

## Virgil reads; Octavia faints: grounds for doubt

It is curious that, while critical analysis of the details of Virgil's life has been progressing, to good effect, since 1911, there remain many writers on Virgilian topics who continue to believe the details of the VSD (Vita Suetonii-Donati) with awed respect<sup>1</sup>. When, five years ago, I offered an account of Virgil's life which was deliberately couched as sceptically as the material, and the state of research, would allow and which will doubtless have seemed hypercritical to many<sup>2</sup>, my discussion (n.1, p.19) of one famous story was, I hasten to acknowledge, inadequate and my only excuse is that everyone else, likewise, had missed the obvious evidence. The Suetonius-Donatus life (VSD) relates (ch.32) that Virgil is said to have read books 2, 4 and 6 of the *Aeneid* to the *princeps*, so movingly that Octavia, when he reached '*tu Marcellus eris*', is said to have fainted and to have been revived with difficulty. That 'is said,' *fertur*, is not a way of saying 'I have read,' but counts only, in the muddy waters of literary biography, as an imprecise 'the story goes'<sup>3</sup>; Servius, moreover (on 6.681), tells the story in a different way and it is not even clear that the books Virgil read, according to Servius, were 2, 4 and 6<sup>4</sup>. So far, nothing new. However, in the early stages of my commentary – 'in progress' – on *Aeneid* 11, I was prompted by M.L.Delvigo's article in *MD* 42 (1999), 199ff.<sup>5</sup> to look at some of the main texts of ancient consolation-literature, if only because the many books on the topic are so unsatisfactorily indexed. Thus the younger Seneca addresses Marcia, daughter of the historian Aulus Cremutius Cordus (the man immortalised by *Tac. Ann.* 4.34f.) on the loss of a son and at the outset confronts sagely enough the topic of different human reactions in the face of grief. His *exempla* are, remarkably, Livia, Augustus's wife and the mother of Drusus (who d.9 B.C.)<sup>6</sup>, on the one hand, and Octavia, Augustus's sister: of the latter Seneca, like his father well enough informed on Augustan literary

gossip, and unlikely to risk the effect of his *exempla* by a palpably fraudulent invention of his own, writes *..uoluit, nullam sibi de illo* [i.e. Marcellus] *fieri mentionem ... tenebris et solitudini familiarissima, ne ad fratrem quidem respiciens, carmina celebrandae Marcelli memoriae composita aliosque studiorum honores reiecit et aures suas aduersus omne solacium clusit*. So, she sat with her brother and listened to Virgil's wonderful lament, and her reaction was faithfully recorded. Or was it? Given that there are already reasons for registering doubt at the story's reliability<sup>7</sup>, we can now add that the whole episode is entirely out of keeping with our specific information on her attitude to such occasions and texts, perhaps, above all, since Virgil had used, and must, in 'court circles' have been known to have used, Augustus's own *laudatio funebris* on Marcellus<sup>8</sup>.

In many cases, the romanticising methods of early Virgilian biography are quite easily disentangled, and the perpetrators' sense of humour is indeed a most enjoyable object of study. Here, though, the nexus between the two versions is far less easy to establish.

- (1) There are no grounds for suspecting that VSD was right, i.e. that Virgil really recited, despite Octavia's well-known aversion to such performances. It is indeed almost invariably probable, *a priori*, that VSD is wrong, unless there are very good reasons for supposing otherwise (e.g. date of birth, date of death).
- (2) If VSD, then, is wrong, does his account in some way derive from the fact related by Seneca? Did the biographer mean to suggest a singular lapse on the poet's part? For months I lived with his jokes and games, and such a suggestion seems entirely improbable. There is in fact a quite substantial corpus of evidence for highly emotional reactions to literature in antiquity<sup>9</sup> and the fainting story looks very much like a familiar enough type of technical embroidery upon a typical reading-scene (n.7), whose historical credibility is lessened not only by the evidence of Seneca but by VSD's general anachronistic heavy-handedness in handling the poet's relations with the *princeps* (*Companion*, 18f.).

Nothing of the above has anything, of course, to do with *Aeneid* 6, but it is some comfort to have discovered that my earlier scepticism, though ignorant, was not out of place and that we are just a little freer than we were before to read the text without pseudo-biographical incrustations.

**Notes**

1. Cf. the outline survey in (ed.NH) *A companion to the study of Virgil* (*Mnem.*Suppl.151, Leiden 1995), 1. S. MacCormack, *The shadows of poetry* (Berkeley 1998), 1ff. is still a 'believer,' seemingly unaware of the problems, while the *Enciclopedia virgiliana*, shrinking as usual from decision, prints both impeccable accounts of the sceptical position (Naumann, 5\*, 570ff., Brugnoli, 5\*, 575ff.) and a vast, almost novelettish restatement of all that has ever been said about the poet's 'life' (Della Corte, 5\*\*, 2ff.).

2. *Companion*, 1ff..

3. *Companion*, 19, after H.Naumann, *Das altsprach.Unterricht* 24.5(1981), 8.

4. *Ibid.*, after C.Murgia, *HSCP* 72(1967), 334.

5. On the nice problem of the cloaks at 11.72ff., ingeniously discussed by, *inter alios*, R.O.A.M.Lyne, *Words and the Poet* (Oxford 1989), 186ff..

6. See the ps.Ovidian *Consolatio ad Liuiam*, most easily consulted in vol.3 of the Loeb Ovid.

7. The use of *fertur*, the existence of variant versions, other (fishy) stories about Virgilian recitations, reading-scenes as stock biographical elements (*loc.cit.*, n.3).

8. This has long been known and is a fact, not an hypothesis. I discuss some of the consequences at *CQ* 39(1989), 266, though I seem to have shocked R. Gleason in *Vergil's Aeneid: Augustan epic and political context* (ed. H.-P. Stahl, London 1998), 130, n.35.

9. S. Farron, *Vergil's Aeneid: a poem of grief and love* (*Mnem.* Suppl.122, Leiden 1993), 39ff.

