

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ascanius, the infant prince snatched from the flames of a defeated Troy, is the *Aeneid*'s smallest hero, but his part in the story that looks forward to the birth of Rome and the boundless growth of Rome's empire has large implications. This book argues that he raises a series of significant questions about the future, and not only because – as a child, as his father's putative successor and as the ancestor of an important Roman *gens* – he himself represents the glories to come after the *Aeneid*. Rather, Virgil uses Ascanius to hint at the manifold difficulties associated with looking forward beyond the present. These difficulties affect not only the poet's contemporary readers in Rome (and indeed his later readers in and outside Rome as well) but also the narrative itself and the characters who toil in it towards the destinies that might be divinely ordained but remain opaque, at least to them. Further, Ascanius is used in this way despite the fact, paradoxically, that his own future, so long in the past when Virgil was writing, might have seemed fixed.

When the *Aeneid* focuses on Ascanius and shows us other characters looking at him too, it is very often the uncertainty, the contingency and the malleability of the future that are stressed as the various perspectives the text offers on Aeneas' small son reveal how views of the future are shaped by different desires and competing agendas. At the same time, being a figure closely associated not only with the Roman future but also with the Trojan past, which the *Aeneid* suggests must, to a certain extent at least, be left behind to ensure the glories that lie ahead, this symbol of the future is threatened by (and potentially a threat to) the evolution of that very future. All this makes Ascanius an important and complicating factor when we consider the issues of continuity and change that are central to Virgil's epic. We come to see that he is potentially too Trojan to inhabit in any comfort the proto-Roman

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world to which the poem looks forward and which he, supposedly, stands for, and that he is invested not only with a sense of hope for the future but also its deep anxieties. And as the *Aeneid* traces his striving towards an adulthood that is several times frustrated and never properly achieved, Ascanius provides a way of thinking about the operation of the text itself, an epic which is notoriously plagued by delays, and which reaches yearningly beyond the constraints of its own, in some ways inconclusive, ending towards an ideal never achieved, and quite possibly unachievable.

Large questions await, but I begin with something smaller, an iconic scene that stresses Ascanius' diminutive size and encapsulates much of the standard view held, both in antiquity and today, of Virgil's youngest hero. In it, still a small child, Ascanius clings to Aeneas' hand and follows in his footsteps as he escapes from the burning city of his ancestors. When Aeneas tells the story to Dido in Carthage, he emphasises his son's diminutive size (*parvus Iulus*, 723) and suggests both that Ascanius' infant legs make his steps shorter than his father's and that he might be stumbling slightly as he hurries to keep up (*non passibus aequis*, 724):¹

'haec fatus latos umeros subiectaque colla
 veste super fulvique insternor pelle leonis
 succedoque oneri; dextrae se parvus Iulus
 implicuit sequiturque patrem non passibus aequis;
 pone subit coniunx.' (*Aeneid* 2.721–5)

'Having said these things, I cloak my broad shoulders and bent neck with the covering above of a tawny lion's pelt, and take on the burden of my father; having attached himself to my right hand, little Ascanius follows his father with unequal steps; my wife comes along behind.'

This is the picture of Ascanius that dominated the ancient world from the late sixth century BCE, when black figure vases first show him accompanying his father on the flight from Troy.² It became even commoner after the *forum Augustum* was officially dedicated in 2 BCE. In it was a statue of Aeneas fleeing Troy, bearing his father Anchises and his ancestral gods on his back and

¹ I use the Teubner edition of the *Aeneid*: Conte 2011. Translations of the *Aeneid* and all other texts are my own throughout.

² *LIMC* II.1 Askanius: 2–3.

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grasping Ascanius by the hand, standing prominently in one of the two large exedrae, and mirrored by a statue of Romulus carrying the *spolia opima* in the other.³ The grouping was replicated in art throughout the empire in representations of the escape from Troy; it appears in free-standing statues, on vases, jewels, medallions and coins, as well as in paintings, reliefs and mosaics.⁴ These images look back to the iconography of the *forum Augustum* but also reflect the Virgilian scene, which clearly influenced the development and standardisation throughout the ancient world of depictions of Aeneas' escape from Troy with his family.⁵

