

BOOK REVIEW

Poetry Underpinning Power: Vergil's Aeneid: the Epic for Emperor Augustus, A Recovery Study. By HANS-PETER STAHL. Roman Culture in an Age of Civil War. Swansea, Wales: The Classical Press of Wales, 2016. Pp. xii + 492. Hardcover, \$110.00. ISBN 978-1-910589-04-5.

This book is an effort by a seasoned scholar to reestablish a partisan Augustan reading of the *Aeneid* against recent scholarship (particularly of the “Harvard school”) that has sought to understand it as something more humane and politically subversive. With considerable erudition and a certain amount of sarcasm, Stahl presents Vergil as a calculating, perhaps even cynical, ideologue operating under orders to champion the Augustan political order.

The book is divided into three unequal parts. The first and the third are largely about “allocating guilt and innocence”: the Harvard interpretation, Stahl claims, depends almost entirely upon elevating Turnus over Aeneas. He argues, on the contrary, that Vergil at all points vilifies the former and defends the latter, and that he indicts Turnus for defying the will of the gods, for killing Pallas merely to punish his father Evander, and for displaying moral duplicity and cowardice when he pleads for his life. On this reckoning, therefore, Aeneas is obligated to kill Turnus. Vergil’s defense of Aeneas in other contexts (especially his relationship with Dido) emerges at other points in the book.

Stahl insists that any attempt to attenuate Vergil’s black-and-white moral judgment in shades of grey is to impose modern sensibilities on a text that won’t support them—willful misinterpretation by critics who have cherry-picked evidence according to extrinsic criteria in order to make the poet and the poem more appealing to themselves, rather than pursuing what he calls a “long-distance” or holistic reading. The balanced view, he insists, leaves no doubt that Vergil’s programmatic intention is one of unequivocal support for Augustus.

I for one am quite willing to acknowledge that regard for authorial intention is important, for all its theoretical limitations: otherwise all texts indifferently become mere sounding boards for our own opinions. It seems hard to dispute that there is a clear Augustan bias at least on the surface here. At the same time, I find his claims somewhat too absolute. To begin with, he protests too much: if a poem’s

total meaning expresses a given position, do we really need to show that no other position has the slightest place there? Most convincing rhetoric—especially poetic rhetoric—grants some voice to the opposition. Perhaps more problematically, Stahl cherry-picks some of his data too. For all his insistence on “long-distance” reading, he grounds his argument on a few key aspects of the poem and ignoring others—for example, much of Book 6.

My chief difficulty with the book, however, is its tone. Much of it seems belligerently polemical, fraught with sarcasm and condescension. Stahl quotes opposing scholars selectively, but singles out their words for mockery with italics, question marks, exclamation points, and ironic quotation marks. Even where I agree with his assessment, I find the ridicule unpleasantly acidic. At some points this may just be a matter of taste, but at others it becomes an actual impediment to understanding. Convoluted sentences, broken by parenthetical insertions, any of which may be understood as sarcastic, do not usually enhance clarity.

Neither do straw-man arguments. Stahl contends, for example, that the Harvard school presupposes that we are only now escaping a 2000-year “conspiracy” (his term) of willful misinterpretation. That such a conspiracy existed or could have existed is of course absurd, as we are meant to understand. But it is equally absurd to equate an interpretive tradition with a conspiracy. People largely see what they expect to see; generations of readers assumed that the *Aeneid* was Augustan propaganda largely because that’s how most of its first readers took it. This is apparently what Vergil expected most readers to see. It does not follow, however, that he could not also have folded in a secondary—even antithetical—meaning covertly. If previous generations have failed to see something, humility suggests that we should proceed with caution. It does not mean that we should refuse to recognize anything new.

The middle section of the book, which brings historical and archaeological data to bear on the narrative of Book 8, was to me the most interesting and fruitful—partly because it’s the least tendentious, but also because it shines new light on an underappreciated piece of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas’ survey of the future Roman ground through the double vision of two time periods is meticulously and thoughtfully recounted. (It is also illustrated with a map, which is unfortunately located at the back of the chapter’s notes, and hence might go unnoticed until one has finished reading the chapter. It’s worth seeking out.) I think this forms an enduring contribution to the literature, irrespective of the polemical framework it’s being used to support.

Overall, Stahl does not persuade me that Vergil is merely “Augustus’ ideologue” or that literary-theoretical criticism of the *Aeneid* is necessarily suspect. I might still be persuaded, but this study ultimately rests on a rather narrow basis of argument, and takes little account of other important problems in the poem. Even skeptics (amongst whom I count myself) can admit that the Harvard interpretation has added some nuance to our understanding of the *Aeneid*: if we cannot accept it entire, we can still sift it for valuable insights. On the same rationale, even an enthusiastic adherent of the Harvard school would do well to read this book: it raises a number of important questions for which a critic—from either camp or from neither—ought to have an answer.

BRUCE A. MCMENOMY

Scholars Online. mcmenomy@dorthonion.com

