

Virgil in the Classroom

Revised from a paper given to the Virgil Society on 20 January 2007

Virgil's presence in the classroom has been more or less constant from as early as the 20's BC. Even now, despite the eclipse of that other evergreen stalwart of the curriculum, Caesar, he continues to hold up his hoary head as a permanent feature, albeit an optional one, of the GCSE and A level syllabus. For countless generations of schoolchildren, a book of the *Aeneid* provides the first – and, in the majority of cases, only – encounter with an original Latin text, and anecdotal evidence suggests that that encounter is seen as integral to their experience of the subject.

The reasons for this are fairly straightforward. Classicists are, if I may be forgiven the generalisation, a pretty conservative bunch, and once Virgil had established himself at the centre of the canon it was difficult to dislodge him. Moreover, whole-hearted endorsements by such giants of modern literature as Milton and Dante acted as buttresses to an already towering presence; equally, those responsible for instructing the young were firmly of the view that impressionable schoolboy minds could not fail to be guided and inspired by the apparent moral instruction contained particularly in the *Aeneid*, with its exhortations to filial and religious piety, to a martial valour which nonetheless required self-control, its support of an imperialistic ethos, and its warnings against the power of women to derail men from their true destiny.

In the course of the last fifty years or so, of course, there have been immense changes in education, in our approach to the literary canon and in society as a whole. The classics are no longer at the heart of the curriculum, and those who do study them are no longer solely white middle-class males. In this context, the concept of *imperium sine fine* is far from unproblematic, and even the advice *debellare superbos* may seem uncomfortable when one views, for instance, the invasion of Iraq. Modern readers find it difficult to view Dido as a mere distraction, while the abandonment of Creusa seems positively callous. At the same time, educational theory and the public examination system tend heavily towards “accessibility” – ensuring that pupils of all abilities are able to engage with a subject and to be rewarded in examinations – and “relevance” – teaching in a way

that enables pupils to connect the subject-matter with their own lives and experience, and teaching material that will be of direct “use” in adulthood.

The impact of these cultural shifts on the study of the Classics has been significant. Greek has dwindled away to an A level entry of some two hundred; the number of comprehensive schools offering Latin is steadily falling; verse composition has disappeared from schools, and the writing of continuous prose is examined only as an option at A level, where it is taken by approximately half the entry. Moreover, the classical languages, with their need for careful learning of grammatical forms and for analytical and logical thinking, are universally perceived as “difficult” – indeed a 2006 study at the University of Durham found that GCSE Latin was approximately a grade “harder” than other subjects.¹ Partly in response to this perceived difficulty, the defined vocabulary for GCSE Latin was recently cut to 450 words; but calls remain for the examination to be made still easier. In the *Times* on January 3rd 2007, Bob Lister, director of the PGCE course in Classics at Cambridge, was quoted as saying that he would like to see “less translation from the original and more about the cultural aspects of Roman civilisation”.²

Virgil’s position appears precarious indeed. To those not involved with Latin teaching in schools, it may well seem inconceivable that pupils with the limited range of linguistic equipment required by recent GCSE unseen translation papers should be expected to tackle Virgil; and there are strong arguments in favour of this view. At the same time, however, the orthodoxy that decries translation into and out of the language as irrelevant and inaccessible sees “literature” as the primary purpose of the study of the Latin, and hence the set texts remain an integral part of the GCSE syllabus, making up 50% of the total marks.

The situation for teachers might seem impossible. On the one hand the syntax and vocabulary prescribed for the examination are very basic, and becoming more so; on the other, teachers are expected to guide their pupils through one of the most gloriously complex works of Western literature, written not only in a foreign language, but one no longer spoken, containing ideas which are both culturally unfamiliar and expressed in the highest poetic style, with an enormous wealth of historical, mythological and literary allusion, none of which can be claimed to be particularly “accessible” to today’s sixteen-year-olds. At AS level, the examination taken by most pupils a year after GCSE, the

¹ As reported in *e.g.* the *Daily Mail*, 25th June 2006:
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-392445/Pupils-told-avoid-latin-hard.html>

² A. Blair, ‘Classics in schools are “facing extinction”’.

situation is not significantly better; only in the second part of the A level syllabus (A2) do linguistic and literary demand begin to come together.

