

Homer Through Roman Eyes

Hum 110 Lecture Laura Leibman

Friday Feb. 10th, 2006

Outline

I. Introduction

- A. The Poet's Two Responsibilities
- B. The Poet as *Vates* (Prophet)
- C. Virgil's *Aeneid* as “unfashionable manifesto against Alexandrian miniaturism”
- D. THESIS OF LECTURE: Virgil's success in imitating lies in two qualities:
 - 1. His recognition that he must not merely *imitate* Homer, but that he must also “change the terms” of the Homeric tradition to meet Roman taste and culture *and*
 - 2. A general revival of artistic interest in Homer during the Augustan Age as evidenced by the use of Homeric motifs in Roman wall paintings.

II. Homer Through Virgil's Eyes

Virgil's ability to both continue and change the Homeric epic is apparent on at least three levels:

- A. Content
- B. Structure
- C. Style
 - 1. Homeric Style
 - a. Homeric epithets, Homeric similes, and dactylic hexameter
 - b. Homer's poetry is rapid, plain and direct in his syntax and words; plain and direct in the substance of his thought, that is, in his matter and ideas; and, finally, he is eminently noble (Arnold)
 - 2. Virgil's Style

III. Homer Through Roman Eyes

- A. The House of the Tragic Poet
 - 1. Decorating houses with mythological scenes was common and in good taste during the Age of Augustus.
 - 2. Wall decorations as *Memoria*
 - a. Example from Plutarch's *Lives*
 - 3. The Mythological Panels
 - a. Atrium: Hera and Zeus, Aphrodite and unrecognized male, Briseis and Achilles, Helen and Paris, Amphrite and Poseidon, and Achilles and Agamemnon
 - i. The Change in the Status of Women
 - 1. More Status
 - 2. Increase in Negative Representations
 - 3. Fulvia vs. Octavia
 - b. Tablinum: Alcestis
 - c. Peristyle Garden: Iphigenia
 - 4. Other Representations of Women: biographical friezes and masks of ancestors
- B. Van Wyck Brooks' notion of “A Usable Past.”

Terms

Intertextuality: a text (e.g. a work of literature) that invokes another, and ensures that we must read one text through another.

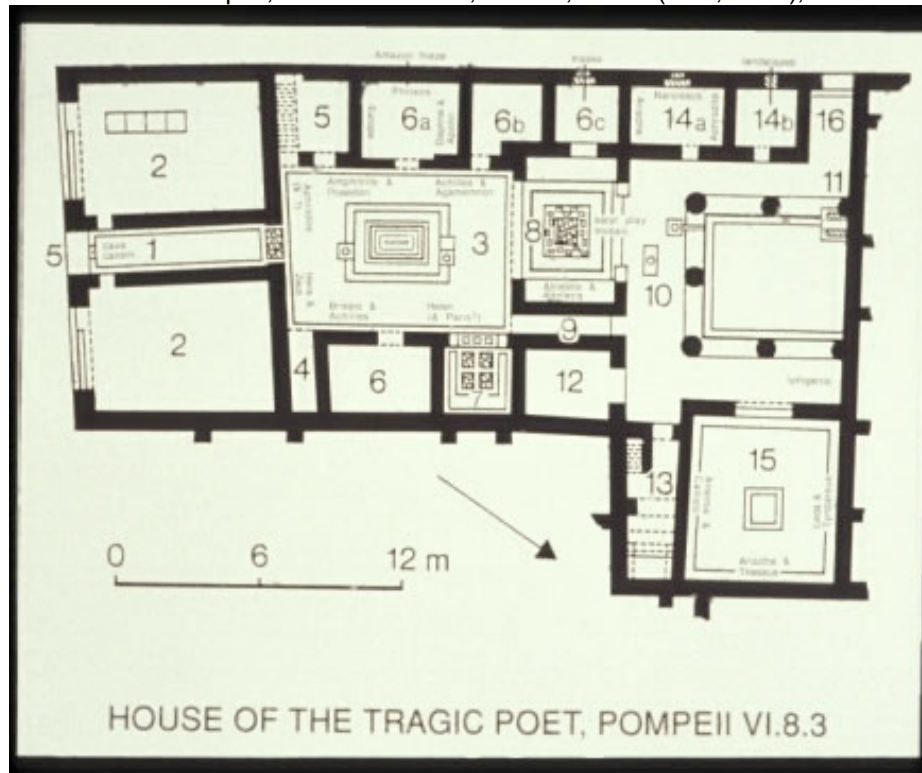
Memory Palace: a rhetorical technique used by the Romans for retaining and accessing large amounts of information

Penate: (literally “inner part”)—Roman gods of the house (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*).

