

Aeneid Wars

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The Aeneid. by Vergil. Translated by Shadi Bartsch. Random House, 464pp., \$35 cloth.

Vergil, *The Aeneid*. Translated by Sarah Ruden. Introduction by Susanna Braund; notes and glossary by Susanna Braund and Emma Hilliard. Yale, 392pp., \$18 paper.

RECENTLY THE STUDY OF ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN literature seems to illustrate Newton's Third Law of Motion—for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Young scholars in “the classics” (a phrase under increasing attack) are lobbying for a reinvention of their field that will accommodate their ideologies.

Their target is an easy one. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British scholars largely defined the field, and they did so in their own image, which included many race, gender and class biases. Their worldview also tended to incorporate strong emotional connections between the Roman Empire and their British Empire, which is why they focused on the perceived glory days of the Augustan era, downplayed the repulsive aspects of that era, only grudgingly studied the following century, and then largely ignored the empire's literature after about 100 A.D.

The dissolution of the Roman Empire was painful for British classicists not only because of the parallels to their own nation's international decline, but because the literature became increasingly Catholic. Hatred of Catholicism was a standard failing of the British elite through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and classicists were no different. Most classicists of that period viewed Late Antique Latin poetry as degenerate, and simply did not study it or teach it.

The strangeness of this cutoff for the study of a language's literature still escapes attention in our colleges and universities. French departments do not stop teaching French literature after Moliere and Racine, Italian departments do not stop teaching Italian literature after Dante and Petrarch, so why do almost all classics departments feel they have no duty to study and teach Latin literature after Juvenal, Martial and Seneca?

The general intentions of the new generation of classicists are clear, but the specifics of their vision are not. One of the few areas of common ground between the old guard and the new guard is distaste for Catholicism, so do not expect to see Prudentius, Corippus or Aldhelm on curricula any time soon. You may not see Virgil's *Aeneid* or Homer's *Iliad* on as many readings lists any more either. As just one example, Oxford had a heated public debate last year about removing both books from its second-year curriculum. Some would go even further—a Stanford University classics professor, Walter Scheidel, recently stated about classical studies that “I don’t think it should exist as an academic field.”

Whether as a reaction to the critics or not, there is also renewed interest in some quarters in ancient Roman and Greek texts. Public universities, such as the University of Vermont, may be dropping classics departments, but interest is surging among home-schooling parents, private schools, and some religious colleges and universities. Classics for All, a non-profit British institution, is doing a wonderful job of expanding interest in and access to Greek and Latin literature for students traditionally denied the opportunity to engage in such study by the class, race and gender biases of the British academic establishment.

As part of this revival, a growing number of translators have recently taken on the most significant texts. The earliest translators of these texts, such as Pope and Dryden, valued good poetry over literal accuracy. In the nineteenth century, academic philologists took over the field and tipped the balance toward painful literal accuracy and against the pleasures of poetry. Due to the sentimentality about Augustan Rome, translation of the *Aeneid* and other texts also suffered from avoidance of literal accuracy whenever it cast Rome in a bad light—so rape became romance, slaves became servants.

Translation of the *Aeneid* in most of the twentieth century was not much better, except that the Victorian *faux* antique diction gave way to the over-the-top, testosterone-driven language of Ezra Pound—language that often paid little attention to what the text actually said. Robert Fitzgerald’s 1983 elegant translation is a notable exception to that generalization, but it achieved concision at the cost of excluding key details and it continued the tradition of looking at Rome through rose-colored glasses. Harold Bloom and acolytes of deconstructionism appear to have given *Aeneid* translators of the early twenty-first century even greater license to use the *Aeneid* as something akin to a writing prompt for sprawling free verse that wanders far from the source text. The unfortunately popular Robert Fagles 2006 version is the best example of this phenomenon, and the nadir is surely Frederick Ahl’s 2007 translation.

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It was against this backdrop that Sarah Ruden's 2008 translation of the *Aeneid* challenged the classical establishment. It was a challenge for which she was well prepared—she is a distinguished poet with a doctorate in classical philology from Harvard. While there was reluctance in some quarters to welcome into the men's club the first woman to translate the *Aeneid* into English, what upset the classics establishment even more than her gender was her decision to render the poem in blank verse, the workhorse meter for Milton and Shakespeare. I once witnessed a panel where two tenured Ivy League professors tried to shout Ruden down as she tried to explain her rationale for her decisions on prosody.

For all the criticism she received, Ruden's embrace of the regular blank verse of Shakespeare and Milton has been influential. The great David Ferry published a disappointing 2018 *Aeneid* translation in loose blank verse, and Len Krisak raised the ante in 2020 with a version in rhymed and metrically regular iambic hexameter couplets.