There are those who are willing to throw in the towel, who argue that Virgil is simply too subtle and too mature a writer to speak to young minds, and that to teach him at GCSE is only to harm the classical enterprise. For these colleagues there exists an alternative set text: a collection of shorter, usually personal, poems by a range of authors, together with a longer, narrative, extract, the whole neatly packaged in the form of published anthologies with helpful vocabulary and explanatory notes on the facing page.

There are others who adopt an entirely pragmatic approach. Believing that Virgil's Latin is utterly unapproachable by their pupils, and often with very limited time at their disposal, they study the text essentially in translation, sometimes matching up the Latin words to the English, sometimes merely handing out a translation to be committed to memory, and ensure that the pupils are given sufficiently copious notes to enable them to answer questions on alliteration, onomatopoeia, etc. This approach is often regarded by the pupils themselves – and their parents – as the “right one”: I have all too frequently listened with gritted teeth while a parent tells me proudly how they have been testing their child on their Virgil until he knows it all by heart. “Of course”, they add cheerfully, “we don't have a clue about the Latin!”

A new publishing initiative was recently brought to my attention which to a great extent formalises this approach.³ It consists of a text of the GCSE and A level prescriptions of a range of set texts, together with a literal translation, running vocabulary, analysis of verb forms, literary notes, and a “quick-start” guide which rewrites the text in natural English word order. Such an approach certainly integrates the text with the translation, making it more likely that the pupil will have some acquaintance with the Latin; on the other hand, it encourages the belief that there is only one translation, and that that translation is an exact and perfect equivalent to the Latin; it negates the possibility of ambiguity, and it makes largely redundant the role of the teacher in explanation and discussion.

One has to ask, first, is it possible to study Virgil at this level in a way which involves pupils actually engaging with and analysing the Latin text? And second, is it worth it? Are the world and language of Roman epic too far removed from the orbit of today's

³ David Carter, *Classical Workbooks*, <http://www.bluevalleys.com/we/classicalworkbooks/default.asp>

sixteen-year-olds for them to gain any intellectual, spiritual or aesthetic enrichment from the study of a book of the *Aeneid*? Can Virgil, in short, truly be brought into the classroom?

My answer to these questions is “yes”, and I shall devote the remainder of this paper to explaining why that should be the case. While not denying the difficulty of Virgil’s Latin, I am utterly convinced that the beauty of his poetry, the depth of his humanity, and his fearless confrontation of fundamental and universal issues, enable him to speak and be heard at an immense variety of levels. Certainly, in my own teaching career, where I have taught Virgil at GCSE in virtually every year, and frequently at A level also, I have never encountered a group who failed to be excited by the drama of the *Aeneid* and the questions it raises.

First of all, then, the “how”. At this point I must apologise if what follows seems either tediously laborious or blindingly obvious: in the light of what I have said above about possible approaches to the text, I felt it right to explain in detail precisely how I go about it. I should also acknowledge that my own teaching career has been spent in highly selective schools, though I very much believe that the study of Latin as a genuinely academic discipline in no way need be confined to the very able.

In the study of any foreign language, the jump from a textbook of specially-written and carefully-graded material to the study of literary authors is a considerable one, and this is particularly the case in Latin as currently taught, where the two courses most commonly used in schools – the Oxford Latin Course and the Cambridge Latin Course – both give considerable editorial help alongside their reading passages. Moreover, in the case of Virgil, or indeed any verse author, the word order means that pupils will be utterly at sea without a really solid knowledge of accidence, which is not necessarily acquired through a course whose emphasis is on reading. It is remarkably easy for pupils to make rapid progress through a course where assistance from the textbook and the teacher, coupled with their own common sense, enables them to translate apparently accurately despite a lack of knowledge of accidence and syntax. But commitment from teachers to genuine preparation of their pupils for the reading of original texts entails a really systematic teaching of linguistic fundamentals which often seems at odds with the direction of the textbook.

