

BOOK REVIEW

The Burdens of Aeneas: A Son's Memoir of Duty and Love. By JAMES C. ABBOT JR. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2018. Pp. 304. Hardback, \$28.00. ISBN: 978-0-88146-657-7.

Classicists may lament the loss of Latin and Greek programs amidst the enthusiasm for STEM education, but in many respects the Classics remain a strong presence in popular culture. The sword-and-sandals epic enjoyed a revival after *Gladiator* became a hit in 2000; books such as Mary Beard's *SPQR* made Roman history compelling to the general reader; "prestige" television such as *The Wire* and *The Sopranos* have invited comparison to Greek tragedy.

A small but notable result of this interest has been the publication of several books that combine Classical scholarship with reflections on the author's relationship with his father. (Women have not yet published anything comparable, Ann Patty's *Living with a Dead Language* notwithstanding.) Daniel Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey: A Father, A Son, and an Epic*, Rory Stewart's *The Marches* and the book here reviewed offer this new approach to the works of the Greeks and Romans.

Despite the subtitle, *The Burdens of Aeneas* contains more than the author's remembrance of his father. It begins at the 9/11 memorial with one of the recordings by a survivor: a woman pleading with a young firefighter not to enter the ruined building, and his response: "Lady, it's my job to go in there." This self-sacrifice reminded the author of Aeneas's *pietas*, and led him to reflect in turn upon his own father's resemblance to Vergil's epic hero. The result is a book that is partly a memoir and partly scholarly commentary on the *Aeneid*, interspersed with thoughts on many other authors and topics. While it follows the *Aeneid* book by book, the narrative is far from linear.

Abbot Sr. definitely has an impressive *curriculum vitae*: a lawyer, state court judge, chairman of the board of education, director of the Chamber of Commerce, cofounder of a hospital foundation and leader in many other civic positions. In many ways, he sounds like a descendant of *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s Atticus Finch. He is unfortunately also deceased, having died in 1997. As a result, his authentic voice is largely absent from a story that is one-third his, if we assume that the other

two thirds belong to Aeneas (or Vergil) and to Abbot Jr. Much of the book consists of epistles from the son to his late father, dated from October of 2014 to Father's Day of 2015. In these letters, the father responds in italics what the son imagines him saying, and often becomes a kind of non-specialist Everyman reacting to the *Aeneid* rather than a hero in his own right. There is one exception, however: In the book's most powerful chapter, titled "Of Heroes and Monsters," Abbot Sr. almost singlehandedly averts a violent and racially charged altercation following the suspicious death of a black man in the town jail and a clash between a state patrolman and four young black men outside a nightclub. The son addresses his father:

Ultimately, you decided to go alone into the street and try to persuade everyone—person by person, black and white—to go home. You started with the first men you encountered: touching a shoulder, looking into a face, trying to make eye contact. The entire area was a dense throng of murmuring, grumbling, sometimes shouting men. You moved inch by inch from one man to another, reassuring black acquaintances, friends, and clients ... To white acquaintances, friends, and clients, you urged, "Put that gun down and go home. Let our policemen and city officials work it out ..." (186-187)

As a result, the black men gradually disperse, and the white men put away their weapons and go home. This incident is strongly reminiscent of the first extended simile of the *Aeneid*:

Ac veluti magno in populo cum saepe coorta est
seditio, saevitque animis ignobile vulgus,
iamque faces et saxa volant—furor arma ministrat;
tum, pietate gravem ac meritis si forte virum quem
conspexere, silent, arrectisque auribus adstant;
ille regit dictis animos, et pectora mulcet ... (1.148-153)

As often, when rebellion breaks out in a great nation,
and the common rabble rage with passion, and soon stones
and fiery torches fly (frenzy supplying weapons),
if they then see a man of great virtue, and weighty service,
they are silent, and stand there listening attentively:
he sways their passions with his words and soothes their hearts

Curiously, the author does not cite the simile, but instead intercuts the events of Georgia in 1971 with the encounter between Hercules and Cacus. We find out a few pages later that Abbot Sr. paid dearly for his moral courage, and that he fell into deep depression when his son was eleven (an affliction Abbot Jr. also suffered from as an adult). That is effectively all we learn about this remarkable man.

Abbot Jr. is fully aware that his book meanders frustratingly for the reader who would prefer a more straightforward approach to the *Aeneid* and/or the author's life. His father expresses this frustration in one of their imaginary dialogues:

Buddy?

Yes?

I'm not entirely sure where this is heading...

Me neither. Sometimes, at least.

... and I'm beginning to lose a sense of where we are. (193)

It is noteworthy that two books about a father, a son and an epic poem appeared within a short time: Daniel Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey*, and this book. If you want an intelligent discussion of a classical epic paired with funny and touching memories of an exacting and eccentric parent, skip this and read Mendelsohn. Abbot offers instead a series of meditations, which sometimes obscure and sometimes illuminate the stories of both Aeneas and the Abbots.

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