



IMPOVERISHED AESTHETICS

New Approaches to Marginality
in Latin Literature

ABSTRACT PROGRAM

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OCTOBER 20-22, 2022

• table of contents •

"How to Talk to Paper About Poetry: Materiality and Aesthetic Judgment in a Catullan Diptych"	3
by EMILIA BARBIERO (New York University)	
"The Sublime in Seneca and Statius: Aesthetics, Excess, and the Canon"	4
by THOMAS BOLT (Lafayette College)	
"The Way and Its Poor: Bareness of Life from Seneca to Jerome"	5
by ALEX DRESSLER (University of Wisconsin-Madison)	
"Couture's <i>The Romans of the Decadence</i> and the Unmooring of Rome's Decline"	6
by BASIL DUFALLO (University of Michigan)	
"The aesthetic foolsgoldstandard in Petronius"	7
by ERIK GUNDERSON (University of Toronto)	
"First-Person Feminine Latin Poetry: Sulpicia's <i>Elegidia</i> "	8
by ALISON KEITH (University of Toronto)	
"Virgil's Troilus and Metapoetry"	9
by ANDREW MCCLELLAN (Davidson College)	

• table of contents •

"Beyond Utility: Paradoxes of Knowledge Acquisition in the <i>Aeneid</i> " by REBECCA MOORMAN (Providence College)	10
"The Poetics of Hunger in <i>Metamorphoses</i> 8" by MARIPIA PIETROPAOLO (McMaster University)	11
"An Unhomely Homecoming: Encounters with the Uncanny in Seneca's <i>Agamemnon</i> " by ELAINE SANDERSON (University of Edinburgh)	12
" <i>gula est</i> : Appropriating the aesthetics of illness in Martial's <i>Epigrams</i> " by KATE STEVENS (Rutgers University)	13
"Empire of Exhaustion: the Tired Subject of Latin Epic" by JAMES UDEN (Boston University)	14

"How to Talk to Paper About Poetry: Materiality and Aesthetic Judgment in a Catullan Diptych"

by EMILIA BARBIERO
(New York University)

This paper focuses on the only poems addressed to texts in the Catullan corpus. Catullus 35 addresses a papyrus inscribed by the speaker with a letter to Caecilius, a friend currently composing a poem on the Magna Mater; Catullus 36 is addressed to the "shitted-out pages" (*cacata carta*) containing Volusius' (apparently foul) *Annales*.

This paper proposes to explore the implications of this address to a material object and its effect in disrupting literary conventions: how do these animate texts function as lyric addressees? What does their ability to listen and speak 'say' about Catullus' poetry? How do these poems play with the notion of textual presence and writing as a means of substituting the self? How does addressing a material object relate to the aesthetics pronouncements both 35 and 36 make? Finally, it argues that these unique material addressees are evidence of a deliberate, authorial arrangement of the Catullan collection.

"The Sublime in Seneca and Statius: Aesthetics, Excess, and the Canon"

by THOMAS BOLT
(Lafayette College)

Recent years have seen a resurgent scholarly interest in ancient aesthetics. In Latin literary studies, scholars have focused primarily on the sublime in the epic tradition from Lucretius to Vergil (e.g., Hardie 2013 and Hardie 2009). Yet Statius' sublime, which can jarringly careen from serious to absurd in a short space (e.g, Venus' accidental injury at the hands of Mars in *Thebaid* 3), seems to resist scholarly consensus. This paper seeks to construct a different lineage for Statius' sublime through prioritizing Senecan tragedy and scientific thought. I argue that Seneca's sense of the infinite nature of the universe (e.g., NQ 1.pref.7) influences Statius' decision to re-deploy the sublime not as lofty and ennobling but as absurd and subversive. This paper closes by considering case studies from Statius' *Thebaid* in which the poet debases the sublime as a means to reframe Vergilian influence on the canon.

