

BOOK REVIEW

Variety: The Life of a Roman Concept. By WILLIAM FITZGERALD. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. 240. Hardcover, \$55.00. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-29949-5

Evoking the triple triumph held by Octavian after the battle of Actium, Vulcan's shield in *Aeneid* Eight displays multiple ethnic groups in a wondrous and variegated array drawn from the far corners of empire. Such assortment highlights the Roman concept of variety as both an aesthetic and a political idea, an ancient precursor to our modern concept of diversity. Rich in such examples, William Fitzgerald's book, *Variety: the Life of a Roman concept*, offers a deeply engaging exploration of the classical roots and manifestations of *varietas* as an idea that circulates in multiple, overlapping discourses of antiquity—philosophical, imperial, aesthetic, linguistic—with a force-field that continues to shape contemporary thought. With a far-ranging discussion that begins with nuanced philological probing of the semantic fields of *varius*, including its Greek brethren (e.g. *poikilos*, *daidalos*), Fitzgerald unpacks the manifold ways that the 'varietas complex' radiates through different genres, authors, tropes, and historical periods. The reader encounters patchwork juxtapositions that exemplify *varietas* not only as the subject of Fitzgerald's book but also as a principle organizing his selective analyses. Through five chapters, an introduction, and conclusion, *Variety: The Life of a Roman Concept* provides provocative readings of disparate texts that call attention to a neglected aesthetic vision inherited from antiquity.

The introduction lays out the "why" of the book, challenging the normative critical pursuit of formal 'unity' in the works of classical authors, and advocating instead for a principle of "non-assimilation" or an aesthetics of variety that eschews balance and embraces the rhetorical abundance of *copia*. Chapter 1 excavates the rich veins of Greek and Latin meanings that run through words etymologically or semantically connected to the 'varietas complex' in passages of English poetry, including Matthew Arnold, Shakespeare, Pope, and Louis MacNeice. Classical authors—Cicero, Catullus, Ovid, Horace, Vergil and Plautus—serve to explicate and display such semantic range, with a focus on the visual and phenomenological meanings of *varius* and its kin.

In the second chapter on “Variety’s Context,” Fitzgerald gives an erudite and hopscotch overview of scholarly, philosophical and artistic defenses and formulations of variety, exploring particularly the conceptual nexus of *varietas*, nature, human artistry, and God. Displaying a masterful and varied range of his own, Fitzgerald juxtaposes the role of *varietas* in the theodicies of Christian texts with Vergil’s deployment of the concept in the first Georgic. Questions of aesthetic pleasure in relation to *varietas* dominate the rest of the chapter, with analysis of its temporal dimension as a corrective to boredom and *satietas*, and its visual aspect, often expressed in metaphors of jewels or mosaics, as ultimately an aesthetics of political diversity; thus, Flaubert’s *Salammbô* evokes ethnic variegation as a brilliant multiplicity symbolized by the heterogeneous sparkle of precious stones. Further examples drawn from contemporary art, whether the Haida sculpture of Bill Reid or the video installations of Nam June Paik, as analyzed by Fredric Jameson, demonstrate the relevance of *varietas* as a concept with a claim on our multicultural society. This chapter puts to rest any doubt that such classical concepts persist as hermeneutic lenses for self-reflection.

Chapter 3 homes in on three specific Latin authors, Pliny the Younger, Lucretius, and Horace, to examine how they engage variety as an aesthetic principle that shapes the world-view of their texts. Here, Fitzgerald eschews the wide-ranging analysis and broad scope of the previous chapters and focuses in depth on *varietas* as a textual strategy. For Pliny, it serves to alleviate the anxiety of a single pursuit, reinforcing provisionality and intermittency as characteristics of the elite life (88). Lucretius, in turn, prizes variety as nature’s abundance, or *copia* (recalling, as Fitzgerald indicates, the connection with Ciceronian rhetoric). The Epicurean author’s analogies between the multiple permutations of language and the variously arranged atoms of the universe are provocatively set against the verse of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The discussion of Horace in this chapter is briefer than earlier advertised, but sets the stage for the more developed analysis of Horatian poetics in Chapter Four, which examines the principle of rhetorical amplification as it intersects with the subjectivity of a first-person speaker in different genres. The priamel as the rhetorical trope of *varietas* par excellence (some choose x, others choose y, but I prefer z) produces different effects in lyric, Propertian and Ovidian elegy, didactic verse, the satires of Horace, Juvenal, and Persius, and even philosophical discourse. The panegyric verse of Statius brings the focus back to the visually aesthetic roots of *varietas*, as exemplified by the spectrum of luxuries consumed by the speaker’s wandering gaze in the *Silvae*.

Chapter Five takes the concept of the list—at the heart of the priamel as trope—and explores it at the level of genre by examining *varietas* as the dominant “organizing” feature of works characterized by the modern generic category of the miscellany. Analyzing recurrent metaphors for the genre—bouquets, meadows, etc.—Fitzgerald defends randomness and heterogeneity as the aesthetics of the miscellany, discussing Aulus Gellius’ *Attic Nights*, in addition to Martial’s collection of epigrams, Pliny’s *Natural History*, and even Horace’s *Carmina* in light of such an aesthetic.

In this book, Fitzgerald has reveled in the riotous garden of Latin letters and their afterlife, offering his readers a learned and lively analysis of the many-sided effects of *varietas* as a thematic and generic concept. If a book on variety necessarily involves ragged edges, messily defying the neat and formal evolution of a single argument, Fitzgerald’s agile handling of his own various interpretive angles brings a crisp lucidity to a fascinating subject.

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