Central to the enterprise must be preparation of the text by the pupils themselves. At GCSE level I would expect about twelve lines to be prepared per forty-minute lesson; twenty at AS and twenty-five to thirty at A2. Armed with a good school edition and

with their own knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, my classes prepare by looking up and writing down vocabulary – with genitives, genders, principal parts, etc. – prior to working out a translation *as far as they can*. They may, if they wish, write a translation themselves, but they are not allowed to bring it to the lesson, where their sole focus must be the Latin text itself, with their vocabulary list, and perhaps some notes they have made during preparation, as an *aide-mémoire*.

In the lesson itself, the text is projected onto an interactive whiteboard⁴ which I annotate with linguistic and literary points as they arise. I will read out two or three lines, and then choose someone to translate. The level of translation typically varies from the virtually flawless to the frankly ropy, in which latter case I might ask to see the pupil's vocabulary list to ensure that he has done the preparation. However weak the group, and however excruciating the process, I will never simply translate the text for them: while I will offer help over difficulties, for example an historic infinitive, or an omitted part of *sum*, and will on occasion resort to telling them what word to translate next, I believe it essential that translation should come from the class, not the teacher. It is immensely helpful to use the whiteboard for, say, highlighting a noun and adjective pair, or bracketing off a relative clause, when analysing the Latin. The material from the whiteboard is saved and made available to the pupils when they come to revise at the end of the year.

After between thirty and fifty lines, instead of preparing a new passage of text, the pupils are asked to write up a translation, which they then bring to class. We read through the text for a second time, with pupils correcting or annotating their translation as we go. They then revise the lines for a consolidation test, which will be in the format of a GCSE question.

The emphasis is thus on very close reading of the Latin text, something which enables pupils to experience Virgil's magnificent verse at first hand without the mediation of a translation. The reading aloud of every line means that some, at least, will hear for themselves the sound-picture as the serpents in book 2 make for Laocoon and *sibila lambebant linguis vibrantibus ora* (2.211), and feel the great maw of the cave at Avernus in 6.237 – *spelunca alta fuit vastoque immanis hiatu*. Recently my current GCSE set encountered the hypermetron at 4.629: while I am not quite sure how many of them

⁴ An interactive whiteboard displays the screen of a computer to which it is linked, and can be annotated with a special stylus.

– myself included – felt, with Austin,⁵ that “Dido seems to leave the two peoples locked for ever in their enmity”, we were able to feel the metrical oddity and sense that Virgil was Up To Something.

Moreover, pupils are much more alert to Virgil’s choice of vocabulary, something inevitably blurred by translations, where a Latin word may need to be rendered by a whole range of English words in order to create idiomatic translation in its varied contexts. An excellent example of this is the crucial word *culpa* in book 4; another is *furor / furius / furere* in book 12; while the phrase *arma amens capio* (2.314) simply cannot be rendered into English in a way which replicates the concision and euphony of the Latin. Thus pupils begin to understand that Latin is a language, not a code, that *culpa* means *culpa*, not “guilt” or “sin” or “fault” or “blame”, an understanding which is the beginning of real fluency in a language. A stimulating exercise is then to give pupils a passage from a literary translation of Virgil – Dryden is a favourite – and to ask them to examine how an English reader’s understanding of the text is enhanced or undermined by it.

