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“Women Must Weep—Or Unite Against War”: Virginia Woolf’s Feminist Critique of Classical Epic in *To the Lighthouse*

KIT PYNE-JAEGER

Abstract: Previous scholarship on Virginia Woolf’s classicism has acknowledged her debt to Vergil primarily in the context of the *Eclogues* or *Georgics*, and her debt to classical epic as a genre rarely and sparsely. Tremper (1992) and Tudeau-Clayton (2006) have both suggested a reading of “The Lighthouse,” the third part of *To the Lighthouse*, as an example of modernist epic. This paper, conversely, proposes that the novel in its entirety functions as a satirical critique of epic, specifically of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, with the goal of demonstrating the pitfalls of epic ideology as it impacted English society during the First World War.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Vergil, epic, satire, pacifism, reception, feminism, *Aeneid*, underworld

In a journal entry for 16 February 1905, Virginia Woolf, then Virginia Stephen, wrote: “I read a bit of Latin the *Georgics* [sic], instead—stately & melodious; but without the vitality of my dear old Greeks. However, there is a charm in Latin, which haunts one. Even that little bit of Virgil with T. in the summer [...] brought a sense of harmony into them, such as for many months they had not known; & therefore I dont forget it” (*The Early Journals*). Woolf continued to be “haunted” by Vergil throughout her literary career, from her treatment of elegy in the pastoral tradition of the *Eclogues* to her critique of the English public-school fetishization of Roman imperial militarism in *Jacob’s Room*. Woolf’s affection for the *Georgics* as well as the elegiac likeness between *To the Lighthouse* and the *Eclogues* have led previous scholars of Woolf’s classical reception to interpret the novel’s references to “Virgil,” which leave the text unspecified, as referring to either group of shorter poems. Conversely, this paper will argue that *To the Lighthouse*’s receptive relationship with Vergil operates primarily through its ability to function as a subtle feminist critique of the conventions of classical epic, which Woolf understood to be foundational to the patriarchal ideology of heroism that led to England’s self-destruction during the First World War. In *To the Lighthouse*, she satirizes those conventions by invoking, then subverting, the narrative conditions of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, in order to demonstrate the failure of such a self-perpetuating patriarchal ideology in the face of global catastrophe and the failure of male writers as producers of the national mythology that bolsters it.

From the second paragraph of “The Window,” the first third of Woolf’s tripartite novel, the critical subtext of *To the Lighthouse* is clear: this is a biting play on classical epic, intended to evidence the absurdity of its narratological and psychological conventions when applied to 20th-century culture. When Mrs. Ramsay tells her son James that he can visit the titular Lighthouse “if it’s fine tomorrow,” Woolf renders six-year-old James’s response in language that is Odyssean, Aenean, classically and heroically masculine:

To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail, within touch. [...] he appeared the image of stark and uncompromising severity, with his high forehead and his fierce blue eyes, impeccably candid and pure, frowning slightly at the sight of human frailty [...] (Woolf 1)

Woolf begins her novel *in medias res*, a trope drawn directly from classical epic and characteristic of both Vergil and Homer, by having Mrs. Ramsay answer an unheard question whose specifics must be inferred by the reader. Where the *Aeneid* begins with Aeneas' Trojan fleet caught in a deadly storm during a sailing expedition (*Aeneid* 1.82-123), however, the epic naval journey of *To the Lighthouse* is a little boy's fantasy, a six-year-old's romanticizing of a brief day trip and an excursion by boat to perhaps a thousand feet offshore. As hero of his imaginary "expedition," he has an aspect like the fin de siècle's epic protagonists, polar explorers or military officers lionized to the point of surrealism—one of "stark and uncompromising severity, "impeccably candid and pure," "frowning slightly at the sight of human frailty." Like the application of *in medias res* to a wholly ordinary conversation between a woman and her son, the six-year-old as epic hero has a comic effect that sets the tone for Woolf's slyly effective satire of classical epic elsewhere. Her wry view of the English fetishization of epic narrative is even more apparent in her description of Mr. Ramsay's bleak internal reasoning:

What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all of his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness (here Mr. Ramsay would straighten his back and narrow his little blue eyes upon the horizon), one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure. (Woolf 2)

