R. Alden Smith

*Virgil. Blackwell Introductions to the Classical World.*


R. Alden Smith’s *Virgil* comes as another installment to Blackwell’s series, *Blackwell Introductions to the Classical World.* In this book, Smith provides a summary of the essentials for Virgilian scholarship, Virgil’s life, works, the political context of their composition, the transmission of the Virgilian texts and Virgil’s legacy and reception. Smith’s treatment of Virgil’s works, however, is in no way a perfunctory synthesis of recent scholarship. Rather, Smith makes new ground exploring the ‘thematic contours’ of Virgil’s works. Smith argues that themes of ‘dialogue’, ‘wisdom’ and ‘mission’ pervade all three works in varying degrees and he explores these themes in each of Virgil’s works with close reading.

In Chapter 1, Smith argues that Virgil is a poet working in a web of literary predecessors and contemporaries. Virgil appropriates Homer in all his works but reinvigorates the epic form with allusions to Alexandrian poets; Theocritus; Callimachus; Apollonius of Rhodes; Attic tragedians; annalistic poets such as Naevius and Ennius; neoteric poets Catullus and Cinna; as well as members of his own poetic coterie, like the elegist Gallus. Virgil does not imitate. A poem may have a Homeric antecedent but its meaning is expanded by allusions to Alexandrian poetry among many other sources. Any passage therefore is polysemous and the ‘Model Reader’ recognises that these poets and their works constitute a ‘code’ in the Virgilian poem.

The danger, as Smith admits, is that decoding allusion can become a search for secret messages, like the plot of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (19). Occasionally, Smith cannot escape this problem and his discussion of the importance of numbers, acronyms and structural parallels in a poem is sometimes too obscurantist. For ex-
ample, Smith notes that the first letter of each word of the opening of the *Aeneid, arma virumque cano*, forms an acronym of Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* (105), identifying the story as a foundation myth. Smith claims that Alexandrian allusive practices here foreground the theme of ‘mission’ in the *Aeneid*, but is this a deliberate Alexandrian technique or are we treating Virgil too much as a poet-cryptographer? ‘Code’ is a useful way to think about poetic allusion, but can be carried to excess.

In Chapter 3, following this discussion of Virgil’s life and poetics, Smith begins his reading of the *Eclogues*, arguing that the *Eclogues* in particular embody the thematic contour of dialogue. Virgil’s depiction of the agonistic exchanges between shepherds allows him to put forward opposing views and ideas. However, in the broader context of the book as a whole, Virgil creates a sense of dualism, contrast and dialogue. *Eclogues* 1 and 9, 2 and 8, 3 and 7, 4 and 5, and 6 and 10 form oppositional pairs. Through this method of dialogue, both at a character and structural level, Virgil makes a contrast between East and West, Arcadia and Rome, rural and urban life.

In Chapter 4, Smith examines how the *Georgics* are a type of wisdom literature. Readers have long recognised that Virgil’s *Georgics* are far from being mere depictions of agriculture, but also carry ethical and political symbolism. Smith shows that by juxtaposing themes of labour and rest, death and regeneration, political pessimism and optimism, these poems create a dialogue and constitute it as a piece of wisdom literature. Furthermore, the gradual move from agriculture to viticulture and apiculture foregrounds the major themes of the *Aeneid: telos*, mission, and the historical drive toward the establishment of Rome and Roman *imperium*.

In Chapter 5, Smith argues that the theme of ‘mission’ permeates the *Aeneid*. The poem can be uncontroversially described as a teleological epic: it depicts the resettlement of the Trojans into Italy, repeatedly affirming the historical imperative of their success and the assured destiny of Rome. The mission of the *Aeneid* is for the Trojans to settle in Italy to become the proto-Roman society that will eventually produce Augustus, the *pax Augusta*, and a new golden age. The strength of this chapter is that, for each book of the *Aeneid*, it comprehensively covers the dualism of Trojan and Italian, East and West, and the forces in the narrative transforming Trojan refugees into the antecedents of Roman Empire.
In the next two chapters, Smith discusses the textual transmission and reception of Virgil and admits that some sections warrant a book-length treatment (178). Occasionally, however, brevity leads to some superficiality. For example, in summarising the legacy of Virgil, Smith mentions Statius' *Thebaid* and claims that Theseus of Book 12 is based on Aeneas (170). Scholarship on the *Thebaid* has long regarded Theseus as a complex character whose arrival in Book 12 after the Theban civil war is not necessarily a victory of justice or *pietas* but an incursion of despotic power.¹ Recent scholarship has come to see Statius’ engagement with Virgil as complex and even subversive, as a poetic rival working with and against Virgilian models.² Later, when discussing Virgil’s reception in Renaissance literature, Smith identifies obvious candidates such as Sannazaro and Vida, but omits another important Renaissance poet, Baptista Mantuanus, who composed his own *Eclogues* and Christian *epyllia*, the *Parthenices*, in imitation of Virgil. However, as Smith admits, a book length treatment is necessary to discuss Virgil’s legacy, and even that is optimistic.

Despite this minor shortcoming, inevitable when dealing with Virgil, Smith’s *Virgil* provides a number of fascinating insights, particularly his discussion about the manuscript tradition and its emendation. Smith’s prose is accessible and complicated concepts of literary analysis, Pythagorean philosophy and manuscript dispute are made intelligible for the layman. It is well researched and offers substantial insight into Virgil’s poetic technique and close readings of individual poems.

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