There is no doubt that this approach makes considerable demands of the pupils. In anticipation of writing this paper, I asked my current GCSE set, who are reading book 4, to write – anonymously – a brief paragraph on Virgil – what they liked, what they disliked, what they found difficult, what they felt they had gained from it. Most commented on the difficulty of the language, though some felt that it became easier with practice; one, somewhat alarmingly, wrote that Virgil’s vocabulary was “not that more [sic] advanced”. Several wrote that they appreciated the opportunity to read some unadapted Latin. “As it is written by a native Latin speaker”, wrote one, “it is more interesting and idiomatic, but also harder. It is the first Latin verse I have read, and I enjoyed seeing the Latin in this context”. “I found some vocabulary and grammar difficult but once they had been explained I felt it made me a better classicist”. I also spoke to an AS class about their experience of Virgil at GCSE. All commented on the difficulty, but all were unanimous that it had been the best part of the course, one remarking, “I know it’s a cliché, but you really do get out what you put in”.

This of course is hardly a scientific study, and the AS group in particular were in gender, demographic and ability largely unrepresentative of those studying Latin in schools today. Nor would I pretend that all come to lessons ready to rattle off an accurate and idiomatic translation: my pupils are as capable as any of telling me that the tense

⁵R. G. Austin, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos, Liber Quartus*, 1955, Oxford (*ad loc.*)

of a verb is dative, or translating *ira Iovis* as “the angry Jupiter”. But these boys at least appreciated that rising to the challenge of attempting to read Virgil for themselves had given them a genuine experience of Latin poetry.

I remain convinced, then, that it is possible for schoolchildren to engage with the language of Virgil. But what do they take from it beyond the code-breaking, problem-solving satisfaction of puzzling out a tricky bit of syntax? At the simplest level, there is much to be enjoyed in a narrative and dramatic sense: the death of Priam, the hunt in book 4, Turnus and Aeneas’ single combat, the Sibyl’s invocation of the powers of the Underworld – all work as story-telling in a way which is easy to forget when one reads Virgil as an adult immersed in highly intellectualised and sophisticated contemporary scholarship. Virgilian simile works well, too: particular favourites have been the wounded deer at the beginning of book 4, the fall of Troy compared to the chopping down of a great tree in book 2, and Turnus as a hungry wolf in book 9.

Second, pupils are often surprisingly interested in Roman history: book 2, of course, is particularly fertile ground, but my current set wrote approvingly of Virgil’s references to the Punic Wars in book 4, and, fresh from viewing the BBC series *Rome*, have been quick to enjoy possible references to first-century events: does Dido’s wish that Aeneas *cadat ante diem mediaque inhumatus arena* (4.620) evoke Pompey? How is our picture of *pious Aeneas* affected by the fact that in dallying in Carthage with Dido he is behaving much more like Mark Antony with Cleopatra than like Augustus, the austere servant of the Res Publica? “I like the way Virgil is writing for a ‘modern’ Roman audience”, wrote one. Another, rather ambitiously: “It sort of feels like you can relate both to the story and see what a Roman reader may have felt”.

Virgil’s constant use of mythology and of earlier literature adds depth to pupils’ experience of the text, even at their necessarily rudimentary level. When one looks at the characterisation of Dido in the second half of book 4, for example, the reference to Medea’s dismemberment of her brother in lines 600-01 (*non potui abreptum divellere corpus et undis / spargere?*) helps pupils to see her transformation from queen and leader to vengeful witch, as does discussion of the motif of child-eating in Greek mythology. Similarly, the story of Phaedra provides helpful parallels in understanding a woman who is an innocent victim of a divine plan and whose subsequent actions have dire consequences. (Ironically, this approach becomes more dangerous at A level. As a former A level examiner myself, I know that the prescriptive nature of mark schemes can make it difficult for candidates to gain credit for material not “directly” related to the text. We see this particularly in the later books of the *Aeneid*, where knowledge of

Homer, despite Virgil's constant dialogue with the concepts of Homeric warfare and the Homeric hero, cannot be *required* by the examination given that he is a Greek author and this is a Latin exam).

