Essay 1: Literary Analysis of the *Aeneid*

Assignment

Choose a passage (~25–100 lines) from Virgil’s *Aeneid* that contains a thematically significant extended metaphor or epic simile. How does the conceptual work of this passage and its form contribute to a larger motif in the epic as a whole?

Your final paper will be between 3–4 pages in length (no more than 5) and will be worth 30% of your writing grade. For the purposes of this assignment, you will treat Robert Fagles’ translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (2006) as the primary source.

Learning Goals

- Make specific, clear, arguable claims
- Produce cohesive paragraphs
- Present well-selected evidence from close reading that is well-contextualized and explained
- Develop strong warrants and effective transitions between ideas
- Adopt the appropriate stance, style, and genre conventions of literary analysis
- Practice active revision such that the final draft demonstrates that the student has developed flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proofreading drafts while also reflecting on the process of writing itself

Required Reading

Before you begin brainstorming for this assignment, make sure you have read the following:

- Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin Books, 2006, Books 1, 2, 4, 6,
The Writing Process

Your first essay assignment this year in Humanities Core is a literary analysis of a passage from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The purpose of this assignment is for you to focus on a single primary source in detail and to think about how form creates meaning. As you learned in Jayne Lewis’s *Writer’s Handbook* chapter, literary analysis involves close reading—the formal description and interpretation of carefully selected portions of a literary work. When you close read your chosen passage, you examine how its literary features—such as diction, syntax, imagery, and figures of speech—create meaning. Your reading is “close” because it examines details, keywords, or lines from your passage that you consider to be most important in representing a specific point of view.

While the primary evidence for your claims will be drawn from a close reading of your chosen passage, your essay should also reflect upon how those authorial decisions about form shape a larger theme/motif of the text. Such themes include, but are not limited to, the costs and rewards of founding and/or building an empire, civilization and barbarism, Roman conceptions of virtue, gender and the role of women, community and individuality, private and public duty, friendship and enmity, self and other, beginnings and endings, suffering and loss, fate and individual agency, etc.

Because you will be analyzing a literary work of a particular genre, you will likely examine formal features common to epic poetry—for example, the ornamental epithet, the invocation to the muse, *vaticinium ex eventu*, etc—alongside common literary features like meter, diction, and alliteration. In particular, if you choose a passage containing an epic simile (often called a Homeric simile because it is so particular to the Greek epic), you should contemplate the implications of this formal device for a Roman poet like Virgil. Use Andrew Zissos’s Humanities Core lectures and Bernard Knox’s introduction to our edition of the *Aeneid* as your guide.

In classical literature like the *Aeneid*, metaphors and similes can serve different poetic functions and accomplish different forms of conceptual work. Sometimes these devices act to make something clearer to the reader by appealing to a familiar experience or idea. Other times, these devices try to make something more vivid or immediate by evoking a surprising or unexpected sensory image. Part of the work of your essay will be to make interpretive claims about the function of the extended metaphor or simile in the particular case of your passage. Is the function of the metaphor to make an idea clearer or more comprehensible? Or is it to make an idea striking or resonant? What associations might the metaphor have called up for its intended audience?

Take, for instance, the scene in Book 1 in which Aeneas and his crew find themselves tossed about in a tempest conjured by Juno. Neptune sweeps in to calm the storm, and his actions are described in the following simile:

> Just as, all too often, some huge crowd is seized by a vast uprising
the rabble runs amok, all slaves to passion, 
rocks, firebrands flying. Rage finds them arms 
but then, if they chance to see a man among them, 
one whose devotion and public service lend him weight 
they stand there, stock-still with their ears alert 
as he rules their furor with his words and calms their passions. (1.174–81)

It is the nature of metaphor to have multiple levels of meaning that can be parsed. First, you should establish what is literally happening in the passage by summarizing the scene, and then identify what is being compared on the figurative level. In this passage, the chaotic seas are likened to an angry mob and the god who quells the tempest is compared to a great mortal leader, a man capable of quieting a violent uprising. Next, you should inventory how the passage operates formally by carefully annotating for diction, syntax, imagery, and figures of speech. One might note, for example, the significance of certain word choices, enjambment, alliteration, and synecdoche in the lines above. A third critical prewriting step will be to brainstorm the thematic relationship of the part to the whole. What larger themes of the epic are operating in this passage? In the introduction to our edition of the Aeneid, Knox links this particular simile to a series of Roman values that would have been familiar to Virgil’s audience: pietas, a sense of loyalty and duty to the nation; gravitas, “a profound seriousness in matters political and religious”; and auctoritas, “the power and respect won by men of experience, of successful leadership in war and peace” (14). The devoted public servant in the simile above certainly seems to embody these values—one might even go so far as to suggest that this simile is a figuration of Augustus, the emperor who commissioned the Aeneid.

But you need not know a great deal about Roman culture or the context of Virgil’s writing to perform an effective close reading; rather, the real work of this assignment is to make connections between the formal decisions of the poet and the interpretive meaning you identify within the passage. Perhaps one might assess the contrasting alliteration used to describe the crowd: “rabble” that “runs amok” without a leader to guide them, but “stock-still” like obedient animals with “ears alert” when he arrives. One might excavate how Virgil’s choice of verbs conveys specific Roman leadership values; the leader who can harness the unruly crowd must “rule…their furor,” but also be capable of “calm[ing]…their passions.” One could observe that the synecdochic logic of the phrase “Rage finds them arms” serves to deindividuate the angry crowd: their ire and the violence that it threatens seems unified, strengthening the comparison back to a natural force like the literal tempest that suggested this simile. Here, we can see how meaning is generated in the passage on multiple levels. Using details like these, a literary analysis of this passage could argue that poet is skeptical of the mores and motives of the masses and glorifies strong, authoritarian leadership.

Merely establishing that a metaphorical vehicle and a larger theme/motif are present in the passage is not a sufficient claim for this assignment. Ultimately, your essay must establish what the speaker of the poem is describing and comparing in the passage (summarization), how Virgil establishes this meaning at the level of diction, form, and rhetorical strategy (close reading), and why it is written in just that way (interpretation). Your interpretive claim (thesis) should convey how the form of the text generates its meaning. This assignment is also a place where you will begin to develop strong humanistic claims, organized paragraphs, and effective transitions.
between ideas. This will happen over multiple drafts with peer and instructor feedback on your revisions.