

BOOK REVIEW

The Epic Distilled: Studies in the Composition of the Aeneid. By NICHOLAS HORSFALL. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xvi + 160. Hardcover, \$75.00 ISBN 978-0-19-875887-7.

In this impressive volume, Nicholas Horsfall explores how Vergil composed his masterpiece and how his original readers received it. Familiar to scholars of Roman literature through his commentaries on *Aeneid* 2, 3, 6, 7, and 11, Horsfall now weaves his Vergilian investigations into a book of ten brief chapters, each of which considers a distinct aspect of Vergil's poem or its Roman context. Throughout the book, Horsfall illuminates with learning and vigor how Vergil draws not just on literary sources, but also on areas such as geography, historiography, and antiquarian studies in crafting the *Aeneid*, a practice that produces a "continuous intellectual dialogue between poet and reader in matters both of language and of content" (156).

Individual chapters investigate subjects such as Vergil's access to libraries and their texts (Ch. 2), the erudition of the *Aeneid* and its readers (Ch. 3), and the epic's inconsistencies (Ch. 6), and Horsfall elucidates his thoughts on each topic through explorations that typically center on specific aspects of the text, like a detail about dry throats in a simile (153) or the use of *fertur* in the description of the underworld's gates (114). Perhaps the book's greatest strength is its elucidation of complex and delicate concepts through numerous examples. While their sheer density makes frequent recourse to the text of the *Aeneid* and its commentaries essential, such illustrations are necessary for understanding the topics Horsfall explores, and his rich investigations point the way toward many avenues of future research.

"Erudition and Invention" (Ch. 4) and "Signposts by the Wayside" (Ch. 7) are representative illustrations of how Horsfall offers insight into the poem's composition and the demands it places on its readers through his deft exposition of varied and fragmentary bodies of material. In "Erudition and Invention," Horsfall shows how Vergil, when he must invent a new character or episode, ensures that this element is "discreetly cloaked in learning, reading, and tradition" (46). In his discussion of Aeneas' Mediterranean travels, for instance, Horsfall

demonstrates how Vergil draws on Homer and Apollonius in the Trojans' encounter with the Harpies, an episode not present in typical renditions of their route.

In a similar manner, Vergil builds Achaemenides, an utterly new character, out of a series of details from stories of shipwrecks, castaways, and human suffering. The thorns piecing together Achaemenides' garments may recall Sophocles or Accius' depiction of Philoctetes' clothing, while his diet of berries and wild plants fits well with earlier depictions of primitive sustenance. The same sort of "familiar and traditional" (56) detail goes into constructing Camilla's biography. In her name, her toy weapons, and the mares' milk she drinks, Vergil draws on motifs from a range of sources and fields to fashion a unique figure. In both cases, Vergil creates new characters who are not altogether new through the adaptation of traditional material, thereby offering his readers the pleasure of learned recognition instead of the disturbance prompted by "some awkward or violent novelty" (53).

In "Signposts by the Wayside," Horsfall illuminates an especially shadowy corner of the *Aeneid* that is challenging to isolate and describe, let alone analyze. Here, he argues that certain words and phrases signal to the reader the mode or tone of a particular passage. Horsfall elaborates how he is arguing not that these instances communicate that Vergil is following an earlier writer specifically, but rather that the poet "tells us firmly but discreetly at verse X that the manner or tone of the passage is Homeric, tragic, or aetiological, or whatever" (101). This is a concept best explained through illustration, and Horsfall gives the reader many opportunities for contemplation. Examples he discusses include *turrigerarum Antemnae* (7.631), an epithet that looks Homeric but is not; the tragic irony in Dido's response (4.376 ff.) to Aeneas' claims of divine orders; as well as verses in *Aeneid* 6 that associate parts of that book with the middle Republic. These are suggestive aspects of the text to investigate further, particularly in thinking about the difference between invoking the aura of Homer or tragedy without recalling a distinct scene from the *Iliad* or *Oresteia*.

Horsfall's slender book offers a splendid investigation of the manner in which Vergil composed the *Aeneid* and the manner in which it was received by his audience. Through its richness *Epic Distilled* raises many questions for future research, such as about variation in Vergil's audience or the effect of the poet's disguising of his inventions, while, at the same time, its numerous examples provide enticing points from which to begin. Horsfall allows us to overhear Vergil's

intellectual dialogue with his readers, and it is a conversation that all those interested in the *Aeneid*, Vergil, or Roman literature and culture will want to join themselves.

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