

The New Criterion

Books

May 2008

Virgil up to speed

by [Richard Garner](#)

On *The Aeneid*, translated by Sarah Ruden.

Sarah Ruden, translator

The Aeneid.

Yale University Press, 320 pages, \$35

Introductions to Virgil's *Aeneid* often begin with reference to Homer. Rightly so. Knowing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil translated and reworked phrases, similes, and an enormous number of episodes and elements from them for his *Aeneid*—so much so that already during his lifetime he was criticized for stealing. He reportedly replied to his critics that *they* should try such theft: they'd find it was easier to snatch Hercules' club from him than to take verses from Homer. Readers of Greek and Latin would agree that whatever the difficulty, Virgil could have taken Hercules' club and lion skin and anything else he wanted. However much he borrowed, his monumental account of Aeneas and the origins of Rome and Roman values is his own.

But Virgil was right about the difficulty of moving anything from one language to another. Italian, a direct descendent of Virgil's Latin, pleasingly expresses this damaging process: *Traduttore, traditore*. The translator is (inevitably) a traitor. Still, Latin shared two very helpful features with Greek: both languages used a dizzying array of endings for nouns, adjectives, and verbs; this allowed very free word order without loss of clarity. English, however, pretty much makes do with *-s*, *-ed*, and *-ing*. And with no more than that to label the functions of words, severe restrictions on word order hobble any translation into English—particularly from metrical poetry in a language not so bound.

So translating the *Aeneid* into English poses a fearsome task. And yet the past thirty-five years have produced three fine verse translations, those of Mandelbaum (1981), Fitzgerald (1983), and, most recently, Fagles (2006). Mandelbaum and Fitzgerald chose iambic pentameter for their translations; Fagles uses a freer verse line. All three are admirable in their way. But all, in facing Virgil's densely constructed verse, use many more lines than the original Latin—as many as three to two.

Sarah Ruden, a classically trained poet and translator of Petronius, Aristophanes, and the *Homeric Hymns*, has now taken on Virgil. She, too, has chosen iambic pentameter for her *Aeneid*. But she has limited herself to one English line for each of Virgil's. The result is a translation that is fast, clean, and clear, sometimes terribly clever, and often strikingly beautiful.

Ruden's enforced brevity brings a variety of advantages. At the most superficial level, a Book 1 of 756 lines (instead of 1,053 in Mandelbaum's translation; 1,031 in Fitzgerald's) generally endears itself to the speed-obsessed culture of the twenty-first century. But speed was pleasing two millennia

ago—Virgil intended his battle scenes and much of his narrative to move swiftly and cleanly. And Ruden’s economy has other more profound attractions. Time and again, Virgil has packed his meaning and observations into one line. Epigrammatic statements that lose their punch in more diffuse translations are virtually always preserved by Ruden with immense profit to the impact in English. Moreover, Virgil repeatedly makes the point, particularly through Aeneas himself, that conciseness is attractive in and of itself. Greeks were famous for (treacherous) eloquence; good Romans kept it short. A compact translation is in keeping with Virgil’s style.

Much of Ruden’s achievement is in making these iambic pentameter lines sound natural and effortless. Take this example when Aeneas sees and envies the construction of Carthage: “What luck they have—their walls grow high already!” Or this, when Dido assures the Trojans of her compassion (a line Rousseau found incomparably beautiful, profound, moving, and true): “My own experience has taught compassion.”

Ruden renders the powerful account of Aeneas first shouldering his father (and his debt to the past) as: “I picked my father up and sought the mountains.” Then, later, Aeneas taking up his shield embossed with Roman history (and his duty to the future): “He shouldered his descendents’ glorious fate.”

Ruden’s skill also shines in longer passages. Here is Anna advising Dido on holding Aeneas at Carthage:

Weave pretexts for delaying as you fete him:
Seas raging through the days of wet Orion,
Ships damaged, and a hard and stubborn sky.

Ruden seems to rise to special eloquence at the end of books, as in this address to a drowned sailor at the conclusion of Book 5:

Oh, trusting victim of calm sea and sky,
Unburied on some strange shore, Palinurus!

Ruden has found ingenious solutions to echo some of Virgil’s great sound effects—solutions I’ve not seen in any other translation, prose or verse. Consider Virgil’s hypnotic description of the welcome arrival of sleep:

Tempus erat quo prima quies mortalibus aegris
incipit et dono divum gratissima serpit.

Ruden renders this as:

It was the time when the first, sweetest sleep,
A gift from gods, slips into weary mortals.

Even the Latinless reader will be able to sound out the lines and see that Ruden has preserved the lullaby of the repeated *s* sounds and the assonance of *dono divum* replacing the *d*’s with *g*’s in “gift from gods.”