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"The Way and Its Poor: Bareness of Life from Seneca to Jerome"

by ALEX DRESSLER

(University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Continuities between Classical and Christian forms of asceticism were recognized by the ancients, as when Jerome called the Neronian philosopher, “our Seneca, of most moderate existence” (*continentissimae vitae*, Jer. *Vir. ill.* 12.850, 629a). While many modern thinkers (e.g. Foucault 2011, 177-90) have discussed the *aesthetic* character of this asceticism, none have explained its development from the idea of the thesis, argument, or theme of a work of art, *propositum* (Jer. *Comm. in Eph.* 1.11, 1.558, cp. Quint. 3.3.5), in ancient aesthetic theory. Reviewing instances of this word, which will come to denote the monastic “way” of poverty, in the letters of Seneca and Jerome (Sen. *Ep.* 5.4, with *TLL* 1Aβ2), I argue that the reduction of art to its theme in criticism was fundamental to the formation of the aesthetics of existence in ethical life and to certain forms of “realism” or the representation of the poor in Latin literature.

"Couture's *The Romans of the Decadence* and the Unmooring of Rome's Decline"

by BASIL DUFALLO
(University of Michigan)

This paper argues that Thomas Couture's well-known 1847 painting, *Les Romains de la Décadence* ("The Romans of the Decadence") deploys a powerful aesthetics of disorientation with roots in classical Latin literature. As a self-conscious reception of Juvenal's *Satire 6*, quoted by Couture himself in the catalogue of the Paris Salon, the painting profits from its affiliations with a subversive satiric voice allowing for pleasure in the portrayal of error and disgust. But what is more, by focusing on the "impoverished aesthetics" of both painting and poem, we see that while ostensibly castigating the morals of a particular historical period in universal terms, both text and image achieve important effects by staging a variety of queer subject positions unmoored from conventional notions of temporality and identity. The subsequent reception of the painting as a recurring emblem of decadence is especially intriguing in this regard.

"The aesthetic foolsgoldstandard in Petronius"

by ERIK GUNDERSON
(University of Toronto)

This paper discusses the relationship between the aesthetic program of the *Satyricon* and its verse inserts; in particular, it explores the poetic productions of Eumolpus. The narrator and inset characters regularly deride his efforts. But one is given very few cues as to what, precisely the problem with his poetry is and why, exactly the (generally suspect) people in the world of the novel find it so appalling. Eumolpus' *kakozelia* (i.e., his affected sublimity) in fact offers the inverted double of the novel's own program (i.e., its artful stupidity). Eumolpus' would-be golden verses consistently both fail to inspire and succeed in amusing precisely because, despite his cynicism, he has yet to abandon the idea that verses might somehow still be golden in the world in which he finds himself. The narrated world already bodes a new post-epic universe even as Eumolpus clings to the wreckage of hexameter verse.

"First-Person Feminine Latin Poetry: Sulpicia's *Elegidia*"

by ALISON KEITH
(University of Toronto)

This paper focuses on Latin love poetry voiced in the first-person feminine, by a woman who names herself Sulpicia ([Tib.] 3.9, 11, 13–18), discussing the themes that emerge from her poems and relate them to the staple themes of the popular love poetry of Catullus, Gallus, Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid. Yet Sulpicia differentiates herself from the other Latin elegists by speaking in the first-person feminine. What happens to a literary form focused on a man's desire for an elusive or hard-hearted mistress when the poet-lover is herself female? Which literary conventions are overturned, which reinforced when a Roman woman speaks of love? What social standards are challenged, what norms upheld by a woman's expression of desire? Comparison of Sulpicia's themes and imagery with those of other contemporary Augustan authors, all male, illuminates the radical transformations of Roman codes of conduct for elite women in this period.

