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The Virgil Commentary of Servius

Servius (called Marius or Maurus Servius Honoratus in manuscripts from the ninth century onwards) was a grammarian active in Rome in the late fourth and fifth centuries AD. His celebrated commentary on Virgil is generally held to be based on a commentary (now lost) by the earlier fourth-century commentator Aelius Donatus (the teacher of St Jerome). Some manuscripts contain an enlarged version of Servius' commentary, the so-called *Servius Danielis* (*Servius auctus*, *DServius* or *DS*), published in 1600 by Pierre Daniel and thought to be a seventh- to eighth-century expansion made on the basis of material from Donatus' commentary not used by Servius himself.

We know little about Servius' life. He appears as a young man in Macrobius' dialogue the *Saturnalia* (dramatic date 383–4) as a respectful follower of the pagan leader Aurelius Symmachus (*Sat.* 1.2.15). But Servius' speeches in the *Saturnalia* have little to do with the commentary of the real Servius:¹ Macrobius shaped the figure of the famous grammarian for his own purposes (and probably wrote his work after the death of Servius). It is true that Servius was a pagan, but he was not as strong an advocate of Neoplatonism as Macrobius; Alan Cameron includes him among the 'centre-pagans', people with no deep investment in the pagan cults.²

Interestingly, Servius uses the past tense in referring to pagan cults, where his source, that is Donatus, had used the present tense. We can observe this change of tense by comparing Servius with DS;³ for example, in his note on *Aeneid* 8.641, Servius writes that for sacrifices endorsing treaties and alliances, *porcus adhibebatur* ('a pig was used'). Referring to the same type of sacrifice DS on *Aeneid* 12.170 refers to those who *porcum adserunt ... in foederibus ... solere mactari* ('affirm it is customary to sacrifice a pig when

¹ Cf. Kaster (1980).

² Cameron (2011: 176–7).

³ Cf. Murgia (1988: 496 n. 5); Cameron (2011: 555–7).

making treaties'). Servius' use of the past tense (*adhibebatur*) corresponds to the political state of his times: in 391 AD the emperor Theodosius had banned pagan sacrifices and, when Servius wrote his commentary (probably in the first decade of the fifth century), pagan cults were no longer officially practised. This adjustment to the new political situation shows that Servius' commentary was not a sort of pagan Bible, as stated fifty years ago by Herbert Bloch.⁴

Readers and users of Servius' commentary were mainly Christians, who had to reconcile their reading of Virgil with their faith. Several features of the commentary were conducive to this reconciliation, and in fact supported it, if we consider its success and fortune in the fifth century (and later). One such feature was the allegorical approach applied to pagan gods, for example the incestuous relationship between Jupiter and Juno, mentioned by Virgil at *Aeneid* 1.47, where Juno calls herself *et soror et coniunx* of Jupiter ('at once sister and wife'). This line is quoted by Lactantius to criticize the immorality of pagan religion (*Inst.* 1.47.14). Servius explains it allegorically:

et soror et coniunx: physici Iovem aetherem id est ignem volunt, Iunonem vero aërem, et quoniam tenuitate haec elementa paria sunt, dixerunt esse germana. Sed quoniam Iuno, hoc est aër subiectus est igni, id est Iovi, iure superposito elemento mariti traditum nomen est.

both sister and wife: the natural philosophers take Jupiter to be understood as the upper air, that is fire, but Juno as the lower air, and, since these elements are equal in thinness, they called them siblings. But since Juno, that is the lower air, was subject to fire, that is Jupiter, logically the name of husband has been given to the element on top.

Virgil was also criticized by Christian authors for the theory of metempsychosis expounded by Anchises in *Aeneid* 6. Augustine (*Civ.* 13.19) attributes to Virgil a Platonic view on metempsychosis, which is in fact Plotinus' position. Servius distinguishes between the doctrine expounded by Anchises and Virgil's own position, attributing to the poet the less radical theory of metempsychosis worked out by Porphyry, which Augustine preferred to the orthodox Platonic version (*Civ.* 10.30).⁵

Servius' commentary comes at the end of a long period of Virgilian commentary, which had already begun in the first century BC.⁶ The commentary form itself goes back to Hellenistic and earlier Greek scholarship, above

⁴ Bloch (1963: 210).

⁵ Cf. Stok (2013).

⁶ Cf. Ziolkowski and Putnam (2008: 623–8).

all on Homer, and in a sense Servius' work bears the same relationship to Homeric commentary as the *Aeneid* does to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (the commentary on the *Eclogues*, similarly, has its roots in the Greek commentaries on Theocritus).⁷

The format is the familiar one of a lemma (one or more words of the text) followed by comments, in the manner later reproduced in the modern variorum edition. Sometimes scholars are named, but more commonly we have merely expressions like 'some say ..., others ...'. The text is typically seen as raising a 'problem' (*quaestio*), to which a 'solution' is offered; the methodology goes back to the beginnings of Homeric commentary.⁸ From a modern point of view, this means that the tendency is towards the removal of 'difficulties', rather than their incorporation into a more complex reading, but the same objection might be made to many modern commentaries. The range of interests is also similar to that of modern commentaries (unsurprisingly, since modern commentary has been shaped in part by the Servian model), including textual problems, grammatical points, rhetoric and poetics, and general cultural background.

