Virgil’s Aeneid – the Culminating Achievement of William Morris’s Illumination Work

by Ulla Mickelsson

In our day there is a revival of interest in William Morris’ work.1 “Morris began his work by writing the tale beautiful; he made the wall beautiful, the floor beautiful, the home beautiful; and his last concern was for the book beautiful.”2 From 1870 to 1875 he was much more concerned with written than with printed books and during this period he wrote out and decorated several manuscripts. Morris produced more than 1500 pages of writing in several styles of script and a great deal of ornament. In beauty of handwriting and splendour of decoration the great folio manuscript of Virgil’s Aeneid takes the first place among Morris’ illuminated manuscripts.

Morris translated several of the Icelandic sagas, but he also wrote verse translations of the classics, the Aeneid of Virgil and the Odyssey of Homer. In one of Morris’ notebooks is the following record of the starting of his translation of the Aeneid: “1874. December 14th. Monday I began my translation of the Aeneid and did that week 131 lines.”3 Morris was racing through Virgil and he got much pleasure out of his translation of the Aeneid, which is occasionally expressed in his letters of the time. Besides translating Virgil, Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, who was Morris’ most intimate, lifelong friend and collaborator, were working on their project for a great illuminated manuscript of the Aeneid. On December 10, 1874, Burne-Jones wrote to Charles Fairfax Murray4: “Morris is well: we are hard at the Virgil which goes apace . . .”, and on August 14, 1875: “Every Sunday morning he [Morris] reads Scott to me while I draw for the Virgil.”5 The manuscript was to be a monumental work, with a half-page miniature for each of the twelve books, designed by Burne-Jones, to be set in a full-page border with the opening lines of the book in gold capitals. There were to be alternately gold and blue headlines, the capitals in the text arranged in contrast – gold on a page with blue heading, and vice versa – and many illuminated initials and ornaments with figures in the text. As Burne-Jones described the project: “it is to be wonderful and put an end to printing.”

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Burne-Jones made twenty-nine pencil drawings for the illustration of the
*Aeneid*. Of these only a few are found in the manuscript. These designs are
now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (11831–29), where they were
bequeathed by J. R. Holliday in 1927.

The designs consist of twelve half-page miniatures and seventeen initial
letters and illustrations. All are signed EB–J and dated individually 1873,
1874, or 1875. Some of them are inscribed.

The twelve miniatures are the following: Venus appearing to Aeneas be-
fore Carthage, Aeneas flying from Troy, Aeneas and the Harpies, The death
of Dido, The burning of the ships, Aeneas and the Sibyl in the Underworld,
Lavinia in the Palace of Latinus, Venus bringing armour to Aeneas, Iris and
Turnus, Aeneas slaying Mezentius (unfinished), Aeneas at the tomb of
Mezentius, and The death of Turnus.

The seventeen initial letters and illustrations are: Juno, Letter H: Cas-
sandra amid the flames of Troy, Letter H: The Golden Bough, Letter I:
Helen hidden, Neptune, Letter D: Troy burning, Tartarus with the punish-
ments of the damned, Letter D: The passing of Dido, Letter E: The ruin of
Priam, Letter P: Dido’s wedding, Letter I: Rumour blowing horn, Letter Q:
Love and Dido, Letter E: The wooden horse, Letter T: Neptune and the
Burne-Jones shows a great sureness and delicacy of hand in these masterly
drawings of 1873–75.

The writing of the manuscript was begun by Morris in the winter of
1874/75. With the exception of the first page of Books II–VI, it was written
out by Morris to the foot of page 177, almost to the end of Book VI. A
half-page miniature of Venus and Aeneas was painted on the first page.
Twenty-two marginal initials were designed to embellish the pages up to page
72. After nearly six books of the manuscript were completed it was laid aside
from the pressure of other work. As time went on Morris realized that the
execution of the *Aeneid* was going to last long and he wrote to C. F. Murray
in Rome for his help on May 27, 1875: “I have somewhat slacked from the
Virgil translation, as I found it not possible to get it out this summer, &
easy enough to get it out by October: also I have begun one of the Master’s
pictures for the Virgil: I make but a sorry hand at it at first, but shall go on at
it till (at the worst) I am wholly discomforted. Meantime whether I succeed or
not in the end ’twill be a long job: so I am asking you if you would do some of
them, & what it would be worth your while to do them for: I think I should
have to see you before you could get to work on them, but if you dont come
over here this summer, as I suppose you wont by your letter, I shall like
enough to coming to Italy next year & we can talk about it then.”6 In
November the translation of the *Aeneid* was published, but the pictures for
the manuscript were still unfinished, and Morris never resumed work on them. Some fifteen years later J. W. Mackail, Morris' biographer, remembers seeing Morris turn over the sheets of the Virgil manuscript and hearing him talk of finishing it, but he never did so. Finally he sold the manuscript as it was to C. F. Murray.

