BOOK REVIEW

The Ears of Hermes: Communication, Images, and Identity in the Classical World. By MAURIZIO BETTINI. Translated by WILLIAM MICHAEL SHORT. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011. Pp. xv + 278. Hardcover, $59.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1170-0.

Maurizio Bettini's *The Ears of Hermes: Communication, Identity, and Images in the Classical World* begins with the word "communication" and ends with "unlimited semiosis." These bookends encapsulate the author's sweeping project of telling how images, words, and gestures work in tandem to create cultural codes. As the playful title suggests, Hermes will hover in the background as god who facilitates—and at times interrupts—communication. Bettini is at once storyteller, linguist, and bricoleur whose work is informed by structural anthropology, continental semiotics, etymology, and psychoanalytic theory. Few classicists can glide from Ennius to Pliny, Diodorus Siculus, and the exegetical tradition (not to mention Rilke and Poe) with as much deftness as Bettini. In contrast to his more streamlined *Portrait of the Lover* (1999), this volume is composed of individual essays that he wrote over the course of several years. That the essays blend into a coherent whole is due in large part to the author's gift for compelling narrative. *Ears* is parceled into three parts: "Mythology," "Social Practices," and "Doubles and Images." Although the subtitle intimates that roughly equal attention will be devoted to the Greek and Roman worlds, the book focuses almost exclusively on Rome. The Italian original, simply called *Le orecchie di Hermes* (2000), contains several chapters that the English version omits; even there, however, only the chapter on Oedipus as "detective" centers on a Greek text.

Part 1 introduces Hermes as god of exchange (both tangible and symbolic) who presides over the interpretive aspects of conversation. While winged feet are his better known attribute, ears are also sacred to this "god of the whisper." This leads into a fascinating discussion of the Romans" somatic localization of memory. Roman monitory gestures include tugging at or tapping the earlobes (cf. Pliny, *Ep.* 94; Horace, *Serm.* 1.9). Some *nomenclatores* would "stuff" names into aristocrats' ears during the *salutatio*, while other *monitores* were tasked with

remembering the intricate details of the calendar and religious rituals, thus serving as human PDAs or "external memory banks." Hermes was thought to be present in the silence that descends when an absent topic of conversation unexpectedly appears (known as *lupus in fabula*). Bettini puts the proverb through its paces, drawing on Pliny and Greimas to analyze the phatic and semiotic implications for the sudden silence caused by the arrival of a third person in a first- and second-person scenario.

"Brutus the Fool" presents a structuralist–narratological analysis of the "false fool" in Roman, Danish, and Persian legends (Brutus, Amleth, and Khusràw), a figure who feigns stultishness to gain power. Before becoming a national hero, Brutus provokes scorn due to "low" habits like eating *grossulos ex melle* and a tendency to fall or lie prostrate. But not only does Brutus solve riddles, he also poses them—as when he offers the Delphic oracle a symbolic effigy of himself, in the seemingly hollow wooden stick that actually encases gold. The cryptologist who keeps his true nature under cover becomes a touchstone in the Roman cultural imagination. In a grace note to his discussion of the false fool, Bettini shares his wistfulness for a lost Roman mode of storytelling in which (par)etymological jokes, puns, and even "walking rhetorical figures" reside within deceptively simple stories.

"Social Practices" takes the reader on a journey through Roman cultural identity via the phenomenology of *mos maiorum*. To what extent is *mos* fixed versus flexible? What forces, individuals, and collectivities cause *mores* to change? Bettini argues for a fundamental division between *mos*, which is human-driven, and *fas*, which is divine-ordained. On *fas*, see Bettini's substantive article on *fari* (*Arethusa* 41 (2008) 313–75), one of a few surprising omissions in light of the promise of an updated bibliography. We find *mos* inscribed not only in literature but in "texts" such as exempla, educational practices, judicial and senatorial procedures, topography—in sum, the *facta* and *dicta* of the masses that contribute to cultural memory. Bettini redefines *mos* as a paradox of on-the-surface fixed conservatism that is actually quite mercurial at its core—in Straussian terms, a "hot" culture that presents itself as "cold."

