

BOOK REVIEW

Author Unknown: The Power of Anonymity in Ancient Rome. By TOM GEUE. Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. i-xii + 364. Hardback, \$48.00. ISBN: 978-0-67-498820-0.

A *uthor Unknown* takes as its central premise the idea that unknown, unnamed or otherwise unclear authors and subjects have considerably more meaning and power in ancient texts than most philologists and literary scholars have historically wanted to admit. The author uses readings of several texts notorious for ambiguity or uncertainty of authorial attribution, audience or subject definition, to demonstrate various ways in which the obscuring or omission of names and labels can actually create meaning.

The book consists of an introduction, three sections, each with a brief introduction of their own and containing two to three chapters (totaling eight main chapters), a conclusion, acknowledgements, notes, references, a general index and an *index locorum*. The introduction, subtitled “Literature Unmastered,” argues for the utility of key terms such as “anonymity” and “authority” that inform the central approach. It also offers an overview of the rest of the book, explaining the three thematic sections, and how the various chapters and authors examined therein contribute to the theme under which it is placed and to the overall thesis. The introduction concludes with some explanation of the overall style and approach, noting, “This is a risky book. I don’t expect it to win over many readers. But I hope it will continue the important work of shepherding these texts more into the mainstream of a community ... that had often not known what to do with them, apart from exercise a scholarly mastery over them and work to *put them in their place*” (25). While the author is clear about focusing largely on a close-reading strategy, he also acknowledges risks that come with engaging exclusively with the literary text (21) when there is basis in previous scholarship, a

¹ Emphasis in the original.

hazard he mitigates with the twenty-page long references section.

Thematic section one, “The Power of the Name,” addresses the “politics of anonymity from various angles” (22). Chapter 1 examines the *Res Gestae* of Augustus, alongside works of Suetonius, to argue that Augustus strategically includes and excludes names to bolster his own imperial authority, while Suetonius includes the power of using names but also makes use of universal nameless knowledge to similar effect. Chapter 2 takes a similar idea but applies it to Ovid’s *Ibis* and how both text and author use anonymity against their victims. Chapter 3 continues with the examination of antonomasia in the *Octavia* and how the erasure of names results in multiple possibilities for the author, main character, context, date and audience; the “everyman” possibilities of the effect of removing names creates “a true play of the Unknown” (114).

The second thread, “The Universal No-Name,” includes Chapters 4 through 6. The main argument here is that these are texts using fictional authors and contexts. Chapter 4 argues that Phaedrus’ *Fables* gains meaning on the premise that the stories are fictions authored by a fictional persona attempting to gain recognition but cannot on the basis of being a nobody. Chapter 5 takes on the *Laus Pisonis* and how it takes the scenario of a wannabe poet, but anonymizes the author as well as addressee and context. Chapter 6 brings in the *Eclogues* of Calpurnius Siculus to address unprovable, unattainable and circular forms of authority.

Part 3, “When and Whence,” includes the final two chapters, each addressing two texts. Chapter 7 looks at the *Apocolocyntosis* and *Satyrica*, arguing that the former uses proverbial authority to frustrate the question of authorship and the latter uses writing in a way that “becomes a misleading form of context (or paratext) ill matching the reality it frames” (24). Chapter 8 argues that Tacitus’ (?) *Dialogus* uses commonplaces and idioms to de-personalize itself and its historical timing, while [Longinus’] *On the Sublime* uses anonymous quotation and self-quotation to transcend time, history and culture.

The attention drawn to the scholarly impulse of defining and labelling a text is a strong point of the book overall, and the approachable style renders it accessible to a variety of levels. However, the more casual nature of the analysis leads to some problems, most notably some inconsistency in translating the Latin and occasional Greek. For example, when analyzing the *Apocolocyntosis*, a three-line description of Phoebus presented in a text-block is translated, but a single line

concerning Claudius quoted on the same page is left untranslated (see page 207). This might cause difficulty for someone with limited knowledge or experience with the original language.

Similarly, there are places where scholarly context is assumed or under-developed. For a scholar familiar with the scholarship this may not be an issue, but that may not apply to every reader. For example, early in the chapter considering the *Laus Pisonis*, the author claims that “The scholarship on the *LP* is a stunning example of the kind of historicist mania that this book is doing its best to offset, if not overhaul” (144). Without contextual elaboration, anyone but a specialist in Imperial-era panegyric or possibly satire might struggle to appreciate the argument based on the literary text alone. In fairness, the end notes do provide some scholarly background, but it is too brief to fully support as broad a claim as “stunning example of historicist mania.”

Author Unknown has a lot to offer, especially to junior scholars, in terms of methodology for approaching a problematic text and use of close reading, yet these are the readers who might benefit from more direct engagement with scholarly context. More advanced scholars could also benefit from the proposed approaches, but are less likely to appreciate the more casual treatment of scholarly context. As such, *Author Unknown* is at its worst an intriguing thought experiment, and at its best a potentially revolutionary reminder of the importance of recognizing what knowledge we do have versus the information we lack.

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