

Constructing Literature in the Roman Republic: Poetry and its Reception. By SANDER M. GOLDBERG. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xi + 249. Cloth, \$70.00. ISBN 0-521-85461-X.

The central thesis of this absorbing study of literary reception and canon-formation in the late Republic is that “literary history is a story to be told, and storytelling is never ideologically neutral” (p. 209). Roman intellectuals, that is, had no less partial and tendentious a conception of what constituted Latin literature than their modern counterparts: Goldberg (G.) sets out both to trace “the process that turned poetic texts into cultural capital for Romans to collect and to spend” (p. 206), and to uncover the motives that shaped late Republican and Augustan writers’ construction of their own literary histories.

G.’s approach thus has something in common with the suggestive pages on the subject of “do-it-yourself literary tradition” in Stephen Hinds’ *Allusion and Intertext*.¹ Like Hinds, G. lays emphasis on the role of the reader in determining not only the meaning of literary texts, but what qualifies as literature at all. A central and challenging claim here is that the Roman literary canon *could* have ended up looking quite different, had scholars of the later Republic privileged, say, historiography or the *fabula praetexta*, rather than the epic of Ennius and Naevius.

Each of the six chapters that comprise the main body of the book is more or less self-contained; inevitably, this makes for some repetition, but will also aid readers interested in a particular aspect of late Republican reception. In Chapter 1, G. considers the centrality of epic in the literary scholarship of the late Republic, arguing that the prominence of Ennius was not inevitable: far from being continuously popular until put into the shade by the publication of the *Aeneid*, the *Annales* was not—according to G.—an immediate and universal success, and was falling into obscurity until “rescued” by the scholarly exegetes C. Octavius Lampadio and Q. Vargunteius. (One wonders, however, whether Suetonius—on whose testimony G.’s argument is based—can be taken at face value here: the picture painted by Suetonius of the critics “saving” the beleaguered author has a suspicious flavor of self-promoting rhetoric, perhaps suggestive of an uncritical acceptance of the tendentious claims of earlier writers.) G. goes on to argue that we should find it surprising that Plautus soon appears alongside Ennius in the literary canon: the point is usefully illustrated by an excellent discussion of evidence for the (limited) circulation and availability of dramatic scripts (pp. 47–50), vividly demonstrating

¹ Cambridge, 1998.

the very great difference between this kind of “literature” and, for example, epic, which in the Roman world was probably disseminated in textual form from the outset.

Returning in Chapter 2 to the theme of performance vs. reception of written texts, G. reviews the evidence for dramatic performances in the 1st century BC, arguing persuasively that, with the rise of mime as the most popular form of stage performance, comedy came to be experienced mainly through written texts. The textualization of drama, and its adoption as a subject of scholarly commentary, are interestingly related by G. to its canonical status and its cultural importance as a “possession” of the highly-educated elite, an item of cultural capital which can “serve to define a social group through shared knowledge” (p. 97).

In Chapter 3, G. turns from the scholarly study of comedy to the cultural “work” to which it was put in 1st-century literature. G.’s fine analyses of passages from Cicero, Lucretius and Catullus offer strong support for his important claim that comedy loomed much larger in the cultural formation of the Roman elite than has commonly been recognized. At the same time, as G. convincingly shows, the cultural importance of comedy was problematic for a writer like Cicero, because of its amorality—a genre in which “bad” behavior is rewarded and strict morality ridiculed had to be handled with care. (Less persuasive is G.’s claim that Cicero and Lucretius skirt this difficulty by invoking comic paradigms in a limited and merely superficial way: his comments to this effect on pp. 95 and 99 tend, arguably, to underestimate the subtlety of the rhetoric in the passages considered.)

Chapter 4 takes as its point of departure the famous “theatrical” simile of *Aeneid* 4.469–73, arguing that the details of the simile are suggestive of Roman rather than Greek tragedy. Roman audiences, G. argues, experienced tragedy *both* in the form of stage performance *and* in written form; this dual reception facilitated the use of tragic allusions, whether to create a sense of shared culture or to distance the narrow circle of the educated elite from the population at large. The chapter concludes with an excellent discussion of the fusion of epic and tragic models in Catullus 64 and *Aeneid* 4; it is a little difficult, though, to put one’s finger on the central point of the slightly rambling argument of this chapter as a whole.

With the discussion of Lucilius in Chapter 5, G. is on rather more well-trodden ground. He makes a good case for the importance of the satirist’s social status in enabling personal attacks on members of the elite of a kind nowhere apparent in comedy. Particularly striking in this connection is the link G. makes between Lucilius’ upper-class background—which will have freed him from the need to fulfill either the demands of a specific patron or the expectations of a broader

audience—and the innovative and experimental character of his poetry.

The final chapter moves from the Republic into the Augustan period, with a persuasive discussion of the influence exerted on the literary canon by the libraries founded by Pollio and Augustus. G. argues that Roman libraries, unlike their Hellenistic counterparts, were characterized by selectivity, and did not aim at completeness: inclusion in or exclusion from such collections could therefore have considerable symbolic significance. As throughout the volume, this general argument is supported by compelling close-readings of apposite texts—in this case, Horace's *Epistle* to Augustus, and Ovid *Tristia* 3.1 and 4.10.

In sum, this is a rich and stimulating book, notable throughout for the ease with which G. moves between broad generalizations and detailed analyses of specific passages. The author wears his considerable learning lightly: while his book is theoretically informed (though, by and large, unashamedly historicist in approach), it is highly readable, mercifully jargon-free and unencumbered by lengthy footnotes. G. is, in general, admirably sceptical in dealing with his ancient sources (the discussion of evidence for the so-called *carmina convivalia* in the Introduction, for instance, is a model of scrupulous care, and will offer an interesting counter-blast to Thomas Habinek's recently-published *The World of Roman Song*²—for which see the reviews by D. Feeney and J. Katz in *JRS* 96 (2006) 240–2, and J. Zetzel in *CJ* 102 (2006) 88–91). G. is equally sensitive to the complexities of interaction between literature and criticism. While one may find matters of detail to quibble with, the overarching argument is both important and persuasive, and students of Republican literature will find the volume equally valuable for its nuanced and stimulating readings of late Republican texts and their intertextual relations.

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² Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.