

Aeneid Book 8. 615-731

Then Venus, bright goddess, came bearing gifts through the ethereal clouds: and when she saw her son from far away who had retired in secret to the valley by the cool stream, she went to him herself, unasked, and spoke these words: 'See the gifts brought to perfection by my husband's skill, as promised. You need not hesitate, my son, to quickly

challenge the proud Laurentines, or fierce Turnus, to battle.' Cytherea spoke, and invited her son's embrace, and placed the shining weapons under an oak tree opposite.

He cannot have enough of turning his gaze over each item, delighting in the goddess's gift and so high an honour, admiring, and turning the helmet over with hands and arms, with its fearsome crest and spouting flames, and the fateful sword, the stiff breastplate of bronze, dark-red and huge, like a bluish cloud when it's lit by the rays of the sun, and glows from afar:

then the smooth greaves, of electrum and refined gold, the spear, and the shield's indescribable detail.

There the lord with the power of fire, not unversed in prophecy, and knowledge of the centuries to come, had fashioned the history of Italy, and Rome's triumphs: there was every future generation of Ascanius's stock, and the sequence of battles they were to fight.

He had also shown the she-wolf, having just littered,

lying on the ground, in the green cave of Mars,  
the twin brothers, Romulus and Remus, playing, hanging  
on her teats, and fearlessly sucking at their foster-mother.

Bending her neck back smoothly she caressed them  
in turn, and licked their limbs with her tongue.

Not far from that he had placed Rome, the Sabine women,  
lawlessly snatched from the seated crowd, when the great games were  
held in the Circus: and the sudden surge of fresh warfare  
between Romulus's men, and the aged Tattius and his austere Cures. Next,  
the same two kings stood armed in front of Jove's altar,  
holding the wine-cups and joined in league, sacrificing a sow,  
the new-built palace bristling with Romulus's thatch.

Then, not far from that, four-horse chariots driven in different directions tore  
Mettus apart (Alban, you should have kept your word, though!), and Tullus  
dragged the liar's entrails through the woods, the briars wet with sprinkled  
blood. There was Porsenna too, ordering Rome to admit the banished  
Tarquin, and gripping the city in a mighty siege: the scions of Aeneas  
running on the sword for freedom's sake. You could see Porsenna in angry,  
and in threatening, posture, because Cocles dared to tear down the bridge,  
because Cloelia broke her restraints and swam the river.

At the top Manlius, guardian of the Tarpeian Citadel, stood before the  
temple, defending the high Capitol. And there the silvery goose, flying  
through the gilded colonnades, cackled that the Gauls were at the gate.  
The Gauls were there in the gorse, taking the Citadel,  
protected by the dark, the gift of shadowy night. Their hair was gold, and  
their clothes were gold, they shone in striped cloaks, their white necks  
torqued with gold, each waving two Alpine javelins in his hand, long shields

defending their bodies. Here he had beaten out the leaping Salii and naked Luperci, the woolly priest's caps, and the oval shields that fell from heaven, chaste mothers in cushioned carriages leading sacred images through the city. Far from these he had added the regions of Tartarus, the high gates of Dis, the punishment for wickedness, and you Catiline, hanging from a threatening cliff, trembling at the sight of the Furies: and the good Cato, at a distance, handing out justice.

The likeness of the swollen sea flowed everywhere among these, in gold, though the flood foamed with white billows, and dolphins in bright silver swept the waters round about with arching tails, and cut through the surge. In the centre bronze ships could be seen, the Battle of Actium, and you could make out all Leucate in feverish preparation for war, the waves gleaming with gold. On one side Augustus Caesar stands on the high stern, leading the Italians to the conflict, with him the Senate, the People, the household gods, the great gods, his happy brow shoots out twin flames, and his father's star is shown on his head. Elsewhere Agrippa, favoured by the winds and the gods leads his towering column of ships, his brow shines with the beaks of the naval crown, his proud battle distinction. On the other side Antony, with barbarous wealth and strange weapons, conqueror of eastern peoples and the Indian shores, bringing Egypt, and the might of the Orient, with him, and furthest Bactria: and his Egyptian consort follows him (the shame). All press forward together, and the whole sea foams, churned by the sweeping oars and the trident rams. They seek deep water: you'd think the Cycladic islands were uprooted and afloat on the flood, or high mountains clashed with mountains, so huge the mass with which the men attack the towering sterns. Blazing tow and missiles of winged steel shower from their hands, Neptune's fields grow red with fresh slaughter. The queen

in the centre signals to her columns with the native sistrum, not yet turning to look at the twin snakes at her back. Barking Anubis, and monstrous gods of every kind, brandish weapons against Neptune, Venus, and Minerva. Mars rages in the centre of the contest, engraved in steel, and the grim Furies in the sky, and Discord in a torn robe strides joyously, while Bellona follows with her blood-drenched whip. Apollo of Actium sees from above and bends his bow: at this all Egypt, and India, all the Arabs and Sabaeans turn and flee. The queen herself is seen to call upon the winds, set sail, and now, even now, spread the slackened canvas. The lord with the power of fire has fashioned her pallid with the coming of death, amidst the slaughter, carried onwards by the waves and wind of Iapyx, while before her is Nile, mourning with his vast extent, opening wide his bays, and, with his whole tapestry, calling the vanquished to his dark green breast, and sheltering streams.

Next Augustus, entering the walls of Rome in triple triumph, is dedicating his immortal offering to Italy's gods, three hundred great shrines throughout the city. The streets are ringing with joy, playfulness, applause: a band of women in every temple, altars in every one: before the altars sacrificial steers cover the ground. He himself sits at the snow-white threshold of shining Apollo, examines the gifts of nations, and hangs them on the proud gates. The conquered peoples walk past in a long line, as diverse in language as in weapons, or the fashion of their clothes. Here Vulcan has shown the Nomad race and loose-robed Africans, there the Leleges and Carians and Gelonians with their quivers: Euphrates runs with quieter waves, and the Morini, remotest of mankind, the double-horned Rhine, the untamed Dahae, and Araxes, resenting its restored bridge.

Aeneas marvels at such things on Vulcan's shield, his mother's gift, and delights in the images, not recognising the future events, lifting to his shoulder the glory and the destiny of his heirs.