Servius was not a philologist, but sometimes he discusses textual variants on the reading of the text he comments upon. In his note on *Aeneid* 12.120, where the priests preparing the duel between Aeneas and Turnus are *velati lino* ('veiled with linen'), Servius observes that the officials in charge of making treaties, such as the Fetials and the *pater patratus*, never used linen clothing. Evidently Virgil had been criticized for this by earlier commentators, but Servius affirms that Virgil was not ignorant, but purposefully introduced a discordant element because the peace treaty was ill-fated. In addition to this defence, Servius says that Hyginus and Caper considered the text corrupt, and that Virgil wrote *velati limo*, that is wearing a *limus*, the apron worn by the ministers who brought the victims to the altar. The variant *limo* has been criticized,⁹ but in fact it is adopted by all the major modern editions of the *Aeneid*.

Servius' 'literary' explication of the text consists in part of elementary explanations of the meaning of words and the construction of sentences (often introduced with the phrase *ordo est ...*, meaning 'take the words in the following order').¹⁰ An example is 1.109, *saxa vocant Itali mediis quae in fluctibus aras: ordo est 'quae saxa in mediis fluctibus Itali aras vocant'* ('take the words in the order: "which rocks in the middle of the waves the

⁷ Cf. Farrell (2016).

⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics* ch. 25, with Lucas (1968).

⁹ Murgia (2004: 195).

¹⁰ Cf. Levy (1969: 237).

Italians call altars”’). There are also, however, more advanced observations on rhetorical figures of thought and speech and on narrative technique. It is this last element which may be most interesting for modern critics. Servius often comments on what he calls *persona*, and what modern narratologists would see as matters of voice and mood (focalization, point of view). At *Aeneid* 1.23, for instance, Juno is described as *veteris ... memor ... belli* (‘mindful of the old war’), referring to Troy; however, since the Trojan War was not particularly old at the dramatic date of the *Aeneid*, there is a *problema* awaiting a *lysis* or solution. Modern commentators tend to take *veteris* as focalized by Juno, and meaning something like ‘past’ rather than ‘ancient’ (with a hint of bitterness), but Servius adopts a different solution:

veteris belli: quantum ad Vergilium pertinet, antiqui; si ad Iunonem referas, diu gesti. Tunc autem ad personam referendum est, cum ipsa loquitur; quod si nulla persona sit, ad poetam refertur. Nunc ergo ‘veteris’ ex persona poetae intellegendum. Sic ipse in alio loco ‘mirantur dona Aeneae, mirantur Iulum flagrantisque dei vultus’ partem ad se rettulit, partem ad Tyrios, qui deum esse nesciebant.

the old war: to the extent that it refers to Virgil, ‘ancient’; if you refer it to Juno, ‘fought for a long time’. One must refer an expression to the point of view of a character only when he or she speaks; if there is no character speaking, it is referred to the poet. Therefore here, ‘old’ is to be taken as coming from the character of the poet. So Virgil himself in another passage says, ‘they admire the gift of Aeneas, they admire Iulus and the blazing face of the god’ [*Aen.* 1.709–10], referring in part to himself, in part to the Tyrians, who did not know that he was a god.

Since Virgil speaks in 1.23, Servius is not prepared to accept an embedded focalization, even though it would be natural with a phrase like ‘mindful of ...’; he therefore says that *veteris* (‘old’), must ‘pertain to Virgil’, that is, represent his point of view rather than Juno’s. The example cited within the note is, however, more complicated. When Cupid, disguised as Iulus, goes to the banquet in Dido’s palace, he is much admired; the denomination ‘Iulus’ represents the point of view of the Tyrians, who do not know that it is really Cupid, while ‘the blazing face of the god’ is clearly from the point of view of the omniscient narrator, who knows his real nature. Despite his explicit statement that ‘who sees?’ should coincide with ‘who speaks?’, therefore, Servius is in fact willing to accept variation in focalization as a critical tool, and does so elsewhere in his commentary. Even where a modern critic might wish to take a different line, the comments are extremely suggestive.

Rhetorical analysis naturally plays an important role throughout. This may consist simply in the labelling of rhetorical figures in the poems, from

aposiopesis (e.g. 2.100) to zeugma (e.g. 1.120), but it may be more extensive, especially in the comments on the speeches of characters such as Sinon in Book 2 or Drances in Book 11. The rhetorical tendency to see all speech as performance directed towards an end rather than revelatory of character has in the past seemed antiquated and unhelpful, but now perhaps attracts more respect. One interesting aspect of this approach to rhetoric is the way Servius reads descriptions of speakers' moods in the introduction to speeches. In *Aeneid* 1.521, for instance, when Ilioneus speaks to Dido, he is described as beginning to speak *placido ... pectore* ('with a calm breast'), and Servius comments:

placido sic pectore coepit: more suo uno sermone habitum futurae orationis expressit.

thus he began with placid breast: in his usual fashion, Virgil has expressed the tone of the coming speech in one phrase.