In this group, Ascanius wears the clothing of an oriental prince, including the *mitra* or headdress seen as characteristic of the East. He thus acts as a visible reminder of the Trojan world from which Aeneas has come, while Aeneas himself, garbed like a Roman soldier, is dressed to reflect both the Roman race that he is to found in Italy and the Roman values that he demonstrates in saving his family and his gods from Troy's destruction. The scene is a paradigm of the *pietas* for which Aeneas was renowned,⁶ and came to be seen as proof of that virtue, ensuring Aeneas' inclusion as one of the first entries in a second-century CE list of men who 'had been exceptionally *pious*' (*qui piissimi fuerunt*):⁷

In Sicilia cum Aetna mons primum ardere coepit, Damon matrem suam ex igne rapuit, item Phintia patrem. Aeneas item in Ilio Anchisem patrem umeris et Ascanium filium ex incendio eripuit. (Hyginus, *Fabulae* 254)

When Mt. Etna in Sicily first started to blaze, Damon snatched his mother away from the conflagration and his father Phintias as well. In the same way Aeneas in Troy snatched his son Ascanius from the fires and his father Anchises on his shoulders.

³ P. Zanker 1988, fig. 149. The statue of Aeneas, his father and Ascanius is mentioned in Ovid's description of the *forum Augustum*, *Fasti* 5.563–4. See also Chaplin 2000: 174–6; J. D. Evans 1992: 109–18; Severy 2003: 165–80.

⁴ LIMC I.1 Aineais: 97–113, 118–26, 132, 135–42, 145–51, 153, 159. The evolution and spread of this image is discussed by M. J. Anderson 1997: 206–7; Battistoni 2010: 43, 131–3; Rawson 2003: 32–4; Severy 2003: 70–3; Sinn 2006; Spannagel 1999: 103–11; Spinazzola 1953: 150–5.

⁵ See further below, p. 16.

⁶ P. Zanker 1988: 202, 210.

⁷ For the text see Marshall 1993. For the act as a demonstration of Aeneas' *pietas*, see also Ovid, *Fasti* 1.527–8.

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As Hyginus' summary highlights, in this dramatic vignette Ascanius and his grandfather Anchises function primarily as appendages to Aeneas, allowing the hero to demonstrate the qualities that make him the proper founder of the Roman race, one too young and the other too old to display such heroism themselves.

Virgil's Ascanius has often been seen similarly as 'a peripheral figure with only occasional effect on the narrative',⁸ peripheral both because of his youth and because the text's real hero is his father. Indeed, the only previous book-length study of Ascanius' role in the *Aeneid* focuses on what the portrayal of the prince reveals about Aeneas, deflecting attention from the boy to his father.⁹ This book, by contrast, argues that Ascanius matters for other reasons as well. It is true that Ascanius' youth is a significant element of his presentation throughout the *Aeneid*, where he is often described as a child, and is called 'little' (*parvus*) on four other occasions during the fall of Troy in Book Two.¹⁰ However, while this may necessarily limit the practical contribution he can make to an epic narrative in which adult masculinity is an essential and defining element of the genre,¹¹ it by no means renders him insignificant. Indeed, the fact that Virgil's Ascanius is never a man, but wants to be one, is one reason that his representation is so important in the *Aeneid*, allowing us a unique perspective on the aspirational masculinity of the epic. In addition, Ascanius' childishness makes him vulnerable, and in doing so points to another significant aspect of his portrayal in the text. When we see little Ascanius stumbling from Troy's conflagration, we are reminded of the other small children who do not survive the last days of Priam's city,¹² and of the fact that the *Aeneid* generally

⁸ Petrini 1997: 87.

⁹ Ross 1977.

¹⁰ *parvus*: *Aen.* 2.563, 674, 677, 710. Also 'beardless' (*impubis*): *Aen.* 5.546. His childishness is stressed repeatedly with the noun *puer* and cognate adjective *puerilis*: *Aen.* 1.267; 2.598; 3.339, 341; 4.156, 354; 5.74, 548, 569, 599; 9.641; 10.236, 605; 12.435.

¹¹ Hinds 2000. See also Pratt 2007: 25 on the incongruous presence of children in the *Iliad*'s world of 'war and sex'.

