



Christopher Baswell. *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 24. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xviii, 438; 6 black-and-white facsimile plates. \$59.95.

In his knowledgeable and elegant study of the *Aeneid* in medieval England, Christopher Baswell investigates two kinds of medieval response to Virgil's text: marginal commentary and the creative redactions (the *Roman d'Eneas* and Chaucer's *House of Fame* and *Legend of Good Women*) which to some extent developed out of those commentaries. Baswell's analysis of these works rests on the premise that the *Aeneid* was not received as a "monolithic entity" in medieval England, but rather "as a series of historical phenomena. . . whose meanings are indeed conditioned by the language of the text, but simultaneously by an elaborate matrix of annotative and sometimes visual reinscription on the page" (6). The fluidity with which the marginal comments found in one manuscript could flow out of the mouth of Dido in a later version (as occurs in Caxton's *Eneydos*) testifies to the flexibility demanded of Virgil's text by its medieval redactors, who regularly enveloped commentary into the central text in "an insistent centripetal movement" (6). This confusion about what constituted the authentic Virgilian text was compounded by questions of the veracity of Virgil's story, as Aeneas's account of the fall of Troy contradicts those of Dares and Dictys, long believed to be more accurate. Virgil's Dido, too, competed with Ovid's.

Baswell's argument attempts to tidy this variety of voices even as it explores the implications of such textual polyphony. His thesis argues that three major "visions" of the *Aeneid* can be distinguished in medieval English responses to the text: the pedagogical, the allegorical (which further subdivides into two types), and the romance.

The pedagogical approach to the *Aeneid* seeks to understand the strangeness of Virgil's text by glossing details of grammar, ancient religion, society, and geography in an effort to "reconstruct difference," in Baswell's terms. In discussing this type of commentary, Baswell studies the three sets of marginalia found in Oxford, All Souls College 82, a twelfth-century manuscript which may have belonged to a tutor of Henry II. The various hands (one each from the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries) reveal the best and the worst of pedagogical commentary, for while the latest hand bespeaks the activity of an educated and even ingenious mind, the earlier, rather pedestrian, commentaries work more to flatten than elevate Virgil's text. Yet whatever the effect of this

approach, its virtue lies in its desire to elucidate without judgment, a practice which counters those critics who argue that medieval readers were uninterested in the historical context of ancient works.

While the pedagogical approach demonstrates respect for the central text, the allegorical reveals a commentator more independent of Virgil, a *magister* asserting control over the *auctor*. The distance of the allegorical impulse from the Virgilian poem is strikingly apparent when “Bernard Silvestris,” for example, writes that the rape of Latona signifies “the eagerness of study” (118). Yet however radically this interpretation departs from Virgil’s text, it was, nevertheless, this exegetical mode which inspired the thoroughgoing commentaries of “Bernard” and Fulgentius, both of whom adapted the *Aeneid* into a narrative of spiritual ascent. In addition to outlining the allegorical tradition, Baswell also explores this approach as found in the two commentaries in Cambridge, Peterhouse College 158. Of particular interest in this chapter is the relationship demonstrated between Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* and the *Aeneid*. Two separate arguments are made, the first concerning direct influence, a case which Baswell builds through careful study of verbal echoes and parallels. The second argument reveals that, however subtle these direct connections that Baswell reveals, medieval commentators made explicit a more general connection, as they used Boethius to explain Virgil and vice versa, thereby giving the allegorical reading of Virgil even greater prestige.

The second kind of allegorical vision is found in London, BL Additional 27304, a manuscript whose marginalia Baswell links to the Peasants’ Revolt. These comments reveal an ethical interpretation of the *Aeneid*, an approach which uses the *Aeneid* as occasion for commentary about normative social behavior, extending even to instruction about table manners. In this style of commentary, the *Aeneid* ceases to be approached as a narrative, but rather as a series of disconnected exempla. This haphazard moralizing (which Baswell links to the work of the classicizing friars) leads the commentator into some embarrassments, as when he directs the reader simply to “apply the story of Aeneas to Christ.”

Among these three types of commentary, then, one finds very different ideas about the *Aeneid*, which is treated variously as a text to be respected for its difference, stripped of its letter, or dismembered for its stories. These different approaches, in turn, produce very different *Aeneids*.

At this point, Baswell then turns to literature to explore creative reworkings of the *Aeneid*. In Chapter 5 he focuses on the twelfth-century *Roman d’Eneas* to discuss the influence of commentary on the poem. Yet there is much more in this chapter, as Baswell interprets the *Eneas* in the context of the Anglo-Norman court of Henry II. Here, Baswell brings together the strands of several articles he has recently published to argue that the poem both expresses and endorses issues of

law, power, and patriarchy which were central to Henry's court. In this romance *Aeneid*, we also see the pull of Ovid's account of the Carthage story, as his exploration of the female voice in the *Heroides* triumphs in the redactor's dramatic expansion of the character of Lavine and her agency in her marriage to Aeneas.

It is finally in Chaucer's *House of Fame* that one sees the cumulative effect of encountering so many *Aeneids*. Building on Sheila Delany's idea of skeptical fideism, Baswell (in Chapter 6) characterizes the *House of Fame* as a hermeneutic labyrinth, with Geoffrey acting like Aeneas in the first six books of the *Aeneid*, as he cruises the Mediterranean in search of semiotic certainty. To cast the hero as a reader redounds on Geoffrey who by reading becomes in turn a sort of hero. But clearly a lesser sort, as he collapses in the face of conflicting traditions, "a ful confus matere," producing an interpretive ambivalence which ultimately renders his efforts "puny and comic next to Aeneas's heroic exegesis of supernatural signs" (229). While Aeneas will find an unquestionable authority to guide his quest to its completion, Chaucer's poem simply ends just before the revelation of the "gret auctorite," thereby keeping the solution to his problem forever in obscurity. In the *Legend of Good Women*, however, Baswell finds a more muscular Chaucer, one willing to push aside or even doubt the ancient authorities in rendering his own account of "the Carthage incident."

The book's final chapter is an envoi which looks to Dido and Aeneas in the Renaissance, discussing briefly Caxton's *Eneydos*, Douglas's *Eneados*, Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* and the *Faerie Queene*, as it opens avenues which might be profitably explored by others. The book concludes with four appendices, the first two listing medieval manuscripts of Virgil with English connections, with the third and four containing some Boethian glosses on the *Aeneid*, and the accessus to the *Aeneid* of "Anselm of Laon."

There is an appeal to this book which supersedes even the strength of its central argument, and for which I offer two explanations: the first is Baswell's seemingly magical ability to spin straw into gold, as he takes some of the driest material possible and, through consistently intelligent and beautifully subtle readings, transforms it into the stuff of wonder. The second explanation is the presence throughout the text of informative excursions, which are cleverly, often brilliantly, developed, on such subjects as hermeneutics in the *Aeneid*, Servius's commentary and its links to the allegorical tradition, visual representations of the *Aeneid* in England, and many, many more. It is the consistently high quality of Baswell's analysis, as well of his prose style, which makes this book pleasurable as well as scholarly.

Wendy Chapman Peek
Stonehill College