

# Surrey's innovations and achievements in his aeneid



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Surrey's Innovations and Achievements in His Aeneid Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, is credited as the inventor of English blank verse. In addition to this, he translated books II and IV of Virgil's<sup>1</sup> Latin epic the Aeneid. This paper will endeavor to show what an accomplishment this was for a poet of the age of King Henry VIII, and how different and modern blank verse, and the work of translation that was couched in that blank verse, was from the rest of the poetry of the time. Much has been written in past centuries about the quality of Surrey's poetry. Until the 20th century, Surrey was considered a better poet than his near-contemporary, (though Wyatt was older, and outlived him) Sir Thomas Wyatt (Schmidt 125). Surrey's reputation has slipped considerably, and his style of poetry, considered "conventional" and not always coherent, is now said to "please rather than move us" (125). His Aeneid, however, is considered "subtly conceived and executed with exemplary plainness, a verse direct and transparent, displaying its matter rather than its manner," (128) but it is also said that it only "makes a fair attempt to imitate the style of the original. Its form is one at that time unique in English literature and probably difficult for an English poet to manipulate" (Ridley, 3). Let us consider firstly the scope of achievement of the Earl<sup>3</sup>, at a time when he was occupied not only with court duties but also various military campaigns, and also considering the brevity of his life, and then consider the merits of his production, especially in regard to the other poetry in circulation at the time. The date of the translation of the two books of Virgil<sup>2</sup> is put by Ridley around 1540 (Ridley, 4), when the poet could have been no more than 24 years old (the exact day in 1517 of his birth is not known, nor is that year beyond question, [Casady 21]). He was, at this time, <https://assignbuster.com/surreys-innovations-and-achievements-in-his-aeneid/>

made a steward of the University of Cambridge (Ridley 4), and had been and would continue to go on military expeditions for the King in France, in his capacity as Earl Marshal of England. This young man, who was considered a gifted linguist, knew and could translate Italian, Spanish, Latin, and French well (Bender, 180). He made at least one trip to France, (besides his various military ventures in that country) where he came into contact with (and had probably read before, in England) Italian unrhymed verses. In 1532, Surrey visited the court of Francis I while Luigi Alamanni was there, and Alamanni in that very year “ published a work dedicated to the French king, containing poems in blank verse.” (Ridley 3). So Surrey was aware of Italian unrhymed verses, and was known to admire the five-foot line of Chaucer (Bullett viii). This he synthesized into an unrhymed, five-foot line that came to be known as blank verse. About this invention, Sir Harris Nicolas (the memoirist of the un-authored Poetical Works) quotes the even earlier biographer of Surrey, Dr. Nott: Surrey perceived that some change in our [that is, English] versification was unavoidable, and he attempted a change, which was conceived as the event has proved in a perfect knowledge of the nature and genius of the English language. The change he proposed and effected was this. He substituted for the old rhythmical mode of versification one, as nearly metrical as the nature of any language, which regulates the value of syllables by accent, and not by quantity, will allow. He limited the heroic verse to ten syllables, and these he divided into five equal iambic feet; for he perceived that the frequent return of the short syllable was necessary to correct that languor and ponderosity which the constant recurrence of monosyllables would otherwise occasion. He was aware, however, that the iambic measure, though sweet in itself, was liable to become monotonous

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and pall upon the ear. He therefore introduced the further refinement of breaking the lines with pauses. The natural place for the pause was at the end of the fourth syllable where the old caesura generally fell; but he varied the situation of his pauses as he found the harmony of the verse required, or as he thought the beauty and effect of the passage would be heightened by it. (Poetical Works lxvi-lxvii, brackets mine) It's difficult to imagine how this sort of leap of poetic invention could have occurred. The reading of blank verse in Italian, and the knowledge and admiration of Chaucer's five-foot line, do not necessarily lead to the logical inevitability of turning these two things into an iambic pentameter unrhymed English line used for translating classical epic poetry. And there isn't any doubt that Surrey was the inventor of this English poetic form (Ridley 1). "When he attempted blank verse he had no guide whatever, as far as we have yet been able to discover, but his own judgment and taste." (Poetical Works lxix). It was certainly an important, a bold, and a very valuable (to English poetry) step for the young Surrey to introduce this form into English, for not only was it adopted and used by such great poets as Shakespeare and Milton with great success (Bullett vii), but also it is important to note how little innovation, until the invention of free verse, came after the introduction of blank verse. "An attentive reader will be surprised to find how little was added afterwards by even Dryden or Pope to the system and perfectness of Surrey's numbers" (Poetical Works lxviii). Blank verse became so important and long-lasting that "Soon after blank verse was introduced by the Earl of Surrey in his translation of Books 2 and 4 of Virgil's *The Aeneid*... it became the standard meter for Elizabethan and later poetic drama; a free form of blank verse remained the medium in such twentieth-century verse plays as those

