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21L.001 Foundations of Western Culture: Homer to Dante
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Homer/Virgil Essay Prompt

Write a substantial (eight-page) essay that makes an argument about one way in which Virgil engages with Homeric epic: how and to what effect he does it, and how it should affect our understanding of the *Aeneid* and, retrospectively, the *Iliad* and/or *Odyssey*. This is a wide-open topic, and it's crucial to your success that you sharply limit your focus so that you can acquire depth before attempting to make a broader argument about how your chosen theme relates to the texts more globally. I encourage you to explore independently and craft your own focus; the following are examples that you are free to adopt should you wish to.

1) Competitive tension, on and off the battlefield. Obviously interesting would be the funeral games for Patroclus and Anchises in the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, respectively. You might also consider the various duels of the *Iliad* (as distinct from the chaotic cut-and-thrust of all-out battle); Odysseus's participation in the games on Phaeacia; and the way that initially non-lethal competition with the bow turns into slaughter near the end of the poem. Surprising or sudden drawbacks from competitive engagements (Glaucus and Diomedes, various exchanges between the gods) might factor into your readings too.

2) Death and the Underworld. Think about representations of the dying and dead, focusing specifically but not necessarily exclusively on Aeneas's descent into the Underworld to speak with his father, and Odysseus's analogous trip to speak with the shades of Tiresias and his mother. You might also consider the organization of the Underworld, the fates and attitudes of those resident there, and the impact that the dead have upon the living. Depictions of the act of dying (in battle, for example) might also prove fruitful to consider.

3) Female prominence and power. The *Aeneid* is famous for its women: tragic Dido, vengeful Juno, valorous Camilla. Yet many have argued that this prominence only disguises (and thinly at that) the extent to which the poem valorizes masculine achievement at the expense of female power; Dido is abandoned by Aeneas, Juno fails to halt his progress, and Camilla is killed by his forces. How does Virgil build on or depart from (or both) Homer's representations of "women in charge," and how does all this matter to our understanding of the Virgilian and Homeric projects as a whole?

4) Comradeship and homosocial bonds. Think about the relationship(s) between a) Aeneas and Pallas and/or b) Nisus and Euryalus in relation to that of Achilles and Patroclus, which in the centuries after Homer wrote was widely regarded (by Plato and Aeschylus, among many others) to have been erotic. The point here is not to speculate about the activities or proclivities of characters outside the confines of the fictions in which they appear, but rather to analyze how masculine devotion to other men is represented in those fictions, and how that representation matters to our understanding of other themes that Virgil and Homer tackle.

5) Armor and identity. The crucial importance of armor – practical, symbolic, and at times (we suggested) almost magical – emerges clearly in both Homer and Virgil, but to substantially different effect. Think about how Achilles’ armor, the shield crafted for him subsequently, and Aeneas’s shield (this is not an exhaustive list; you could talk about others, and/or fewer than the three listed above) create, communicate, and delimit meaning. How do the arms and the man who wears them (to borrow shamelessly from Virgil) interact, and how does this matter?

6) A topic arrived at independently, in consultation with me.

Bear in mind that these are only suggestions on how to begin organizing your thoughts. You may form arguments that draw on images or themes at the junction of two or more of these listed “topics” (or, of course, from other material entirely). The questions I pose are designed to jump-start your creative process, not to constitute a set of “answerables” that you must “deliver” (to adopt, momentarily, the horrifying lexicon of business).