

BOOK REVIEW

Virgil's Ascanius: Imagining the Future in the Aeneid. By ANNE ROGERSON. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 238. Hardcover, \$99.99. ISBN: 978-1107115392.

In writing the *Aeneid*, Virgil exercised magisterial control over a mass of conflicting stories about Aeneas and his descendants. Aeneas' son has three names, one of which the *gens Julia* claimed as a link to the founder. Virgil assigns the boy variable ages depending on the scene's emotional needs. He makes him old enough to run away from Troy without being carried, yet still young enough seven years later to be cuddled on Dido's lap, yet somehow old enough to take part in war a year later. Prophecy hints indirectly at challenges for Ascanius after the end of the *Aeneid's* narrative. Lavinia's son Silvius will contest his claim to the throne in Lavinium after Aeneas's death. As James J. O'Hara demonstrated twenty-five years ago (1990), these are examples of poetic inconsistency that Virgil purposefully included in the narrative, not signs of incomplete composition.

Virgil's typical reticence in characterization leads to further problems in understanding Ascanius. How much responsibility does he bear for triggering the war in Latium, given the Fury's interference? How foolhardy is he to disregard his father's instructions and permit Nisus and Euryalus to undertake their fatal mission? Ascanius also struggles to define his identity in the *Aeneid* amid an array of challengers and doubles. Cupid physically supplants him at Dido's court, Pallas takes part of his place in his father's affections, he fails at ruling in his father's absence, and Silvius is waiting to fight him for the throne. Memories of other potential rulers, such as Astyanax and the son that Aeneas and Dido did not have, remind him and us how the succession could have unfolded differently.

This fine monograph on Ascanius treats these well-known problems and adds several others to the discussion. Rogerson focuses on Ascanius as "a symbol of a contested future" (11), his ambiguities reflecting the uncertainty that a Roman reader of the early Augustan period might well have felt concerning the nation's future. Youth, dependence, and narrative reticence contribute to Ascanius's

apparent "susceptibility to appropriation" (77) in others' narratives and political schemes. For example, the eroticization of Venus's grandson, her *iustissima cura* (*Aen.* 10.132), both classes him with the epic's other beautiful and vulnerable young men and emphasizes the difference between the aspirations of individual gods and Roman historical destiny. Venus briefly hides Ascanius away (*recondam*, *Aen.* 1.681) in order to permit Cupid's deception of Dido (132), the opposite of the epic's goal of *Romanam condere gentem*. Rogerson's keen attention to conflicting focalization drives many excellent readings. She shows how various characters see in Ascanius the futures they desire to see, or are capable of seeing. For example, Andromache sees the boy "through the lens of her own loss" (119), while Anchises likely recalls the divine fire that crippled him when he sees the flames playing about his grandson's head.

Other readings link the *Aeneid* successfully both to prior tradition and to literary succession. The comparison between Ascanius' self-revelation to the Trojan women as they burn the ships and Pentheus' attempted self-revelation to his murderous relatives in Euripides' *Bacchae* is particularly intriguing (97). Propertius and Ovid appear in several places as sophisticated readers of Virgil's Ascanius. More investigation of the way Virgil's successors read Ascanius would indeed have been helpful. For example, Claudian (briefly mentioned in a footnote) came the closest of any extant classical Latin poet to working for a real-life Ascanius, the youthful emperor Honorius supervised by the regent Stilicho. His panegyrics draw on Virgil's themes to create a tactful negotiation of the "contested future" under this inexperienced ruler in a divided empire.

Like its subject, the book fulfills much of its promise but still shows some signs of remaining in its adolescent dissertation stage. The footnotes and scene summaries are overly comprehensive, and some familiar matters are rehearsed at length. (Is this likely to be the first, or third, book on the *Aeneid* that a novice Virgilian would read?) The mysterious Child of *Eclogue* 4 receives only a brief mention (187); a fuller reading of this difficult poem and its connection to the *Aeneid*'s succession narratives would have been welcome. Aaron Seider's *Memory in Virgil's Aeneid* (2013) is in the bibliography, but perhaps was too recent for its systematic approach to cultural memory in the epic to be fully incorporated. Greater attention to memory studies and Virgil's skillful "creation of the past" would have helped the discussion of the familial and historical burden placed on Ascanius. Despite these reservations, it is safe to say that earlier books on Ascanius will now follow *non passibus aequis*. Rogerson offers a far fuller and more sophisticated

reading of Ascanius than Lee's *Fathers and Sons in Virgil's Aeneid* (1979) and Pettrini's *The Child and the Hero* (1997). *Virgil's Ascanius* is recommended for anyone working on Roman epic or on family issues in Roman literature.

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