

David S. Wilson-Okamura. *Virgil in the Renaissance*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xiii + 300 pp. index. append. illus. tpls. \$95. ISBN: 978-0-521-19812-7.

In *Virgil in the Renaissance* David Wilson-Okamura sets out to describe, with plentiful examples and a particularly rich use of Latin commentaries, how readers and writers in the European Renaissance read Virgil, what they expected to find in his works, and which elements — both thematic and stylistic — of the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid* they considered most significant. The result is a fine book that should be required reading for all students and scholars of Renaissance literature or culture.

Virgil in the Renaissance is impressively well-written, carefully controlled, accessible, and unobtrusively scholarly. Commendably easy to read, it nevertheless offers a synthesis of a great deal of invaluable primary research — the tables of Virgil commentaries and their dates of printing, with which the book concludes, are probably worth the cover price alone — and the generous and authoritative footnotes throughout the volume offer rich pickings, exemplarily well-organized.

Wilson-Okamura's work naturally invites comparison with that of Craig Kallendorf, whose books and articles he frequently acknowledges. In his most recent book, *The Other Virgil*, Kallendorf uses detailed case studies to trace evidence of pessimistic readings of the *Aeneid* — a style of interpretation that has dominated Anglophone classical scholarship over the last half-century, but which has traditionally been considered a modern development — in early modern Virgilian commentary, criticism, and imitation. Wilson-Okamura, on the other hand, while never denying the presence of such readings, offers a pragmatic overview. *Virgil in the Renaissance* shows us what most readers and critics probably thought and felt about Virgil between the late Middle Ages and the seventeenth century: we find, for instance, hints of unease about the negative features of the *Eclogues* — a commonplace of modern criticism — in both Servius and Sidney, but these hints of reserve are unusual. For Renaissance readers, the *Eclogues* are principally intended, as Servius puts it, “to imitate Theocritus and to praise Caesar” (65).

This survey approach naturally entails some drawbacks, about which Wilson-Okamura is commendably straightforward in his introduction. In a book of fewer than 300 pages (including index and appendices) many important themes and episodes pass undiscussed: we find very little, for instance, on the Orpheus and Eurydice episode in *Georgics* 4, or on the shield of Aeneas in *Aeneid* 8. The selection, however, is judicious: the author concentrates upon those aspects of Virgil's work that, as he demonstrates, were the focus of greatest ethical and stylistic interest in the Renaissance.

Second, *Virgil in the Renaissance* is not, primarily, a work of literary criticism, and Wilson-Okamura is interested in well-known Renaissance authors primarily as witnesses to the interpretation of Virgil, rather than as voices that might seek to challenge or contest common readings. That said, his range of reference — especially

among English authors — is both extensive and, often, charming: alongside lively Latin commentators we find telling quotations from Jonson, Puttenham, and Rabelais, and the author's readings of Spenser are particularly acute and convincing. Readers with scholarly interests beyond England, Italy, and France will find fewer examples of direct relevance to their work, and Neo-Latin literature is in general underrepresented, but the book's approach and design invites the reader to apply its conclusions to the particular texts or artifacts he or she knows best.

Too much discussion of classical reception in Renaissance literature is naïve or underinformed about current classical scholarship. In this respect, Wilson-Okamura is exemplary: repeatedly he introduces discussion of a theme or episode with an accurate, concise, and up-to-date summary of current interpretation. For many readers not themselves classicists, this will prove one of the book's greatest virtues.

Virgil in the Renaissance is that rare thing: a straightforward but subtle and enjoyable work of reference relevant to a wide range of students and scholars. For those with expertise in Virgilian reception specifically, little that Wilson-Okamura says will come as a surprise; but the systematic approach, generosity of reference, and consistently telling use of examples makes *Virgil in the Renaissance* an invaluable resource even for the (relatively) expert. There is plenty here to take issue with, and many gaps to fill — and any second edition should include a bibliography, the absence of which is particularly frustrating in such a well-referenced work — but it is hard to imagine a more useful starting point for any graduate student or scholar wondering about the presence of Virgil in a Renaissance text.

VICTORIA MOUL

King's College London