



Review of Genevieve Liveley and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell (eds.), *Latin Elegy and Narratology: Fragments of Story* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), ISBN 0814204066. xiii + 288pp.

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This volume, drawing on the results of a conference held at Princeton in 2004, brings together an intriguing combination of mainly young scholars from across Europe and the Americas. For our understanding of Latin elegy, we can find value in its inquiry into the particular narrative modalities of a poetic form which still tends to be identified – reductively – in relation to its thematic content. Here discussion of the diverse body of Latin elegiac poetry is not limited to our customary ‘erotic elegy’; the editors have made a commendable effort “to cover all of the principal works encompassed in the sphere traditionally labelled as “Latin elegy”” (7 n20). Between their two contributions, Eleonora Tola and Steven Green manage to map out the possibility of a distinctive elegiac poetics in Ovid’s *Tristia* and *Fasti*, while in a revealing foray into the field of late Latin elegy Christian Kaesser does the same with the eleventh poem of Prudentius’ *Peristephanon*.

For our understanding of narratology, we can find value in the volume’s use of the theories of Gérard Genette, Paul Ricoeur, Mieke Bal and others to explore the different possibilities and modes of narrative. As the editors observe in the opening paragraph of their introduction, the techniques of narratology have more and more in recent times been

brought to bear on the reading of classical literature – although for the most part in those cases (epic, historiography) which tend towards a conventional narrative structure. Rather than integrating a series of events into a linear progression towards some point of closure, elegy returns repeatedly to the same ideas and situations – but this simply makes it unconventional, rather than ‘anti-narrative’. Michèle Lowrie observes astutely in her contribution: “often with critical frameworks, the interest of their practical applications lies in the gaps – the places where the individual instance challenges the model” (165).

We would be entitled to ask however at what point narratology can continue to inform our appreciation of elegy as a form of discourse in its own right. We need not assume that narrative is the fundamental instance of all discourse and the ways in which elegy challenges the category of narrative could be taken as its particular virtue. This is a sentiment with which I am sure the contributors to *Latin Elegy and Narratology* would agree, but there are nonetheless points in this collection where the focus on narratology seems to have them presupposing a teleological structure at some level. We could consider that the patent preference for Ovid (to whom more pages of this book are dedicated than all the other elegists put together) might be due to the fact that the narratological method favors his more coherent style to the vacillations and vicissitudes of Propertius or Tibullus.¹

For example: the first chapter of this volume belongs to Duncan Kennedy, appropriately enough as his *Arts of Love: Five Studies in the Discourse of Roman Love Elegy* (1993) seems to have largely shown the way for readings such as those we have here. Returning to former territory in this discussion of ‘Elegy and the Erotics of Narratology’, Kennedy takes an interesting new approach in the form of Freudian psychoanalysis (by way of narratologist Peter Brooks). He focuses primarily on *Amores* 1.5 to consider how elegy systematically defers the satisfaction of desire – in both knowledge and sexual intercourse – at a narrative end-point (24). His conclusion is that psychoanalysis provides us with a useful metaphor through which we can come to enjoy the “erotics of form” (31).

While I would certainly agree with this, it occurs that with only a little refinement Kennedy’s psychoanalytic metaphor has more to reveal

¹ The editors themselves (7 n20) offer the explanation that Ovid receives this much attention because his elegiac output – with the *Amores*, *Heroides*, *Ars* and *Remedia Amoris*, *Fasti* and *Tristia* – is so much broader than that of his predecessors.

about the “erotics of form”. After all, in relation to Freudian ‘drive’ – a notion which is frequently alluded to here (19, 20, 23) – a clear distinction is made between the ‘end’ (or ‘object’) and the ‘aim’. For Freud the object is, strictly speaking, a matter of indifference: rather, the *aim* of the drive is to satisfy itself simply by *encircling* that object of desire over and over again. Jacques Lacan explains in his discussion of the concept:

“If the drive may be satisfied without attaining what... would be the satisfaction of its *end* of reproduction, it is because it is a partial drive, and *its aim is simply this return into circuit.*”²

I would suggest therefore that this concept of drive can be taken as a metaphor for the elegiac meter in Latin: its primary impulse is *not* to resolution at some narrative ‘end’, but rather to attain satisfaction in this movement of endlessly circulating around the object of desire. Thus in psychoanalysis ‘desire’ and ‘drive’ are not synonymous with one another, as they often appear to be in this collection (20, 79, 256). Of the two only *desire*, crucially, is by nature narrative – in the sense that “it *tells the story* which allows the subject to (mis)perceive the void around which drive circulates as the primordial loss constitutive of desire.”³ Again, this is not contrary to what Kennedy argues in other terms, but the distinction I think has much to offer in terms of the extent to which we should understand the special ‘satisfaction’ of elegy as narrative.

