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Dynamics of marginality: liminal characters and marginal groups in Neronian and Flavian literature

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Preview

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The dynamics of marginality have emerged as an important concept in contemporary literary criticism. Broadly speaking, the concept has usually been applied to refer to inequality experienced by an individual or a group in a particular context at a given time in relation to a ‘centre’ with a set of core elite ideological values, power structures, cultural conventions, and social norms. As it pertains to literature, the concept of marginality often refers to individuals or groups who are depicted as being separated from the hegemonic or elite classes due to their social status, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, geographical location, or any other aspect of their identity.

Dynamics of Marginality is really the first book on marginality in classical texts, since the recently edited volume of Marco Formisano and Cristina S. Kraus titled *Marginality, Canonicity, Passion* (Oxford 2018) is more concerned with the concept as it pertains to the development of the classical canon (cf. pp. 3–4) and its reception, including the employment of ‘marginal’ texts by classicists as a possible means of renewing interest in the discipline along the lines of reception studies.^[1] But *Dynamics of Marginality* aims to explore the use of marginality *per se* in classical texts. According to the editors Konstantinos Arampapaslīs, Antony Augoustakis, Stephen Froedge, and Clayton Schroer, the objective is to situate this concept within the Neronian and Flavian periods and within modern Latin literary criticism (p. 1). The publisher’s blurb declares that the main focus of the collection of essays is on ‘marginal’ voices, that is, ‘underappreciated authors and critical voices’, with a view to understanding how such writers and voices are presented in relation to the themes of each work discussed. Although the chapters have not been formally arranged into sections, they may be categorized into four parts, as virtually suggested by the editors (cf. pp. 4–6): the Introduction and Victoria Pagan’s discussion of marginalia (2 chapters); marginality as a theme associated with Roman country life (3 chapters); marginality in Petronius’ *Satyricon* (2 chapters); and the marginalization of figures in Silius Italicus’ *Punica* (2 chapters).

The Introduction (pp. 1–8) commences by providing an overview of the concept of marginality in Latin literature and modern criticism before considering the use of its root *margo* in ancient literature (pp. 1–3).^[2] The four editors argue that marginality becomes increasingly common in imperial Latin literature, with Ovid being cited as a prominent ‘marginal’ writer in the sense of his exile by Augustus to Tomis and his exilic poetry (p. 3). They further mention the suggestion of Lowell Edmunds that canons can change over time and a resurgence of interest in a particular

author such as Silius Italicus can raise a ‘marginal’ writer to ‘canonical’ status (p. 4 n. 10).^[3] At a base level marginality can involve marginalia or comments written in the margins of manuscripts, with these comments serving as potentially elucidative sources of information on the text itself. After these four pages of introductory material, summaries of the eight chapters are provided (pp. 4–8). The discussion of marginality and Philo of Alexandria by Pagán is a critically appropriate way to follow up on the Introduction, since she commences her chapter by examining a gloss of *impudicitiam* in Tacitus’ *Annales* 6 as a way of reading the text of Tacitus and of opening up possibilities for the reconstruction of lost parts of the work. Pagán goes on to suggest that the Philo can be regarded as a “paratext” since he is tenuously positioned between Roman and the alien as well as Jewish and the ‘other’, in addition to his historical proximity but physical and social distance from the Rome of Caligula.

In part two, Eleni Manolaraki, Jonathan Master, and Paul Roche explore marginality as a concept associated with Roman country life in the elder Pliny’s *Natural History*, the anonymous *Moretum*, and Persius’ *Satires*, respectively. Manolaraki maintains that Pliny applies the act of ‘grafting’ to what she terms ‘botanical politics’ and gives the example of Vespasian, whose life is reflected in grafting through being implanted onto the Julio-Claudian line as well as his policies of embedding diverse social and ethnic groups and provincial areas such as Spain and Syria into the Roman empire. Master focuses on the physicality, sensory experience, and difficult lives of the marginalized figures of Simulus, a poor farmer, and Scybale, his African female companion. While the image of Simulus hard at work, specifically his baking of bread, is reminiscent of the divine Hephaestus/Vulcan, he is still portrayed as a sweaty and undignified labourer who along with Scybale struggle to survive on a daily basis. In the final chapter of this triad, Roche explores the marginalized identity of the speaker of Persius’ *Satires*. Roche contends that Persius’ self-identification as a *semipaganus* (a half-rustic) situates him at the periphery of Rome’s community and rural boundaries. This social isolation is matched by Persius’ own marginalized position in respect of contemporary Neronian poetic sensibilities.