In "Face to Face in Ancient Rome," Bettini transfers to Rome the work done by French anthro-classicists Vernant and Frontisi on Greek physical appearance. Roman conceptualization of faces can be mapped onto a cubist collage of anatomical features. According to Bettini, the crucial distinction between the Greek and Roman face is that the *prosōpon* is a face that "sees," while the Roman face "speaks." His thesis that *os* constitutes identity marker par excellence for Romans

is provocative, but I am not convinced that so sharp a distinction must be drawn between Greek visuality and Roman orality. More persuasive by far is his contention that *facies* represents exteriority, whereas *vultus* ("the semiotic face") encodes interior states. This is because the forehead, brow, and eyes move on their own, and thus carry considerable expressive potential (playing Varro, Bettini mentions a folk etymology from *volvo*). Discussion of the face leads to issues of disguise and "identity theft." Against a backdrop of togate sameness, and in the absence of photo IDs and DNA testing, how do I prove that "I" am "myself"? Further, what steps must an individual take in order to imitate convincingly someone else? Bettini adduces well-known examples of identity theft in the *Aeneid* (Cupid's of Ascanius; Iris' of Beroe), in addition to the figure of the *versipellis*. But not all acts of assuming another's identity involve the intent to deceive. In fact, the most "Roman" of cultural institutions is based on assuming someone else's features: Bettini reminds us that portraiture transmitted not only individual identity but also family resemblance, and, on a larger level, *mores*.

The final part of *Ears* examines "Doubles" and "Images" at Rome through a close readings of the *Aeneid* and the *Amphitryo*, a discussion of funerary practices, and a word study. Bettini returns to the issue of stolen identity in "Sosia and His Substitute." With most other literary examples, the original is whisked away to avoid contact between the original and *alter ego*, or the Double actually proves to be a twin. But Plautus' Sosia interacts face to face with the individual who has usurped his identity. What is more, doubling can cause inversion of social hierarchies. When Mercury becomes a second Sosia, the slave finds newfound freedom and the privilege of *ius imaginum*, which he could not otherwise have enjoyed. Sosia also experiences an uncanny preview of his death. In "Death and Its Double," Bettini analyzes the performative nature of Roman aristocratic funerals, where *gravitas* and ribaldry (e.g. satyr impersonators dancing the *sicinnis*) are co-present. The interplay parallels modern-day "roasting," an observation Bettini elucidates in his discussion of caricature. Doubles were especially crucial to imperial cult. We have the fullest picture of an emperor's *alter ego* in Suetonius' depiction of the *archimimus* Favor, who was so well-versed in Vespasian's mannerisms that the emperor could, in effect, continue telling his toilet jokes after death (*Vesp.* 19). This chapter represents an important addition to the English edition. In "Ghosts of Exile," the Buthrotum episode of *Aeneid* 3 illustrates the phenomenon of doubling *in deterioribus*. The city's inhabitants (Helenus, a substitute husband for Andromache), material objects (a second tomb for Hector that remains for-

ever empty), and topography (*falsa Simois*; *Xanthus arens*) constitute a miniature Troy that has been relocated to Italian shores. Bettini links the drive to create images and objects that approximate, but never quite replace, the original to individual and collective forms of nostalgia. The final chapter, a mapping of Latin *argumentum* via examples from Petronius, Quintilian, Plautus, and others, ties together the discussion of "inferential signs" that wends through *Ears*. Bettini presents a kaleidoscope of meanings activated by *argumentum*: legal and rhetorical proof; flash of insight; subject; iconographical device.

The Ears of Hermes will prove invaluable to anyone who is interested in Roman cultural practices. Short's elegant English rendering captures Bettini's fluid style quite nicely, and his translator's preface gives a helpful précis of the project's nascence and the changes it has seen from *Le orecchie* to *Ears*. Typographical errors are few. As a small quibble, some phrases could have been reworded to sound less Italianate (e.g. "Two preliminary remarks," 131; "We can begin with an example," 232). At times, resumptive elements can cause redundancy, as with the discussion of aristocratic funerals that appears in "Sosia and His Substitute" but is more fully articulated in "Death and Its Double." But the lack of continuity is really only jarring at the start of certain chapters, where a few sentences might have smoothed the individual essays into a more seamless whole. A bit disappointingly, *The Ears of Hermes* lacks a formal conclusion; however, the coda that presents *argumentum* as fable's apologue also serves a meta-level function. It tugs on our ears, reminding us of the semiotic work to be done whenever we encounter words, cultural institutions, texts.

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