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Nora Goldschmidt, *Afterlives of the Roman Poets. Biofiction and the Reception of Latin Poetry* (Classics after Antiquity), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. xviii + 227, ISBN 978-1107180253, £75

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This interesting book has its origins in the ERC-funded project ‘Living Poets: A New Approach to Ancient Poetry’ at Durham University (p. xv), which explains its approach to reception from the point of view of reaction to the ‘lives’ of ancient authors, as known, inferred or imagined. In line with this framework, the volume not only provides case studies analysing specific aspects of reception in relation to a selection of Roman poets, but also investigates the concept of ‘biofiction’. As set out at the start (p. 1): ‘This book is a manifesto at heart. It argues for the recognition of a distinct mode of the reception of Roman poetry by which poetic texts are read fundamentally in terms of the imagined lives of their authors.’ To explore how a certain image of the figures of ancient

authors are created in reception on the basis of information from their own works, biographical sources and fictional elements, the book adopts the term ‘biofiction’, developed from the expression ‘fiction biographique’ by a French scholar (p. 4): this label acknowledges the large amount of fiction in later writing about the lives of ancient authors and the sometimes deliberate blending of historical reality (or what can be regarded as such) and fiction in such texts.

An ‘Introduction’ (pp. 1–27), setting out the methodological and conceptual context, is followed by five main chapters and a brief ‘Post-Mortem’ (pp. 185–90) in place of a conclusion, in addition to the standard academic apparatus at the beginning and the end of the volume.

The five main chapters deal with different formats of reception of different Roman poets in in different periods (in chronological order). The first chapter, ‘Medieval Ovids’ (pp. 28–55), looks at the reception of a poet for whom no ancient biography exists, but whose own works include a good deal of material for biofictional reception; the chapter considers particularly ~~on~~ how this material was deployed in the medieval *accessus* tradition and in the thirteenth-century poem *De vetula*. The second chapter, ‘Staging the Poets: Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster*’ (pp. 56–84), is the only one that does not take its starting point from the figure of a particular poet but rather from a specific work of the early modern period, a play (first performed in 1601) responding to the lives of several Roman poets, including Virgil, Tibullus, Horace and Ovid. The third chapter, ‘Lucan and Revolution’ (pp. 85–129), looks at the use of Lucan’s *Bellum civile* in the time of the English Civil War and up to the French Revolution. The fourth chapter, ‘Lucretius and Modern Subjectivity’ (pp. 130–55), presents Victorian reactions to Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*: engaging with this work enabled writers of the period to explore discussions on the relationship between religion and science and on issues of psychology and physiology. The fifth chapter, ‘The Death of the Author: Herman Broch’s *Der Tod des Vergil*’ (pp. 156–84), moves to the twentieth century and to reactions to Virgil: it studies the reception of Virgil in a modernist novel, again focusing on a single example.

Overall, this book offers a wealth of interesting observations of detail on the medieval, early modern and modern works investigated, as the novel approach of a ‘biofictional’ perspective enables studying these writings from a distinct

perspective, leading to new insights and clearer descriptions of previous observations. For instance, it had already been noted that Matthew Gwinne's play *Nero* (1603) includes a scene showing Lucan's death, partly building on Tacitus's account in the *Annals* and partly on Lucan's own *Bellum civile*, as the utterances of the character Lucan consist almost completely of quotations from the poem (highlighted also by Gwinne's marginal notes). A 'biofictional' approach can provide a label for the compositional method used and illustrate not only how the scene is an interesting example of intertextuality, but also how such a presentation of an important section of Lucan's biography contributes to the play's "'resistant' voice' (pp. 95–9).

Beyond the interpretation of individual texts, a more significant contribution of the book in a broader context might be the detailed exploration of the concept of 'biofiction' and the testing of the usefulness of this concept for the study of the reception of ancient works, achieved by looking at a series of examples. It is noteworthy that this concept emerged after 'The Death of the Author' (Roland Barthes, 1967) had been proclaimed; yet, obviously, the 'author' recreated and studied in such a way is not the 'historical author', and the portrayal of the 'author' in the later texts is still independent of the original creative process. Thus, one could argue that the concept of 'biofiction' could only arise on the basis of preceding developments in literary theory.

True to its title, the book concentrates on the aspect of 'biofiction' and on demonstrating that '[f]ictional life-writing (or "biofiction")... is add space before ... a core mode of the reception of Roman poetry' (p. 3); thus, it looks at the texts selected from that perspective, ignoring other elements. While one might sometimes wish for a broader discussion of the intriguing works presented, such an expansion might have watered down the book's aim and focus. There could have been more justification of the selection of case studies and more discussion of why these are particularly telling, though, altogether, they provide a good overview of the guises in which 'biofiction' can appear and what kinds of insights this approach can yield for reception in the various historical and intellectual contexts.

The final section acknowledges that the case studies looked at are 'test cases': 'Each episode stands at the centre of a cultural history of biofictional reading that testifies to the reception of Roman poetry as a life-centred enterprise, and

to the role of Roman poetry in the history of biofictional life-writing.’ It is also pointed out that the material could be expanded to include other types of artists from the ancient world (e.g., philosophers, orators, historians, visual artists) and to investigate examples of reception that are less centred on the West and Europe (pp. 185–6). It is hoped that this call will be followed by future research. For only if a wider range of test cases is studied – organized systematically, for instance, by period or region – can it be shown to what extent the concept of ‘biofiction’, stimulatingly presented in this book, is a generally valuable approach for the study of the reception of ancient authors, demonstrating when and where the ‘biofictional’ reception of particular authors was popular and what kinds of forms were prominent.

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