



The Phoenix and the Mirror

Avram Davidson

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The first book in the Vergil Magus series. Against the backdrop of a hauntingly familiar yet alien otherworld, Avram Davidson casts the adventures of the sorcerer known as Vergil Magus. Vergil was to construct a virgin speculum, a mirror of magical properties.

The Phoenix and the Mirror Details

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From Reader Review The Phoenix and the Mirror for online ebook

Mark says

All book reviews are personal. If they're not, then they're not really reviews, but rather synopses. Screw that. If I'm going to review a book, I'm going to write about what it meant to me, how I reacted to it. Otherwise I'm wasting my time and the reader's. Anyway, digression aside, I picked this one back up on a whim, as a long absent friend. First time in close to twenty years. Which is probably why I'd forgotten how much I love it. Davidson starts with the premise that all of the tales told of the poet Virgil are true, of how he was a magician and sorcerer. He then constructs a fictional Roman empire around him, defined and bordered by the legends and tales of the empire and later times. What remains is history, but blurred, fuzzy in places. As such, it's one of those books to be read, not so much for the plot, as for the ride, following along as Vergil travels the Mediterranean, gathering materials to construct a virgin speculum, a bronze mirror to be used for divination. It's interesting how much this book had an unconscious influence on the way I think about story. I've got a project I'm working on (as I tend to have) and the echoes of world-building from this book are definitely present in the way I think of my sort of real world past, the way I try to meld history and story. Good stuff. Recommended.

Xenophon Hendrix says

I wanted to like this book way more than I did like it. Among connoisseurs of fantastic literature, *The Phoenix and the Mirror* by Avram Davidson has the reputation of a neglected classic. I was primed to be impressed.

Unfortunately, I found myself slightly bored through most of the book. I hypothesize that the problem is the detached point of view of most of the narrative. The reader is seldom allowed to see anything from the interior viewpoint of the protagonist, Vergil Magus. We, the readers, aren't allowed to know what the great wizard cares about, so we don't know what *we* should care about.

Also, a few incidents in the book happen without adequate explanation. Something happens, and the reader is left wondering just what it was. Only later is it explained. Note that these aren't mysteries that are supposed to be left unexplained until the end; these are merely confusing events that could have been rendered much less confusing with an introductory sentence.

Finally, among the faults, there are two coincidences essential to the plot that are never explained. This is simply bad plotting. An author is allowed one big coincidence to get the story rolling, but leaving any other unexplained is unsatisfying to the reader.

The book isn't all bad. The creation of the magic mirror referred to in the title is a good scene. So are a couple of encounters with legendary creatures. The author displays impressive erudition about myths, legends, and mysticism, and Davidson is noted for his style and precise diction.

I just wish the book were as good as its reputation.

Bob Rust says

The Phoenix and the Mirror (1966) opens the Vergil Magus sequence in a medieval Alternate History whose universal scholastic worldview encompassing everything from geography to alchemy turns out to be literally accurate. Vergil goes through a number of adventures in this ornately humanized environment in order to find materials to construct a "virgin mirror" or speculum to trade for his stolen virility; but the novel closes without coming to a satisfactory climax.

Laura says

What a strange little book. I don't think I've ever read something quite like it, although the ease with which every now and then some obscure esoteric medieval manuscript is cited did remind me of Umberto Eco - more Baudolino though than any other of Eco's books. A handful of magical creatures as well, just like in Baudolino. But here I think the similarities stop - The Phoenix and the Mirror is through and through a fantasy novel, with a wizard as a main protagonist but a totally different breed of wizard than what we usually get. A hard-working nerdy wizard, you see him struggling and you get inside his head and all that knowledge of his is shared with the reader. And the wizard is Virgil, the Roman poet, this inspired by medieval legends by which Virgil was a great magician, possibly immortal.

Raymond St. says

Not quite a classic; but not for lack of quality.

If there is a scale measuring drama and thunder in fantasy, Phoenix serves for a marker at the far end from Pottery, Leibery, Zelaznery and all D&D type sword-and-sorcery.

A subtle story, fascinating for the endeavor of creating a magic object. This is magic presented as actual artifice, with cost and labor. As though magic were something special and difficult. A bizarre concept.