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by Maxwell Anderson and T. S. Eliot" (Abrams, 25). And the translation that Surrey undertook was by no means an easy one. The classical Latin of Virgil was difficult, and in many ways very different from the scholarly and Church Latin used in Tudor England. In addition, Virgil was perhaps the greatest of the Latin poets, and his complete mastery of the concise and almost endlessly suggestive Latin language would be difficult to translate accurately at all, much less into beautiful verse. Ridley maintains that Surrey was not quite up to the job, but made a valiant try. The failure of Surrey is understandable enough. A young minor poet was trying to accomplish with a new form and an immature language what one of the greatest of all poets had accomplished at the height of his power, employing a seasoned mode of expression and a language that lent itself naturally to poetic ambiguity, echo, and nuance. Surrey could and did achieve a degree of epic dignity, [and] measured firmness of statement" (Ridley, 36). Surrey was certainly ambitious, and took a major poem, that had not been yet translated into English (there was a complete version by Gawin Douglas<sup>4</sup> in the Scots dialect, written some years before and widely circulated, [Ridley 14]) and attempted to put it into a new verse style that was in keeping with the dignity and heroic theme of the poem. Was this ambition justified? If he had been able to complete the entire epic, and if the quality of the work was similar to our examples of Books II and IV, then the ambition would certainly have been attained. It is not known if it would ever have been finished, even if Surrey had lived, since there is no extant manuscript (see Notes) of any more of a translation of Virgil's poem. It may be speculated that if Surrey had lived more than his 29-30 (it is not known exactly, see above, p. 2) years he might well have completed the entire epic. There is no evidence as to his <https://assignbuster.com/surreys-innovations-and-achievements-in-his-aeneid/>

intentions. The fragments that we possess give us an enticing look at a brand-new form of English poetry, however, and they stand out among the other old-fashioned verses of the day, which can seem dated, awkward, and needlessly rigid by comparison. Take, for example, the end of book II. Aeneas, having been left Creusa's (his wife's) ghost, perceives that the Greeks are at the gates of the city of Troy. The verse is regular and musical, and the subject matter is dealt with affectingly: This having said she left me all in tears, 5And minding much to speak; but she was gone, 5And subtly fled into the weightless air. ["-to" is weak and could be read as unstressed] 4 or 5Thrice raught I with mine arms t' accoll her neck, [embrace] 5Thrice did my hands vain hold th' image escape, 5Like nimble winds, and like the flying dream. 5So night spent out, return I to my feres. [" to" is weak and could be read as unstressed] 4 or 5And there wond'ring I find together swarmed 5A new number of mates, mothers and men, 5A rout exiled, a wretched multitude, 5 [could be read " exiled", this does not affect the number of feet, but gives a nice minor irregularity to the line]From each where flocked together, prest to pass, 5With heart and goods, to whatsoever land 5By sliding seas me listed them to lead. 5And now rose Lucifer above the ridge 4Of lusty Ida, and brought the dawning light. 5The Greeks held th'entries of the gates beset; [" of" is weak and could be read as unstressed] 4 or 5Of help there was no hope. Then gave I place, Took up my sire, and hasted to the hill. [" to" is weak and could be read as unstressed] 4 or 5 (Bender 251-252)Each line, without exception, can be read with five feet. This is an extraordinary stretch of regularity for a " minor" poet, and one doing " pioneer work" (Ridley, 34) especially since the subject matter is at the same time both intelligible and suggestive. It is the slight irregularities, or <https://assignbuster.com/surreys-innovations-and-achievements-in-his-aeneid/>