Mr. Ramsay engages in fantasies of epic heroism no different from his son's; he perceives himself as an Aenean voyager, making a "passage" in "frail barks" to "a fabled land" over the horizon like Latium, the country where Aeneas is destined to found Rome at the conclusion of the *Aeneid* and for which he forsakes other responsibilities, relationships, and ethics. Typical of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century translation of classical epic are phrases like "any mortal being" and "strung from his loins," which further emphasize his self-conception as epic protagonist: a mythic, masculine figure able to transform the course of national history. What renders this self-conception savagely satirical is the fact that Mr. Ramsay's supposed adherence to the principles of classical masculinity—"courage, truth, and the power to endure," suggestive of Aeneas' "*forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit*" (*Aen.* 1.204-205)—takes the form of petty cruelty to a child, as irrelevant to the course of history as his son's fantasy of voyage into the unknown and even less heroic. Transplanted into the 20th century, the neo-Romanitas of the epic protagonist falls short of accomplishments that will immortalize him; instead, his Iliadic ideology of heroic bravery, truth and endurance is reified in all-too-human acts of narcissism and brutality. He is Woolf's parody of an epic protagonist, a person attempting to fictionalize himself with recourse to a classically heroic ideology, to immortalize himself as the object of epic poetry by composing an imaginative form of that poetry about himself as ideal Aenean hero.

In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, the midpoint of a twelve-book epic, Aeneas enters the underworld in order to speak with his dead father and see a vision of Rome's imperial future after its founding, still to come, in Latium. "Time Passes," the midpoint of Woolf's tripartite novel, sees the Ramsay family and their boarders enact a similar katabasis as the focus of the narrative moves from the complexity of family life and marriage to loss, death, and the passage of time. Parallels to the *Aeneid* are clear from the first paragraph of "Time Passes," when Mr. Banks concludes, "Well, we must wait for the future to show" (Woolf 88) in parallel to the vision of his future that leads Aeneas to enter the underworld, to the last, when Lily Briscoe sits "bolt upright in bed" (Woolf 101) perhaps in reference to Aeneas leaving the underworld through the Gate of Ivory, one of the "two gates of sleep," which "[sends] false dreams up towards the heavens" (*Aen.* 6.893-896). Yet here too Woolf

maintains her wry, almost parodic attitude towards the Vergilian epic narrative that gripped the men of her social circle so completely. Like the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, the midpoint of *To the Lighthouse* is concerned with an underworld in which takes place a rapid procession of events—birth, fame, death—all subordinate to a grander purpose. However, in Woolf's novel, that grand purpose is the infinitely small changes in and around a house as time passes, rendering its description in epic language comically grandiose and its precedence above human experiences of death and loss, to such a degree as to confine them to parentheticals, disturbing. The house becomes not merely an underworld, not even merely a setting for Woolf's satire of the sacrifice of life to narrative, but in itself a landscape of the wartime mythology she critiques:

Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house was ramshackle after all) crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing room questioning and wondering, [...] asking, Were they allies? Were they enemies? How long would they endure? (Woolf 89)

When Aeneas must cross the river Acheron to enter the underworld (*Aen.* 6.300ff.) he encounters “the whole throng of the dead [...] rushing to this part of the bank [...] as many as are the leaves that fall in the forest at the first chill of autumn, as many as the birds that flock to land from deep ocean when the cold season of the year drives them over the sea to lands bathed in sun” (*Aen.* 6.307-314), who “wander for a hundred years, fluttering round these shores” (*Aen.* 6.329-330). Here, and elsewhere in Roman literature describing the shades that inhabit the underworld, they appear as airy, fluttering, disembodied yet identifiable images of human beings, strikingly like the personified “airs” capable of asking questions couched in epic language (“Were they allies? Were they enemies?”). The house and its surroundings become the epic underworld, populated by spirits, into which Aeneas descends, an intertextuality that becomes still more explicit with the first parenthetical reference to a death: “[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]” (Woolf 90). Also in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas encounters his lover, Dido, queen of Carthage, in the underworld, he begs, “Do not move away. Do not leave my sight. Who are you running from? Fate has decreed that I shall not speak to you again” (*Aen.* 6.466-468); however, Dido “kept her eyes upon the ground and did not look at him” and “rushed away, hating him, into the shadows of the wood” (*Aen.* 6.470-474). Both scenarios depict the “epic protagonist” denied physical contact with the woman he loves due to her untimely death, but Mr. Ramsay is not offered even Aeneas' closure—he can know neither that his wife will continue to exist in some form nor that any kind of logic, like Dido's resentment at her abandonment, governs her absence from him. The “underworld” of Woolf's novel rejects any possibility of death as less than a total loss, a horrific disruption in the progress of daily life.