At the beginning of this century Murray asked the calligrapher Graily Hewitt to write out the remaining six books of the *Aeneid*. This Hewitt did and he also gilded the text on the first page of Book I, wrote in letters of gold on the opening pages of Books II–VI, filled in the blue and gold initials in the text up to page 72, did the headlines "P. VIRGILII MARONIS" in ultramarine on the verso pages and "AENEIDOS LIBER" and the appropriate number in gold on the recto pages. A few of the initial letters, for instance on pages 46 and 47, as well as the headlines on these pages are by Morris. All the initials after page 72 are only in pencil.

Murray got Mrs Louise Powell to draw the borders, imitated from the Kelmscott Chaucer borders, to the opening pages of the twelve books. The first border in the manuscript was gilded by Hewitt, those to Books VII, VIII, and IX were coloured by Mrs Powell, the rest were only pencilled in.

Murray himself painted the half-page miniatures to the opening pages of all the books, except Book III, where the miniature is omitted, and also the historiated initials and illustrations in the margins. Murray's miniatures and illustrations were all made after the original drawings by Burne-Jones. Murray had learnt from the old Italian masters the secret of brilliant, deep, transparent colour which characterizes his work.

Five persons took part in the writing and illumination of the *Aeneid* and yet it remained incomplete. The manuscript is now in the Edward Laurence Doheny Memorial Library of St. John's Seminary at Camarillo in California. It is bound in brown morocco, blind-tooled in imitation of twelfth century bindings, is written on vellum with white and purple vellum end-papers and contains 370 pages.

The scripts in Morris' manuscripts were based on humanistic precedents, most of them on Italian models of the fifteenth century. The *Aeneid*, which is the most mediaeval, both in colour and design, of Morris' manuscripts, is written with black ink in a clear and strong round Roman hand, distinguished by fine diagonal finials and elongated diagonal commas. The writing in the Virgil is of a larger body than the scripts in Morris' other manuscripts. The letters are wide, almost square in many instances. The letter g is overlarge and not well executed. Hewitt, who was studying Morris' writing in the first six books while working on the Virgil, considered Morris' writing extraordinarily strong, though rough and disturbed with the dash of diagonal strokes to the commas and tails to p's and q's; and the pages somewhat uneven owing to
the fact that Morris did not cut his own pens, which Hewitt thought rather remarkable. From page 178 to the end of the manuscript Hewitt wrote out the 
Aeneid calligraphically. Although Hewitt tried to continue the style of lettering of the first six books, there are differences between Morris and Hewitt. Hewitt abandoned the diagonal finials and commas and his g is more satisfactory than Morris'. A. C. Brinton thinks that "his hand is firm, regular and more technically trained than that of William Morris, he pens a more modish g but the spice of the Morris calligraphy is gone."9

The great floriated marginal initials are Morris' work (Plate 1). These are numerous especially in Books II and III, from page 43 to page 72, most of them in colour. The quality of their colour and handling are amongst Morris' finest work his daughter May thought. "The painting is solid and luminous, the broadly-designed leafage, carefully modelled and finished, is at once strong and delicate, reminding one of the finest early French Gothic sculptured ornament."10 Morris used the white colour very finely in finishing and he also played with the gold with pleasure. Sometimes two colours were used - a pale silvery gold, which May Morris compared to the colour of a harvest-moon,11 and one of a richer tone, or the gold was glazed with thin red and painted with red veins. The richly ornamented initials are made up of foliage and extending over several lines. The use of the acanthus is very conspicuous, as background, as an entangling element, as an outgrowth of a letter, or an initial is made up entirely of acanthus leaves.