This year Yale University has released a revised version of the Ruden translation. The competing translation is from Shadi Bartsch, the Helen A. Regenstein Distinguished Service Professor in Classics at the University of Chicago. Bartsch's approach is closer to that of Ruden than that of Fagles or Ahl. Both translators embrace meter, although Bartsch's meter is less strict:

After some experimentation, I compromised between the familiarity of Shakespearean blank verse and Vergil's meter by allowing six, sometimes five beats in my iambic lines. (p. LI)

Both translators translate line-for-line, a practice that makes it much easier for students to tie these translations to citations in scholarly articles; this approach also acts as a governor against unnecessary verbiage. Both translators are also zealous about avoiding the Victorian and postmodern claptrap that has diminished so many translations.

A good starting point for thinking about these two books is to look at 11.875 (*quadripedumque putrem cursu quatit ungula campum*), a line for which A.N. Wilson once contrasted the G.P. Goold “literal” translation from the venerable Loeb series with a laughable line from the Ahl translation.

And in their galloping course the horse hoof
shakes the crumbling plain (Goold)

Cloven-hoofed quadruped clatter kicks
clumps, quivers plains at a gallop (Ahl)

Bartsch and Ruden render these lines as:

they shook/the pockmarked plain with
horses at full gallop (Bartsch)

And hoofbeats’ rhythms shook the soft-earthed plane (Ruden)

These takes are both reasonable, although I would probably have chosen the simpler “dusty” for *putrem* over the more lyrical choices Bartsch and Ruden made. As you look closer at their versions, though, you start to see differences in language that reflect the two translators’ different approaches. Ruden achieves full line-for-line equivalence, but Bartsch pulls in a foot from the previous line.

In and of itself, the occasional theft of a foot from a previous line is not a big deal. However, Bartsch had difficulty maintaining the line integrity of both the original text and good iambic pentameter verse in English. Frequently she resorts to enjambment where lines end with conjunctions, pronouns are split from verbs, and other awkward choices, as in this excerpt from 5.315-320:

At the signal, suddenly
they sprang out from the gates and sped over
the distance, rushing on like storm-clouds. When they
saw the finish line, Nisus flashed into
first place, faster than winged lightning and
the wind. (5.315-320)

Contrast this section with Ruden’s more fluid and concise version:

At the signal,
They sprang across the line and down the course,
Pouring like clouds. Now with the goal in sight,
Nisus flashed out ahead and took the lead
As swiftly as the wind or wings of thunder.

Ruden understands that once a translator chooses the verb “sprang,” the adverb “suddenly” suddenly becomes extraneous.

There are times when Bartsch's philological focus is helpful. In the section quoted above I prefer her more accurate "winged lightning" to Ruden's "wings of thunder" on both philological and esthetic grounds. However, Ruden's word choices are only rarely off-key, whereas Bartsch's choices regularly miss the mark as poetry. A small example of this difference between the two translators occurs at 1.635 where Ruden uses "fat lambs" but Bartsch uses "fatty lambs"—a description that evokes an unappetizing and unhealthy piece of meat on a plate rather than a gamboling farm animal. Thirty-two lines later a reader can see this contrast again when Ruden uses the properly assertive "You know," but Bartsch uses the flimsier "You're aware"—a phrase of faculty meetings, not battlegrounds.

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* retain their grip on the public imagination; words and phrases from these epics are firmly lodged in our parlance, and genres from film to comic books continue to mine Homer's characters and scenes. The *Aeneid* once had a similar role in Western culture, but today's undergraduates—clearly the target audience for both editions—will usually be unfamiliar with the poem. This unfamiliarity makes it important that translators render the text not only accurately, but with rhythms and word choices that keep reminding the readers that the *Aeneid* popularized the phrase "the golden line."

Self-indulgent free verse translations loosely tethered to Virgil's Latin have worked to undermine the reputation of the *Aeneid* and made it easier for critics to call for it to be removed from curricula. If the Bartsch translation had been released fifteen years ago, it would have been controversial and celebrated as superior to the reigning versions of Fagles and other recent translators. However, the Ruden translation, both in its 2008 edition and the 2021 edition, accomplishes everything that the Bartsch translation does, and more. They both show the unappealing aspects of the poem, much in the way that Emily Wilson's widely acclaimed 2017 translation of the *Odyssey* did, and they both inform their translations with serious philology in ways that Fagles, Ahl and others did not. Both versions are reasonably accessible to readers and generally free of the "translatese" that haunts the Loeb and many earlier translations.

The difference comes down to the quality of the poetry, and there Ruden has the edge over Bartsch. The Bartsch translation has moments of genius, but they are too few and they invariably come in lines where a regular iambic pentameter line forces the concision and power that consistently sustains the Ruden translation. Ruden set the bar for *Aeneid* translations in 2008, and has raised it now with this revision. I am confident it will be a long time before a translator exceeds the standard that she has set. A