

BOOK REVIEW

I, the Poet: First-Person Form in Horace, Catullus, and Propertius. By KATHLEEN MCCARTHY. Ithaca, NY and London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2019. Pp. viii + 244. Hardback, \$52.95. ISBN 978-1-501-739552.

In this study Kathleen McCarthy analyzes the formal strategies that enable Roman poets speaking in the first person both to create the illusion of a real social world operating independently of the text and to communicate with readers removed in space and time. Her point of departure, explained in the introduction, is a distinction between two textual components, “story” and “discourse”: the former is the scene in which the speaker, or in love elegy the “Ego,” is a character, the latter the language which serves as the poet’s vehicle of expression. The figure of the speaker/poet is the key to this system; the two roles overlap but are not identical, and their shifting relations produce the literary effects studied. From a present-day audience’s perspective, one additional factor comes into play: the text is perceived as composed in some manner “for-us,” insofar as it still generates an aesthetic and emotive impact, and simultaneously “not-for-us,” because it is directed at the poet’s contemporaries—specifically, named addressees. In contrast to critics who view the latter as its primary communicative targets, McCarthy posits that Latin authors through reading earlier Greek poetry were sensitized to the possibility of reception by unknown audiences different from themselves and shaped their artistic products accordingly. Since she theorizes, finally, that inclusion in a written collection, the form in which Romans encountered Greek poems, radically alters the reception dynamic, McCarthy applies her critical tenets to selections from author-arranged volumes by three writers: Horace, Catullus and Propertius.¹

¹ McCarthy allows that the question of Catullan arrangement is still not fully resolved but states we can have “a high degree of confidence that he did organize and circulate some collection(s) in his own lifetime” (30 n.68). With one exception (c. 65), her Catullan examples are drawn from the poly-metric section of the *corpus*.

Subsequent chapters discuss methods of relating the poet's agency to that of the speaker interacting with his "storyworld." Citing examples from Propertius's first book of elegies, McCarthy illustrates a "conversational" technique in which the "Ego," appealing to an internal audience, uses language obviously formulated by an extrinsic creator, the poet. In contrast, a "performative" model more closely unifies the poet with the authoritative speaker: Horace's religious odes and Catullus's invectives draw readers in by employing discourse efficaciously on behalf of an implied community. Next, McCarthy looks more closely at how poet and speaker are aligned within categories of poems. In his second book of elegies, Propertius, she finds, closes the previously established gap between poet and "Ego," who is now more preoccupied with his artistic aims. Poetry as subject matter in Catullus is seen replicating the social tasks actually performed by poems in dealings between elite Roman males. Stylized autobiographical elements in Horace's sympotic odes invite readers to ponder the altered shape of public and private life under Augustus and the consequent function of poetry. Lastly, McCarthy studies poetry taking the form of a verse epistle. Propertius, otherwise concerned with the tensions between speech contained within the storyworld and speech circulating as poetry for readers, employs the epistolary form just once. Catullus and Horace, on the other hand, constantly experiment with ways to map one dimension onto the other. Although those approaches differ in other respects, both poets represent writing as deftly mediating between two partners in a communicative exchange. A brief epilogue applies the tactics of previous investigations to Ovid's books of exile poetry: by positing that the speaker's appeals to Augustus are part of the storyworld and that communication with a wide readership is their actual purpose, we better understand how Ovid conveys the impression of a "regime of surveillance" headed by a malevolent autocrat looking over the reader's shoulder.

While McCarthy's distinction between "story" and "discourse" seems a promising heuristic tool, applying it to individual poets and texts produces mixed results. On the positive side, she astutely notes that Catullus attracts general readers into his storyworld by fostering a sense of intimacy yet tantalizing them with incomplete scenarios. Her model also allows her to make sophisticated observations regarding Horace's deviations from the norms of Greek hymnic and sympotic poetry and the complexities of inferred readership in his first book of

Epistles. However, her accounts of the dynamic between “Ego” and poet in Propertius’s elegies, especially in his first book, are dense and not entirely convincing because she frequently needs to qualify her examples. As a broader objection, the part of genre in determining poetic practice may be inadequately considered. McCarthy justifies her rejection of generic explanations in a lone footnote (36 n.74); surely that option requires a fuller defense. In what appears to be another oversimplification, she pays no attention to chronology, and thus Propertius’s and Horace’s receptions of Catullus are not assessed. Though deeply indebted to Catullus in his *Odes*, Horace, as Putnam has shown,² distances himself from his predecessor’s intensity, which in turn must affect the relations of poet and speaker. Similar claims might be made for Propertius’s adaptations.

McCarthy’s investigation, in short, is often insightful and contains many provocative suggestions, but it does not answer certain pressing questions posed by Latin first-person poetry.

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² M. C. J. Putnam, *Poetic Interplay: Catullus and Horace* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006) 7–8.