The opening page of the Aeneid is superb. The page is surrounded by a broad border, adapting the grape vine pattern of the Kelmscott Chaucer. The border was drawn by Louise Powell and gilded by Hewitt with raised gold for the pattern and flat gold for the background. There is a half-page miniature of Venus appearing to Aeneas before Carthage, corresponding to Burne-Jones' original drawing (Fitzwilliam Museum 11831). Morris settled the colour of this and painted it in, but he was not pleased with the result and asked Murray to go over it all, which Murray did, except the head of Aeneas which remains of Morris' original work.12 The head of Aeneas bears resemblance to that of Burne-Jones. The miniature shows red-gowned Venus appearing to her son Aeneas, fully Armed with spear and shield, outside the walls of Carthage. "A blue mist tinged with gold is about to encompass the hero while his ageless mother who has just revealed herself no forest maiden but a goddess indeed, treads with graceful step upon a similar gold-encircled cloud."13 Below the illustration, Morris painted the opening lines of the Aeneid in large square Roman capitals on a grey-purple ground. The letters were left laid with the red "bole" ground ready for gilding. The gold was later applied by Hewitt.

In the outer margin of page 2 is an illustration of Juno by Murray, after
Burne-Jones’ design (Plate 2). The goddess in a draped dress, holding a sceptre in her right hand, is drawn in a car by two peacocks. A fortified city is seen in the background. The page is headed with the caption “P. VIRGILII MARONIS” in ultramarine.

The lower part of the outer margin of page 26 is embellished with the historiated initial Q (Plate 3). Within it is the miniature of Love and Dido. Love, in the likeness of the boy Ascanius, kneels on Dido’s lap, with his arms round her neck, and whispering into her left ear. The Q is made up of a foliate ornament with a long leaf flourish.

Page 29, the beginning of Book II, has a broad full border of flowers and foliage in pencil. The half-page miniature shows Aeneas flying from Troy. In the centre is Aeneas bearing his old father Anchises on his back and holding his little son Iulus by the hand. To the right is Venus leading Aeneas out of Troy. To the left is the phantom of Creusa, Aeneas’ wife, stretching out her hand to touch the head of her son.

On page 44 is the historiated initial H with Cassandra amid the flames of Troy. The nude Cassandra with only a cloth round her hips is shown surrounded by flames. The letter is made up of a white acanthus ornament. The heading’s blue capitals “P. VIRGILII MARONIS” are Roman, so also the blue capitals in the text, whereas the blue and red foliate initial in the margin is Morris’ invention.

On page 48 is an unfinished E with the ruin of Priam. This is a skizz of Priam bending over the naked body of his son Polites.

On page 50 is the illustration of “Helen hidden” in the initial I. Helen in a draped dress crouches by a pillar in the Temple of Vesta on the night of the Sack of Troy.

The opening page of Book III is surrounded by a foliate border, only pencilled in. The half-page miniature is lacking. For the third scene only Burne-Jones’ pencil drawing of Aeneas and the Harpies (1183) exists. On the drawing Aeneas and his two companions stand, armed, to the right. Winged Harpies swoop upon them. In the background are rocks and the sea.

The opening page of Book IV has the same foliate border in pencil as Book III (Plate 4). The miniature shows Dido, in a draped dress, kneeling on a funeral pyre surmounted by armour, falling upon Aeneas’ sword. Dido may be a portrait of Jane Morris, Morris’ wife. “In design, colour and feeling, the Dido of Book Four epitomizes the “Brotherhood’s” ideal of female beauty. This Pre-Raphaelite Dido, clad in dull blue, leans upon the sword that shall within a moment pierce her heart. The brooding mystery of Rossetti’s best canvasses is approached in this portrayal of the queen’s agony.”

The same unfinished foliate border as in Books III and IV frames the opening of Book V, where we find the miniature of the burning of the ships.
A group of six frenzied Trojan women bearing torches come rushing to burn the fleet that lies ready to convey Aeneas to Italy.

Book VI has a border in pencil and the miniature of Aeneas and the Sibyl in the Underworld. The Sibyl, bearing the golden bough, conducts Aeneas, armed and with drawn sword, through the Underworld. The dominating colour is ultramarine with highlights in white.