Hadn't thought about it in ages; Avram Davidson should be better remembered.

egellantier says

a quasy reread, since i've read this book several times in russian (and, going by this time, the translator did a very decent job). a somehow disjointed story of alt!history-fantasy vergil, an alchemist and magus, going on a quest to create a virgin speculum, a magical mirror that would reflect its owner's desire, for elusive and dangerous cordelia, a dowager queen. it's a weird, dense, richly styled, beautiful book, full of weirdly dated gender fail (there's this whole sequence in cyprus that's just, no), packed with gorgeous and cleverly twisted historical and literary allusions, but my favorite part, and the reason i've re-read it, lazily, about five or six times, is the amazing competence porn in the description of the process of actually creating the magical mirror. there's an overarching plot and a political intrigue and a magical twist ending and an adventure to find some ingredients, and it's all good, but the making of the mirror, described in a loving, finicky detail is just so incredibly satisfying. you can't believe how much tension can fit into finding the proper wax for making the models, for example.

Alex Sarll says

You know how in a mediaeval painting of a classical scene, the Rome or Jerusalem depicted isn't the past we now picture, but a precursor of the artist's own age? That's where this intriguing oddity is set, a world in which there can be such a personage as the Doge of Sparta or - in the lead - Vergil Magus. The Roman poet was apparently thought an alchemist by mediaevals, and so he appears here, engaged in a great and complex work which - as Adam Roberts' introduction notes - can be seen as a representation of the novelist's own endeavour. The alchemical work, though, can be spoiled by the slightest and most marginal imperfection - something which is mercifully not true of a book, where the clumsy editorial slips and inappropriate clockpunk cover of this edition cannot outweigh Davidson's playful erudition and lambent prose. (Perhaps it isn't quite antiquity as mediaevals saw it, because some legends - not least christianity itself - seem more bent out of shape than even a village idiot would render them. But if you try too rigidly to define exactly what games Avram Davidson is playing, you'll generally come a cropper. He's pretty much the writer Umberto Eco believes himself to be)

Nikki says

I'm really not sure what to think of this. It reminds me of John M. Ford's *The Dragon Waiting*, somehow; something about the style, the density of it and allusiveness. I'm sure I missed some things by not being aware of the Vergil stories, not picking up on all the mythological references properly -- and I have a pretty good background in that sort of thing, since I took Classics.

It's a slightly different style than expected, too, I think. It slides seamlessly between scenes without any transition, it slips from direct speech into reported speech -- it doesn't make things easy. I quite liked the writing style, for the most part, but I wouldn't like it to be a common one, if that makes any sense.

The story itself... it's a quest narrative, but the quest is more about knowledge than action, at its heart. It's about making a magical object, in a context where magic isn't easy, isn't a shortcut as it can be in other fantasy works. It's a long slow process, like any other way to make something, and it requires sacrifices and effort. It's an interesting take on it.

I wasn't overwhelmingly fond of the portrayal of women -- Cornelia, Phyllis and Laura seemed pretty nebulous, and the love aspect was just flung in there -- but *The Phoenix and the Mirror* was something a little different to my usual fare. It just wasn't as good as I'd hoped.

Ivan Stoner says

I'm not totally sure how to rate this book. It took me more than three years to finish (in fits and starts). It's only about 200 pages. My wife bought a nice copy from Peter S. Beagle, who was apparently friends with Davidson and ended up with a bunch of them after Davidson died. It was a very nice present. I love it.

Davidson is wonderfully creative. The care he took in putting Vergil Magus in the Medieval Mediterranean world is remarkable.

His prose is -- interesting. I found it difficult. In fact, the entire story was a struggle.

Where an obviously smart, gifted author writes a book that feels tough but right on the edge of fascinating, this is usually a cue that I'm missing something. So there may be a different level to this story than simply Vergil building his mirror. I didn't get it. Possibly on a re-read I would, but I don't see it suggested in other reviews. It's also hard for me to commit to slogging back through this one when I have other things on my shelf.

Prediction: Davidson is an unappreciated genius who deserves to be discovered at some point, but I'm not the person to do it.

Ignacio says

La lectura de esta novela como una historia de peripecia, valorada en función de las cosas que suceden, lo más probable es que conduzca a la frustración; globalmente, más allá de sus cincuenta últimas páginas, apenas cuenta mucho. Sin embargo la recreación de la Roma de Augusto tal y como podría verse desde la Baja Edad Media, mágica, mitológica, es deslumbrante. Más si se aprecia la imaginación de Davidson a la hora de describir las calles de Nápoles, los cultos a los dioses, un Sahara mítico relleno de extrañas criaturas... y su manejo del lenguaje para describirlo, arcaico, barroco. Después hay cosas que no se entienden mucho, como las treinta páginas dedicadas a describir la construcción de un espejo, pero si se ha entrado en el juego ya no se abandona.

fonz says

Una estupenda novela fantástica de intriga que me parece increíble que no se haya traducido aún al castellano, hubiera quedado fenomenal en Alamut, entre el Wallace Breem de "El enviado de Roma" y "El puente de pájaros" de Barry Hughart, con unas gotas de la erudición juguetona de un Joan Perucho, por ejemplo.

