

## Book Review

### Exploring Vergil

Williams R. Pp. 79. Self-published, 2023. Paper, £13.65. ISBN: 979-8397052757

Steven Hunt

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK  
sch43@cam.ac.uk



Williams is a US school teacher who has written numerous books for teaching K-12 students. This booklet is designed for students at the higher end of their Latin studies. While it does not fit the requirements of the AP Latin examination or the UK A Levels, it could perhaps be used as a bridge to those qualifications or as an alternative to them. The booklet presents a number of interesting ways to approach the text, including comprehension questions,

essay ideas, scansion practice and some creative writing and performance activities.

The booklet is 79 pages, of which pages 15 to 34 are extracts from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Books I, II and IV. These books are, of course, the most famous and perhaps accessible of the whole epic, and suitable for the students involved. The booklet has 11 parts. After a brief Introduction, there is a summary of the whole of the *Aeneid* in English. Section III is one of the more intriguing parts: here Williams suggests students and teacher make dramatic reading dialogues based on the readings from the texts. An example is given, between Juno and Aeolus. Further suggestions of dialogues are given (eg Venus and Cupid, Hector and Aeneas) and I could see these being something that students could develop in the course of reading the original texts as a way of brining the story to life with the sort of creative responses that only teenagers might be able to bring.

Section IV is a list of Figures of Speech and how to recognise them. This section flows into three extracts which Williams has chosen because they offer students opportunities to interpret the passages for their content and their poetic technique (Book I, 81-91, where Aeolus releases the winds; Book II, 234-245, where

Aeneas tells of how the Trojans took the Wooden Horse into Troy; Book IV, 522-532, where Dido realises that Aeneas is leaving). Section V is all about characterisation, with nine extracts from Books I, II and IV (Ilioneus, Dido, Androgeos, Priam, Aeneas and Dido). The extracts are between 15 and 30 lines and manageable in two or three lessons. Williams suggests that students read, comprehend and translate the passages, with a focus on the actions and behaviour of the characters involved. For each extract, 5-10 questions are suggested to support the student's enquiry.

Finally, Section VI contains a number of essay-based questions. These draw on the same extracts from the unit and there are also a number of broader questions about the collection altogether. Section VII contains some famous Virgil quotes. Section VIII talks about rhythm and metre. Section IX is described as 'Poetry to Poetry'. What this envisages is that students start to compose their own short extracts in Latin, using the ideas and vocabulary that they have encountered in the earlier parts of the booklet. I think this is the most challenging section, and would require a lot of work from the teacher, I imagine, to maintain accuracy – although I have to say that it is an innovative approach which follows SLA principles in the sense that only after masses of language input would one attempt language output, and that the language output activity should follow the input activity. And finally, there is a vocabulary list, using standard dictionary format.

In all, this is an interesting mix of things. I quite like the way that it has different texts which are chosen to focus on specific teaching and learning activities: translation, content comprehension and personal responses to poetry and characterisation. The extracts from Books I, II and IV are the most well-used and suitable for students at this stage in their learning. Rather than looking at every single aspect of a short extract, this approach means that students can appreciate the whole narrative, with deeper dips into shorter sections. This is aided by having the whole story at the start: students can 'slot in' the extracts to the overall storyline. This approach does not really fit the US or UK examinations, where close reading and understanding of a short passage and not much outside it is required; but it may be suitable for those not taking those examinations, or as a bridging activity from coursebooks to original literature. The more creative activities - dramatic dialogues and poetry writing – are ways of making the text come alive for students and may be interesting to pursue as an ongoing homework or out of class activity over a period of weeks. They also work as means for factual recall of the story and vocabulary.

In my view, while the booklet does not conform to what usually happens in examination preparation classes, Williams' sequencing of activities and suggestions for creative interpretations based on more traditional readings give one much food for thought about lesson design more generally.

doi:10.1017/S2058631024001223