On page 154 is a marginal illustration of the Golden Bough. On a tree alight the two doves that guided Aeneas to the Golden Bough. Above, in a cloud, is Venus against a background of roses.

From Book VII on the manuscript changes its character and is less typical Morris. Ornamental initials and marginal designs are lacking and the borders are of a different type.

The border of Book VII, designed and coloured by Louise Powell, consists of big leaves and small flowers interspersed. The miniature shows Lavinia in the Palace of Latinus. Lavinia, dressed in white and with altar-fire circling around her, moves through a purple colonnade.

Book VIII has a coloured border of foliage, small flowers, and rosettes, and an unfinished picture of Venus presenting armour to Aeneas. Venus stands facing her son, who, partially armed, is to receive the spear and pennon. Aeneas’ corselet and helmet lie on the ground between them. In the background are trees and rocks.

Book IX has a coloured border of small flowers and foliage-rosettes. Here we find the illustration of Iris calling Turnus to arms. The winged Iris alights in a rainbow before Turnus, who fully armed kneels at the margin of the sacred spring. In the background are a tree and cliffs.

The foliate borders in the last three books are all unfinished. The miniature on page 268 (Book X) shows Aeneas slaying Mezentius. Mezentius, falling backwards from his rearing horse, is transfixed through the throat by Aeneas’ sword. The horse is very badly executed.

The two last miniatures are unfinished. One is of Aeneas standing at the tomb of Mezentius, beside which he has planted an oak tree. Upon the branches are hung the spoils of Mezentius as an offering of the victor to the God of War. Heaps of slain are seen in the background. The other miniature is of Aeneas fighting with Turnus. Aeneas, with his spear, transfixed the shrinking Turnus through his shield, upon which crouches the Fury sent by Jupiter. A rocky gorge forms the background.

Eleven half-page miniatures painted by Murray from Burne-Jones’ pencil drawings are found in the Aeneid. Of the original seventeen historiated initials and illustrations only six were used by Murray, two in Book I, three in Book II, and one in Book VI.

Morris’ chief illuminated manuscripts, A Book of Verse, the Rubáiyát of
Omar Khayyám, the Odes of Horace, and the Aeneid of Virgil are characterized by their brilliant and close decoration, culminating in the splendid Aeneid, "the beauty, crispness and freedom of its writing places this, even in its unfinished condition, among the notable manuscripts of the world."

REFERENCES

1. William Morris (1834–1896), writer, designer, business man, socialist, turned to printing towards the end of his life. In 1891 he founded the Kelmscott Press where the sumptuous Chaucer was printed.
4. Charles Fairfax Murray (1848–1919) was a world-known collector of pictures and books. He spent a good deal of his time in Italy. He bought vellum for Morris in Rome. Murray also collaborated with Morris in the illumination of many manuscripts.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., xxiii–xxiv.
P. VIRGILII MARONIS

linqui pollutum hospitio et dare classibus. Ustras
cego instauramus. Olydor simus et ingen
ageritur tarnulo tellus. Sunt manibus ars,
curnaeae maria. Vitis atque cupress
credunt. Lades crimem de morte solut:
inferimus tepido somnium. Cymbia late
sanctus et sacri patres. Animamque sepulchro
condimus, et magna supremum voce celenus
ubi prae fides pelago placet aequi venti
dant maria, et lenus cepit mis vocat usterniam,
deducunt socii ueri et litora compleant
provehimur portu. Terraque urbesque recidum,
ara mari colit et medio grattissima tellus
credunt maris et adestinao.
quae juris retenes ans et litora circunj
erantem. Ytono e celsa quiroque revinuit
immortuque soli dedit et contemner sic venos
htec feror; haec sesso tuto placidissima portu
accipit. Gregis venenatim. Politus urbus
rectum. Reer idem hominum, herbisque sacdes
vitis et sacra redimitus tempora lauro
occurrunt. Veterem nchisen agnosit amicum
jungimus hospicio deltras et tecta subitus
omina deae venerabile structa vetust
propriam. Hymnare donum. Da moenia sessis
et genus et manibus urbus. Serva altera
vex.
eigna, rectque manus atque imnitis chilli
quem sequitur, quove ire jubes, ubi ponunt sedes

Plate 1