Vergil (Publius Vergilius Maro)

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P. Vergilius Maro (ca. 70–19 BCE), known to moderns as Vergil or Virgil, was the greatest Latin hexameter poet. He is the author of the pastoral *Eclogues* (ca. 38 BCE), didactic *Georgics* (ca. 29 BCE), and the epic *Aeneid*, which was at least technically unfinished (it has some incomplete lines) at his death in 19; it is possible that one or two poems in the collection *Catalepton* may be by him. He was born near Mantua (Mantova) in northern Italy. Little is known of his family; traditional accounts of his humble parentage in conjectural ancient biographies are inconsistent with his evident high education which may have begun at Milan. Like HORACE, Vergil seems to have lost property in the confiscations of 41; the *Eclogues* show a local concern with northern Italy and Mantua, but at the end of the *Georgics* we find the poet in the region of Naples, and it has been plausibly suggested that lost northern estates were compensated by new southern ones; this may have been through the agency of Augustus' minister MAECENAS, whose patronage Vergil attracted about this time, perhaps as a result of the *Eclogues*, for which the politician ASINIUS POLLIO and not Maecenas appears to be the chief figure of patronage. The *Georgics* celebrate the praises of Augustus (of which there is only a small trace in the *Eclogues*), reflecting this shift, and similar encomium is famously a key feature of the *Aeneid*. Vergil traveled to Greece on one occasion in the 20s BCE (Hor. *Odes* 1.3) and we are told by ancient biographies that he died at Brindisi on returning from a similar trip in 19.

The *Eclogues*, ten carefully arranged poems, combine some close imitation of the Hellenistic pastoral poet THEOCRITUS with complex engagement with the tense Roman politics of the period. *Eclogues* 1 and 9 lament the land confiscations, while carefully lauding

Figure 1 Mosaic of Vergil writing the *Aeneid*. Image © Gianni Dagli Orti/The Art Archive/Bardo Museum, Tunis.

the "young man" (the future Augustus) who was formally responsible for them; *Eclogue* 5 seems indirectly to lament the death of Julius Caesar in the guise of the shepherd Daphnis; while *Eclogue* 4 seems to mark the Treaty of Brindisi in 40 BCE, while being carefully ambiguous on the parentage (Octavian or Antony?) of the future child it celebrates. *Eclogue* 2 provides a version of Theocritus' *Idyll* 11, with less comedy and more homoeroticism, and *Eclogues* 3, 7, and 8 have considerable Theocritean flavor. The book is strongly metaliterary: *Eclogue* 6 presents a wide range of poetic themes of Hellenistic color, while the concluding *Eclogue* 10 shows subtle play with the work of the poet's friend, the elegist CORNELIUS GALLUS.

The *Georgics*, in four books, follow HESIOD's *Works and Days* from archaic Greece in giving agricultural advice, but utilize Hellenistic texture and subtlety as well as themes and images from the recent *De rerum natura* of LUCRETIUS. All this is updated to contemporary Italy by rich descriptions of Italian landscape, especially in the celebrated "praise of Italy" in book 2, and by a symbolic use of the figure of the farmer: the good

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farmer and his hard labor to produce crops amid natural vicissitudes seem to stand for the good citizen and the collective labor of the new Roman state after Actium, and the divine good farmer Aristaeus, who uses dramatic means to reconstruct his bee community (which has some hints of Rome), has some aspects of Augustus. The poem confronts the dangers of natural disaster (e.g., the plague of book 3), the destruction wrought in Italy by the civil wars of the 40s (in the conclusion to book 4), and the self-indulgence and political disposability of non-political poetry (in the Orpheus episode in book 4), but it is also addressed to Maecenas and provides firm encomium of Augustus, especially in the opening of book 1, in which he is to be added to the cosmic deities, the beginning of book 3, where his forthcoming return and triumph are anticipated, and the poem's close at the end of book 4, where he is depicted as a world conqueror.

The *Aeneid*, in twelve books, narrates the story of AENEAS, putative ancestor of Augustus, as he travels from the sack of Troy to the founding of the Roman people in Italy. The poem owes much to Homeric models, though it echoes many other works and styles; books 1–6 follow the *Odyssey* in narrating the hero's wanderings both directly and through a lengthy embedded narrative and in including a descent to the Underworld, while books 7–12 are closer to the *Iliad* in their detailed account of a military campaign which (eventually) casts Aeneas (in some senses a parallel for Augustus) as a second victorious Achilles and his opponent Turnus as a second defeated Hektor. The poem presents a complex picture of the gods: JUPITER, for example, is both frivolously anthropomorphic in Homeric style and a representative of Stoic destiny. The victims of Aeneas' progress are often presented with some sympathy: Dido, the Carthaginian queen abandoned by Aeneas in book 4 under divine pressure, echoes the great protagonists of Greek tragedy, as well as representing the founder of Rome's greatest enemy, while Turnus can be a true Italian hero as well as a vicious enemy. This complexity comes out especially strongly at the much-discussed conclusion of the poem: Aeneas disables Turnus, hesitates, and then kills him, showing both an inclination to clemency and a desire to revenge his fallen comrade Pallas, both arguably laudable, but the poem's sudden end focuses on the lament of the shade of Turnus as it departs for the Underworld. The poem was massively influential in imperial Rome generally and in western literature since the Renaissance.

SEE ALSO: Augustus; Civil war, Roman; Homer; Patronage, literary.

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