

Landscape symbolism in the aeneid



Throughout *The Aeneid*, Virgil details the fated trajectory of Aeneas, who follows his preordained path from the ashy ruins of destroyed Troy to the high ramparts of incipient Rome. In the convoluted framework of the epic poem, these two cities appear as among the few absolute certainties, marking the starting and ending points of the Trojans' journey as well as essential boundaries within which Virgil geographically and historically contextualizes the entire plot. Between these two designated locations, however, lie places of uncertainty: seas, mountains, and forests, the latter of which soon emerge as Virgil's primary regions of ambiguity. Different peoples are defined through their contrasting relationships with forests; the Latins are described in terms of their affinity for and integration with nature, while the Trojans, by their desire for conquest and construction, are placed inherently in opposition to forests and their associations with the primitive, virginal, and supernatural. Forests function in *The Aeneid* not only as backdrops but also as dynamic actors, as Aeneas and the rest of the Trojans have encounters that take place both within forests and with forests. These human interactions with nature reveal the nuanced and complex nature of the highly symbolic landscape that is the Virgilian forest.

Where the Trojans appear to stand at odds with the forests, the "rustic" Italians live in harmony with them, having integrated their natural environment into their culture and lifestyle. The home of King Latinus exemplifies this intimate relationship; his palace is described as "an awesome place both for its forests and for the sanctity of ancient worship" with "images of their forefathers [...] carved in ancient cedar" (166). The use of wood and other natural materials (as opposed to man-made ones) to

express power and history reveals the centrality of the forest as a component of Latin identity as well as the degree to which Latin concepts of nature, ancestry, rusticism, and religion are closely intertwined. This connection is further developed when the Arcadian king, Evander, traces the origins of the land and its people from the time when “ These groves were once the home of fauns and nymphs and of a race of men sprung from tree trunks and sturdy oaks” (198). Although that “ golden age” has passed, the Latin people still retain elements of this past, maintaining a primitive worldview and a peaceful coexistence with the forests that is soon disturbed by the Trojans in their quest to found Rome.

The initial conflict that begins the war between Latins and the Trojans does not take place between two men; instead, it occurs as an antagonistic act towards the Latin forest itself. Aeneas’ son, Ascanius, is driven by divine forces to shoot down a stag, cared for by a Latin woman, Silvia (whose name appropriately derives from the Latin word for “ forest”). Virgil explains that “ this hunting was the first cause of the troubles, and for this the rustic minds of Latium were driven to war” (176). Indeed, in the act of hunting and killing the animal (which had lived so peacefully with both the woods and people), Ascanius essentially violates the harmony that had been established between humanity and nature. His action serves as a harbinger, foreshadowing future intrusions by the Trojans onto the land, and highlights the tension between the two opposing concepts at play in the Trojan drive for conquest: the forests that the Latins have kept virtually unbreached and the city that Aeneas envisions to build on that previously untouched soil.

For the Trojans, the forest represents the unknown – a place of both uncertainty and danger. Seemingly out of the realm of civilization's control and influence, it functions as a location for exile, but its "darkness" proves to be detrimental for the exiles that find themselves lost in it. It is in the woods that Dido and Aeneas have their first romantic tryst, overseen by the gods above; in their forest cave, detached from any reminder of other human presence and the sanctity of man-made institutions, the lovers succumb to raw and unregulated passion, losing their self-control and shirking their duties in the process. The forest that was the site of Dido's consummation of her doomed lust is recalled in her funeral pyre, piled high "with logs of pine and planks of ilex" and the "greenery of death" (96). A similarly tragic ending comes to warriors Nisus and Euryalus, friends who lose one another while escaping from the enemy in the treacherous, unfamiliar wilderness of the woods. The deceptive, maze-like forest offers them no refuge from their fate:

"And shaggy, wide, the forest stretched, with dark ilex and thorny thickets; everywhere the tangled briars massed, with here and there a pathway glimmering among the hidden tracks in the dense brushwood. Euryalus, who is hampered by the shadowed branches, by his heavy spoils, mistakes his way through fear" (224).

In both examples, the forest functions as an ambiguous crossroads of sorts, allowing for both the union and separation of these ill-fated couples. Dido and Aeneas are united in mutual love in the forest, but the forest also eventually provides the medium by which Aeneas leaves Dido; "[his] crewmen, keen for flight, haul from the forest boughs not yet stripped of

leaves to serve as oars and timbers still untrimmed” (92). Nisus and Euryalus are initially separated by the forest, but the forest subsequently becomes the setting for Nisus’ display of courage and loyalty, a suitable tableau for his fervent desire to be reunited with his friend, even if in death.

The mysterious and enigmatic nature of the forest is further emphasized by its associations with the gods and the supernatural. When Amata is driven to insanity and furor by the fury Allecto under Juno’s instructions, “ She pretends that Bacchus has her; racing to the forest, Amata now tries greater scandal, spurs to greater madness. She conceals her daughter in leafy mountains, stealing from the Trojans that marriage, holding off the wedding torches” (173). Amata’s actions also reveal the parallel that arises between the similar images of the untouched forest and Lavinia, the virginal maiden; both are objects of Trojan lust and the fertile bodies from which their future city, and its inhabitants, will arise. In the context of *The Aeneid*, forests are thus politicized to the extent that they are no longer mere environments in which actions take place arbitrarily. They are liminal spaces, where the characters find themselves straddling the lines between life and death, wilderness and civilization; they are also, themselves, engaged actors and participants in the essential and ongoing conflict between gods and humans, Latins and Trojans.