

BOOK REVIEW

Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion. By Verity PLATT. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xviii + 482. Hardcover, £75.00 / \$130.00. ISBN 978-0521-86171-7.

In our age of IMAX movies, skyscrapers, and colossal billboards, it is hard to imagine seeing a statue and believing it to be a manifestation of a divinity. Yet when seeing Alan LeQuire's scale replica of the Athena Parthenos in Nashville, Tennessee, one of my companions started and gasped audibly. How could a plaster statue have evoked such a physical response, in a scholar of Greek sculpture no less? Was this a kind of epiphany? Clearly this is no mere depiction of a goddess; the factor of size is heightened by workmanship, setting, and materials (even if mundane compared with Phidias' gold and ivory). Yet it is an extreme case of cognitive dissonance to feel Athena's presence inside a building in central Tennessee (all due respect to Mr. LeQuire). And now that I have seen the replica a number of times, I continue to be surprised by the awesome (in the truest sense of the word) presence of this statue.

Transforming an epiphanic encounter into either image or text requires the highest levels of *technē* and *enargeia* (54). Such qualities of both ancient sculpture and ancient texts (hymns, ekphrasis, epigrams) are Verity Platt's subject. In an extended and revised version of a doctoral thesis written under the guidance of Jaś Elsner, Platt explores the formal means by which Greeks and Romans made "the gods present through acts of human creativity" (2). She expresses her thesis perhaps best at the end of Chapter 2: depictions of the gods "reveal how an active and self-conscious engagement with the ontological and theological problems raised by the mutual dependence of epiphany and representation was fundamental to religious art and its literary reception" (122). Such representations are, naturally, not unproblematic and Platt deals deftly with the ways in which artificial creations can sometimes undercut the spectacular aspects of epiphany.

Speaking most generally, this volume's argument lies in a variety of binaries regarding supernatural and "man-made," carried over different media or textual types. The book is divided into three Parts, arranged chronologically (Archaic,

Classical, and Hellenistic Greece; the Second Sophistic; Roman sarcophagi). Part III (Chapter 8) is the most narrowly defined, examining “how the relationship between epiphany, representation and *paideia*” on mythological sarcophagi was addressed in ways different from the Second Sophistic philosophical and literary evidence (27), which is explored in Part II. Individual chapters deal with epiphany in assorted settings/media: votive reliefs and early Greek poetry (Chapter 1); Hellenistic politics and sculptural production (Chapter 3); Callimachus and epigrams on sculpture (Chapter 4, in particular the Aphrodite of Knidos); Dio Chrysostom (Chapter 5); dreams and cult statues in the Second Sophistic (Chapter 6); and a discussion of Hellenic anthropomorphism in book 6 of Philostratus’ biography of Apollonius of Tyana (Chapter 7).

One of the clearest and best case-studies in Platt’s collection of visual analyses is that of Phidias’ colossal Athena Parthenos and the more ancient Athena Polias (Chapter 2, especially pp. 83–100). The question of which image was more potent to ancient viewers, which was “closer” to Athena in appearance or sacredness has been an issue since at least Herrington 1955.¹ While more recent studies² have mostly assigned numinous qualities to Parthenos and Polias based upon expensive materials and miraculous appearance, respectively, Platt more carefully articulates the shared functions of these two statues with respect to the variety of possible epiphanic qualities. Indeed these two statues illustrate the conceptual crisis of sacred images in Greek culture, the tension between “their phenomenological effect (when they are experienced as a form of epiphany) and their ontological status (that is, their material ... nature, their existence as *objects*)” (82, Platt’s emphasis). Phidias’ Parthenos might have been the very definition of *agalma*, blending as it did luxurious materials, essential iconography, Classical naturalism, and a high level of *technē*. This was essentially a hand-crafted divine manifestation. Viewers lucky enough to actually lay eyes on the Parthenos³ would have been charmed into thinking they had witnessed an actual epiphany

¹ C. J. Herrington, *Athena Parthenos and Athena Polias* (Manchester, 1955).

² E.g. A. A. Donohue, “The Greek Images of the Gods. Considerations on Terminology and Methodology,” *Hephaistos* 14 (1997) 31-45; K. D. S. Lapatin, *Chryselephantine Statuary in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Oxford, 2001).

³ One compelling question not raised by Platt’s book is the functional accessibility of ancient cult statues. How many viewers would have had the opportunity to study these statues with the same kind of diligent eye with which modern scholars can conjure up even now-lost images? Moreover, the volume takes for granted an intellectually elite viewer, one with vast knowledge of literature and art history.

as “cognitive reliability” surpassed “cognitive dissonance” (83). That is to say that the accuracy of the statue as a real depiction of the goddess (as described in literature or reinforced through common knowledge) was more apparent to viewers than the statue’s status as a man-made object. Yet the mysterious origins of the Athena Polias, combined with a (purported) aniconic appearance and olive-wood material, might have positioned it as something theologically “closer” to the goddess. The fantastic advent of the Polias, having fallen from heaven,⁴ confirms “the gods’ power to materialize” (97) in the physical world. The epiphanic nature of the more formally humble Polias was also bound up in its status of not being worked by hand, according to Platt, as well as its olive-wood material, a metonym for the goddess’ gift to the city (98).

Platt’s deftness with both literary and visual analysis, across a broad chronological range, is impressive. Yet this reviewer found Platt’s writing style to be syntactically abstruse and heavy-laden with the jargon of critical theory. While Platt’s theoretical approaches could be of tremendous help to graduate students approaching textual and visual material with similar hermeneutic aims, such students might be alienated by her dense prose and use of trendy buzzwords. One thinks of the maxim attributed to Albert Einstein: “Everything should be as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

To conclude, two technical observations and one more general: The bibliography is comprehensive and up-to-date.⁵ The illustrations are of generally good—not excellent—quality; the fifty-odd photographs are all black and white. In short, this book is ultimately a valuable exploration of an under-studied phenomenon worthy of attention, yet this reviewer fears that Platt’s style will be a hindrance to its receiving broad appeal.

FRANCESCA TRONCHIN

Rhodes College, tronchinf@rhodes.edu

⁴ Paus. 1.26.6.

⁵ I was surprised not to find the following volume in the bibliography, as it seems relevant to Platt’s aims: James I. Porter, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 2010).