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Book Review: Kallendorf, Craig. The Other Virgil: "Pessimistic" Readings of the Aeneid in Early Modern Culture

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Abstract

The *Other Virgil* is introduced as a contribution to the debate within classical scholarship over the historicity of "pessimistic" readings of Virgil's *Aeneid*. This debate might at first appear to be a minor intradisciplinary quarrel, but in fact it has important implications for reception study more broadly, raising questions about the historicity of reception (and reading in general) and about the validity of various contemporary methodological approaches to reception and allusion.

Keywords

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Kallendorf, Craig. *The Other Virgil: "Pessimistic" Readings of the Aeneid in Early Modern Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. xiv, 252 pp. \$99.00.

The Other Virgil is introduced as a contribution to the debate within classical scholarship over the historicity of "pessimistic" readings of Virgil's *Aeneid*. This debate might at first appear to be a minor intradisciplinary quarrel, but in fact it has important implications for reception study more broadly, raising questions about the historicity of reception (and reading in general) and about the validity of various contemporary methodological approaches to reception and allusion.

As Kallendorf summarizes in his preface, the traditional reading of the *Aeneid* is as a pro-Augustan poem: it praises its founder-hero, Aeneas, as a model of Roman virtue, and uncritically celebrates the values of imperial Rome. In the period after the Second World War, however, some classical scholars began to read the poem as irreducibly ambivalent about the imperial project, and as containing--in the words of the title of R.O.A.M. Lyne's influential 1987 book--"further voices" (notably, the voices of women and of Aeneas's antagonists), which undercut, critique, or complicate pro-Augustan values. This "pessimistic" reading has been criticized as ahistorical, and the stated aim of *The Other Virgil* is to supplement Richard Thomas's 2001 study *Virgil and the Augustan Tradition* (which provides evidence for pessimistic readings of the *Aeneid* in antiquity), by "show[ing] in some detail that there is a continuous tradition of 'pessimistic' readings that extends through the early modern period in Europe and the western hemisphere" (viii). Kallendorf does so through readings of various poems which engage closely with the *Aeneid*, grouped into three chapters with different theoretical and chronological foci: "Marginalization," on Francesco Filelfo's fifteenth-century Italian epic *Sphortias*; "Colonization," on Alonso de Ercilla's Spanish epic *La Araucana* (1575), Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610-11), and Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz's late seventeenth-century lyric poetry; and "Revolution," on Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Joel Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* (1787) and *Columbiad* (1807), and Victor Alexandre Chretien Le Plat du Temple's *Virgile en France* (1807-8).

As this grouping suggests, Kallendorf's book has a double focus. On the one hand it provides a historically rooted account of patterns of allusion to Virgil's *Aeneid* in specific texts from ca.1480 to 1808; on the other, it seeks to read these texts in terms of the resistant or creative uses to which they put their Virgilian allusions, grouping them into three broad categories. The attempt to bring together fine-grained historical analysis of reading practices with theoretical considerations is laudable, but in practice the first approach is notably more successful than the second. As a historian of reading practices, Kallendorf is exemplary. He brings under-studied texts to the attention of classicists and pays meticulous attention to educational practice, the history of editions and translations of particular texts, and other key resources for historically-oriented reception studies (including commentaries and marginalia). His closing argument that classical reception scholars should make more use of these is amply supported by the book itself. However, as a theorist of reception, he is less successful. Strikingly, he has a much less commanding sense of the historical development of the canon of critical theory than the other fields with which he engages (for example, attributing the idea that "Self is generally predicated against Other" [215], not to Lacan or Sartre or de Beauvoir but to Stephen Greenblatt's 1980 book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*). He states that he has "made a special effort to link [his] insights to the broader concerns of literary theory and cultural studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (ix), but in fact he mainly draws on theoretical

concerns articulated in the 1970s to 1990s by Michel Foucault (chapter one, on marginalization, literature and power), Edward Said and Homi Bhabha (chapter two, on colonization), and Hayden White and others (chapter three, on new historicism). In fairness to Kallendorf, this time lag does reflect a general tendency in Classics, a discipline into which literary theory has been notoriously slow to penetrate.

More seriously, however, Kallendorf's use of theory does not display the precision and rigour which characterize his historical analyses; furthermore, the theory has little purchase on his readings of the texts. In chapter one, he cites Foucault's model of power as "something which circulates," so that "individuals... are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (27), to argue that Filelfo's epic *Sphortias*, written in praise of Francesco Sforza, contains moments of resistance in which allusions to the *Aeneid* are used to critique Sforza, and that the *Sphortias* should therefore not be read as straightforward encomium. But if Foucault's model of power is correct, then writing straightforward encomium cannot be immune from the complexity of power and the inevitability of resistance either: the theory has no real connection with the argument about genre that Kallendorf is in fact putting forward. His use of the term "the Other" in chapter two is even more problematic. In a particularly telling example, he writes of "a Caliban who is little more than a projection of negative values created in reference not to the indigenous Other, but to European imperial ideology and literary tradition" (123). But the Other *is*, by definition, a projection of negative values created in reference to European ideology and tradition. For this sentence to make sense, Kallendorf must mean that Caliban is not created in reference to an indigenous subjectivity or in reference to an indigenous culture considered on its own terms (as Self). This imprecision might be considered simple terminological looseness were it not for the fact that Kallendorf's persistent use of "the Other" as a simple synonym for "an indigenous person" repeats and reinforces the Eurocentrism of his sources, a problem reflected more broadly in his argument throughout this chapter.

Later in chapter two, Kallendorf reads Sor Juana's "Decima 100," a Spanish-language poem composed in Mexico, which rewrites Book 2 of the *Aeneid* as a love story, inverting the values of the poem so that feminine emotions overcome masculine reason. He concludes that because of the poem's inversion of Virgilian values, "for the first time in our enquiry, the Other becomes a speaking subject," in that "the voice of the Other resounds clearly" (136). This use of "the Other," not as theoretical tool but as blunt instrument, simplistically collapses the subject position of a seventeenth-century Mexican/Spanish poet with "that which is othered in the *Aeneid*." This ahistorical conflation illuminates a central problem with Kallendorf's methodology. For it is never clear in *The Other Virgil* quite how allusive poetics work to produce meaning in their new context. What *is* the relationship between Sor Juana's reading of the *Aeneid* and her own poetic project and cultural/historical situation? Her voice "resounds clearly," but what is it saying? Why does it speak in Virgil's terms? And what, precisely, do those terms mean in her own day?

The problem arises from the lack of a model for a dynamic relationship between alluding text and source text. Kallendorf frequently lapses into referring to the *Aeneid* as if it were a relatively stable and inert model against which the meaning of a new text can be fixed and measured. It is as if any text using Virgilian allusion and taking a nuanced, ambivalent, or critical position on imperialism or colonialism had to be understood as recognizing something which is already in the *Aeneid*, rather than critiquing, transforming, or lampooning a text that in the period was usually taken as a straightforward encomium of empire. Even Le Plat's satiric parody of the

Aeneid, Virgile en France, is understood as an "insistence on reading Virgil 'pessimistically' . . . [a] sympathetic response to, and vigorous rearticulation of, the 'other voices' in the *Aeneid*" (201). Thus Kallendorf's commitment to his stated aim--to provide historical evidence for the existence of pessimistic readings of the *Aeneid* in the early modern period--seems to cut his theoretical analyses off short. This is unfortunate, because it limits the potentially broader interest of this book, which thus remains most convincing as a contribution to intradisciplinary debate within Classics.

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