

BOOK REVIEW

Self-Portrait in Three Colors. Gregory of Nazianzus's Epistolary Autobiography. By BRADLEY K. STORIN. *Christianity in Late Antiquity* 6. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 261. Hardback, \$95.00. ISBN 978-0-520-30413-0.

Gregory of Nazianzus's letter collection: the complete translation. By BRADLEY K. STORIN. *Christianity in late antiquity*, 7. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019. Pp. xiii + 234. Paperback, \$34.95. ISBN 978-0-520-30412-3.

Visitors to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam can admire a painting by the hand of the 17th-century Flemish painter Jean-Baptiste de Champaigne, depicting two of the so-called Cappadocian fathers, Basil, bishop of Caesarea, and Gregory, bishop of Nazianzus. The painting clearly emphasises the friendship between the two men: Basil's left hand is resting on Gregory's arm, while Gregory is portrayed with his right hand on Basil's shoulder. The accompanying text underscores their unity by calling them *amicitia fratres*. Indeed, Basil and Gregory went down in history as inseparable friends.

But were they? In his colorful study of the letter collection of Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329-390), Bradley Storin argues that deep-rooted ideas of who Gregory really was are not that obvious. Building further on the work of scholars like Susanna Elm and Neil McLynn, Storin does not read Gregory's letters as historical documents that give insight into the real Gregory, as he claims previous biographies and studies of Gregory have tended to do (17-25), or merely as educational material for his nephew Nicobulus, which is how Gregory himself introduces his letter collection (*ep.* 52). Instead, as he explains in the first chapter of his book, Storin aims at reading the letter collection as "an autobiographical text in which the crucial act of authorship emerges in the editorial selection and arrangement of previously written letters" (25). When read in its historical context, the letter collection, Storin contends, is a craftily edited text intended for authorial self-presentation. The letter collection should be reckoned among Gregory's other autobiographical and highly apologetic works from after his failed bishopric of Constantinople in 381, in which he tried to lay a new, non-clerical

foundation for his authority (25). It is the central claim of the book that Gregory was attempting to do exactly this in his letter collection, by skilfully painting a self-portrait. The book focuses on three “colors” of this self-portrait, Gregory “the Eloquent,” ‘the Philosopher’ and “the Basilist.”

Chapter 2 first makes the case that Gregory’s letter collection is indeed a carefully planned project, by demonstrating that the original order of the letters was most likely by addressee, with the letters to Nicobulus and to Basil placed first. However, Storin pushes his argument for organisation a step further by arguing for the existence of “dossiers” in the collection: letters clustered around Nicobulus and Basil, or letters that share a similar theme. These dossiers, he argues, are “the collection’s underlying structural soundness and coherence” (99).

Chapters 3 to 5 each discuss a component of Gregory’s authorial self-presentation. By framing himself in his letters as “eloquent” (Chapter 3) and as a model philosopher (Chapter 4), Gregory presents himself as a legitimate member of the late antique elite and by no means in need of any official position among the clergy to support his authority (137).

The most interesting color of Gregory’s self-portrait is discussed in the fifth chapter, Gregory as “Basilist.” Storin’s central argument is that Gregory entered into competition with some other bishops for Basil’s legacy that followed the latter’s death in the late 370s. While Basil is only rarely mentioned in Gregory’s pre-Constantinopolitan works, the collection features letters that stress Gregory’s long and intimate friendship with Basil. At the same time, the letters to Gregory’s rival bishops each highlight “qualities in its addressee that Gregory no doubt intended to help diminish the force of their claims on Basil and bolster his own” (149), such as their dependence on Gregory or their vices. This is a very intriguing chapter, although a few of Storin’s arguments might be too far-fetched. For instance, Storin argues that Gregory, in order to link himself more to Basil, intentionally included letters to some of the same addressees as we find in Basil’s letter collection. However, significant overlap between the networks of two contemporaries from Cappadocia is not surprising, and I am less certain that this overlap indeed “smacks of autobiographical strategy, not coincidence” (166).

Finally, in the book’s epilogue, Storin reflects on the implications of his study and underscores how much of Gregory’s memory “stems directly from his authorial self-fashioning in his orations and, particularly, his letter collection” (178).

Storin’s well-written book offers a fascinating interpretation of Gregory’s letter collection. Perhaps the main issue with the book is that Storin’s in-depth analyses cover only a selection of the letters. In the end, the book leaves the reader curious

to the rationale behind the inclusion of the other letters in the collection, and Gregory's presentation of most of his other addressees. This might offer fertile ground for future research.

As a companion to *Self-portrait*, Storin has also published the first complete translation of Gregory's letters in English. Together with the monograph, the translation will undoubtedly spark more scholarly interest in his letters. The translation stays close to the Greek, but is at the same time very well readable. The rather informal register of English nicely reflects the language of Gregory's letters ("here's how I'm doing"). A short introduction and some essential notes on the context aid the reader's understanding of the letters.

The translated letters are not arranged according to the now standardized chronological order in modern editions, but follow the arrangement of one of the manuscripts. Although this return to what might have been the original outlook of the collection is to be applauded, it makes the translation somewhat less user-friendly. Because Storin himself still uses the modern numbering in his monograph, a reader who wants to read the translation of a letter himself first has to look up the letter in the index with the modern numbering of the letters (which is easily to be confused with the index with Storin's own numbering) for the right page, instead of flipping directly to the translation of the letter. Nevertheless, with both his excellent monograph and the important translation of the letters, Storin has done scholars of Late Antiquity a great service.

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