In her companion to Kennedy’s chapter, Patricia Salzman-Mitchell takes Ovid’s fragmented description of the naked Corinna as programmatic of an elegiac narrative that presents its reader with ‘Snapshots of a Love Affair’ and requires them to fill in with their imagination the blank spaces left by its omissions. In her conclusion she makes the proposition that “the many gaps and lack of events in elegiac narrative stem, to start with, from a gap in the meter” (46) – that is, the missing foot of the hexameter stolen by Cupid in *Am.* 1.1. This is an astute perception, which I think can be taken further. Certainly, the Latin elegiac couplet is distinctive even from the Greek in that it is almost always self-contained as a unit of meter and meaning. But, where elegy

² ‘The Partial Drive and its Circuit’ in *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* (trans. Sheridan, 1979) 179 (my emphasis)

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997) 32 (emphasis mine)

can only capture the smooth, multidimensional texture of Corinna's body in these scraps of description, it is clear that something is always left out, missing, from the couplet's completed cycle. Thus, at both a formal and a narrative level, elegy is engaged in a process of constantly deferring its own end-point and marking out the absence of a unity it cannot possibly attain.

The link between elegy's fragmented narrative structure and the fragmented elegiac couplet of *Amores* 1.1 is one that is also picked up by Kaesser in his aforementioned discussion of *Peristephanon* 11. Credit must be given here for the inclusion of a piece on an elegiac poem of the fourth century, where most studies of elegy continue to assume that it died along with Ovid.⁴ Kaesser demonstrates successfully that metrical choice was an important feature of Prudentius' poetics – the 'mutilated' elegiac meter in this case being best suited to recounting the dismemberment and martyrdom of the schismatic St. Hippolytus. While Kaesser may be too quick to elide what is a long and varied tradition of elegiac poetry between Ovid and Prudentius, what we have here is the beginnings of a case to be made for a redrawing of boundaries in our definition of Latin elegy, to include authors who did not merely chance upon the meter even as they composed on themes that may appear unfamiliar.⁵

This is a case that Eleonora Tola makes strongly for Ovid's *Tristia*, as she explores whether "their inclusion within the elegiac genre, and especially in a sort of variation of Roman love elegy, could suggest a new and different narrative modality which could be characteristic of the whole genre" (52). In her analysis Tola too happens upon the idea of fragmentation; initially in Ovid's narrative of his journey to Tomis, which is broken up among the poems of Book 1; and subsequently, in the motifs to which Ovid returns obsessively as he describes his life in exile. With exemplary close reading of certain passages – especially of Medea's mutilation of Absyrtus in *Tr.* 3.9 (62-3) – Tola shows that the

⁴ Consider, for example, the claim made in the promotional blurb of the most recent 'big book' study, Paul Allen Miller's *Subjecting Verses: Latin Love Elegy and the Emergence of the Real* (2004): "The elegy flared into existence, commanded the cultural stage for a few decades, then went extinct."

⁵ In other words we might wish to reassess the kind of assumptions made by Martin von Albrecht when he remarks of Rutilius Namatianus' fifth-century elegy *De Reditu* that "one would have expected hexameters rather than elegiac couplets, but in that period the connection of certain meters with specific genres had loosened," *A History of Roman Literature* vol. 2 (1997) 1335

recurring imagery of dismemberment is manifested in the text at a formal and at a narrative level. On this segmentation of the narrative, she draws the conclusion that these elegies are “framed by a temporality that breaks its linear configuration and suggests rather the image of a circle” (65).

That such a circular structure could be a feature inherent to the elegiac couplet is also intimated in Benjamin Todd Lee’s contribution to the volume (197 n5). With only one chapter in this collection it appears that Tibullus continues to be regarded as the poor relation of the Augustan elegists, but Lee at least provides him with a valuable treatment. Using more traditional philological techniques to reinforce his narratological study, Lee focuses specifically on the function of the subjunctive mood in the so-called Delia cycle. His discussion of ‘The Grammar of 1.1.’ is revealing, despite some minor inconsistencies concerning the position of *soleo* – which is even cited at one point as *sedeo* – at 1.36 (200-1). From here Lee is able to identify in Tibullus’ poetry a dialectic interaction between two forms of narrative; in the indicative an external, linear narrative of public events and in the subjunctive an internal, circular narrative of subjective imaginings. Wisely, he suggests that “[l]iterary analysis should consider both forms of narrative time, before rejecting one in favour of another” (219).

A similar dialectic is at work in Steven Green’s reading of *Fasti*. Setting it alongside the other works in Ovid’s considerable elegiac corpus, Green suggests that we can recognize in this poem three distinct aspects to Ovid’s persona in *Fasti*; firstly, an experienced didactic and erotic poet; secondly, a poet inexperienced in dealing with unfamiliar subject matter; and finally, a poet in exile. The section on the second of these is only brief and the argument that Ovid “can be seen... as a naïve and... tactless interviewer” (185) is presented in such a way as to make it seem somewhat subjective. That, however, does not diminish the excellence of the third part of the discussion, in which Green readdresses the question of *Fasti*’s status as an exile poem. He takes it to be a kind of inverted *Tristia*: where in his poetry on life in exile, Ovid is haunted by his fantasies of Rome, here as he meditates on Rome’s culture and religion, thoughts of his exile are “always just beneath the surface and detectable to the astute reader” (190). Here also then we can understand the poem’s elegiac identity as defined in accordance with this relation between a linear narrative of public events and a circular narrative of private concerns.

