slavery arguments. Slaves who were Christians read Exodus as promising eventual freedom (Raboteau), but Edwards co-opts and inverts this reading by making Tommey’s plantation, rather than the North, the promised land.

This novel exemplifies the “Lost Cause” narrative that arose after Reconstruction, perpetuating the image of an antebellum South which blacks loved as much as whites and drawing on some of the paradoxes that underlie American slavery and racial relations at the time. Eneas is simultaneously the paragon of loyalty but also a “champion liar” (17) and seemingly a thief (33). Likewise, he has the “wisdom of the serpent and simplicity of a child” (35), and the latter justifies the paternalistic, patronizing attitude people have to Eneas throughout. Reading Edwards’ *Eneas Africanus* reminds us of the ways that Greek and Roman texts were used to promote some of our country’s most repellant ideas, instilling and reinforcing racism (Daw), and it provides a window into the South’s longstanding and problematic connection with antiquity.

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