It is not so much that Ilioneus really is calm at this point, as that he speaks calmly, puts on an air of calm. Servius' approach to these introductory phrases can be very subtle; in 4.265, for instance, Mercury's speech to Aeneas is introduced with the words *continuo invadit* ('at once he assails him'), and Servius again comments: *habitum futurae orationis ostendit* ('he expresses the tone of the following speech').¹¹ Here Servius captures well the implication of aggressiveness which is clearly present in *invadit*, although other commentators will prefer a more neutral evaluation of the word (so Heyne says that he would prefer to take it simply as 'he addresses him'). More subtly, when in 4.92 Juno 'accosts Venus with these words' (*talibus adgreditur Venerem ... dictis*), Servius sees the 'craftiness' of her speech already anticipated by the introductory word *adgreditur: cum calliditate loquitur* ('she speaks with craftiness'). *Adgredi* is a common idiom for 'addressing' someone (*OLD* s.v. 2), and certainly there are other instances where no 'craftiness' is implied, for instance in the occurrence of the same phrase at 3.358 (Aeneas addresses Helenus), but here, as Juno accosts Venus, the verb may well have hostile overtones ('to attack', 'to work upon someone by guile', 'to try to corrupt someone', *OLD* s.v. 3), although subsequent commentators have not picked up Servius' suggestion.¹²

The Servian commentaries can be studied from various aspects. Most readers of Virgil use them as a heuristic device, a mine of information and

¹¹ Servius uses the same phrase a further seven times (on *Aen.* 1.107; 2.115; 7.451; 8.35; 11.387, 534; 12.807).

¹² For similar remarks see Servius on *Aen.* 4.107; 6.387.

views to excavate for use in constructing their own reading of the Virgilian text. They tend to be used opportunistically: quoted if they support an interpretation, ignored if they do not. There is nothing wrong with this approach, so long as it is clear that Servius' authority in itself does not in any way validate a reading.

Another perspective is to study Servius' commentary in its own right, as a late antique work with an ideology of its own and as an important document in the history of ancient literary criticism, rhetoric and education. Such studies are complicated by the stratified nature of the commentary itself, but in several cases comparison between Servius and DS allows us to detect Servius' position against that of previous exegetes. A striking feature of his approach is the defence of Virgil from criticisms made against him in the past¹³ (already by Hyginus, a contemporary of the poet, then by Virgil's detractors of the first century AD, and also by Probus and other commentators). We have already seen above an example of Servius' defence of Virgil, apropos the linen clothing of the priests in *Aeneid* 12.120. The same approach is applied by Servius to grammatical questions; for example, previous exegetes had criticized Virgil's use of *tota* instead of *omnia* in *Aeneid* 1.185 (the stags hunted by Aeneas) *hos tota armenta secuntur* ('whole herds follow behind these'). Servius justifies the Virgilian use as poetic: *usurpant tamen poetae et ista confundunt* ('the poets however misuse and confuse the two forms'). Servius' consideration of Virgil as always 'right' is highlighted by his definition of the poet as *totus ... scientia plenus* ('overflowing with knowledge', *ad Aen.* 6 *praef.*), an image shared by Macrobius and later developed by Fulgentius and in medieval culture.

Apart from its own interest as a late antique text, the Servian commentary is always worth consulting on passages in Virgil's poems. The more interesting observations are by no means always picked up by modern commentators, even those (such as R. G. Austin) who make an especial point of using the Servian material. They are not an infallible, neutral source of information about Roman customs or lost texts, nor do they embody 'what the ancients thought' about Virgil or anything else. Even Servius' knowledge of Latin, as a native speaker, is not necessarily to be preferred to that of a modern scholar (he is as far distant in time from Virgil as a modern scholar is from Shakespeare). Even where a critic may wish to disagree, however, Servius' commentary is always a potentially productive stimulus for criticism.

¹³ Cf. Keeline (2013).

FURTHER READING

Editions: Thilo (1881–87); the ‘Harvard Servius’: Rand et al. (1946) (*Aen.* 1–2); Stocker and Travis (1965) (*Aen.* 3–5); and now Murgia and Kaster (2018) (*Aen.* 9–12). See also Ramires (1996) (*Aen.* 7); Ramires (2003) (*Aen.* 9); Jeunet-Mancy (2012) (*Aen.* 6). On the manuscript tradition, see Murgia (2014). For a dissenting view on the relationship of DS with Aelius Donatus, see Daintree (1990).

Index: Mountford and Schultz (1930).

Life: Murgia (2003).

General works: Goold (1970); Kaster (1988: 169–97); Casali and Stok (2008); Bouquet and Méniel (2011); Copeland and Sluiter (2012); Garcea, Lhommé, and Vallat (2016); Zetzel (2018).

Hermeneutics: Jones (1961); Lazzarini (1984); Dietz (1995); Delvigo (2013). Varro in Servius: Vallat (2017).