

Review

Francis Cairns, *Virgil's Augustan Epic* (Cambridge University Press 1989) xi + 280pp. Casebound. £27.50

Readers acquainted with Professor Cairns' numerous contributions to the study of Augustan poetry will expect to find in *Virgil's Augustan Epic* thorough documentation and a number of new ideas; they will in neither respect be disappointed. They will recognise, too, a certain continuity in method and approach, even if the emphasis is somewhat different.

Much of Cairns' work has been devoted to an exposition of his view that 'generic composition' is an essential key to our unlocking of Roman poetry in its apogee no less than in its supposed or real decline. In his book on the *Aeneid*, the genre is replaced by the stereotype, with a discussion of Virgil's adherence to and deviation from what may be termed the norm. Acceptance of the hypothesis in its generality as opposed to particular details will rest on similar premises in both instances.

The early chapters deal with the theme of the 'good king'. From a variety of sources, as codified by modern scholars, Cairns draws up a catalogue of traits held in antiquity to be representative of this ideal; a kind of 'composite' is thereby formed. By comparison and contrast, he then argues that the Virgilian Aeneas is by and large an embodiment of this array of monarchic virtues, whereas Dido and Turnus fail to attain them. The former, in fact, falls from grace, whereas the latter never really reaches it. As a consequence, the actions of Aeneas are made more comprehensible and indeed worthy of praise, at least from an 'Augustan' point of view.

One wonders, however, whether the 'good king' can be constructed on any other bases than those Cairns regards as stereotypical. One may of course concede readily that, at this or that historical moment, some may be dropped and others made more prominent. Is it possible that we might draw up a similar 'profile', for, say, the 'good doctor' or even the 'good plumber', and then apply them to texts that contain doctors and plumbers among their participants? This is only to assert that stereotypy is inevitable in *any* characterisation, indeed in our judgments of humankind in general. Instances conform or diverge, but the pattern is there, implicitly, as a yardstick. Again, is Aeneas in fact a king? He is termed *rex* certainly, but in the ancient world there was no hierarchy of noble ranks, no princes, dukes, earls or knights. What kind of *rex* was Aeneas? Is the leader of a band of exiles, even if of royal descent, a 'king' in the full sense with which we endow it?

In chapter 4, stereotypy is applied not to people but to a quality, *concordia*. Its characteristics occupy two pages of the text, and it is then traced and measured with reference to them throughout the whole epic. Though some useful ideas emerge in the

process, one is again left with the feeling that, if concord is to play any part in the narrative at all, it cannot do so on a radically different basis from that which has been so carefully tabulated. Can *concordia* be other than concordant, or discord be other than its opposite?

The same fundamental doubts may be felt about subsequent chapters, in which Dido is brought into relation with the elegiac tradition and Lavinia with the 'maidens' of lyric. One should not really be in any way surprised by the parallelisms, for they could, to a greater or lesser degree, be traced in traditions that owe nothing to ancient elegy or lyric. Which is not summarily to discount them; it is rather their status that raises important theoretical questions.

There is a great deal more in Cairns' book, all the same, that may be read with profit, including his chapter on the 'Italianisation' of Aeneas and his re-assessment of the relationship between Homer and Virgil in the last two chapters. The bibliography occupies 21 pages and there are two indexes.

The title itself has a polemical edge, implying rejection of readings of Virgil popularised in the 'radical' sixties and seventies, and still not quite dead today. That is commendable. Whether the directions indicated and assumptions made by Cairns are the right ones to carry Virgilian scholarship into the third millennium of the Christian era is much more doubtful. Whatever our doubts, however, the book should be read; indeed the raising of doubts is in itself a cause for gratitude.

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