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Fiona Cox, *Sibylline Sisters: Virgil's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 284. £55.00. ISBN 978-0-19-958296-9 (Hbk).

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Fiona Cox sees in the image of Virgil's Sibyl (*Aeneid* Book VI) 'an exemplar of female wisdom and creativity, of far-sightedness and ripe understanding, a woman too disruptive and disturbing to be allowed (or to want) full access to society' (p.48). In her wide and engaging survey of contemporary women's writing, Cox finds an exciting abundance of female authors rewriting Virgil, some as an act of homage, others as an act of patriarchal resistance, creating new Sibyls and new Virgils to describe female experience.

Cox's study covers fiction produced from the 1980s onwards by North American and European authors (all translations from the Latin, French or German are provided), and aims to demonstrate that we are entering a new period of Virgilian reception spearheaded by women; a fact that is all the more remarkable given that until the twentieth century women were denied a classical education (Cox points us here to Virginia Woolf's excellent essay from 1925, 'On Not Knowing Greek' (p.3)). Virgil has been previously refigured by some of the greats of the male Western literary canon, perhaps most famously by Dante, and echoes of Virgil's devastated Troy shade the World War poetry of T. S. Eliot. So how do these women relate to Virgil?

After a chapter on Virgil's presence in contemporary women's poetry, ten authors are discussed in their own short chapters, ranging from literary heavyweights such as Joyce Carol Oates and A. S. Byatt to lesser known feminist writers like Janet Lembke and Ursula Le Guin. The author-by-author approach is helpful and allows the reader to see the classical allusions that colour each author's *œuvre*, but there were recurrent themes and images that would have been interesting to see discussed together. For example, with the main exception of Janet Lembke (who translates and updates Virgil's

Georgics with an eco-feminist twist as a comment on climate change), it was predominantly Book VI of the *Aeneid* as a place of limbo that exerted the most influence on the women writers. About to enter the Underworld, Aeneas is caught between two worlds, and the majority of the writers discussed here feel themselves to be, or have created characters who are similarly displaced, whether as Jewish diaspora (Ruth Fainlight), as a divorcee (in Margaret Drabble's *The Seven Sisters*), as an Alzheimer's sufferer (in A. S. Byatt's *The Little Black Book of Stories*) or as a women of mixed nationality, for example, Michèle Roberts, half French, half English, or Eavan Boland, born in Ireland but educated in England.

It is from Book VI that these women also take the Sibyl, fashioning themselves as Sibyls who tell the lost stories of their female ancestors (Eavan Boland, Ruth Fainlight), find a Sibyl in a dying grandmother or sister, or create a group of story-telling Sibyls who recount the variety of female experience aboard an Ark (Michèle Roberts). Boland, Drabble and Oates also cite the Sybil's warning to Aeneas, *hoc opus, hic labor est* ('That is the work, that the effort', *Aen.* VI.129), for just as finding his way out of the Underworld will be the hardest part of the journey for Aeneas, so for these women will the struggle be writing their way out of the existing female silence in Western literature. The women writers discussed by Cox also repeatedly used the image of the helpless spirits of the dead, unable to speak, as symbolic of the silencing of women throughout history and literature (for example, Monique Wittig, who creates a lesbian feminist *Inferno*, and Christa Wolf, who also gives a new voice to the silenced Cassandra).

Although Cox recognises the 'paradox inherent' in the use of the Father of a literary tradition that has silenced women's voices in order to describe women's feelings of exclusion and exile (p.13), this reviewer would have liked to see a sharper distinction drawn between women like Oates who have 'turned to classical works as a way of connecting their experiences and backgrounds to a dominant literary culture' (p.11), and those who, like Crista Wolf and Monique Wittig, strove 'not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us' (p.12).

Cox concludes that 'Virgil leads us into personal underworlds' and that the use of and reshaping of Virgilian images and narratives become 'an act of daughterly *pietas*' (p.265). It is Virgil's ability 'to speak of both individual and universal histories' that has ensured his lasting appeal (p.266), and that through their conversations with Virgil and Virgilian characters, these women authors have enabled him to speak for female experiences that were excluded from his original work.

Sibylline Sisters is an accessible and enjoyable read, and although it is a shame that due to the number of authors covered each one could not receive more in-depth treatment, the book introduces the reader to a broad scope of authors and poets of interest to those working in classical reception, and who the reader may not have come across before. Previous work by feminist classical scholars has tended to use classical allusions in theoretical writing only,¹ so Cox's study is an indispensable reference point for classical allusions in contemporary women's fiction. The subject matter also invitingly paves the way for further academic research, and given the appeal of Virgil to diasporic communities, this reviewer would welcome further work on Virgilian presences in the writings of other marginalised communities, for example in the fiction of people of colour and in postcolonial literatures.

¹ See, for example, the use of the story of Echo by Alison Sharrock in her 2002 article 'Gender and Sexuality' for *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, or of Philomela in Patricia Joplin's 1984 article 'The voice of the shuttle is ours', *Stanford Literary Review* 1.25-53.