Quotes

1. Robert Pinsky argues that the poet has two responsibilities: to continue the art, and to change the terms of the art as given ("Responsibilities of the Poet," 19).
2. "Among the Romanes a Poet was called *Vates*, which is as much as a diviner, foreseer, or Prophet, as by his conjoynd words *Vaticinium*, and *Vaticinari*, is manifest, so heavenly a title did that excellent people bestowe uppon this **hart-ravishing knowledge**, and so farre were they carried into the admiration thereof, that they thought **in the chanceable hitting uppon any of such verses, great foretokens of their following fortunes, were placed.**" (Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie*, 1580-81).
3. Victorian poet and thinker Matthew Arnold argued, however, in a lecture he gave at Oxford "On translating Homer," that the translator of Homer should be aware of four other essential qualities of Homer's verse: Homer is **rapid**; he is **plain and direct in his syntax and words**; he is **plain and direct in the substance of his thought**, that is, in his matter and ideas; and, finally, that he is **eminently noble** (*On Translating Homer*, 9)
4. Galinsky argues that the hallmarks of Augustan Age Poetry are
 1. Not "simply echoing a party line or dissenting from it, but...reflecting in various ways, including the sophisticated manipulation of poetic conventions, on the complexity of the times and on the many dimensions of the Romans' view of themselves both as individuals and collectively" (225).
 2. Helping to "formulate their [Romans] views on the chief problems of existence" (225.)
 3. The idea that a poem is "not a mere presentation of diffuse purposes, but is combined with a strong moral center" (225).
 4. "Like the political system and Augustan art, Augustan poetry often defies easy categorization." It is dynamic and evolves (225-26).
5. Named for the mosaics of actors in the third section of the house--the *tablinum*, the House of the Tragic Poet has been described as "a small jewel of a house, well proportioned, with uncommonly rich walls and pavements, one of a very small group of houses of more or less canonical plan in which, despite its diminutive size, there is a lavish display of wealth" (Richardson 322).
6. "One...feature which is characteristic of Roman [house] painting of the imperial (but not republican) period is the mythological paintings: a formally constructed scene, in a Hellenizing idiom, of a subject from Greek mythology" (Wallace-Hadrill 150).
7. Petronius's *Satyricon* describes a house that seems remarkably like the "House of the Tragic Poet" with its hall filled with paintings of "The Iliad and the Odyssey... and the gladiatorial games given under Laenas." (29.9).
8. Imperial architect Vitruvius remarked that decorating houses with "the figures of the gods or detailed mythological episodes" such as "the battles at Troy, or the wanderings of Ulysses" was in good taste, unlike "paintings of monstrosities" which offended the eye and corrupted the viewer (Vitruvius 211-12).
9. "As Porcia looked at it, the image of her own sorrow which it conjured up made her burst into tears, and she went to see the picture time after time each day, and wept before it. On this occasion Acilius, one of Brutus's friends, quoted the verses from Homer which Andromache speaks to Hector; 'Hector, to me you are all: you have cared for me as a father, mother, and brother and loving husband...' (*Iliad* VI.429-430). Brutus smiled at him and said, 'But I shall not give Porcia the answer that Hector gave'" (Bergman quotes Plutarch's *Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans* 248).
10. "The present is a void...The American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value. But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?" (Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," 213-16.)

Floorplan from Bettina Bergmann's "The Roman House as Memory Theater: The House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 76, No. 2. (Jun., 1994), 250.



C. Key to Rooms:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Fauces (corridor) | 9. Corridor |
| 2. Tabernae (shops) | 10. Porticoes and Peristyle (pleasure garden) |
| 3. Atrium (central hall/reception room) | 11. Aedicular Lararium (shrine to the household gods) |
| 4. Atrienensis' Room (slave/usher in charge of atrium) | 12. Possibly another cubiculum |
| 5. Vestibulum (entryway) and Storeroom | 13. Kitchen with Latrine |
| 6. Cubicula ("bedrooms") | 14. Cubicula |
| 7. Ala (alcove) | 15. Entertainment Room |
| 8. Tablinum (dining and entertainment room) | 16. Posticum (minor entrance) |

D. Selected Bibliography:

- Anderson, William and Lorina Quatarone, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Vergil's Aeneid*. NY: MLA, 2002.
- Bergmann, Bettina, "The Roman House as Memory Theater: The House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii," *The Art Bulletin*. LXXVI (2) June 1994: 225-56.
- Clarke, John R. *The Houses of Roman Italy*. Berkeley: U. of Calif. P., 1991.
- Culham, Phyllis, "Did Roman Women Have an Empire?" *Inventing Ancient Culture*, ed. Golden and Toohey. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Delia, Diana, "Fulvia Reconsidered," *Women's History and Ancient History*, ed. Sarah Pomeroy. Chapel Hill: U. of N. Carolina P., 1991.
- Dixon, Suzanne, "Continuity and Change in Roman Social History," *Inventing Ancient Culture*, ed. Golden and Toohey. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Dupont, Florence. *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- Galinsky, Karl. *Augustan Culture*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996.
- Gransden, K.W. *Virgil The Aeneid*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Nicholson, Nigel, "Silver Latin." Reed College: Hum 110 Lecture, 2001.
- Pinsky, Robert, "Responsibilities of the Poet," *Politics and Poetic Value*, ed. Robert von Halberg. Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1987. 7-20.
- Richardson, L. *Pompeii: An Architectural History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1988.
- Thompson, Mary Lee. *Programmatic Painting in Pompeii*. PhD Diss: NYU, 1960.
- Vitruvius. *The Ten Books on Architecture*, tr. Morris Morgan. NY: Dover, 1960.
- Wallace-Hadrill, Andrew. *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1994.