

ANTON POWELL – PHILIP R. HARDIE (ed.), *The ancient lives of Virgil: literary and historical studies*, Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2017, xii+210 pp., £60.00, ISBN 978-1-910589-8.

The nine essays collected in *The ancient lives of Virgil: literary and historical studies* derive from papers presented at the Classics Faculty in Cambridge University in 2013. The book's title describes the essays perfectly, for they focus on the ancient lives of Virgil, principally *Vita Suetoniana Donatiana* (hereafter *VSD*) and *Vita Phocae*, from the perspectives of philology and history. But this bland description does not do justice to the dynamism and significance of the collection. Philology and history have not in recent years been supportive partners as Anton Powell points out in his preface where he described the volume as “counter-current” (p. vii). The current the essays swim against is the contemporary radical separation between history and philology when it comes to the ancient lives of the poet. The tendency has been to focus on philological studies of the poetry while denying value to the historical worth of the information embedded in the ancient lives. Here, Nicholas M. Horsfall (1946–2019) looms large and controversially. Five of the nine chapters in the collection address his influential 1995 essay in which he forcefully analyzed *VSD* to conclude that this foundational ancient life essentially is “not biographical fact, as we understand it, but either explication of V.'s text in biographical terms, or defence of the poet against criticism.” As for Suetonius, he “stands throughout but a step from unabashed fantasy.” In another place, “Suetonius is therefore innocent of anachronism but guilty of simple stupidity.”¹ So, where did Suetonius get his information about the “life and times” of Virgil? Horsfall argued that it came mainly from biographic-allegorical exegesis of the poet's own words. Thus, that Virgil's father bought a wood “must derive” from *Georgics* 2.426–33's evocation of trees and plants. That his father kept bees “is a transparent theft from *G.4*” on bee-keeping.² About the only biographical information from *VSD* that can be trusted as “unassailable” are data points not found in the poetry, Virgil's birth and death dates and the location of his tomb.³ In the face of Horsfall's withering critique of *VSD*, the challenge scholars meeting in Cambridge in 2013 faced was to look beyond the dichotomy of history and fantasy to restore balance to the appreciation of the ancient lives, a balance that privileges both philology and history. In this, the essays succeed impressively, not by arguing that the *vitae*, especially *VSD*, are historical documents as we understand that term, but that they are more akin to literary criticism or to hagiography that nevertheless build

¹ N.M. Horsfall, “Virgil: His Life and Times,” in idem, *A Companion to the Study of Virgil*, Leiden 1995, 1–25, here 4, 19, 20.

² Horsfall, “Virgil: His Life” 5.

³ Horsfall, “Virgil: His Life” 5, 21.

on scrutiny of persons, places, and events woven into the poetry. What separates these authors from Horsfall is that while he accepts Virgil's birth and death dates and the location of his tomb as the *only* genuine historical facts transmitted by *VSD*, they ask that if these biographical tidbits are accurate and valuable, what else in the lives might be so?

All told, the ancient and medieval centuries witnessed the production of some 39 Virgilian *vitae*.⁴ Fabio Stok's "The *Vita Donati* in the Middle Ages" (pp. 133–152) shows just how influential the *vita* that Donatus included in his fourth-century Virgil commentary was. Generally accepted as a reproduction of Suetonius's lost second-century *vita*, *VSD* survived as a freestanding text after Servius's Virgil commentary superseded that of Donatus. The transmission of *VSD*, given its importance, was relatively limited. Among all the Virgilian *vitae*, the *VSD* is exceptional for its length, a feature that Stok believes limited its widespread use. Most *vitae* tell their readers what they should know about the poet in a few brief paragraphs. At 8, 14, and 39 printed pages in its modern editions, the *VSD* far outstrips its ancient and medieval companions as the most comprehensive of the Virgilian *vitae*.⁵ While its transmission was limited, its influence was not. Most of the information about Virgil transmitted in the more condensed lives comes ultimately from *VSD*, albeit "they often reveal changes, interpolations and distortions" (p. 139). Or, as Andrew Laird put it in his "Fashioning the Poet: Biography, Pseudepigraphy and textual Criticism" (pp. 29–49), since the *vitae* were copied one-by-one by hand, they were "more like websites than printed books: the opportunity to change, update, and improve them would have been tempting" (p. 43). Then, too, as Stok points out, some of the information preserved in the *VSD*, such as its final part concerning Virgil's detractors, apparently was of no interest to later composers of Virgilian *vitae* (p. 139).