¹² Sons of Laocoon: *Aen.* 2.213–15; grandson of Panthus: *Aen.* 2.320–1. Panthus' grandson is, like Ascanius, held by the hand as his grandfather clutches Troy's conquered gods and sacred objects and tries to flee: we do not hear of him again. On the overlap between this escape attempt and Aeneas' iconic flight, see Horsfall 2008, *ad loc.* Cf. also the little son of Aeneas, whom Dido wishes for: *Aen.* 4.328–9, with Casali 2004–5: 147–53 on

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proves terminal for its young heroes.¹³ Little Ascanius, however, must survive, if for no other reason than that he is the eponymous ancestor of the *gens Iulia*, from which are to spring the dictator Julius Caesar and his adopted son, who would become Rome's first emperor, Augustus. Virgil's Ascanius in this way is a paradox, put repeatedly at risk by the same narrative that insists on the necessity of his escape from danger. He is a counterfactual figure in such moments, a reminder of the vulnerability of the narrative itself, a story which so easily could have turned out differently. And we should not feel complacent about his survival: we will see not only that it is genuinely imperilled but also that survival beyond the end of the epic will not guarantee a cessation of the threats that trouble the future of the young Trojan prince.

Those threats have to do with an as-yet unborn younger brother who will act as a rival to Ascanius' place as his father's successor, and will be addressed in more detail later. It is important to note here, however, that the vignette with which we started, where the little Ascanius followed after the heroic and pious Aeneas, not only marks him as secondary to his father, but also presents him as an important symbol of succession.¹⁴ This message was emphasised in the *forum Augustum*, where an independent statue of Ascanius also stood among a row of Alban kings and members of the *gens Iulia* that flanked the larger representation of his escape from Troy with his father and grandfather in the northern exedra, like ancestral *imagines* in a Roman *atrium*.¹⁵ It is from this dynastic and political perspective that it can be argued that Ascanius is 'the most important character in the poem' even by those who see him as peripheral in other respects.¹⁶ Moreover, he represents not only Rome's future rulers but, more generally, what

the implicit dangers to this child; and the little Trojan companions of Ascanius during the *lusus Troiae*: *Aen.* 5.563–5, 568–9, on whose survival and repression see Gowers 2011: 112–13.

¹³ Block 1980: 130; Petrini 1997: 8, 95. Golden 1990 notes on children in Greek literature: 'the child is seldom a symbol of what is to come ... when, as rarely, he is, the future hopes he represents are often unrealised' (7).

¹⁴ Baroin 2010: 32–6.

¹⁵ Flower 1996: 224–36; Severy 2003: 165–80. On the strong dynastic programme of the *forum Augustum*, see also Spannagel 1999: 256–358.

¹⁶ Petrini 1997: 87.

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is perhaps the most important desire in the *Aeneid*, the guarantee of a future in which the young do not die and it is possible to bring up one's sons. We can see this hope again and again throughout the text, especially in a number of passages to which I will return in subsequent chapters: in Jupiter's promises in Book One of a steady cycle of generations leading from Aeneas to Augustan Rome; in Andromache and Helenus' barren settlement at Buthrotum; in Latinus' hopes for descendants to glorify his name; and in the grief at the deaths of Marcellus, Lausus and Pallas, Ascanius' doomed counterparts. It is also clearly apparent in the simile which compares Vulcan, rising in the small hours to work on the shield which will display Rome's future glories, to a diligent housewife starting the day before the sun rises so that 'she might be able to rear her little sons' (*possit parvos educere natos*, *Aen.* 8.413). The survival of children is an ideal closely linked both to the figure of Ascanius and the Roman future he represents, and he is therefore significant not only because of his Julian descendants but, even more, because he himself provides us with a model of succession.

The figure of Ascanius following Aeneas during the escape from Troy was picked up by later Roman writers who also, in various ways, were interested in succession as an idea and an aspiration. Thus in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, Claudius is imagined limping up to heaven 'with unequal steps' (*non passibus aequis*, 1.2),¹⁷ taking the same path that the deified Augustus and Tiberius took before him. And at the end of Statius' *Thebaid*, his epic is enjoined to 'follow after the *Aeneid* at a distance and forever worship its footsteps' (*longe sequere et vestigia semper adora*, *Thebaid* 12.817).¹⁸ In both cases, secondariness is the key theme: the lame and stuttering Claudius is a disappointing, and risible, successor to the earlier emperors, while Statius' *Thebaid* marks its deference to the *Aeneid* even as it reworks one of its defining images.¹⁹ Similarly, when the image is reversed, and one character follows another with equal steps rather than 'unequal'

¹⁷ Eden 1984.

¹⁸ Hill 1996.

¹⁹ Hinds 1998: 91–8.

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ones, it is not just the length of their stride that matches up: the suggestion is that they are worthy to be considered as their companion's equals more generally.²⁰ Intrinsic inferiority and a concomitant (if hopeless) desire not to be inferior are closely linked in this iconic image of the flight from Troy, which gestures both towards the qualities and aspirations of the characters themselves and – as most clearly articulated by Statius – the nature of the stories that are told about them, their fittingness to be part of the genre into which they stride, or stumble.