In the third section, Christopher Star and Konstantinos Arampapaslis examine the concept of marginality in Petronius’ *Satyricon* as manifested on both the human and divine levels. While the figures of the *Satyricon* are obviously marginalized figures, Star avers that the law assumes an important role in the delineation of marginality in the novel. This applies particularly to Encolpius, whose criminal status and the violation of human and divine laws drive him to wander from one marginal setting to another. Arampapaslis argues that Petronius employs the marginal deity of Priapus as a major deity in the *Satyricon*. Encolpius is one character among many in the marginalized world of the *Satyricon* and, according to Arampapaslis, his wanderings perhaps are the result of Petronius’ attempts to depict the contemporary anxieties of such fringe figures who wandered from place to place in search of a better life.

The fourth (and final) part features two essays by Theodore Antoniadis and Angeliki Roupou on the marginalization of certain characters in Silius Italicus’ *Punica*. Antoniadis presents arguments that Silius employs the major figure of Hercules at the margins of the *Punica*’s narrative and that he functions as a reference point for judging characters such as Scipio positively and Hannibal negatively. Antoniadis further maintains that when Silius adduces an example of a positive judgement of Hercules through the hero’s assimilation with Scipio—though Silius’ representation of Scipio is more nuanced and ambivalent than this association suggests on the surface^[4]—he still remains a marginal figure. Roupou examines the role of Hannibal in the *Punica* and notes that Hannibal is established as a central figure in the first book and gradually moves from the margins of his ethnic and geographical identity to the centre of the narrative and to Rome. Hannibal becomes the focus of the *Punica*, but he is pushed to the margins of the poem at its end when he leaves Italy to return to Carthage and eventually becomes a mere spectator of events, at which point the boundaries between Roman and Carthaginian are dissolved (pp. 148–150).

As the four editors of this volume note (p. 8), marginality is an inherently protean concept, which means that few writers (at least in this collection) identify the same geographical or ideological margins. However one describes the phenomenon, there is no doubt that Roman writers used ‘marginality’ and related concepts as a means of presenting various social and ideological issues.

Marginality in literature can serve a number of functions, including to challenge or undermine the dominant narrative, to amplify marginalized or suppressed voices, and to encourage the reader to reassess critically the prevailing power structures and societal norms behind the text. The editors and contributors mention various kinds of marginality—for example, ethnic, geographical, topographical, spatial, social, ideological, cultural and even aesthetic—that not only potentially can serve these functions but also be referred to by other critical terms. One of the more common types of marginality that is cited in the volume is geographical in nature, for example, in the final chapter by Roumpou on Silius’ *Punica* (pp. 138, 141, 149–150), though this kind can also be described as ‘geographical distancing’. Where this strategy becomes especially significant in the *Punica* is when Silius uses it to project Rome onto foreign and Italian cities and their inhabitants to comment upon historical events and Roman actions, political circumstances and values.^[5]

In the short Introduction the bibliographical citations are selective rather than comprehensive.^[6] Commendably, however, instead of including individual bibliographies at the end of each chapter, the editors place them in a cumulative Bibliography, which helps to give the volume the sense of an integrated whole, as in the case of a sole-authored monograph, instead of nine disparate discussions. On the other hand, abstracts appear at the beginning of each chapter, which conveys the feel of an academic journal. These information in these abstracts is incorporated into the Introduction and therefore did not need to be repeated. While including abstracts at the beginning of each chapter provides an easy means to check their individual contents, anyone purchasing a single chapter will also need to buy the cumulative Bibliography (pp. 157–67). In addition to the Bibliography, there is a List of Contributors (pp. 153–34), a short General Index (pp. 169–70) and an Index Locorum (169–76). The majority of contributors include previous English prose translations of both Greek and Latin verse and prose passages instead of their own translations. Typographical errors are rare (e.g., ‘Roupou’s focuses’, p. 7).

