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*Oxford Readings in Vergil's Aeneid*, Edited by S.J. Harrison**

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**Review of: *Virgil*, Edited by Ian McAuslan and Peter Walcot and *Oxford Readings in Vergil's Aeneid*, Edited by S.J. Harrison**

**Disciplines**

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***Virgil*. Edited by Ian McAuslan and Peter Walcot. Greece & Rome Studies, 1. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Classical Association, 1990. Pp. vi + 202. ISBN 0-19-920166-8 (hb). ISBN 0-19-920170-6 (pb). \$49.95 (hb). \$17.95 (pb).**

***Oxford Readings in Vergil's Aeneid*. Edited by S.J. Harrison. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. Pp. x + 477. \$75.00 (hb). ISBN 0-19-814389-3. \$29.95 (pb). ISBN 0-19-814388-5.**

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**Reviewed by Joseph Farrell, University of Pennsylvania.**

Each of these volumes collects a group of previously published essays on Vergil. The shorter but less narrowly focused collection presents itself as "the first in what is hoped will be a continuing series, collecting together Greece Rome articles published on a particular author or theme" (vi). The editors have provided two useful indices, of subjects and passages. The essays themselves appear just as they originally did in the pages of *G & R*, except for new pagination. I cannot discern a method behind the order in which they are printed. The bibliographical information given about the original articles is inadequate: only on the contents page are we told when the different papers appeared, but without the original pagination or volume number. Thus the first essay in the volume is listed as "Imitation and the Poetry of Virgil [by] Guy Lee (April 1981) [p.] 1." All of this is a nuisance for users of this collection who will want to cite the papers fully and properly. In the *Aeneid* volume, all the papers, which were published originally in a variety of places, have been reset to produce a uniform appearance (in contrast to, for instance, the Princeton Series of Collected Essays), a decision that pleases the eye, but drains the purse, and has introduced some misprints. Full bibliographical information is given on pp. vi-vii; but it would have been helpful to indicate the original pagination in the margins of the individual essays, as is normally done in the better collections of *kleine Schriften*. Most of the papers are arranged by subject, following the order of the poem (the last eight deal with more general topics); and where several papers treat of a similar theme, they appear in order of original publication. The volume is unindexed.

Nearly all of the essays included in these collections are of a very high quality, some of them acknowledged classics, most of them familiar to serious Vergilians. But this fact in itself raises a question, indeed the main question about both volumes: Why? Vergil is perhaps the most widely taught and intensively researched classical author, and not only students, but scholars as well should welcome a carefully chosen collection of essays in English either on his entire oeuvre or on his final masterpiece. Steele Commager's excellent survey of approaches to Vergil is still useful, but was published a quarter-century ago,<sup>1</sup> and D. R. Dudley's collection of original essays by various authors is almost as old.<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom's more recent anthology of reprinted and previously unpublished material is rather uneven in quality.<sup>3</sup> So, the time was probably right. But beyond this, what are these volumes intended to accomplish? The *G & R* editors say nothing about this. The editor of the *Aeneid* volume states that one of his goals was to collect material that had originally been published in out-of-the-way places; but most of the 25 reprinted items originally appeared in such journals as

*Classical Philology*, *Classical Quarterly*, *G & R* again (Were there hardball negotiations here with McAuslan and Walcot? R. D. Williams' paper on "The Sixth Book of the *Aeneid*" certainly would have enhanced their collection; perhaps they forced Harrison to take C. M. Bowra's "Aeneas and the Stoic Ideal" by way of compensation), and *The Journal of Roman Studies*. These periodicals are hardly underrepresented in academic libraries. The only essay that I would not expect to find in many North American libraries, which I was glad to read for the first time here, is David West's 1987 Jackson Knight Memorial Lecture. I therefore doubt that the real purpose of either volume is to collect scattered and largely unavailable (and therefore neglected) critical masterpieces. I am also a bit curious about the intended audience. Again *G & R* say nothing, while the *Aeneid* editor speaks formulaically of "undergraduates and sixth-formers" (along with "their teachers"). I am not familiar with this group of readers, but I would venture to say that there are few among their American counterparts to whom I would assign, say, G. P. Goold's famous paper on the Helen episode of Book 2 -- essential reading for specialists, recommended for graduate seminars, and readily available in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, but rather technical for most younger students and, at 67 pages in this volume, a questionable inclusion.