Such innate lack, moreover, is characteristic of children in the Roman imagination, where they are consistently represented as deficient versions of adults.²¹ Insufficient not only in stature, strength and understanding, but also in self-control and in seriousness, children must leave behind and grow beyond these characteristics in order to reach adulthood.²² In ancient epic, such coming of age is often marked – as is the case for Ascanius as well – by killing, whether of animals in the hunt or warriors in battle. The *Odyssey* shows us both possibilities. Odysseus' scar is a permanent reminder of the boar hunt that served as his transition into adulthood.²³ His son Telemachus, who strives to grow up during the narrative, in the end almost matches up to his father in his ability to shoot Odysseus' impossibly mighty bow and by partaking in the slaughter of his mother's suitors.²⁴ Ascanius, as we will see, enjoys a similar moment of initiation when he kills the Italian warrior Numanus Remulus, though his coming of age is immediately compromised by the god Apollo, who intervenes to keep him safely segregated from the adult world of the battlefield. We should also note, however, that the very act of killing in such narratives, and in the *Aeneid* no less than other epics, tends to show us adult warriors regressing towards childhood, in the sense that they often lose the self-control that ideally should characterise their grown-up status. At the end of

²⁰ Aeneas follows the Sibyl into the underworld, matching her as she goes with bold strides (*ille ducem haud timidus vadentem passibus aequat*, *Aen.* 6.263). Claudian's Persephone can equal Venus and Diana step for step (*aequali ... passu, de Raptu Proserpinae* 2.37), on which see Gruzeliér 1993.

²¹ Golden 1990: 1–22; Laes 2011: 77–99.

²² Néraudau 1984: 89–98; Rawson 2003: 134–45.

²³ Homer, *Odyssey* 19.386–466.

²⁴ Homer, *Odyssey* 21.124–35; 22.91–8.

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the *Aeneid*, Aeneas is famously inflamed by rage (*furiis accensus*, *Aen.* 12.946), and we will see that his son Ascanius displays a similar tendency for lack of self-restraint, particularly in the second half of the epic as he moves closer towards adulthood. In part as a consequence of being a figure for succession, Ascanius is also a figure for initiation, and thus a focus for some difficult questions about what it might mean to be an adult hero, and whether the ideals associated with this status are achievable. His hesitant steps towards adulthood mark him on the one hand as inferior to his father but also allow us to question whether the forward movement implicit in initiations is as one-directional as it might seem.

Both peripheral and vitally important, acutely vulnerable yet a survivor, a symbol both of the future and of the past, of succession and of its problems, of initiation and its failures, it is unsurprising that Virgil's Ascanius has attracted radically different interpretations. Recently he has been described by one commentator as 'one of the most puzzling characters in the *Aeneid* – and ... one of the least attractive'.²⁵ To others, he has been much more appealing: 'as real as the boy next door ... a lovely child'.²⁶ To one he is 'an agent of chaos',²⁷ to another 'a concrete representation of optimism'.²⁸ He has been identified as the 'great hope of the Trojans',²⁹ but the same scholar who sees him as an agent of chaos also stresses that the hope he offers is qualified: 'Ascanius' presence promises that there will be a future, but the happiness and security that the Trojan refugees dream of can be compromised by human folly, childish enthusiasm and heedless selfishness.'³⁰ While, as we have already seen, he can be described as 'a peripheral figure with only occasional effect on the narrative and with little characterization',³¹ another reader can claim that 'in spite of his youth his rôle is one of great action',³² and yet another stresses

²⁵ Armstrong 2005: 8.

²⁶ R. E. Coleman 1942–3: 146. Similar views on the representation of Ascanius as lifelike and charming are expressed by Heinze 1993: 128–9; Manson 1981: 62–3.

²⁷ Merriam 2002: 852.

²⁸ Feldman 1952–3: 306–7.

²⁹ Bishop 1988: 291.

³⁰ Merriam 2002: 860.

³¹ Petrini 1997: 87.

³² Moseley 1926: 47.