suggested irregularities, which give interest to the lines. The fact that the fourth line has a weak syllable that can be “swallowed” to make a shorter line, gives illustration to the subject (Creusa) dissolving into thin air. The shorter line is used for a different reason, to give emphasis and weight to the eleventh line, when “Lucifer” makes his appearance. It can't be assumed, I believe, that Surrey meant to have two stresses within the name of Lucifer. It is true that the last syllable is stronger than the middle one, but it is not as strong as the first syllable. The name, pronounced in English, is dominated by the first syllable, and to read it as Lucifer makes the line sing-songy and belies its stark subject matter. Similar to line four, line thirteen “The Greeks held th'entries of the gates beset” has a weak stress on the “of”, perhaps evoking the sense of panic and uncertainty that this revelation would excite in the discoverer. But the speaker reverses his uncertainty with the regular fourteenth line, “Of help there was no hope”. The natural but regular beat shows, perhaps, the speaker's resolution that there was no hope. There is a certain comfort, it has been noted, in owning up to the hopelessness of a cause, when all is lost. Perhaps Aeneas is voicing this cold comfort here. The weak “to” in the final line, gives us an idea of Aeneas leaving - taking off on his horse to the hill and perhaps leaving the trail of his words behind him. The passage is at once affecting and exciting. The image of Creusa leaving, and the anaphora of “Thrice” (the first syllable of the line stressed, also, which is different than the preceding and succeeding lines) as Aeneas tries to catch her, is dramatic and moving. Then the rapid and concise movement to the description of the “mates, mothers and men” (which could be read either as people of Troy, or of a personification of Aeneas' crowding “feres”, and no doubt Virgil's Latin contains this richness of meaning), with the <https://assignbuster.com/surreys-innovations-and-achievements-in-his-aeneid/>

equally rapid finality of the Greeks at the gate and there being “no hope”, leaves the reader a bit breathless. It is compact, concise, meaning-filled poetry, musical without being sing-song, and regular without being pointlessly rigid. Compare this to some other poetry of a slightly later poet (Sir Philip Sydney, 1554-1586). Sidney wrote this poem *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, purely as entertainment for his sister (the said Countess). While it is unfair to judge across genre lines, and this *Arcadia* is definitely a pastoral and not an epic (and certainly not a translation of such a revered classical epic as the *Aeneid*, to boot), note the difference in style and meter. Feed on my sheep, my charge, my comfort feed, [even though there is no comma after on, the sense of the lines from the context should be read in modern syntax as “Feed on, my sheep” rather than “Feed on my sheep”, which would be inviting the reader to eat the sheep!] With sun's approach your pasture fertile grows; O only sun, that such a fruit can breed. Feed on my sheep, your fair sweet feeding flows, Each flower, each herb doth to your service yield; O blessed sun, whence all this blessing goes. (Bender 295) Even if the subject matter of this poem is left aside (the poet is talking to a flock of sheep), the difference between the prosody of Surrey's *Aeneid* and these lines of Sidney's is rather marked. The silly alliteration (fertile, fruit, fair, feeding, flows, flower), and direct addressing of the sun “O only sun” make one think of the mock-poetic antics of the Rude Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There is no ambiguity in the meter, and each line is extremely easily read in a sing-song, nursery rhyme fashion. The meter gives nothing to the subject matter, I believe, in this poem. It is merely a vehicle. Sir Thomas Wyatt, who is now reckoned to be a better poet than Surrey, wrote such lines as this (probably written for musical accompaniment <https://assignbuster.com/surreys-innovations-and-achievements-in-his-aeneid/>