Let us consider each of the collections on its own terms. The basic requirement for inclusion in the *G & R* volume is clear enough, but does it make sense to limit a collection of Vergilian essays in this arbitrary way? We all have our favorite journals, and although I'm not sure why, I've always had a soft spot for *G & R* (I especially like their "Brief Reviews" section) and for their "New Surveys in the Classics" pamphlets. This volume, and the projected series it inaugurates, looks something like a more ambitious version of the "Surveys." The fifteen essays chosen were published between 1972 and 1985, and stick to well-trodden paths. Nine papers are concerned mainly with the *Aeneid*, two with the *Georgics*, and the remaining four with more general topics, such as imitation, symbolism, translation, and biography (this last essay, Michael Winterbottom's "Virgil and the Confiscations," being the only one of the lot to pay any significant attention to the *Bucolics*). Perhaps the editors feel that the *G & R* readership are interested almost exclusively in the *Aeneid*, but this skewed distribution of topics does not represent the importance and abundance of research on Vergil's earlier works during the period in which these papers were first published (a point to which I will return). Beyond this, I was generally pleased with the selection (although I wondered why only the second installment of an R. D. Williams/C. J. Carter twofer was included), but other limitations of the project are readily apparent. For instance, M. S. Spurr's piece on "Agriculture and the *Georgics*" is one of the best to appear in *G & R* in recent years; but I would never let anyone read it except in conjunction with Richard F. Thomas' "Prose into Poetry: Tradition and Meaning in Virgil's *Georgics*" (*HSCP* 91.1987.229-260), or vice versa. The two papers deal with much of the same material; but because of their contrasting approaches, they present entirely different, equally defensible interpretations of the *Georgics*, and anyone who neglects either of them will be somewhat misled as to the nature of this tremendously complex poem. Obviously Thomas' paper wouldn't be included in a volume of *G & R* essays (a situation that, to my mind, further calls into question the rationale behind the project), but surely editorial references to such important and directly related discussions could have been included.

The *Aeneid* volume is by definition more narrowly focused; but, because it draws on more sources than the *G & R* volume (25 contributions from eleven journals, two books, and one lecture series, plus one previously unpublished essay) and covers a longer period of time (1933-1990), it offers a more panoramic view of the Vergilian landscape. The synoptic aims of the collection seem pronounced when one reads the

editor's introduction, a useful and judicious bibliographical survey of "Some Views of the *Aeneid* in the Twentieth Century." But the title of the collection offers a different sort of clue as to its purpose -- in what sense are these "Oxford Readings"? -- and the selection of essays itself asks the reader to gaze upon the critical landscape through a lens that refracts our vision in quite a pronounced way.

The Oxford connection appears to involve more than the publishing house. (They didn't, after all, call it *The Oxford Book of Vergil*.) Many of the papers were written by men (I will come back to this point, too) who have been students or faculty at the University of Oxford. Other authors have a more tenuous connection: G. N. Knauer, for instance, was Nellie Wallace lecturer at Oxford during Hilary Term 1969; G. Karl Galinsky's 1972 book on *The Herakles Theme* was published in Oxford (but by Blackwell); and there may be other such connections not apparent to me. One senses something about what makes these Oxford readings in the inclusion of Eduard Fraenkel's 1945 paper on *Aeneid* 7. That it is a fine essay goes without saying; but a better choice, certainly a more appropriate one for an undergraduate audience, and not yet anthologized, would have been K. J. Reckford's discussion of "Latent Tragedy in *Aeneid* VII 1-285" (*AJP* 82.1961.252-269). The decision to use Fraenkel instead of Reckford is no doubt due to the fact that, for postwar generations, the former represents better than anyone else the study of Latin at Oxford, and the editor probably felt that such a figure could not go unrepresented in a collection with this title. But the difference between the two essays, the included and the excluded, tells us something more about the purpose of the collection. The Reckford paper is a classic New Critical reading, fairly pessimistic, typical of what has come to be called the Harvard School, which I take to be still the prevalent approach to the *Aeneid* in this country. This volume, by its relative neglect of this type of criticism (the essays of Williams, Lyne, and Nisbet included here are only partial exceptions), may be read as an attempt to define an "Oxford School" in contrast to the American prototype.

The tenets of this school emerge most clearly, perhaps, from the essays that deal with Dido, who comes off rather badly in this collection. N. M. Horsfall, addressing the Virgil Society in 1973, argues that the national memory of the Punic Wars, and Naevius' lost, but probably incalculably important and unfavorable portrayal of the queen herself, would have made it very difficult for the Roman reader to feel sympathy for her. Niall Rudd (1976) then argues to the contrary that what happens to her and Aeneas is clearly not her fault; trapped in a bad situation that she cannot control, she does in fact command the sensitive reader's sympathy. Finally, D. C. Feeney (1983) contrasts Dido's misleading, rhetorical loquaciousness with Aeneas' truthful, action-oriented taciturnity. Reading the three essays in this order creates a sense of thesis, antithesis, and resolution, and here it is clear (as it is not in Fraenkel's essay) that sympathy for Aeneas' victims is permissible; but beneath this apparent dialectic lies a uniform hermeneutic ideology. The real issue is that of how we read the poem. Rudd's essay shows that it is not simply a matter of the old optimist/pessimist division; rather, it is a question of how to frame the argument. On this point, all three authors agree that the *Aeneid* can best be interpreted by collecting a great number of facts relating to some part of the cultural context that produced it. For Horsfall this context is the history of Rome's enmity with Carthage; for Rudd it is the Roman ideal of *univiratus* and related institutions; and for Feeney it is a pronounced strain within the ancient rhetorical tradition that claimed to value deeds above words. Far from being an eccentric (or distinctively Oxonian) position, the conceptual frame work outlined by these essays is that of traditional philology. It produces a type of positivist, historically grounded scholarship that one is always glad to have. But a great deal more has been said about Dido, some of it more forceful and persuasive than what we are given here, by critics who do not confine themselves to the historicist and objectivist modes of scholarship