In fact, the exchange between these dichotomous temporalities is enacted in this volume between the two chapters on Ovid’s erotodidactic

poetry. Drawing largely upon the theories of Julia Kristeva, Hunter Gardner examines how the linear progression of ‘masculine time’ relates to the delays of cyclical ‘women’s time’ in the *Ars* and *Remedia*. This is an idea which resonates in two subsequent essays by Genevieve Liveley and Christine Walde: Liveley presents the miniature narratives of the *Heroides* as ‘frozen moments’ in the advance of the master narratives of epic and myth; and when Walde takes a similar point of departure for her discussion of three soliloquies in Propertius 1.16-18, we might ask whether we can ever draw too sharp a distinction between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in relation to the complex subject positions of elegiac love.⁶ Gardner, however, argues that the *Remedia*’s direction to an active life represents the conversion of elegy to a teleology and concludes: “the *puella*... loses her powers to seduce through constant lingering and deferral, when the closed circuit of elegiac love is opened up to a greater world filled with competing ideologies” (85).

Vered Lev Kenaan, on the other hand, reads the *Ars* and *Remedia* as the complementary parts of a narrative cycle which accommodates both the pleasurable and the traumatic elements of the amorous experience. Here her essay is concerned with identifying this as a distinctively Platonic strategy, considering precedents in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* for the understanding of love as an inherently contradictory phenomenon. This Platonic context seems to me less relevant, however, than the one which Lev Kenaan uses in making a similar argument in a previous article from 2005:⁷ in this context especially, her comparison with Boccaccio’s *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* provides an interesting new perspective on elegy and its afterlife. More so than to Gardner’s, I am inclined to agree with Lev Kenaan’s argument that “the lover’s passage from the *Ars* to *Remedia* is not... a linear form of transformation in which one stage in life completely gives way to another” (160-1). Taken together, these poems do not so much open up the “closed circuit of elegiac love” as simply change our perspective on it.

The three chapters of *Latin Elegy and Narratology* which remain to be discussed here are all linked by their reflections on the means by which different narratives are constructed. In Ovid’s tablet-writing

⁶ Paul Allen Miller, of course, also drew upon the theory of Kristeva in establishing his provocative thesis, ‘Why Propertius is a Woman’ in Miller (2004) 130-159. Reference to this study is strangely lacking in Gardner’s chapter.

⁷ ‘The Contribution of the *Ars* and *Remedia* to the Development of Autobiographical Fiction’, *Classica et Medievalia* 56 (2005) 167-184

diptych at *Amores* 1.11-12. Sophia Papaioannou understands the ambiguous role of the intermediary Nape as an allegory for the process of elegiac storytelling. Shifting our attention from the preoccupations of poets to those of scholars, Mathilde Skoie's final chapter identifies a particular "narrative urge" in the arrangement and translation of Sulpicia's elegies in the 18th and 19th centuries. She closes by suggesting that the pleasure of reading these poems is "very much a *narrative* pleasure" (265): certainly, a fitting conclusion to this collection. And in spite of the position that it holds in this review, Michèle Lowrie's contribution should be understood as anything but an afterthought; with characteristic perspicacity, hers is the one essay which addresses directly the question of narratology's capacity to uncover the broader significance of a text. Taking the dislocations in the presentation of Cornelia in Propertius 4.11 as typical of how *exemplum*-narratives functioned in the discourses of Augustan ideology, Lowrie herself continues to provide good examples of the possibilities that are open to a formal analysis of ancient literature.

Given that certain important ideas (notably, fragmentation and circularity) converge across so many of these chapters it seems somewhat churlish of Lowell Edmunds to complain that he "was struck by a certain theoretical incoherence" when he attended the original conference at Princeton.⁸ We should understand that narratology, like any critical discourse – Freudian psychoanalysis in Kennedy's essay, for example – is not a metalanguage that provides some final explanation for literature. Even as the different contributors to this collection draw to different extents on the work of different theorists, we do not find ourselves "dealing with... different, unconvertible critical and theoretical vocabularies."⁹ Rather, these vocabularies represent parallel sets of metaphors which frame the various facets of our texts in different ways. The interaction between these frameworks results, in this case, in a genuine furtherance of our appreciation of Latin elegy and the features that define it as a form of discourse. For this, this cadre of scholars should be held up as an example of how Classical philology has benefited from its increased dialogue with theory in recent decades.

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⁸ 'Critical Divergences: New Directions in the Study and Teaching of Roman Literature' in *TAPhA* 135.1 (2005) 9-10

⁹ *ibid.*, 11

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