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Review of Nicholas Horsfall, *Virgil, Aeneid 7: A Commentary. Mnemosyne Supplement 198*

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Review of Nicholas Horsfall, *Virgil, Aeneid 7: A Commentary*. *Mnemosyne Supplement 198*

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NICHOLAS HORSFALL. *Virgil, Aeneid 7: A Commentary*. *Mnemosyne* Supplement 198. Leiden, Boston, and Köln: Brill 2000. ISBN 90 04 10842 4. Pp. xliv + 567.

This commentary appears after a rather lengthy gestation period.⁷ It derives ultimately (by a process that the author describes in some detail, ix–xi) from H.’s DPhil thesis of 1971. The revised version, however, resembles that early effort “only in some isolated lines and words.” This scrupulous disclaimer, typical of H., was hardly necessary: readers of his numerous contributions to Vergilian studies will be familiar with his formidable learning and assiduous attention to the dynamics of scholarly discussion, and will not have expected him to issue a recycled thesis almost thirty years on. Rather, the benefit of such a prolonged, if intermittent, engagement with *Aeneid* 7 in particular shows through clearly on almost every page. An equally beneficial by-product of the delay is that, having begun the work of revision as recently as 1996, H. was able to make use of digital research tools that had not been widely available or as easy to use just a few years previously. The result is a trove of information, observations, and judgment that will obviously prove to be a major contribution to Vergilian studies.

I should say at once that not all readers of *Vergilius* will find this work equally accessible. Though it would be unfair to say that H. occasionally presents data in almost undigested form, he does presuppose a high degree of familiarity with a very wide range of issues, scholarly debates and procedures, and so on. And, digested or no, the information that he serves up comes in abundance. That is of course what will make this commentary indispensable to scholars, graduate students, and precocious undergraduates. But on the whole, younger students and anyone who is only casually interested in Vergil will find this work much too detailed. Even teachers will have to keep their own counsel about whether the time they could take

⁷ Dispatch has evidently replaced lengthy gestation *tout court*: the volume under review has since been joined by a commentary of similar dimensions on book 11 (*Mnemosyne* Supp. 244, 2003) and these siblings are already expecting another, on book 3.

coming to terms with this trove will be repaid. For those intending to do original research on Vergil, however, or indeed on any number of topics involving Latin poetry and Roman cultural history, this is a book that it would be very unwise to ignore.

H. is known for, among other things, the thoroughness of his investigations, and throughout this commentary one finds summaries of discussions that have taken place over decades or centuries. La Cerda, Heyne, Forbiger, Conington, Henry, and Page emerge as the heroes of old who laid the foundations for H.'s own work. "That said," as H. himself notes at the end of a preface addressed *ad lectorem*, "no small part of what follows is in fact not tralatitian, but derives from a fresh consultation of dictionaries, concordances, grammars and the like" (xxxvii, and see below). The originality and magnitude of H.'s own contribution is only enhanced by those occasions when he calls attention to instances of his predecessors' brilliance (e.g. *Circe* 191, *ierit* 223, *ab usque* 289). Such judgments frequently occur in the context of adjudicating between competing solutions to a problem, which involves not only the commendation of those who got it right, but the unambiguous condemnation of those who did not, a duty from which H. has never shrunk. The result in such cases, whether the reader agrees with H.'s judgment or not, is a clear sense that the *status quaestionis* has been given in full, that the efforts of previous scholars have been given careful attention, weighed, and subjected to vigorous judgment, and that the view that H. endorses is either the result of his own research or else of a penetrating interrogation of previous views. It is true that H. tends to be less generous to more recent predecessors—Fordyce in particular is somewhat belabored in these pages—but in general any sense of undue brusqueness is dissipated by the even greater harshness with which H. castigates and formally disavows earlier ideas of his own (for some choice examples, see the notes on *nympha*. [sic] *Laurente* 47, *accipimus* 48, *quorumque a stirpe* 98, *Corythi* 209, etc.).

To my mind, the most important aspect of this commentary consists in the fact that H. approaches Vergil's language almost as if discovering it for the first time, and that he encourages the reader to do so as well. This sense of novelty can be difficult to recover in the

case of an author who is so familiar and whose influence on Latin poetic usage was so decisive. H.'s ability to discern what is surprising in Vergilian style and usage, and to reveal what is simply not very well understood, are thus of decided importance. A small but, I think, telling example is H.'s comment on *concessit in iras* 305, where he observes that "V's use of prepositions is still in general little understood." This is absolutely right, and it is symptomatic of a more general problem: quite a lot about Vergil's use of the language is strange, as early critics of his *kakozelia* understood; but with familiarity has come a somewhat illusory sense of easy understanding. H.'s great merit, in my view, is that he is often able to see through the haze of false understanding and to call attention to areas where we are more ignorant than we knew. Another case in point is the comment on *laetum* 288, where H. rightly notes that "we do not have the ample and dispassionate study this key term requires." Of course, any number of critics have had a lot to say about the word *laetus* in various passages of Vergil. The point is that Vergil defines what I think must be one of the few areas in classical studies, in which interest in "higher criticism" has in some ways so outstripped the supply of basic information that an interpreter may be in danger of going right off the rails without even realizing it. H. implicitly reminds us that some of the interesting and important work that remains to be done in Vergilian studies may be work of the most basic kind.