that this collection celebrates. Lately a neo-conservative resurgence of such work, particularly in England, has taken place, most of it concerning the *Aeneid*; and one often senses an effort to return to the days before New Criticism, the Harvard School, and our recent fascination first with the *Bucolics*, then with the *Georgics*, two works that tradition has left much more open to interpretation than the "Roman national epic." The skewed focus of the *G & R* volume, to which I alluded above, together with the decision to ignore altogether the *Bucolics* and *Georgics* in this collection, look like further contributions toward the same goal.

What I miss in many of these essays (which in most cases I would not fault individually; it is the character of the collection to which I am objecting) is a self-awareness concerning the interpretive process. What we get instead is a pretence of objectivity that a positivist orientation inevitably creates.<sup>4</sup> Rome's enduring hatred of Carthage is a historical fact. But it is not now, nor has it ever been obvious that, because most Romans regarded Carthage as the archetypal national enemy, they would therefore have regarded Dido as a dangerous villain (nor, could we prove that they did so, would it follow that we too would have to regard her only in this light). Similarly, although the univira had become a rare bird by Vergil's day, we needn't deny that Vergil's Roman audience might have judged the heroic Dido by ideal standards. All of the information that we are given about these background matters is interesting, and the critic wants as much of it as he can get; but *polymathiê ou didaskei oute noun echein oute poiêmata krinein*, and the collection of data itself does not determine the interpretation of literature. This point has a special relevance to Feeney's paper, which is excellent in so many ways, but stops at what seems to me an ideal starting point for another essay. The question he begs is: Why does this richly nuanced verbal artifact present us with a hero who distrusts language, and set against him opponents who are masterful rhetoricians? Does a poem of this sort not, in some sense, undermine its own authority? And does not this sort of poem pose special problems for the critic?

This is precisely the sort of question that this volume does not address. Is the avoidance of such issues characteristic of the "Oxford School"? I have no idea how to answer this; nor can I explain other important omissions from the collection. For instance, I believe that women have for some time been a feature of the Oxford scene, but they are not among the contributors to this volume. One wonders, particularly in light of the chilly reception accorded Dido, whether the type of criticism represented by this collection is not somewhat gender-specific. At any rate, the contribution of feminist criticism, which has been so important in all fields of literary study in recent years, has influenced work on the *Aeneid* as well; and as a corrective to the Dido-bashing contained herein, I would recommend as a start Christine Perkell's fine essay "On Creusa, Dido, and the Quality of Victory in Virgil's *Aeneid*" (*Women's Studies* 8.1981.201-223).

To conclude, it is obvious that I have reservations about both these volumes. Containing between them only one new and one "substantially revised" essay, they cannot really be said to advance the state of scholarship or criticism. The vast majority of the papers they collect were already widely available. I do not believe that the contributions themselves gain very much by appearing in this format; most of them have already made their mark, and the view of Vergilian scholarship that they present is extremely one-sided, in stark contrast to the Commager collection on both counts. And finally, as noted above, I wonder whether these collections address a real pedagogical need. OUP will sell lots of both these books at the hardback price on automatic order to libraries all over the world, and there are paperback editions as well. Perhaps these sales will help to subsidize the publication of original work that would otherwise go unpublished. I hope so; for, although I admire the essays themselves and the work that the editors have done in producing these volumes, in an age of scarce resources and

exorbitant publishing costs, I think that we could have done perfectly well without them.

## NOTES

- [1] *Virgil: A Collection of Critical Essays, Twentieth Century Views*, ed. Maynard Mack (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1966).
  - [2] *Virgil, Studies in Latin Literature and its Influence* (New York 1969).
  - [3] *Virgil, Modern Critical Views* (New York 1986).
  - [4] Various movements sharing important methodological characteristics with traditional philology (Cultural Studies, the New Historicism) have recently been influential in other disciplines. But these movements are politically self-conscious, usually being distinguished by a leftist orientation, in a way that the essays represented here are not.
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