It can also be possible to give pupils a glimpse of Virgil's influence on Western literature and culture, or for them to bring to Virgil their own reading. My GCSE set's study in French of Anouilh's *Antigone* has led to some interesting discussion of the relationship between sisters, with reference to Dido and Anna and Antigone and Ismene. Sometimes surprising insights are elicited. In book 9 (433-37) Virgil compares the drooping head of the dead Euryalus to a purple flower cut down by a plough or to poppies with their heads weighed down by rain. I asked the class – a moderate-ability GCSE set – what emotional response the simile provoked in the reader. One boy commented that it was impossible for us to respond as a Roman audience, because for the modern reader the poppy is inextricably associated with the First World War and with the tragedy of young lives lost in battle. The richness of this personal response, the intuitive, if unconscious, grasp of intertextuality and reception theory, encapsulated the heightened aesthetic sensibility and critical awareness that must be the goal of reading great literature.

Inevitably, there are limitations to the demands that can be made even of the very able at this level. A GCSE or A level text consists merely of a portion of a book: 175 lines at GCSE, 300-350 at A level; and these are not consecutive lines but “highlights” selected by the examination board. A candidate who read only the lines prescribed for GCSE would gain the impression that book 4 was concerned exclusively with Dido, omitting – as the prescription does – the entirety of Mercury's visit to Aeneas, his reaction, and his final encounter with Dido. I have been lucky in having a generous allocation of time and highly able and motivated students, so that a certain amount of non-prescribed text can be read; but it would be foolish to pretend that it is possible to achieve a thorough knowledge of an entire book, let alone a working knowledge of the *Aeneid* as a whole.

A second limitation, interestingly, concerns Virgil's relationship with Maecenas and the Augustan regime, a problem particularly apparent in reading books 6 and 8, and it is here above all that the relative immaturity of the constituency makes itself felt. For schoolchildren, the romantic image of the poet as a soul-searching free spirit is very strong, and once Maecenas' patronage of Virgil is explained, there is a powerful inclination to dismiss the poetry as “Augustan propaganda”. A certain amount of

headway can be made by judicious distribution of Lyne's *Further Voices in Vergil's Aeneid* (1987, Oxford), but in most cases the idea of the *Aeneid* as being in dialogue with the Augustan regime is very difficult to grasp – perhaps not too surprisingly, given the broad variation on this issue in contemporary scholarship!

One also has to grapple with ideas of authorial intention and autobiographical writing. Fortunately the latter is not as problematic with Virgil as with Ovid and – especially – Catullus, where pupils want everything to be “true”; but I am constantly accused of “reading too much into it” or asked whether Virgil really “meant” something. To quote a pupil: “I think too many lines are made out to be onomatopoeic and it's easy to say a line sounds like a bolt of lightning or raging fire for example, when it isn't clear that Virgil originally intended it that way”. In practice, though, the majority can be persuaded that what matters is not what Virgil thought but what the text says; and reminding the class of the *Aeneid's* rate of composition proves helpfully persuasive.

Reading the *Aeneid* in class constantly stimulates discussion of wider contemporary issues. In the autumn of 2001 I was reading *Aeneid* 12 with a GCSE group: questions of the justice of war, of *furor* and *clementia*, evolved in step with the destruction of the Twin Towers and the invasion of Afghanistan. Can one fight a war with *pietas*? Does even a just war inevitably dehumanise and decivilise? The simile comparing the cornered Turnus to a hunted stag, or the final description of Aeneas glimpsing the plundered sword-belt of Pallas evoke a complex range of responses to warfare, which on that particular reading added a further dimension to discussion of the events which were unfolding around us.

Central to the way I teach Virgil, or indeed any literary text, is the idea that the class and I are reading it *together*. Inevitably my knowledge is greater than theirs, and their responses will be shaped in discussion by my more extensive experience of classical language and literature, but every time I read a book of Virgil (and this is not the case with every author) the prism through which I read is altered by the response of the group. To quote from the set: “The open and collaborative approach we adopt to studying the text is excellent, as it allows us to discuss different translations and interpretations”.