In a more general sense, H.'s canvassing of scholarly opinion and his approach to Vergil's language both point to an underlying theme of the commentary: namely, an abiding concern to be clear about what can and what can not be known. The theme comes out over and over again, but is perhaps most visible in a brief section (xxxii–xxxiv) on what a commentary should be. H.'s own opinions are clear, and seem to suppose a great divide between two different styles of scholarship. Thus, this is not a "literary" commentary. Again, H. is disarming on this score: at another point he rather touchingly thanks a number of friends "who have taught me gently what I know of recent approaches to Virgilian criticism" (xii), then later speaks almost wistfully of those "to whom the new techniques come naturally"

(xxxiii) and of his own efforts as “critically underdeveloped” (xxxiv). On this count, it is obviously a matter of great interest to H. that Philip Hardie, here identified as “a scholar who stands among the number of ‘new critics’” (sic, xxxii; clearly *not* used here as a *terminus technicus*), has managed to submit himself “to the long and minute labor of the Virgil commentator” and to make a success of it.⁸ Chalcenterism and *Sitzfleisch* notwithstanding, it is of course hardly the case that criticism and a focus on literary concerns per se, are all of a piece, or that such concerns preclude attention to the linguistic, historical, and religious (etc.) aspects of poetry; one hopes that this is not the case. The specific difference that H. singles out between Hardie’s approach and his own concerns Hardie’s interest in reception; and even if Hardie’s interest in reception studies is a particularly important aspect of his approach to literary study in general, the citation of parallels from later literature (to illustrate “influence”) as well as from earlier (to illustrate “indebtedness”) is hardly an eccentric feature of traditional commentary.

A clearer illustration of H.’s view of the relation between commentary and criticism involves one of the friends whom he thanks for trying to educate him in literary matters, namely, the late Don Fowler, a self-described “commentary fan” who put himself on record as wanting commentaries “not to solve problems but to make them worse,” i.e. to reveal unsuspected difficulties rather than glossing them over or explaining them away.⁹ For his own part, H. describes his “hope and intention” as being “to open up, not to close down, *Aen.* 7, for future readers” (xxxiii). On this point, then, Fowler and H. seem to be in firm agreement. Certainly H. is ever at pains to demonstrate that this or that passage is not as clear or contains more significance than has been generally assumed (see e.g. the entries on *dives* 11, *cernimus* 68, *partibus ex isdem* 70, *eripuit* 119, *vina*

⁸ See pp. xxxii–xxxiii; cf. H.’s review of Hardie, *Aeneid IX* in these pages (*Vergilius* 42, 1996, 145–47).

⁹ Don Fowler, “Criticism as commentary and commentary as criticism in the age of electronic media,” in *Commentarie —Kommentaren*, ed. G. W. Most, *Aporemata* 4 (Göttingen 1999) 442.

reponite 134, *porto* v. *reporto* on line 167; *silvis* 172; *nostri si tanta cupido* 263; *ecce autem* 286, *ab usque* 289, *credo* 297, *recidiva* 322, *attollit* 572, *mediam nigra carpebat nocte quietem* 414, *praecipue* 746, *templo Triviae lucisque sacratis* 778). These passages, in keeping with what I have said above, generally have to do with matters of dictions, syntax, or some other aspect of language per se. In addition, H. makes a number of contributions to our understanding of Vergil's language as a (partly inherited, partly original) latinization of Homer (e.g. *sic deinde effatus* 135, *vina coronant* 146 ("an old problem" expertly treated here), *longaevi regis* 166, *qualia multa* 200, *stabant* and *nitidi* 275, *supposita de matre* 283, *Allecto* 324, *carpebat* 414, etc.).¹⁰

But in a larger sense, I have to suppose that the range of "problems" that H. is prepared to recognize as such is different from those to which Fowler would have acknowledged. For instance, H. is not much interested in ambiguity except as a problem to be solved. It is true that at one point (in dismissing of the admittedly absurd and pedantic question "How does Ilioneus know that Dido is a queen?") he unexpectedly declares, "I hope never to have to read an epic in which all such questions are answered" (on *nuntius*..[sic, again] *reportat* 167). And elsewhere he does admit that there are cases where more teasing uncertainties undeniably exist: "V. nowhere names Latinus' city," he observes (on *ante urbem* 162), commendably dispensing with the name *Laurentum* that some scholars wrongly use to supply what Vergil does not give us. H. goes on to note that "it is still not clear to me why V. favoured this anonymity." Perhaps I should not make too much of an *obiter dictum*, but the remark seems to me indicative of H.'s general approach: it may not *yet* be clear why Vergil did what he did, but *eventually*, at least in principle, it will be. The idea that the question is merely

¹⁰ Because H. is generally so effective in matters involving Vergil's Greek lexicon, it is surprising when he misses out. For instance, H. gives a good account of what *cedro* 178 actually means; but (though he frequently reports word counts) he does not note that the word is a Vergilian *unicum*, just as it is *hapax* in Homer at *Od.* 5.60.

unanswerable is unappealing; that it may be *purposefully* unanswerable is opposite to the assumptions that H. brings to his reading of Vergil.

