

# Kill turnus, refound rome: the closing scene of the aeneid



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Virgil borrows many stories and themes from the Homeric epics and revises them for the Roman tradition in the Aeneid. Aeneas' journey in search of the Latium shores parallels Odysseus' journey to Ithaca, except the latter knows what home he is going to. The war with the Latins is literally a second Trojan War, paralleling the Iliad, only the Trojans win. But both Homeric epics come to a relatively peaceful, definite ending (funeral for Hector, and restored order in Ithaca). In comparison, the Aeneid ends with a violent death, the equivalent of ending as Achilles drags Hector's body around the wall of Troy or when Odysseus kills all the suitors. One reason for this difference and for the suitability of the ending in the Aeneid is that it has a larger cultural directive than either of the Homeric epics. Homer was never commissioned to speak his plays. More than just a story of heroes, war, and art in its various forms, the Aeneid is also about the founding of Rome. Aeneas killing Turnus at the very close of his story is directly a step toward the founding of Rome and also relates to the reestablishment of Rome under Augustus. Much of the scene where Aeneas kills Turnus can be cast in a positive light. First, Aeneas kills Turnus after seeing wearing the belt he stole off of Pallas, Aeneas' ally. In this way, he is avenging his friend and being pious, Aeneas' constant attribute. It is worth noting though, that Aeneas does not say he kills Turnus as pious Aeneas, as he otherwise readily identifies himself, but says, "It is Pallas who strikes, who sacrifices you, who takes/this payment from your shameless blood"(XII. 1266, 7) Additionally, the scene ends the book on a definitively masculine note. For much of the Aeneid, Aeneas does not appear in the worthy hero status of Achilles or Odysseus. He's easily distracted from his mission and must be reminded of his purpose repeatedly by the gods. Virgil in turn makes the very enemies who called Aeneas a

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second Paris look the more feminine party. By killing Turnus, Aeneas can join the ranks of the emotion charged heroes before him, and more importantly, become the great man that Romans of Virgil's time could actually see founding their great city. The final scene of the Aeneid can also show the dark side of empire. Throughout the epic, many people, unknowing pawns of fate, are crushed on the path to Roman greatness. Most of them are women, Aeneas' wife Creusa, Dido, Camilla, but armies of young Latin men fall in their war with the Trojans. "was it/ your [Jupiter] will that nations destined to eternal/ peace should have clashed in such tremendous turmoil", asks Virgil (xii. 678-80). What taints Aeneas' most classically heroic action even more is the fact that he and Turnus share a connection through pre-Roman heritage. The Latins and the Trojans go on to make up the Romans, making Turnus and Aeneas like brothers; fratricide is generally frowned upon. Also, Aeneas' direct compulsion to kill Turnus comes from seeing him with young Pallas' studded belt. While Virgil's description of Turnus' actions "[Pallas] whom Turnus had defeated, wounded, stretched/upon the battlefield" (xii. 1258-60) makes the taking of plunder from defeated enemies seem a gross deed, it is far from unheard of. Aeneas himself does it when he takes armor or weaponry from the Greeks. Whether or not his reason is entirely justified does not explain Aeneas' uncharacteristically emotional reaction, at least for Roman culture. For most of the epic, Aeneas is successful at the stoic mentality, subverting his emotions for his higher goal, but here Aeneas steps into the space of Achilles, "aflake with rage-his wrath was terrible" (xi. 1264), brutally killing an opponent over the loss of a friend. When Aeneas kills Turnus, it provides something deeper than just commentary on the cost of empire or value of stoicism and masculinity. The <https://assignbuster.com/kill-turnus-refound-rome-the-closing-scene-of-the-aeneid/>

closing image is reminiscent of the Battle of Actium, also described by Virgil on the shield of Aeneas, the result of which was Augustus Caesar taking sole control over Rome. In this case, Aeneas is analogous to Augustus and Turnus plays the role of Antony. For one, throughout the epic Augustus is prophesized to Aeneas; the two have a cosmic and distant blood connection to start. Aeneas is the founder of Rome and Augustus refounds Rome. Antony does not share blood with Turnus, at least in a significant way, but they do share a character flaw. Both men lose their senses and rationality because of women. Antony loses his senses, and much respect from Romans because of his marriage to the Egyptian Cleopatra. Virgil, who treats most women in a similar way says, "and-shamefully-/behind him follows his Egyptian wife" (viii. 894-5) as Antony marches to face Augustus bringing with him monsters and barking gods from the decadent East. Likewise, Turnus was originally the Latin's best warrior, stubborn, strong, and sane, but he is literally driven wild by sexual longing for Lavinia despite Queen Amata's plea to keep him from fighting, Turnus is "even keener now for battle"(xii. 96). His lust drives him to kill Pallas and leads to his final fatal encounter with Aeneas. Both characters therefore fit their individual roles in the analogy. Furthermore, Aeneas, as mentioned earlier, kills Turnus who is nearly his brother and at least a fellow nearly-Roman. So too, Augustus defeats Antony (who later kills himself) even though the two helped establish the second triumvirate in Rome. But even with the multi-dimensional interpretations and the connection to Augustus, Virgil could have continued his epic to another point. In addition to making the moment infinitely more important by closing the epic with it, he also keeps from having to fill in the rest of Roman history through Augustus. Virgil's original audience would probably have recognized <https://assignbuster.com/kill-turnus-refound-rome-the-closing-scene-of-the-aeneid/>

the illusions in the last scene to the Battle of Actium. Knowing also how Rome was entering into a sort of golden age of peace under Augustus, a similar era of greatness can be applied to Aeneas. The same logic can be worked in the opposite direction. By closing the story of the founding of Rome with a violent death committed by the father of Rome, it lends validation to the violent ascension of Augustus and places greater emphasis on it by casting it as a founding of Rome.