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the 'psychological realism' of his portrayal.³³ It has even been suggested that Virgil's double-named Ascanius shows signs of a split personality, a vestigial indication in the *Aeneid* of rival histories where 'Ascanius' and 'Iulus' were two separate individuals.³⁴

Every reader's Ascanius will be different, and I do not intend to argue here for either his charm or his unattractiveness. I am interested instead in ways in which he is presented to readers, and I will argue that Virgil's representation of Ascanius in fact encourages such diversity of opinion, in much the same way as the *Aeneid* as a whole speaks with many voices and problematises black-and-white interpretation of its narrative and of its ending.³⁵ As I trace Virgil's portrayal of Ascanius, I am interested partly in how intertexts with earlier works help us to understand the figure and function of Aeneas' son: Homeric epic in particular offers Virgil a model to think with and to argue against, and his engagement with earlier literature is an important strand in the creation of meaning in the *Aeneid*.³⁶ I am even more interested, however, in the ways in which the *Aeneid* speaks to itself: echoes, correspondences and patterns within the poem shape new meaning and give Virgil an independent and distinctive voice within the epic tradition. As a result, his Ascanius is also new. Though Aeneas has sons in all his previous textual incarnations, the son he has in the *Aeneid* is Virgil's creation, moulded in particular by the specific concerns of his epic, and a figure who allows us to reflect on those anxieties. It is for this reason that

³³ Manson 1981: 67: 'la réalité psychologique'.

³⁴ Paschalis 1997: 61–4. The theory suggests that 'Ascanius' is a manifestation of the 'public side' of Aeneas' son, a political character, involved and interested in military and religious activity, while 'Iulus' is a 'private' individual, innocent and helpless during the sack of Troy, later portrayed as beautiful, sensitive and emotional, and involved in erotic scenes and in the revelation of divine will to the human characters of the text. However, it is difficult always to draw such distinctions: the two names are often used close together (e.g. *Aen.* 1.267; 4.274; 5.546–8); Iulus is interested in the hunting which was a precursor to military activity (*Aen.* 7.477–8, 493–4); and Ascanius appears in a number of erotically tinged scenes (*Aen.* 1.658–9, 691–94; 4.83–5), and is several times the object of family affection even when he does not display it (*Aen.* 1.646; 3.484–91; 4.354–5). The revelation of divine will, too, can be viewed as much as a public and political event as a private one.

³⁵ Parry 1963.

³⁶ For Virgil's detailed engagement with Homer, see Knauer 1964. More recently, Hutchinson 2013: 174–5, 333–5 and Goldschmidt 2013 have studied Virgil's use of

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I devote considerable space in this book to tracing the development of Virgil's Ascanius as a crucial part of the larger development of the notoriously carefully worked poem on which Virgil spent the last decade or more of his life.

Two names are used for Aeneas' son in the *Aeneid*. These names, Ascanius and Iulus, which appear with almost equal frequency in the text, are one small reason for what I will argue is a characteristic doubleness about Virgil's Ascanius.³⁷ Certainly, they encourage people to speak of him in ways suggestive of a double identity, as we see in claims such as this: '*parvus Iulus* has found his way into the reader's heart and prepared a cordial reception for *puer Ascanius*, who takes his place'.³⁸ Such a statement implies that Aeneas' son grows from being a 'Iulus' to being an 'Ascanius' as the epic progresses, but this is not the case. Ascanius is the name seen slightly more frequently, and the one used both first and last, but Iulus is almost as prevalent a name for Aeneas' son.³⁹ It is generally agreed that little significance can be attached to the choice of one of these names over the other in any given scene,⁴⁰ though it has also recently been pointed out that the usual placement of the name 'Iulus' at the end of the hexameter mirrors the dynastic hopes embodied in this particular name as well as the young prince's own hopes of inheriting his father's kingdom.⁴¹ Clearly, the name Iulus is politically important, and it is indeed partly for this reason that I choose to use the name Ascanius throughout this book: it is slightly more neutral. Of course, choosing not to call him Iulus is a loaded decision too, and I do not intend to downplay his role as the ancestor of the *gens Iulia*. I do, however, argue that this is not the most important role he plays in the epic, and so it

Homer, Ennius and other literary predecessors. On intertextuality in Roman poetry more generally, see Conte 1986; Hinds 1998.

³⁷ He is called Iulus thirty-five times, and Ascanius forty-one.

³⁸ Moseley 1926: 46. Compare also Mercury, who tells Aeneas to 'think of the growing Ascanius and the hopes of Iulus your heir' (*Ascanium surgentem et spes heredis Iuli / respice*, *Aen.* 4.274–5).

³⁹ Ascanius at *Aen.* 1.267, and at 12.433.

⁴⁰ R. G. Austin 1964, *ad Aen.* 2.563; Moseley 1926: 66; O'Hara 1996: 221.

⁴¹ Cowan 2009.