- but it still gives an impression of a different approach to poetry): Mistrustful minds be moved 3To have me in suspect [though it could be suspect, the short meter demands suspect] 3The truth of it shall be proved 3Which time shall once detect 3Through falsehood go about 3Of crime me to accuse 3At length I do not doubt 3But truth shall me excuse 3 (Bender, 124) While this is, without a doubt, a cleverly done piece of poetry, the tripping trimeter dominates and forces the tone, whatever the subject, to be flippant. The subject matter is in fact rather sad - the speaker is mistrusted by others. Perhaps it was part of Wyatt's cleverness to couch such a sore point in short, silly verses. But the short line and the complete dominance of the stresses and end-stopped lines drain all the seriousness out of this poem. Sir Walter Raleigh, another slightly later poet and a man of action (though longer-lived and, thus, more accomplished) like the soldier-poet Surrey, could write in a similarly light-hearted fashion. The rhymes in this collection of couplets are particularly forceful, and give shape to the whole idea: Conceit begotten by my eyes 4Is quickly born and quickly dies; 4For while it seeks our hearts to have 4Meanwhile there reason makes his grave [it should be Meanwhile, but, again, the short and dominant meter forces the unnatural stress] 4For many things the eyes approve 4Which yet the heart doth seldom love. 4 (Bender, 614) This is another example of a solemn subject matter (the title is "A Poesy to Prove Affection Is Not Love"), but forced into the heavy-beaten rhyming tetrameter all innovation and flexibility is lost. "Meanwhile" must be read incorrectly. The fact that have/grave and approve/love are near or visual rhymes doesn't detract from the fact that they are, indeed, rhymes. The enjambment is ineffectual, if any was intended, and it is virtually impossible to read this poem as anything other than end-stopped. Surrey <https://assignbuster.com/surreys-innovations-and-achievements-in-his-aeneid/>

wrote lighter verse than his Aeneid, it is true, and didn't confine all his writing to blank verse. An example of this flippant, heavily rhymed style of poetry can be found within his oeuvre. O happy dames, that may embrace  
4The fruit of your delight 3Help to bewail the woeful case 4And eke the  
heavy plight 3Of me, that wanted to rejoice [the " to" is weak and could be read as unstressed or stress. It's probably intended to be stressed, as this is a couplet and it would match the following line, but the ambiguity is nice] 3  
or 4The fortune, of my pleasant choice. [again, here, the " of" is weak and could be glossed over to be read as unstressed or stressed. Nice match of ambiguity with the preceding line] 3 or 4Good ladies, help to fill my  
mourning voice. 5 (Bullett, 123)In this example, Surrey is definitely embracing a regular meter (4, 3, 4, 3, 5, which continues throughout the following five stanzas to finish the poem) but he throws in enough ambiguity in the stresses, and just enough variation (the five-foot line to finish the stanza, as opposed to keeping to 4343 throughout, or even 4444 as Surrey or Sidney might have done) to make it interesting. There is a successful enjambment, too, " And eke the heavy plight,/Of me,". By comparison to the simple lines of Sidney and Wyatt (and I deliberately did choose particularly glaring examples - the poems above are by no means representative of all those poets' work, but they are typical of it) " O happy dames" is positively sophisticated. Surrey's rhymes rest easily (embrace/case, delight/plight, rejoice/choice/voice) and we do not feel either the silliness of alliteration as in Sidney, or the forced visual rhymes of Raleigh. By comparison, Surrey's lines are more flowing and " show matter rather than manner" (which was perhaps his goal, and not Sidney's or Wyatt's or Raleigh's, to be fair) as Ridley said of Surrey's Aeneid. The difference between these poems of <https://assignbuster.com/surreys-innovations-and-achievements-in-his-aeneid/>

Sidney, Wyatt, Raleigh and the “manliness” (Poetical Works lxxix) of Surrey’s blank verse translation, and even Surrey’s rhymed lyrics and sonnets, is rather drastic. It is not only mechanics that changed, when unrhymed verse and well-considered variations to a regular meter were brought into the language with Surrey’s Aeneid, but the whole tone and mood of poetry was able to change, also. There was not only less of a distance between blank verse and the patterns of common speech, but the distance between the subject matter and the reader lessened, too. There were no longer so many barriers (ruthlessly regular lines, strict patterns of rhyme unrelieved throughout the piece, consistent end-stopping) between what the poet wanted to say and how he or she could express it and how the reader could experience it. And blank verse elevated the tone and mood of poetry, too. I do not think that Surrey would have attempted to English-versify lines like this, if he had had to keep them constantly in rhymed couplets (as Gawin Douglas did in his Scots dialect version of the Aeneid.) Dreedful in arms, charged with seignorie Shewing in profe his worthy Teucrian race, And under lawes, the whole world to subdue. If glorie of such things nought him enflame: Ne that he listes seke honour by some paine: The towers yet of Rome being his sire Doth he envie to yong Ascanius? (Ridley, 124) Surrey’s verses were both revolutionary and widely read. During the period after his death there is “convincing proof in the rapidity with which editions were multiplied. They were first printed in June, 1557...afterwards preprinted in 1565, in 1567, and in 1569, twice afterwards in 1574, and again in 1585, and again 1587.” (Poetical Works lxx) Surrey’s revolution in English poetry became well known because of its beauty, similarity to the spoken word, gravity of tone, and its flexibility and its many possible applications to other