While there are four editors of a book that contains only eight chapters (excluding the short co-authored Introduction), only one of which is actually written by an editor (Arampapaslis), this can be explained by the fact that three of the editors were students of the fourth editor (p. v). In this sense, the production of this volume represents an enormous compliment to Augoustakis, the senior editor, who inspired his students to produce this volume. As the four editors themselves suggest (p. 8), the innovative nature of *Dynamics of Marginality* and the sophisticated arguments of its individual contributions doubtless will serve as the inspiration for other volumes on marginality during other periods of Greek and Latin literature.

Authors and Titles

Konstantinos Arampapaslis, Antony Augoustakis, Stephen Froedge, and Clayton Schroer, ‘Marginality in Neronian and Flavian Literature’

Victoria Emma Pagán, ‘Marginality and Philo of Alexandria’

Eleni Hall Manolaraki, ‘Grafting and the Marginal in Pliny’s *Natural History*’

Jonathan Master, ‘In the Realm of the Senses: Simulus’ Experience in the *Moretum*’

Paul Roche, ‘Satire from the Margins: The Periphery in Persius’ *Satires*’

Christopher Star, ‘Crime and Punishment: Law and Marginality in Petronius’ *Satyricon*’

Konstantinos Arampapaslis, ‘Much to Do with Priapus: From Religious Margins to the Center of Petronius’ *Satyricon*’

Theodore Antoniadis, ‘Marginalizing Exemplarity? Hercules in Silius Italicus’ *Punica*’

Angeliki Nektaria Roumpou, ‘Between Life and Death: Hannibal at the Center of the Margins in Silius Italicus’ *Punica*’

Notes

[1] Arampapaslis *et al.* cite (pp. 3–4) the study of ‘minor’ Latin poetry by L. Edmunds, ‘Toward a Minor Roman Poetry’, *Poetica* 41.1–2 (2010) 29–80, but Edmunds’ notion of ‘minor’ literature is strictly different from the classical writers’ use of ‘marginality’ explored in the contributions to *Dynamics of Marginality*.

[2] The very first sentence asserts that first-century CE Latin literature ‘celebrates imperial expansion and contraction’, though are there texts that really ‘celebrate’ the latter given that the Roman empire was still to reach its greatest extent under Trajan in 117 CE?

[3] Arampapaslis *et al.* also state (p. 4 n. 10) that the comment of Edmunds (above, n. 1) about Silius ‘seems prophetic given the current renaissance of studies on the *Punica*’, though evidence of Silius’ critical standing as a poet has increased gradually since the middle of the twentieth century and accelerated in the last decade of the twentieth century; on Silius’ reception and rehabilitation, see W. J. Dominik, ‘The Reception of Silius Italicus in Modern Scholarship’, in A. Augoustakis (ed.), *Brill’s Companion to Silius Italicus* (Leiden: Brill 2010) 425–47, published in the same year as Edmunds’ article.

[4] On the ambiguous depiction of Scipio, see, e.g., W. J. Dominik, ‘Civil War, Parricide, and the Sword in Silius Italicus’s *Punica*’, in L. D. Ginsberg and D. Krasne (eds.), *After 69 CE: Writing Civil War in Flavian Rome*, Berlin/Boston 2018, 271–3.

[5] On geographical and other types of ‘distancing’ in the *Punica*, see Dominik (above, n. 4) 272–5.

[6] A case in point is the first footnote in the Introduction (p. 1), where a host of bibliographical references on the *sphragis* of the *Thebaid*, which enjoins the epic to follow in the footsteps of the *Aeneid* ‘at a distance’, could have been provided between the mention of Hardie 1993 and Gervais 2020.