Laird advocates viewing the lives as a form of exegesis rather than as historiography. The exegesis had a purpose: to discover the cause and the intention for the poet's work. To this end, *VSD* includes 14 verse passages in its narrative which Laird analyzes for the first time. Eight of them are not by Virgil. The actual verses from *Georgics* and *Eclogues* are not used biographically, but rather explain the cause, order, and meter of the poems. Three of the verses are epitaphs for Ballista, the gnat of *Culex*, and for Virgil himself ("Mantua me genuit...."). Interestingly, Laird points out that the narrative of Virgil's life in *VSD* depends on statements made by the poet himself and not by characters in his work. The pseudepigraphic verses "make more plausible the process of *inference* from the author's works to the author himself, or from *opus* to *intentio*" (p.44).

Anton Powell, "Sinning Against Philology? Method and the Suetonian-Donatan Life of Virgil" (pp. 173–98), forcefully urges a "more respectful approach

⁴ See J.M. Ziolkowski and M.C.J. Putnam (eds.), *The Virgilian Tradition: The First Fifteen Hundred Years*, New Haven 2008, 179–403 (Section II A, *Vitae*).

⁵ See J.J. Contreni, "Getting to Know Virgil in the Carolingian Age: The *Vita Publici Virgilii*," in V.L. Garver and O.M. Phelan (eds.), *Rome and Religion in the Medieval World: Studies in Honor of Thomas F.X. Noble*, Farnham 2014, 21–45, at 25.

to *VSD*" (p. 173) that combines literary criticism and historical source-criticism while focusing on elements of *VSD* that do not lend themselves to allegorical analysis. Powell builds on the achievements of philologists, but is also sensitive to the approach of historians. Specifically, he challenges Horsfall's failure to take seriously the non-allegorical material in *VSD*. The non-allegorical case studies that Powell perceptively scrutinizes include the question of Virgil's material wealth, his dwelling place abutting Maecenas's property, and his support for the Julian regime. Powell's astute observation that Virgil lived and worked in the early years of Octavian-Augustus's reign is crucial for it reminds us of the risk that Virgil was taking by his proximity to the new ruler of an as yet insecure regime. Those who devalue these inconvenient truths may find the notion of a politically engaged poet "uncongenial" since "Poets may be allowed to be either political or subversive, or apolitical, but not loyalists of an established regime" (p. 182). Most intriguing in Powell's essay is his analysis of a pattern of prompt deaths ("Dying 'not long afterwards,'" [pp. 188-194]) that befell six individuals who for various reasons either embarrassed or stood in Octavian-Augustus's way. Just when the leader was returning home to Rome from the East, Virgil headed in the opposite direction for Greece where he planned to spend three years tinkering with *Aeneid*. But, the new, young leader wanted the work's "politically invaluable prophecy" (p. 192) in circulation *now*. In the event, Octavian-Augustus intercepted Virgil in Athens and got him to return to Italy with him where, "dying not long afterwards," *Aeneid* was published posthumously. Powell carefully couches his hypothesis that the politician had a hand in the poet's convenient sudden death in the necessary qualifiers (*might; may; if*), nevertheless the circumstantial argument rings plausibly.

So, too, does Hans Smolenaars's analysis of *VSD* 27, "The Historical Truth of Vergil's Recitation of the *Georgics* at Atella (*VSD* § 27)" (pp. 153-172), which pointedly challenges Horsfall's denial of "just about every bit of truth in this *Vita*" (p. 153) by concentrating on *VSD*'s account of Virgil's reciting *Georgics* to Octavian. First, though, Smolenaars frames what he calls the four "rules" of Horsfall's approach (pp. 157-160): rule 1, if we find in Virgil's works any material similar to biographical information in *VSD*, we should consider the *VSD* "as a historical extrapolation from Vergil's poetry"; rule 2, "If we can find in *VSD* a similarity of phrasing with Vergil's own poetry, we should consider the information as an extrapolation and reject it as not true"; rule 3, "similarities in *VSD* with texts of other poets arouse suspicion about their reliability"; rule 4, "Sometimes an account may look trustworthy, but should be rejected anyway." Of course, Smolenaars acknowledges that *VSD* does contain fanciful elements, such as the opening account of Virgil's pregnant mother dreaming of the future greatness of her unborn son (pp. 155-56). Reports of maternal prenatal dreams are virtually expected in ancient and, for that matter, medieval hagiography of great figures. But, Smolenaars draws a line: denying the historicity of all elements of *VSD* according to the four rules is akin to throwing out the baby with the bathwater (p. 155). The test case of *VSD* 27 presents us with an explicit historical statement that can be subjected to historical verification. By combining ancient sources

documenting Octavian's itinerary as he returned from the East to celebrate his triple triumph in Rome with geographical elements of his itinerary, Smolenaars arrives at the opinion that the meeting at Atella could well have taken place. Octavian's travels were smoother than anticipated and rather than arriving too early in Rome, he stopped at Atella in Campania "for urgent deliberations with his close friends and to listen to his favorite poet" (p. 169). This plausible case study encourages the historical investigation of other elements of *VSD*.

