

Suffering and the Roman Body in the *Aeneid* James Uden (uden@bu.edu)

Human efforts to heal are frequently met with failure in Vergil's works. Illness leads to sudden, unexpected, bewildering reversals of fortune, and disease exposes the limitations of human power and knowledge. While some scholars have argued for Vergil's adaptation of ancient medical ideas in the *Aeneid*, this paper argues instead that Vergil *resists* the influence of contemporary medical and scientific discourse, placing his characters in a fundamentally pre-Hippocratic world in which health is beyond human comprehension and control. Rather than emphasizing the ability of human beings to heal themselves, Vergil uses bodily imagery to argue for the political and ethical value of suffering in Augustan Rome. 'Social suffering', to use a term from the work of the medical anthropologists Arthur Kleinman and Veena Das, becomes, in the *Aeneid*, an essential part of collective Roman identity.

The most extended scene of healing in the poem is in Book 12 (383-431), when an otherwise unknown Trojan doctor, Iapyx, attempts to heal Aeneas' arrow wound. He is not successful, and instead Venus removes the arrow with magical herbs. The passage notably inverts the heroic vision of the doctors Machaon and Podalirius in the *Iliad*. The inglorious characterization of Iapyx, frustrated in his attempts to apply medical knowledge, may mirror the changed social status of doctors in Rome. In place of any praise of the doctor's skill or success, Vergil instead emphasizes the miraculous nature of Venus' eventual cure. Far from alluding to technical medicine, this climactic episode reveals the incapacities of human *techne* and the need for divine assistance.

In her influential study *The Suffering Self* (1994), Judith Perkins argued that cultural and religious groups in the second century CE positively depicted themselves as suffering bodies. They fashioned collective identities around appeals to imagery of passive endurance and physical pain. Vergil's work notably lacks the detailed attention to anatomy that characterizes these later, Imperial-era texts. But the link between civic identity and bodily suffering is nonetheless already clear in the *Aeneid*, which repeatedly associates its heroes' virtue with the endurance of physical pain. 'Epic medicine' may stand apart from developing discourses of medical knowledge in Rome, but in the *Aeneid*'s imperial vision, the suffering body has a central place.