

## BOOK REVIEW

*Virgil*. By R. ALDEN SMITH. Blackwell Introductions to the Classical World. Chichester and Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pp. x + 210. Hardcover, £70.00/\$99.95. ISBN 978-1-4051-5949-4.

To introduce an author like Vergil broadly but briefly to audiences of students and scholars alike requires deep and sweeping knowledge, the practiced eye of a seasoned teacher, and writing that is both clear and engaging—all traits that Smith brings to his contribution to Blackwell's series of *Introductions to the Classical World*. The centerpiece of the volume consists of three brief but heady studies of the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*, each of which is analyzed using a different thematic lens; these are framed by four chapters that try to contextualize Vergil's work within its literary and socio-political milieu and to explicate its winding journey from the poet's death to today, and the volume closes with an ample selection of suggestions for further reading. Smith has produced an admirable and useful introduction that should become a standard starting point for students on initial and subsequent excursions into this complex poet, although as a whole the book suffers from a somewhat hazy sense of its audience and needs to be supplemented carefully for beginners to use it effectively.

The three central chapters offer lucid introductions to Vergil's works that explicate each clearly while at the same time tying them all together through a sustained and wide-ranging analysis of Vergil's relationship with prior literature and of the complex dualities that permeate each work. In Chapter 3, Smith examines the *Eclogues* in terms of "dialogue," primarily between pairs of complementary and contrasting poems in the collection, but also between individuals within each poem and between Vergil and his predecessors, especially Theocritus. Using a series of readings of paired poems, Smith sensitively brings out the persistent presence of "two voices" throughout the *Eclogues*, illuminating the balance and tensions between rural/urban, male/female, life/death, and light/weighty poetry. He also touches briefly on Vergilian metapoetics, a topic that he takes up in greater depth in his fourth chapter on the *Georgics*. Here Smith analyzes the poem book by book through the theme of "wisdom," especially poetry's power to teach wisdom about common human experience. He

maintains his focus on contrasting pairs and the balance of optimistic and pessimistic that he sketches in Chapter 3; rather than finding the same equilibrium displayed in the *Eclogues*, though, he shows that the narrative movement of the *Georgics* continually flows from positive to negative and back, highlighting the presence of both sides in human civilization. As with the preceding chapter, Smith keeps an eye on Vergil's interactions with his predecessors, particularly Hesiod and Lucretius. In Chapter 5, Smith also analyzes the *Aeneid* book by book, paying special attention to the ways in which the theme of "mission" plays out in the poem and sets it apart from the Homeric epics. Vergil's dualities remain a major interest of Smith's here—Greek/Roman, Trojan/Italian, success/failure, heroism/humanity—but in place of the *Eclogues'* balanced tension and the *Georgics'* ebb and flow, Smith argues with clarity and nuance that the *Aeneid* works to reconcile these competing elements as it moves towards the *telos* of Rome's founding.

These three studies can each be read individually with benefit and enjoyment, but much of their strength derives from the interesting ways in which Smith relates the poems to each other and to the three primary themes that he explores. Chapter 1 aims to set out some of these connections explicitly, though it manages this less successfully, as many of its sections are too compressed or vague (e.g., on Vergil's "Model Reader," whom Smith promotes as an ideal that readers should emulate but whose precise qualities he sketches only loosely), wander into relatively obscure and seemingly unconnected material (e.g., on Turcius Rufius Apronianus' subscription in the Codex Mediceus), or require more knowledge than a novice reader would have (e.g., on Vergil's poetic models). This last issue also detracts from Smith's sketch of the historical Vergil in Chapter 2, which (quite refreshingly) avoids rehashing the standard narrative derived from the ancient *vitae*, but in doing so assumes the reader already knows a fair amount of this biographical information. His discussion of the socio-political context of the 1st century BCE, however, is accessible and touches on many issues that are central to Chapters 3 through 5.

The real gem of this book comes in Chapter 6, where Smith offers a wonderfully concise and comprehensible overview of the Vergilian manuscripts with examples of textual problems that he teases out carefully to show why and how editors emend; teachers who wish to introduce textual criticism to advanced Latin students or to explain how Vergil got from ancient Rome to modern readers will find this section a superb resource. Chapter 7 rounds out the book with a rundown of some of the many ways in which Vergil's work has influenced

literature, visual art, music, and culture from his death up until today, with welcome nods to artists who rarely appear in Classical scholarship (e.g., Ursula LeGuin and the singer Dido), but as with Chapter 1's outline of Vergil's models, novice readers will likely struggle in the flood of unfamiliar names. Chapter 8 closes the volume with ample suggestions for further reading that will be especially useful for those teaching Vergil for the first time, including much readily accessible material that can be used to fill those gaps in Smith's book that will present difficulties to newcomers to Vergil and Classical literature.

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