Irene Peirano Garrison in "Between Biography and Commentary: The Ancient Horizon of Expectation of *VSD*" (pp. 1-28) explored the function of biographical allegory not as a trick or a fantasy, but rather as a practiced interpretive strategy familiar to ancient historical criticism. She notes, importantly, "a poet's work includes his life and in turn his life becomes synonymous with his work" (p. 2). In her view, the poet's works can be mined for legitimate historical details if one remembers that sometimes the mining will yield false gold, what Philip Hardie might call "pagan hagiography" (p. xi). Garrison situated the lives within the ancient narrative commentary tradition since they both responded to biographical clues within the text. Nora Goldschmidt, "Cameo Roles: Virgil in Ovidian Biography" (pp. 115-132), stressed that the lives are a "species of literary interpretation ... a creative mode of reading ancient texts," emphasizing the need to consider the lives in their evolving cultural contexts. Ahuvia Kahane, "Biography and Virgil's Epitaph" (pp. 51-72), focused a perceptive lens on Virgil's epitaph ("Mantua me genuit...."), which is transmitted only in *VSD*. His concern is not whether this was an actual epitaph, which ancient visitors could read carved in stone, but rather how the epitaph functioned as a "biographic emblem" (p. 55), a "verbal site" (p. 63). "Its primary function is not as poem or as a receptacle for information or even as a mark of praise for the dead, but as a 'place-marker' that allows us to focus our veneration and rehearse what we know of 'our' poet, the one within us, whose verse many seasoned admirers and indeed even some idle schoolboys, then, and now, will have been able to recite by heart" (p. 63).

While *VSD* took up the lion's share of interest among the scholars gathered in Cambridge in 2013, the *Vita Phocae* (late fourth, early fifth century) drew the attention of two investigators. Stephen Harrison, "The *Vita Phocae*: Literary Context and Texture" (pp. 73-91), argued that this "comparatively neglected" ancient life merits greater scrutiny if only because it is the sole surviving metrical life (107 Latin hexameters prefaced by six Sapphic verses) of the poet. Its content derives principally from *VSD*, so what makes it exceptional is its verse form. In an important insight, Harrison places *Vita Phocae* "as an intriguing example of a bridge between pagan and Christian literary culture in the period around 400 CE" (p. 89). Specifically, he links the *vita* to the hexameter biblical paraphrases of Juvenecus (fourth century) and Sedulius (first half of the fifth century) and to the metrical versions of prose saints' lives composed by Paulinus of Périgueux (fifth century) and Venantius Fortunatus (sixth century) (p. 89). The boundary between pagan and Christian learning and expression was permeable or, as Scott McGill put it in his "Larger Than Life: The Elevation of Virgil in Phocas' *Vita Vergiliana*" (pp. 93-114), "Phocas was a Christian, but he was

writing a lay poem” (p. 106). And his poem, McGill stresses, was more than a verse version of *VSD*'s prose. In Phocas's telling, Virgil was another Homer who overcame the humble circumstances of his birth to become “an author divinely favored and destined for greatness, and someone whose work would live forever” (p. 106). Phocas's contribution to the *vitae virgilianae* tradition was to creatively embellish what he found in *VSD* by stressing the poet's divine inspiration and his transcendence, a transcendence that outshines Octavian-Augustus in its timelessness. He “poeticizes as well as epicizes” in conjuring for his readers “the great(er) Virgil” (p. 105).

Anton Powell acknowledged that the ancient lives of Virgil “occupy an especially awkward and unstable position” (p. vii). That position now is less awkward and set on firmer footing thanks to the collection's essays which bring scholarship on the ancient lives up to date with new, sophisticated ways of looking at and assessing the *vitae*. Running self-consciously counter to the current of recent influential scholarship gives the collection an edge and relevancy that few collections of conference papers can boast. *The ancient lives of Virgil*, indeed, represents a “new wave of scholarship” (p. ix) that sheds dynamic new light on the formation, transmission, reception, meaning, and cultural contexts of the ancient lives of Virgil. The editors are to be commended for putting together a collection that coheres and not only on account of its unifying subject matter. Many of the authors cross-reference their colleagues' essays making the collection feel more like a conversation than a set of academic silos. A detailed and workable index is a plus.

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