Los puntos fuertes de la novela son la fenomenal ambientación y cómo juega con los elementos fantásticos de un Imperio Romano imaginado por los eruditos y alquimistas de la Edad Media, ejemplo es esa construcción del espejo, que me ha hecho muchísima gracia, entre la exaltación de la ética del trabajo manual y el ingenio humano, y la erudición alquímica y mágica medieval. El tramo final en el desierto y el regreso a Nápoles, que presenta una visión más amplia del universo imaginado por Davidson es muy potente y sugestiva también. Quizá los mecanismos del argumento, por imitación de la tradición narrativa medieval o por otra razón, no sean nada del otro jueves, pero hay muchas cosas con las que maravillarse en esta novela y la flojera argumental no me ha molestado en absoluto.

Sineala says

The premise of this book is amazing: In the Middle Ages, it was believed that the Roman poet Vergil was a magician. What if he really had been?

As you can probably tell, I think this is the best idea for a plot ever.

Set in a strange alternate Europe (I am not sure what time period it is supposed to be) where various kinds of magic and mythological creatures are real, this book details Vergil the alchemist's quest to make a Virgin

Speculum, which is a magic mirror that is created by making a mirror no one has ever looked into before out of ore that has never been in any other form. Naturally his quest takes him everywhere, and by "everywhere" I mostly mean "Cyprus," which is apparently where copper comes from.

The plot is interesting in that it's really not much of a plot, as these things go. If I had to describe it I would call it basically an acid trip through Roman mythology: also included are things like the cult of Cybele, shapeshifters (the werewolves of the Satyricon are mentioned), and of course phoenixes. (Phoenixes? What's the plural? Well, there's only one phoenix, anyway.) I don't think that knowing much about Vergil or the Aeneid is actually necessary; it doesn't really come up. I wish that it actually had been relevant, because otherwise Vergil could really have been anyone; perhaps it will become relevant in the later books.

Davidson's prose is lushly written to the extent where it almost doesn't matter what happens because you want to roll around in the words; there were lots of words that even I didn't know. (I suspect some of them may have been OCR errors in the ebook format, and I wish I knew which ones weren't words; some of the Latin that happens to be actual quotations is also bad, which makes me think it must be some kind of scanning artifact, as I think the author shouldn't have gotten those wrong. On the other hand, some of the invented Latin was also ungrammatical in ways that definitely weren't OCR errors. But anyway, this is just nitpicking.)

I am really of two minds about this book: I like the writing and the dreamy nature of the plot to a certain extent, but at the same time I wish it had maybe been a little clearer and more straightforward and more traditional plot-like events had occurred. I guess I can't quite decide whether I like the style or not. It reminds me a lot of what I have read by John M. Ford, especially *The Dragon Waiting* -- it has that same kind of clever, well-researched alternate-history feel to it, and it manages to induce that "I really like this but I have no clue what is going on" feeling in a way that few other books do. (Because, well, if I don't understand a book, usually I dislike it.)

I do really like the premise, though -- can you tell? -- and as the other two books in this series were ridiculously cheap for the Kindle I will definitely try them next, and hope that I don't burn out on the prose before I finish them.

William Leight says

The obvious reference point here is John M. Ford's "The Dragon Waiting", another alternate-history novel with lots of magic and style to make up for occasional weaknesses of plot and character. However, Davidson's choice of setting, the ancient world as described by writers of medieval romances (who made it resemble the medieval world to a considerable extent), is somewhat more recherche than Ford's, and that's more or less the problem with the book: Davidson gambles that he can get by almost entirely on setting and style, plot and character be damned, and loses badly. Davidson has clearly done a ton of research in order to put together a version of the ancient Roman world in which Vergil (I'm following Davidson's spelling here, though the author of the Aeneid is usually given as Virgil with two i's) is a mage living in Naples, and he is more than happy to show off what he's learned. (For instance, there's a scene in which Vergil is at a hunt and Davidson introduces a discussion of medieval hunting that screams "look at all the books I've read!": T.H. White did it much better, and far more subtly, in "The Sword in the Stone".) Unfortunately, he has not spent the same amount of time putting together a reasonable plot. Take the titular mirror: it has to be made out of brass that Vergil forges himself, so he needs to get some copper and some tin. Copper requires a difficult trip to Cyprus, full of adventure and danger, and tin comes from Britain, even further away, so one expects even more adventures as Vergil obtains some of it, but instead some tin just shows up one day: it's a bit jarring, really. Then, once the mirror is constructed, accomplishing a goal that Vergil has spent the entire first two-

