

REVIEW

JEROME AND CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

Karsten C. Ronnenberg, *Mythos bei Hieronymus. Zur christlichen Transformation paganer Erzählungen in der Spätantike*. Hermes Einzelschriften, 108. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015. Pp. 386. Hardback, €62.00. ISBN 978-3-515-11146-1.

Ronnenberg's book is the first to be devoted exclusively to documenting Jerome's use of mythology—an undertaking which R. accomplishes with generally commendable exhaustiveness, if sometimes somewhat exhaustingly. On the first page of the book's 'Introduction' Jerome is introduced to us as in 392 'der 45-jährige Hieronymus aus der illyrischen Provinz Dalmatia': such dogmatism would seem injudicious, since both date and place of Jerome's birth are moot.¹ The same first page also gives us R.'s first translation of a Latin text (*memoriae et tragoediae vestrae incestis gloriantur, quas vos libenter et legitis et auditis*), which R. misrenders as 'Eure Geschichtswerke und Tragödien prunken mit Inzesten, von denen [but *quas!*] ihr gerne lest und hört'. To quote a proverb dear to Jerome's own heart: *in portu naufragium!* Such mistranslations recur with bodeful frequency throughout this book. One is accordingly tempted to quote Jerome again: *hoc unum scio non potuisse me interpretari nisi quod ante intellexeram*.

Ch. 2 then asks 'What is myth?' (old faces like Jane Harrison and Sigmund Freud) and then 'What do Christians make of it?' (from scoffs to spoliation). In this latter section ancient texts are duly cited—beg pardon, 'mis-cited'. Typos aside, each of the first half dozen pages (29–34) contains a translation that is at odds with the particular text given (e.g., on the last of these pages (34) the antepenultimate word of n. 67 is *deceptus*, but the translation instead renders the variant *invitus* ('ungern')). On the next page (35) *illa* is then twice mis-cited as *ilia*.² On the next page (36) the same lingua-esque *lapsus linguae* (*ilia* for *illa*), which would titillate smutty-minded Jerome, is then repeated a third time. *Und so weiter*.

In ch. 3 R. serves us up the *crambe repetita* of 'Leben und Werk'. Here R. is not always as dab-handed a servitor as might be desiderated. An example of

¹ Cf. (e.g.) M. H. Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago and London, 2006) 268–9.

² One cannot resist pointing out that this penile *lapsus calami* is not sans a certain apropos, since *calami* itself is a homonym of *cala* (*correptio iambica*) *mi* ('loosen your pussy for me!'; cf. *OLD*² s.v. *calo*² 2).

this cack-handedness may be cited from p. 55, where it is asseverated that Jerome travelled from Cyprus to Jerusalem ‘über Konstantinopel’, which is travelogical cack: naturally he went instead via Antioch (*Adv. Rufin.* 3.22). Ch. 4 then turns to the question of Jerome’s own attitude to myth. In the first section, which deals with the terminology Jerome uses in this connection, the sub-section on ‘verbs’ gives the example *Lerneum anguem fabulae ferunt*, which is translated as ‘Die Mythen berichten von der Lernäischen Schlange’ (69). Here, however, *ferunt* does not mean ‘berichten von’, but simply introduces an A. c. I.: *Lerneum anguem fabulae ferunt ... pullulasse serpentibus*. Ch. 5 then treats myth in the Vulgate—an interesting chapter that ranges argutely from comely Sirens to grody onocentaurs (but re the latter *aliquid humanum sapiunt* does not mean ‘als irgendwie menschlich zu begreifen sind’ (95), but ‘show some human sense’ (cf. *OLD*² s.v. *sapio* 6a)). On p. 98 two gaffes in one Hebrew word, while the same sentence goofs again by giving the nominative of *cubiculis* as *cubiculi*.

Ch. 6 is the book’s *pièce de résistance*: ‘Die Nutzung mythischer Referenzen durch Hieronymus’. This biggest slice of the cake is itself divvied up into no fewer than half a hundred meticulously labelled sub-slices, which contain much that is solidly nutritious (however for more muff of a philological kind cf. (e.g.) the very first sub-slice (107–8: *religatum* [sic] *ad saxum Andromedae spectatricem*), where nonsensical *religatum* should be *religatae* and *spectatricem* qualifies Joppa, not Paula). Some general remarks. In sub-slicer 6.3.1.3 (p. 160) R. fails to realize that in *Niobam ... in lapidem et in diversas bestias conversas alias ut Hecubam in canem commutatam* (*Epist.* 60.14.4) the entire sequence *conversas alias ut Hecubam in canem* is merely Hilberg’s supplement (‘explere conatus sum’), which is dismissed as ‘highly questionable’ by Scourfield’s commentary (p. 190), who instead deletes the preceding words (*et in diversas bestias*) as a mere marginal gloss: thus R.’s lengthy disquisition (160–2) on Hecuba’s mutation into a dog barks up the wrong tree. More such misdirected latration meets the ear in 6.6.2.4 (‘Kerberos, Skylla und andere Kläffer’), where the issue is the preface to the sixth book of Jerome’s Commentary on Ezekiel: *haereditariis ... catulis derelictis* (sc. after death of ‘Scylla’), *qui ... genitricis antiquae et pellacis Ulixi venena non deserunt*. In quest of the identity of *genitricis* in conjunction with *pellacis Ulixi* R. leads us on a three-page wild-goose chase (286–8) that chevies inconclusively from Venus, Rhea, and Cybele to Medea and Circe with their appurtenant lore. Here Jerome’s source is however *Adv. Rufin.* 3.22 (*Scyllaeo ... pellacis Ulixi*; not mentioned by R.), of which *genitricis antiquae* (= Scylla) *et pellacis Ulixi* is merely a typical *Selbstzitat* (for ensuing *venena* cf. *In Ier.* 3 *praef.*: *Scyllam ... Ulixes ... venena*).