Within the underworld of the Ramsays' house, the passage of time and its tangible effects become Woolf's ironic parallel to the narrative causation, marked by duty, self-sacrifice, and heroism, that drives Aeneas and that drove, too, the deaths of hundreds of young men in the First World War. In autumn, the trees near the house, “ravaged as they are, take on the flash of tattered flags kindling in the gloom of cool cathedral caves where gold letters on marble pages describe death in battle and how bones bleach and burn far away in Indian sands” (Woolf 90), a metaphor that evokes, in prose so elaborate it seems overtly satirical, the beauty of war in classical epic. It is, in part, epic glorification of brutal violence, selfless death, and doomed youth in wartime—which characterizes the second half of the *Aeneid* following Book 6, as with Euryalus and Nisus (*Aen.* 9.431-448), Pallas (*Aen.* 10.486-490), and Camilla (*Aen.* 11.816-832)—that resulted in the willingness of young

educated Englishmen, steeped in classical culture and thought, to sacrifice themselves for an abstract ideal of England and the perpetuation of English national mythology.¹ The larger “narrative,” the passage of time, takes on language characteristic of epic, and suggestive of the predictable and predetermined progress of myth, throughout: the sea airs become “advance guards of great armies” (Woolf 91); the stillness of an empty room is “the swaying mantle of silence which [...] wove into itself the falling cries of birds,” recalling the famous proem of the *Iliad*—“many a hero did it yield, a prey to dogs and birds” (*Il.* 1.4-5)—as well as the moment in Book 3 where Helen is seen “weaving a great purple web of double fold [...] brodering many battles of the horse-taming Trojans and the brazen-coated Achaeans” (*Il.* 3.125-129); the First World War appears as “the silent apparition of an ashen-coloured ship for instance, come, gone; [...] a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath” (Woolf 94), the “purplish stain” of blood invoking one of the epithets most common in Homeric epic, the “wine-dark sea,” and thus conflating the grisliness of the First World War with the world of epic narrative. The wine-dark sea boils up, atemporally, on the surface of the grey English ocean, just as the glorified, self-destructive violence of classical epic has suddenly broken through into the England of the early twentieth century in the form of rabid enthusiasm for the Great War.

The moment in the *Aeneid* when the subordination of individual experience to an epic ideology that values glory, immortality, and the development of a national mythology becomes clearest, however, is when Aeneas witnesses a procession of his descendants, the most important of Rome’s rulers and heroes, in the underworld. Introducing the spirit of Augustus, under whose patronage Vergil composed the *Aeneid*, Aeneas’ father Anchises declares:

Here is the man whose coming you so often hear prophesied, here he is, Augustus Caesar, son of a god, the man who will bring back the golden years to the fields of Latium once ruled over by Saturn, and extend Rome’s empire beyond the Indians and the Garamantes to a land beyond the stars, beyond the yearly path of the sun, where Atlas holds on his shoulder the sky all studded with burning stars and turns it on its axis. (*Aen.* 6.791-798)

Like the other spirits in the procession, from Roman king Silvius Aeneas to doomed youth Marcellus, Augustus is significant not as an individual human being, but as a component of the cycle of Rome’s national myth: as the “son of a god,” it is not humanity but myth that has produced him, and, in “extending Rome’s empire” and bringing back the “golden years” of Saturn, it is that myth to which he contributes and that he perpetuates. In the parenthetical “procession” of “Time Passes,” Woolf, once again, drastically deemphasizes the importance of an individual’s life in order to demonstrate the callousness of epic ideology:

The Spring without a leaf to toss, bare and bright like a virgin fierce in her chastity, scornful in her purity, was laid out on fields [...] [Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father’s arm, was given in marriage. What, people said, could have been more fitting? And, they added, how beautiful she looked!] [...] The spring [...] threw her cloak about her, veiled her eyes, averted her head, and among passing shadows and flights of small rain seemed to have taken upon her a knowledge of the sorrows of mankind. [Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well.] (Woolf 93)

¹ E.g. Patrick Shaw-Stewart’s “I saw a man this morning”: “Was it so hard, Achilles, / So very hard to die? / Thou knewest and I know not— / So much the happier I. / I will go back this morning / From Imbros over the sea; / Stand in the trench, Achilles, / Flame-capped, and shout for me.” Heroes of classical epic like Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad* were invariably the examples to whom the war poets turned when seeking bywords for self-sacrifice. See also Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (2010).

The personification of the spring as a virgin goddess mirrors the significance of Roman mythological figures like Saturn and Atlas in Vergil's representation of the evolution of the Roman founding myth. Just as Augustus' life is reduced to a cipher for that myth, a signifier of its highest ideal, Prue Ramsay's life and death are reduced to parenthetical asides within an epic narrative of greater importance. Even within the parentheses, the Greek chorus-like commentary allows her no respite from the power of the myth: it is "fitting" for her to be married, because national ideology requires women to be "Angels in the House," propagating the myth as well as the sons who will die for it; women's beauty is one of their few meaningful qualities in epic, hence "how beautiful she looked"; "indeed a tragedy" narrativizes her death, enclosing it neatly in the context of literary genre; "everything, they said, had promised so well" suggests less about Prue's happiness or the success of her adult life than her ability to fulfill an ideal for the "people's" consumption. The complete absence of Prue's inner life in the text, the subsuming of her existence beneath epic narrative, demonstrates the deadly fault of epic ideology—when national myth is at stake, people as people, rather than symbols, become unimportant. Prue's brother Andrew's death in the First World War occurs in the same offhand fashion: "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]" (Woolf 94). The absolute unconcern of Woolf's phrasing—"twenty or thirty young men," failing even to specify a particular number—is difficult to read as anything other than an intentional satire of epic perspective, a caricature of the almost cartoonishly brutal catalogues of deaths in battle that make up the majority of the *Iliad* as well as the latter half of the *Aeneid*.

Other scholars, like Margaret Tudeau-Clayton and Ellen Tremper, have discussed previously the significance of reading "The Lighthouse," the third part of the tripartite *To the Lighthouse*, as an example of modernist epic. With respect to Woolf's reception of Vergilian genre convention, Tudeau-Clayton (2006) argues that "'The Window' [corresponds] to pastoral and comedy [...]; 'Time Passes' to georgic and history; and 'The Lighthouse' to epic and tragedy. This last correspondence is suggested [...] through the epic motif of the symbolic journey and the figure of Mr Ramsay as a self-cast epic hero" (Tudeau-Clayton 306). Likewise, reflecting on Woolf's reference to her work as "what? Elegy?" Tremper (1992) comments that "I [...] prefer to emphasize the tentativeness of Woolf's choice, since, in the particular case of *To the Lighthouse*, 'epic' would have done better. It suggests both the past, in which a foundation for the present is celebrated (as in the *Aeneid*), and the heroic proportions of the spiritual adventure of Lily Briscoe" (Tremper 33). Though this paper has made an effort, first and foremost, to illustrate the extent to which classical epic and its wartime reception in early-twentieth-century British culture were decisive in shaping *To the Lighthouse*, it lacks the space to interrogate here previous scholars' conclusions that Woolf's engagement with classical epic was straightforward—namely that she was writing into a tradition rather than deconstructing it—which future scholarship might look to when addressing the influence of epic narrative and formal structure in "The Lighthouse," the section of the novel this paper has excluded. From the evolution of the *Aeneid's* warrior princess Camilla into a teenage girl with a psychologically complex inner life to the treatment of what would logically be the narrative's ultimate achievement, the success of the "epic journey" to the Lighthouse, "The Lighthouse" is no less cleverly critical of classical epic and its conventions than "Time Passes" or "The Window," and owes the genre, and Woolf's classicism, no less profound a debt.

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