

BOOK REVIEW

Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses. Edited by SHANE BUTLER and ALEX PURVES. Durham: Acumen, 2013. Pp. viii + 230. Softcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-844-65562-5. Hardcover, \$99.95. ISBN 978-1-844-65561-8.

This is the first volume in a projected six-book series from Acumen on ‘The Senses in Antiquity’. While each of the subsequent volumes will cover one of the canonical five senses, contributions to *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses* deal with cases in which multiple senses either operated together, were conceived of as operating together, or were compared (explicitly or implicitly) in such a way as to highlight similarities between their operation (a set of situations all of which may loosely be termed ‘synaesthetic’). The chronological range of material covered (Homer to Lacan) is impressive, although in almost all cases evidence is drawn solely from literary texts (elements of James Porter’s and Shane Butler’s contributions provide exceptions). The lack of any sustained focus on sensory culture as evidenced by the material record feels like something of a blind spot in a volume whose stated subject matter (“the ancient senses”) is not explicitly limited to literature.

One of the primary aims of the volume, as stated by the editors in a brief Introduction (1-7), is to provide an account of the senses in the ancient world which succeeds in moving “beyond the visual paradigm” (2). A precise account of what this scholarly paradigm is taken to consist in is not offered, but it appears to combine (a) a tendency to focus on vision alone, at the cost of the exclusion of the other senses and (b) a hierarchical structure, with vision at the top and the other senses ranked beneath. The rejection of (a) is refreshing and well-motivated, and each of the four remaining senses of touch, olfaction, taste and hearing are given ample space in the volume (witness especially the papers of Mario Telò, Mark Payne, Alex Purves, Ashley Clements, Joshua Katz). While vision is still of central importance to many of the contributions (among them those of Mark Bradley, Curtis Dozier, Katharina Volk, James Porter), in most cases it is considered together with and alongside the other senses (especially hearing). Whether the editors’ anti-hierarchical stance (taken up by various contributors, including most notably Telò, Clements and Dozier) is equally justifiable is less clear (and the editors offer

no defence of it). Research into synaesthetic metaphor has produced convincing cross-linguistic evidence that the transfer of terms from one sense modality to another tends to occur much more readily in some directions (e.g. from touch to taste) than it does in others (e.g. from smell to taste).¹ Such evidence suggests that the sensory hierarchy is not a mere construct to be rejected as unfashionable, but is representative of real cognitive constraints on the kinds of language that may be used to describe sensory experiences. In the light of such evidence, it is a mistake to ignore the potential explanatory value of a hierarchical model of the senses.

An introductory volume to a series of books on the senses should undertake some kind of methodological or theoretical reassessment, and the best essays in this collection do just that. To give an idea of the nature of the work on offer here I focus on two of the stand-out contributions: Mark Bradley (“Colour as Synaesthetic Experience in Antiquity”) argues that colour-words in the ancient world (e.g. Greek *χλωρός*, *οἶνος*, Latin *rubor*) were not understood with reference to an “abstract prototype”, but “were primarily associated with specific, distinct objects” (131). This helps to explain why ancient colour-words are so often applied synaesthetically: the objects with which they are primarily associated do not only possess specific colours but may also possess specific textures, odors and tastes. Bradley presents this color system as fundamentally “different from that which we employ in the modern West” (140). This may be true in the cases of basic color-words (e.g. English ‘red’, ‘yellow’), but we should note that some English color-words (e.g. ‘ivory’, ‘marble’, ‘alabaster’, all of which are used ‘synaesthetically’ to evoke texture as well as color) seem to function in a way quite similar to Bradley’s object-associative model.

Ashley Clements, in what is without question the most compelling and innovative paper of the volume (“Looking mustard: Greek Popular Epistemology and the Meaning of *ΔΡΙΜΥΣ*”), points out that the idea of synaesthetic metaphor, involving as it does the transfer of a term from one sensory domain to another, necessarily requires that each term has a sensory domain to which it properly belongs (i.e. in its ‘literal’ meaning). Clements analyses the Greek term “*δριμύς*” in such a way as to show that this model cannot be applied in all cases of synaesthetic language; he argues that synaesthetic uses of *δριμύς* do not involve transfer from the

¹ Beginning with a series of studies by Stephen Ullman in the 1940s and 1950s, and later developed by J.M. Williams (“Synaesthetic Adjectives: A Possible Law of Semantic Change”, *Language* 52.2, 1976: 461-78), whose well-known diagram of directional transfer is redrawn (inaccurately: the label ‘color’ is missing from the upper right corner) by Ashley Clements on p. 79 of this volume.

literal to the metaphorical, but rather point to various instantiations of a single “supra-modal” concept operating across a number of different domains. The synaesthetic application of $\delta\rho\iota\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$, therefore, cannot be explained by appealing to a traditional notion of metaphor as the description of one domain in terms of another. While this by no means negates the value of the traditional notion of synaesthetic metaphor (we are given no reason to think that most or even many sensory concepts will turn out to be supra-modal), Clements’ paper should serve as a wake-up call to anyone working in ancient metaphor for whom the identification of literal meanings is always assumed to be intuitive or unproblematic.

Not every paper in the volume is of such a high standard, but there is enough stimulating material here (alongside Bradley and Clements, the more notable contributions are those of James Porter, Mario Telò, and Ralph Rosen) to make this worthwhile reading for anyone interested in the interaction of the senses in ancient literature.

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