Thus H. has little interest in the sort of ambiguity that has for years appeared regularly in the pages of learned journals where Vergil is discussed. (Some understated remarks on this score at p. xxiii). Rather it is, according to H., the commentator's job to eliminate ambiguity, not to revel in it or find more. Thus H. observes that *ex ordine* 139 occurs six times in Vergil and notes (following Lenaz, *EV* 3: 880) "the frequency with which *ordo* is used to denote the due order of religious ceremonies." So far so good. But H. continues: "We do not know why the local nymphs should stand before Jupiter and the Magna Mater." No, we don't. No more do we know why Aeneas should be said to view the *Iliacs ex ordine pugnas* at 1.456, after which those some of those *pugnas* (in addition to some episodes that do not involve battles) are specified in a curious order. Here H. prefers to find significance in sacral usage, a sphere that is certainly relevant to this passage; but it is curious that he brings up another potential sphere of meaning without mentioning critical discussions of those meanings.¹¹ Alongside this it is common to find conflicting points of view more openly dismissed: "We would be ill-advised to fret over the 'inconsistency' between this line and 799 (troops from the same spot): two different visions of the country" p. 55; on lines 37–45, p. 68: "A moment's glance at the text is enough to show that it is improper, and dangerous to talk about the 'halves' of the *Aen.*, when the author is at such evident pains to divide the epic here [i.e. line 37], and not at 7.1"; *miro...amore* 57: "...the name Amata (whose link with *amare*, if any [!], is, so far as the etymological evidence goes, ritual, not incestuous)"; "...though it is Trojan, not Latin religion that will prevail in the eventual fusion of the peoples" (*augusta ad moenia regis* 153; but cf. 12.836; cf. similar

¹¹ Oddly, at *ex ordine* 177 "problems" with this straightforward approach are acknowledged and reference is made to Vergil's use of the phrase at 1.456 and 6.754, where any straightforward sense of visual or chronological order is contradicted by the order of the narrative.

remarks on 170–91, *auditique* 196, *Latinus* 250, *daedala Circe* 282, *coeant* 317, etc.).

The book gives little cause for complaint, but a few points should be raised. Puzzlingly, H. parades his disdain for structural analysis, then summarizes in what appears to be a hasty and confusing style the main issues pertaining to the structure of book 7 (xv–xvii). But this summary is indexed to useful discussions in the commentary itself, whether original or adapted from the work of others. One of the few important reference works apparently not known to H. is the *Chicago Manual of Style*. As a result, the conventions of punctuation and such that are used in this book can be a bit disorienting to the reader. But I have to admit that the system that H. uses seems to be applied consistently, and while the book must have been hellish to edit and proofread, I noticed very few typos. As a writer H. has always favored a style that oscillates between hyper-compression and relaxed chattiness. Here both tendencies are generally under control; but the former tendency at its most extreme can produce oracular results (e.g. on *sic voce secutus* 212: “The line is banal, but novel.”), while one can easily find sentences that are interrupted several times by parentheses and that bristle with abbreviations and significant typography, all of it directed at summarizing an argument in the most succinct way possible. On the other hand there are passages that will inform us in a leisurely way about the size of H.’s library, the speed with which he can walk, the fact that he likes pita, splits his own wood, and so on. Some of these remarks must count among the occasional humorous touches that are justified on p. xx, and they are sometimes diverting. Generally, though, I wished H. had stayed with his rigorously compendious style throughout. This is a long book, and it is expensive. Vergilians will need to acquire it. Perhaps Brill was counting on this when they decided not to edit it down. H. himself obliquely defends its length, and perhaps his choice of publisher (when he compares the original bulk of Stephen Harrison’s DPhil thesis to the published commentary on *Aeneid* 10, xxxii), but there is no doubt that the volume could have been trimmed considerably without sacrificing any of the substance.

These complaints are, of course, exposed as mere quibbles when

they are weighed against the erudition that informs this book from start to finish. It is likely that readers will long remain grateful to H. for the depth of his scholarship in far greater measure than they notice any foibles. In what looks like an effort to avert the *malocchio*, H. raises the possibility that his work may “have to be superseded in a hurry,” and goes on to say, “I hope that my successor will find these pages of rather greater practical utility than I did those of my immediate predecessors” (xxxiv). I suspect it may be some time before anyone will feel the need to retrace these steps. It is of course not impossible that someone will be able to reap where H. has sown rather more quickly than the immense scope and impressive learning of this tome might lead one to expect. If so, then that eventuality will be a fitting tribute to H.’s success in clarifying the discussion of *Aeneid* 7 and in showing others the way to articulate new questions and find new answers.

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