

## BOOK REVIEW

*Exemplary Traits: Reading Characterization in Roman Poetry.* By J. MIRA SEO. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 220. Hardcover, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-973428-3.

What if we have been reading characters in Roman poetry all wrong, searching for psychological “roundness” in notoriously flat Aeneases and belated Oedipuses? Seo proposes an alternative method, at once familiar and innovative: that the Romans did (and we should) read such poetic figures as nodes of allusive exemplary discourse. Few scholars today would read the “I” of love elegy or satire as an unproblematic look into the soul of the author but, rather, as a persona, a web of literary and cultural associations that generate a particular set of expectations. In her Introduction, Seo argues that the cultural climate of imperial Rome would have encouraged similar readings of characters in Roman epic and tragedy.

The metaphor of genealogy is apt for describing the mechanisms of this exemplary characterization: characters “inherit” recognizable traits from familial association, literary heritage, and a complex network of allusive identifiers that signal the imitation of a clearly defined model. Yet Seo notes that this exemplary characterization need not result in mere “stereotypes and cookie-cutter schemata,” arguing instead that “reading Roman literary characterization as a form of literary allusion allows us to appreciate that the numerous possibilities and ingenious variations Roman poets perform in lexical allusion are present in literary characterization as well” (15–16).

Seo’s readings of five characters from Roman epic and tragedy are exemplary in the best sense and, with one exception, offer evidence of the utility of this approach. After a preliminary analysis of Apollonius’ Thetis in the Introduction (a strange choice as the first example for an explicitly *Roman* cultural and literary practice), Chapter 1 focuses on Vergil’s creation of Aeneas’ character and the multiple allusive models that compete to inhabit this ideologically significant blank-slate. *Fama*, *kleos*, and the literary tradition should be critical for establishing Aeneas’ heroic identity, yet *Fama*’s dark side, Rumor, consistently fills this void with

the “super-trope” of a perfumed, effeminate, woman-stealing Paris as Aeneas’ doppelgänger. Seo expertly traces the heritage of this “darkling twin” and reveals the ways in which exemplary discourse can generate positive and negative models simultaneously.

Chapter 2 (largely reprinted from Seo’s chapter in *Brill’s Companion to Lucan*) considers Cato Uticensis and the ways in which attempted imitation of his uncompromising example wreaks havoc on the characters in Lucan’s epic. Cato’s paradigmatic suicide is both prefigured and imitated in the epic by Vulteius, Scaeva, Domitius Ahenobarbus, and Pompey. Yet each of these figures fails to live up to the impossible ethical standard set by Cato himself, the unbending Stoic sage whose men are destroyed in the deserts of Libya in their efforts not to disappoint him, thus revealing the failure of exemplarity itself in the ethical bankruptcy of civil war.

Seneca’s Oedipus in Chapter 3 faces a similar exemplary crisis as he struggles to come to terms not only with his Sophoclean self but also with his place in a terrifying, Ovidian Thebes. When Oedipus finally overcomes his metatextual apprehension and “becomes himself,” the audience breathes a sigh of relief as their expectations are met – only to have the floor of decorum collapse underneath them in Oedipus’ grotesque self-blinding and Iocasta’s on-stage suicide. The strengths of Seo’s methodology are particularly evident here, revealing how this type of characterization both influences the narrative and creates room for surprising innovation.

The strength of Chapter 3 is the weakness of Chapter 4, which centers on Statius’ “Doomed Ephebe,” Parthenopaeus. Seo traces the connection between youthful beauty and death through Greek poetry before focusing on the new “pederastic genre,” arising from Ovid’s Orpheus narrative in *Metamorphoses* 10. Although the echoes between Parthenopaeus and the Ovidian Hyacinthus are persuasive, this analysis fails to reveal anything new: beautiful blond boys die untimely deaths, Statius has told us repeatedly that this will happen to Parthenopaeus, and our expectations are fulfilled. Indeed, this seems perilously close to a “cookie-cutter schema,” and one wonders why Seo chose such a dully straightforward case as one of her five.

In Chapter 5, Seo examines the *Thebaid’s* Amphiarus, the “Predestined Prophet.” Here, exemplary traits are put to better use, as Seo points to the ways Amphiarus’ predictive presence “warps” the narrative. Prophetic allusion and type identification assure the reader that the priest will be swallowed by the earth,

but the continuation of the narrative in the Underworld and Amphiaraus' subsequent transcendence to cult-figure come as a surprise.

After a brief Conclusion, Seo attaches a somewhat awkward Appendix on the figure of Hippolytus in Seneca's *Phaedra*; this appendix is apparently part of a forthcoming article, which seems a much more appropriate use of the material than as a post-conclusion half-chapter that repeats many of the themes from Chapter 4.

Seo relies throughout on Matthew Roller's influential 2004 article defining the basic features of Roman exemplarity. Yet the use of Roller's exemplarity in this new context raises questions: Does imitation demand a conscious choice of action? Or can it be inherited without awareness, by dint of literary history? In these fictional scenarios, is the author the imitator, or the character, or both? Strangely, most of Seo's case studies seem to highlight the *limitations* of exemplary models—is this a more widespread concern in Roman culture? Although Seo offers no answers to these questions, she has provided a helpful platform for discussing them. If the sign of a good book is the quality of imagined conversations with the author, this is one worth reading.

JESSICA SEIDMAN

Reed College, seidmanj@reed.edu