To illustrate the fruits of this “open and collaborative approach”, I shall devote the remainder of this paper to looking at the reading which a recent class has produced of the central issue of Dido's *culpa*. I should emphasise that what follows represents the genuine fruits of our class discussion, of the ideas which the pupils have produced, filtered and refined (I hope) through my professional expertise. I hope that it will demonstrate the

extent to which a quite sophisticated response to Latin literature is possible in students who have been taught to approach a text through close linguistic reading.

Part-Medea, part-Phaedra, Dido is to a great extent presented as a tragic figure. Like Medea, she is abandoned by the hero she has helped, and driven to black magic in pursuit of revenge (see *e.g.* 4.509-16); like Phaedra, she is the unwitting pawn of the gods, assailed by an unconquerable and unsuitable love engendered by the goddess Venus herself. For Dido, the fact that Venus works in collusion with Juno, the goddess whom Dido has every right to expect to be on her side, adds a further bitter twist. The scene between Dido and Aeneas at 4.304-87 recalls Medea's confrontation with Jason in Euripides (*Medea*, 446-626); her relationship with Anna echoes, though not uncomplicatedly, the role of sisters such as Ismene and Chrysothemis; her suicide on the bed she shared with Aeneas echoes Deianeira and Jocasta. Unlike Medea, however, she is destroyed; unlike Phaedra, what destroys her is a *culpa*.

Niall Rudd has dissected the issue in his 1976 discussion of 'Dido's *culpa*',⁶ but my pupils have devised another view. Their reading is that Dido's *culpa* is her denial of her femininity, or rather her delusion that she can be both a leader and a woman. Once she has allowed the consummation of her love for Aeneas, she surrenders her position as a ruler: the spell, as it were, is broken and the only resolution can be in her death.

In book 1, we first learn about Dido from Venus, who tells Aeneas of her unhappy past (*longa est iniuria, longae ambages*, 341-42). Sympathy is evoked, then admiration as we learn (357-69) of her flight with her people which so strikingly parallels Aeneas' own, and are told *dux femina facti* (364). But we meet the Tyrians before we meet Dido. Like ants or bees when viewed from Aeneas' vantage point at the top of the hill, they are busy laying out the new city (419-38). *o fortunati, quorum iam moenia surgunt!* cries Aeneas, in a great spondaic sigh. When Dido finally appears, she does not disappoint. We see her through the eyes of the gobsmacked Aeneas: literally first and foremost, she is *regina* (495), *forma pulcherrima* (496), *magna iuvenum stipante caterva* (497). Then comes the resplendent Diana simile, before Dido *laeta* (503), *saepa armis solioque alte subnixta resedit* (506), proceeding to get on with the business of government (507 – but do our antennae twitch a little when she *iura dabat legesque viris?*) This is a queen at the height of her power, beautiful, unmarried, stately, utterly at home with the trappings of royalty, happily taking as her due the deference of her subjects. Her welcome to Aeneas has all the poised graciousness of Arete greeting Odysseus in *Odyssey* 6.

⁶ 'Dido's *Culpa*' in N. Rudd, *Lines of Enquiry*, 1976, Cambridge, 32-53.

Significantly, it is Dido's frustrated maternal instincts that bring all this crashing down. Venus chooses to work on her by disguising Cupid as Ascanius. Dido *pariter puero donisque movetur* (714) and *gremio fovet* (718). At the same time, Virgil makes explicit that this will be her downfall (*infelix, pesti devota futurae ... ardescitque tuendo*, 712-13; *inscia*, 718; *miseratae*, 719). By acknowledging her womanhood Dido makes vulnerable her position as queen, an idea underlined by her heart-rending cry at 4.327-30, where she claims that the opportunity to be a mother would be adequate compensation for her loss of *pudor* and *fama prior*. Tormented by love, she embraces Ascanius, trying to deceive *infandum amorem* (4.85), as though she can convince herself that she loves the child rather than his father, despite the fact that love for either, as an expression of femaleness, disqualifies her for her role as queen.