After said chimeric Hecuba the next sub-segment but three (6.3.2.1) is devoted to *Epist.* 54.9.3, where R. misrenders *superare quod natus sis in carne, non carnaliter vivere* as ‘zu überwinden, was dir im Fleisch angeboren ist, also nicht fleischlich zu leben’. The comma should however be placed before *in carne*, not

after it: here we have instead an elegant paradox (*in carne non carnaliter*), while *nasci* bears the more effective sense of ‘to be by nature’.³ Similarly in sub-cut 6.6.1.2, which concerns itself with the celebrated *subiectio* aimed at ‘Onasus’ (*Epist.* 40.2.3), R. misrenders *quadrante dignam eloquentiam nare subsanno* as ‘Ich mache mich über die Beredsamkeit lustig, die einer Pfennignase entspricht’ (237; cf. the misguided discussion on 241). In fact the meaning is instead ‘I turn my nose up at twopenny-halfpenny eloquence’.⁴

Sub-sections 6.4.2.1–10 all deal with ‘Der Frauen-Katalog in der Streitschrift gegen Iovinianus’. Here R. fails in every case to use Bickel’s critical edition of this pericope, but instead quotes the pediculous *Patrologia* (in the last text cited (218) fifteen discrepancies in six lines; for lousy translation cf. (e.g.) the first text cited (200), where it is Camilla who comes to Turnus’ aid, not, as R. misrenders, the other way round). One may round off by hooking up with the Lernaean Hydra mentioned *in limine* re ch. 4. Under this sub-heading (6.6.2.2: ‘Während die Lernäische Bestie wütet’) misunderstanding of the Latin pullulates in aptly hydra-headed fashion: for example (268) *quod in psalmos quadraginta ferme millia versuum supradicti Origenis ad sensum verterit* does not mean ‘weil er schier Tausende von Zeilen des besagten Origenes für seine eigenen Gedanken über 40 Psalmen nutzte’, but ‘because he gave a free translation of well-nigh 40,000 lines of said O. on the Psalms’. Ch. 6 ends shortly afterwards. Following all its cake (and ale) the concluding ch. 7 offers a eupeptically brief *Schlussbetrachtung*. An *Anhang* then lists all the mythological references in Jerome that R. could find. An impressive bibliography wraps the volume up.

As a final and representative instance of R.’s *modus operandi* one might adduce the antepenultimate sub-slice from Lucullan ch. 6 (6.6.2.5: ‘Vigilantius und der Monsterkatalog’). Here a herculeanly exhaustive enumeration of the seven theses of Vigilantius is followed by a similarly exhaustive enumeration of the twelve labours of Hercules himself, though Jerome himself mentions but a sample (why Geryon is put last puzzles R. (294: ‘Nicht ganz einleuchten will ...’): the reason is the resultant antithesis between Geryon’s Spain and Vigilantius’ Gaul). One of these Herculean labours involves the horses of Diomedes, to which Jerome refers at *Epist.* 22.28.6. R. fails to notice this reference, where Jerome is evidently alluding to *Aen.* 1.752 (cf. Serv. *ad loc.*). R.’s failure to mention this passage is particularly unfortunate, since Jerome’s very next chapter damns the pagan poet he here copies: the inconsistency is typical. This condemnation of Virgil is itself followed immediately by the famous dream, in which Jerome forswore *gentiles litterae* with their mythological *matériel*. Repeated breach of this oath is famously cast in Jerome’s teeth by Rufinus, who makes

³ Cf. the present writer, ‘A Note on Jerome, *Epist.* 54.9.3’, *Eranos* 95 (1997): 1–9.

⁴ Cf. the present writer, ‘Whose Nose and Whose Knees? Two Notes on St. Jerome’, *Orpheus* n. s. 24 (2003): 1–6.

clear (as R. does not) that the sort of belletristic *gentilitas* in the aforesaid reference to Diomedes gets on his nerves. This Jeromian need to show off with orotund erudition is however a key to his *penetralia mentis: Geltungssucht*.

Au bout du compte, notwithstanding the above-mentioned *Haare in der Suppe*, R. deserves our thanks for giving us this *Hausmannskost*—but he is no Housman.

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