thirds of the book striving towards, it is used once, giving an unclear result, and then never referred to again. These kinds of ridiculous plot shenanigans might be forgivable if we cared about the characters, but, frankly, we don't. Vergil never makes much of an impression, his buddy Clemens is nothing more than (in theory, if, alas, not always in practice) a certain amount of comic relief, Cordelia is not especially interesting as a villain, the Ruddy Man manages to be enigmatic and mysterious without being especially intriguing, the love interest would probably be more interesting if she were a cardboard cutout, and that's really about it. There's one more commonality between Davidson and Ford: they are both writers' writers, whose biggest fans seem to be other writers. When it comes to Davidson, at least, I just can't figure out why this is the case.

Margaret says

In the Middle Ages, it was thought that the poet Vergil was also a magician. Davidson takes this medieval belief as his jumping-off point and creates a Vergil who truly is a mage, in a fantastical alternate ancient world, full of sorcery, erudition, mysticism, and alchemy, where Vergil must construct a magical mirror and defeat the demonic powers which are after him. This is the first Davidson I've read, and I loved his language; this is the first paragraph of Chapter Three:

"Westward into the sea the last rose strokes of sunset painted the sky. Smoke of wood and charcoal drifted up to Vergil leaning over the parapet on his roof. Fish and squid, lentil and turnip, bread and oil and garlic, and a little meat -- Naples was having its supper before retiring for the night; though few in Naples would have all of these for supper. A few horses still thumped their way down the street below, and a single heavy cart rumbled. Horses and cart were probably heading for the great stable at the foot of the hill. Women spoke in tired voices, filling their amphoras at the Fountain of Cleo. A baby cried somewhere, the sounds of its wailing thin upon the cool air. The lights of tiny oil lamps flickered like fireflies, and here and there the mouth of a brazier glowed, redly and briefly, as someone fanned the embers or blew upon them through a wooden tube. From the Bay came the faint thump-thump of a galley bailiff beating out the rhythm for the rowers as the ship put into port."

The whole book is full of this kind of wonderful word painting. I hope I run across the other book in the series, Vergil in Averno, soon.

Kat Hooper says

ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

The Phoenix and the Mirror, written by Avram Davidson and published in 1966, is based on the medieval legend that the poet Vergil (The Aeneid) was a mage and sorcerer. Queen Cornelia of Carsus has taken hostage part of Vergil's soul. This leaves him feeling like less than a full man — he's unmotivated and impotent. Though some of his parts don't work too well, Vergil's brain still works fine, so he sets out to meet Cornelia's demand: manufacture a virgin speculum so Cornelia can scry the whereabouts of her kidnapped daughter, Laura.

It's not too easy to make a magic mirror, even for an ancient and powerful sorcerer like Vergil. His first task is to acquire tin and copper ore that has never been used before, but this is difficult in a time when the Sea Huns are prowling the waters and controlling trade. Even if he can get all the materials he needs, the actual construction is an extremely precise and delicate alchemical operation.

Luckily, Vergil has several allies: his colleague Clemens, who's like a walking encyclopedia; a crew of students and apprentices who do most of Vergil's laboratory work; a mysterious Phoenician who is willing to guide him in his travels; a strange woman who dispenses advice and prophecies as she feeds her cats; and a down-and-out Sea-Hun king who can be bribed with the promise of worshipping Aphrodite in her temple of beautiful priestesses.

Avram Davidson uses the backdrop of Vergil's quest to fill *The Phoenix and the Mirror* with some real geography, history, and science, and plenty of richly-detailed bits of medieval legends, fantastical creatures, alchemical instructions, and astrological divinations. Thus, you'll meet a cyclops, a gargoyle and a homunculus along with Roman soldiers and Sea-Huns and you'll learn the exact techniques for the construction of magical mirrors.

The Phoenix and the Mirror is beautifully written and gently and delightfully humorous, too, as Vergil and Clemens playfully stab each other with their witty banter and as Vergil manipulates his intellectual inferiors with his subtle persuasive techniques. The book begins with Vergil being chased by manticores through the sewers of Naples, and it ends with a surprise and a twist, but the middle of the book bogs down with too many details about Vergil's travels and the construction of the mirror.

Intriguing questions about Vergil remain — Where did he come from? How old is he? What are his powers? What was he searching for in the sewers? I hope these will be answered in the sequel: *Vergil in Averno*.