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poetry and drama. The proof lies in the longevity and popularity of the style, which has endured from Shakespeare right down to the present day. Works

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New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. Notes1Publius Vergilius Mara, Roman poet,

B. C. E. 70-19, known in English as Virgil, and, more recently, as Vergil. The “

e” was replaced by the “ i” by medieval scholars in order to make his name

look and sound more like “ Virgin” (as in the Virgin Mary, and “ virgin” was

considered a holy and flattering term to give a non-Christian, even if it was

not literally true), as it was thought that, though a pagan poet, Virgil

somehow had prophesied the birth of Christ. In fact, the poet had received

the information from the Roman Sibylline Oracles, which had learned that

the Jews had proclaimed that a child would be born who would be savior of

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the world. “ Virgil, viewing this prophecy with the vivid imagination of a poet, and willing to flatter the ambition of his patron, composed his celebrated eclogue, entitled Pollio, in which he supposes the child, who was thus to unite mankind and restore the golden age, to be the offspring of Octavia, wife of Antony, and half sister to Augustus” (Goodrich, 89). From this collection of errors and misunderstandings, the name Virgil rather than Vergil has become the common usage, and that is how I will refer to him in this paper. 2 Books II and IV were published in the first appearances of Surrey's translation, respectively, in Totel's Miscellany, dated 1557 (posthumous), and an undated but probably close-in-time version of Book IV by John Day in London. (Ridley, 5) Neither of these have any claim to being authoritative, and there is no manuscript that is known to be in Surrey's hand (though there is the Hargrave MS 205, at the British Museum, but it is unsigned and undated and there isn't any evidence that it is a copy in Surrey's hand, or even a copy that was made during his lifetime by someone else, with or without his knowledge, [Ridley 5]). There is no reason to believe that any more of the epic of Virgil was translated by Surrey, but there is also no extant manuscript or contemporary reference to refute it, either. The Earl may well have translated more, or the entirety, of the Aeneid, and only these fragments survived. There is no evidence either way. 3The Earl of Surrey was a courtesy title. Henry Howard was the son of the Duke and Duchess of Norfolk. In England the eldest sons of high-ranking peers (Dukes, Marquesses, and Earls) are given the secondary title of their father during the father's lifetime. He was not a peer of the realm, though he did hold the military, rather than peerage, title of Earl Marshall in his own right. Since he was executed before his father's death, he never “ possessed a coronet” in <https://assignbuster.com/surreys-innovations-and-achievements-in-his-aeneid/>

his own right (Casady, 21). Technically he was “ My Lord of Surrey” only by courtesy, and in correct official or legal usage would have been referred to simply as “ Henry Howard”, and he therefore was tried before a common jury rather than in the House of Lords, as his father would have been, for his imprisonment and eventual execution. The rules of English nobility and titles are very strict and arcane, as is illustrated by the fact of the trumped-up charge of the Earl's alleged illegal bearing of certain heraldic arms (as a shield, no doubt, for Henry's political motivations) was the means by which Henry VIII was able to end this young man's life (Poetical Works, lvii).

4Florence Ridley's Introduction to Surrey's translation (Ridley, 1-46) makes the well-founded claim that much of the “ living” language of translation of the Aeneid was borrowed from Gawin Douglas's Eneados. She notes on each page of Surrey's text the similarities between it and the language chosen by Douglas. It is not my intention in this paper to compare Douglas' and Surrey's work, but rather to focus on the effect of the English verses that Surrey wrote, and to compare them to other poetry of his time. The fact that some of the phrases Surrey used may have been lifted from Douglas' Scots rhyming couplets does not, in my opinion, detract from their beauty or value. Ridley concedes that Surrey was many times more accurate in his translation of the Latin, and followed more the spirit of compression of Virgil, but she maintains that Douglas was better able to translate the true feeling and meaning of Virgil. Not having read the Scots version entirely, or translated any but a few words of the Latin, I make no such claim in agreement or disagreement. I treat Surrey's translation as an independent work of art within the confines of this paper, as it was probably experienced as such by the majority of its readers in sixteenth-century England.

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