So when Dido, slowly poisoned by her love for Aeneas (4.1-5) says to Anna that, were she not pledged irrevocably to her dead husband Sychaeus, *huic uni forsitan potui succumbere culpae* (19), she refers to the dereliction of duty and diminution of status that would result from her acknowledging her female limitations in taking a husband who would be her natural superior. Like Penelope, she can rule only in the absence of an appropriate male, hence her rejection of Iarbas; like Penelope, in the presence of an appropriate male, she resigns her power (*sceptra dabas*, 597) and the building of the city, her work as queen, is abandoned (86-89), to be taken up by Aeneas, discovered by Mercury *fundantem arces ac tecta novantem* (260). And once resigned, this power cannot be resumed, hence her acknowledgement of her *impia facta* (596) and the loss of *fama prior*. In placing her own needs above those of her people, she of course acts in exactly the opposite way to *pious Aeneas*, who from book 4 onwards increasingly realises that his personal fulfilment must take second place to his destined role as leader of the Trojan exiles and founder of the Roman race.

But what of the marriage? *Coniugium vocat, hoc praetexit nomine culpam* (172); *nec coniugis umquam*, says Aeneas, *praetendi taedas aut haec in foedera veni* (338-39). Without a doubt, Virgil builds up to the scene in the cave as though anticipating a wedding. As the Trojans and Carthaginians gather for the hunt, they wait for the queen, *thalamo cunctantem* (133) – Dido herself has used *thalami* as a metonym for marriage in line 18; Dido's glorious attire, her purple robe embroidered with gold, the golden clasps in her hair and on her robe, are lavishly described; Aeneas himself, *ante omnes pulcherrimus*, is compared to Apollo in a simile which closely parallels the Dido-Diana simile in book 1, with references to the spring and to joyous, noisy dancing; and he *infert se socium atque agmina iungit*. Hunting itself is of course closely associated with courtship, and the

erotic imagery of the storm, with the rushing rivers, is clear. Juno, goddess of marriage, acts as *pronuba*, and gives the sign; the *aether* acts as the witness necessary at a Roman wedding ceremony. And yet, say Virgil and Aeneas, this is not a true marriage. Enacted at a cosmic scale though the wedding is, its lack of firm grounding in the human sphere prevents its being legitimate: although Dido may comfort herself with the belief that she has acted properly in taking a royal consort to whom her power may be duly resigned, in fact she knows well that this is not a formally sanctioned political union, and that no good can come of it. Again, her *culpa* is to yield to her biological female desire for a husband and a family and to place this above her duty as queen.

This may appear a bleakly misogynistic reading, and I would be the last to deny that reading book 4 with a group of sixteen-year-old boys has foregrounded particular issues in the text. In fact, the class began by finding Dido self-indulgent and irritating, and much of our discussion has involved my leading them to an appreciation of her traumatic past, her very real achievements as queen of the Tyrian exiles, and the callous way in which she is treated by the gods. At the same time, I would argue that the text of the *Aeneid* is not generous towards women who stand in the way of destiny: Creusa, arguably Aeneas' soul-mate, is simply removed by the gods so that Aeneas will be free to take a Latin bride, while that bride, Lavinia, appears largely as a cipher, little more than a valuable piece of goods. It is difficult to imagine her forming with Aeneas either the partnership he shares with Creusa or the intense bond he has with Dido

We have come a long way from our starting position of asking how the study of Virgil could be a worthwhile exercise at GCSE. I very much hope that I have demonstrated that it can be, given motivated pupils and determined teaching, and that, despite the blandishments of “relevance” and “accessibility”, Virgil remains as powerful a presence in the classroom as ever.

Colfe's School

C. J. I. BUTLER