Another of Virgil’s famous happy creations (he uses it twice) is a description of the stars encouraging sleep. It, too, features a cluster of *s* sounds and a soothing falling cadence in which the syllables of the words decrease from four to three to two: “suadentque cadentia sidera somnos”

Ruden first translates this as “the setting stars urge sleep.” Nice enough. But at the second occurrence she outdoes herself and rivals Virgil himself: “And falling constellations counsel sleep.” Here the sound and the syllabic structure uncannily match the original. The poetry also echoes the great quiet descriptions of the constellations in Hardy’s poem “Drummer Hodge.”

Admirable poetic invention abounds: clever enjambment to match Virgil’s: “furor pitched my mind/ Ahead:” (*furor iraque mentem/ praecipitat*); deft rhythmic effect that echoes Virgil and gives the weight he created at line endings: “With my friends, my child, my clan’s gods, and the great gods” which matches Virgil’s heavy rhythm, *magnis dis*.

Ruden even finds a way (with Virgilian subtlety) to convey Virgil’s quiet skepticism and the way he places greater distance between himself and the gods than one finds in the Homeric poems. When Zeus weighs the fates of Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*, we are told which way the scales drop. This is one of many passages Virgil “translated.” But he pointedly refrains from reporting how the scales move. Ruden’s question marks (not actually in the Latin) help emphasize the new tone:

Now Jove himself held up a pair of scales,
Evenly balanced, for the pair of fates:
Who was condemned? Which side would
.ju r
Death weigh down?
.ju l

Ruden variously matches Virgil’s vigor, melancholy, and colloquialism. When Aeneas is trying to keep the hysterical Dido calm and focused, Ruden’s “A little on the facts, though” (*pro re pauca loquar*) is just right. Or here’s an ironically knowing Venus carefully maneuvering with Juno:

“If only what you plan succeeds in practice.
Fate—to me—sways, uncertain... .”

The tone is pitch perfect. Ruden’s English remains remarkably free from convolution. What is happening, who is speaking, and who is doing what to whom is always clear. For me, hers is the cleanest of modern verse translations.

Matching Virgil’s Latin line by line in English inevitably requires excision. Most often Ruden finds elements that can be omitted without loss. And sometimes her pruning ingeniously sharpens a Virgilian point. Here are two typically spare lines:

Three times Achilles dragged the corpse
.ju r
of Hector
.ju l
Around Troy’s walls, then traded it for gold.

Ruden is forced to omit the adjective “lifeless” describing the corpse. A fierce editor might have asked Virgil what corpse isn’t lifeless. And in any case Ruden’s stark formulation helps to emphasize the brutal treatment and cold transaction.

But some cuts are costly. When Aeneas responds in frustration to his mother Venus who has disguised herself, Ruden translates: “I am your child—must you keep torturing me/ With these illusions?” Ruden has condensed, “You are cruel too. Why do you torture your child so often with these illusions.” Virgil’s “too” and “so often” provide mystery, depth, and verisimilitude. We

imagine who else's cruelty Aeneas thinks of and what other times he may have felt tortured by his charming but mischievous mother. Again, as Virgil reaches the poem's final violence he addresses his audience directly. Ruden translates: "What god will sing for me such suffering—/ Deaths of all kinds." But Virgil has something like, "What god can now set forth so many bitter things, what god can express deaths of all kinds in song." Ruden's condensation misses the emphasis on the ironic contrast of the beauty of poetry and the grim content it must have here.

Besides the effects of conciseness, one finds odd choices here and there. Several times in Book 1 Ruden's poetry misses the imagery of fire and burning as metaphors for destructive emotion and passion, imagery which Virgil will bring to full blaze in Book 4 in the further development and culmination of the disastrous affair between Dido and Aeneas (where Ruden almost always does preserve the language). Another puzzle is Ruden's arrangement of 4.449: "But tears did nothing. His resolve remained." She reverses Virgil's two sentences. Other translators honor his choice—rightly, I think. But these are small matters outweighed by the many successes in Ruden's work.

Ruden closes her introduction with some reflections on struggle—the struggle to found and maintain a civilization, the struggle to achieve beauty in poetry. These efforts are, she notes, sickening, exhausting—all leading inevitably to death. As she says, "We cannot match in reality our vision of what we need to create from our minds." The world of the *Aeneid* is famously sad; tears—especially Aeneas's, but those of others too—moisten page after page. Aeneas, seeing the Carthaginian depiction of the Trojan War, sees "tears of pity for a mortal world." But side by side with tears Aeneas sees "praise for valor." Many human achievements deserve our praise, and this excellent translation is certainly one of them.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 26 May 2008, on page 85

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