"Virgil's Troilus and Metapoetry"

by ANDREW MCCLELLAN

(Davidson College)

This paper explores the metapoetic potential of Troilus' death depicted on Dido's temple at *Aeneid* 1.474-8. The passage contains a nod to the act of writing in Troilus' 'scribbling' in the dust with his spearpoint-turned-stylus. The scene 'militarizes' Virgil's description in *Georgics* 3 of breaking bullocks for the plow; they 'sign' their hoofprints on the dust's surface. The Troilus scene is invested with 'georgic' plowing imagery, itself a metaphor for literary composition (writing and plowing are linked in Latin poetics). The horror lies in Virgil's transformation of a farmer training bullocks to drag the plow into the youthful Troilus who loses control, *becoming* a plow cutting agrarian furrows. The metaphorical equivalency of writing and charioteering is also relevant: Troilus loses control of his chariot *and* his literary composition. There's authorial self-criticism in Virgil's 'restaging' of georgic imagery: the *epic* poet surpasses the Troilian 'tyro' drawing ephemeral lines in the dust.

"Beyond Utility: Paradoxes of Knowledge Acquisition in the Aeneid"

by REBECCA MOORMAN
(Providence College)

This paper examines three impoverished affects — anxiety, horror, and sovereignty, or Bataille's notion of the momentary dissolution of knowledge into nothingness — to argue for a Roman model of knowledge acquisition paradoxically premised on "non-knowing," or a state of cognitive lack. I develop this model using one representative passage, Aeneas' violation of Polydorus' grave (Aen. 3.13-68). In the passage, horror and anxiety grant Aeneas insight through opposite means of proximity and distance (Kristeva 1980; Ngai 2005), an impossible simultaneity of "towards" and "away from" that creates a moment of aporetic suspension. Aeneas' cognitive capacity dissolves into nothingness, a "sudden opening beyond" knowledge and the work this entails (Bataille 1991). Momentarily delivered from his work of *pietas*, Aeneas enters a suspended state of "non-knowing" which eventually leads to the revelation of Polydorus (41-46). I conclude by considering how this model might inform readings of other passages of questionable knowledge-seeking in Latin literature.

"The Poetics of Hunger in *Metamorphoses* 8"

by MARIPIA PEITROPAOLO
(McMaster University)

Ovid's personification of Hunger in the story of Ceres' punishment of Erysichthon offers readers of the *Metamorphoses* an aesthetic experience based on a theme, a narrative and imagery which do not usually elicit delight but revulsion. Ovid depicts Fames as an abject female character capable of fascinating the readers with intellectual engagement and an experience of uncanny delight. A squalid figure, both solid and vacuous, Fames is the personification of the want of something, a paradoxical figure whose physicality is constructed out of emptiness. The personified Fames becomes a weapon for Ceres and attacks Erysichthon, entering him first through his mouth and dispersing her emptiness throughout his body, force-feeding him hunger itself. The imagery and narrative generate in the readers an aesthetic experience of the grotesque. This paper explores Ovid's aestheticization of hunger and the role it plays in the aesthetic project of the *Metamorphoses*.

"An Unhomely Homecoming: Encounters with the Uncanny in Seneca's *Agamemnon*"

by ELAINE SANDERSON
(University of Edinburgh)

This paper identifies the Uncanny as a major aesthetic force in Seneca's *Agamemnon*, confronting its audience with the same experiences of unhomeliness, displacement, and uncertainty suffered by its internal characters. It begins by demonstrating the unhomely nature of Agamemnon's homecoming, highlighting the duplicitous implications of the terms in which Agamemnon characterizes his safe return and household, and the harmonious dynamics between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are described. It then argues that this disruption constitutes *more than* just tragic irony and that this semantic slippage represents a reflection of the kind of uncanny descent into *un*homeliness which runs through this episode. Finally, it builds on studies by Dodson-Robinson (2010) and Gunderson (2018) to consider how instances of repetition and doubling – such as the doubling of Troy and Argos; past and present crimes; and Agamemnon's death(s) foreseen and reported by Cassandra – create a pervasive and recurring sense of the Uncanny throughout the *Agamemnon*.

"*gula est*: Appropriating the aesthetics of illness in Martial's *Epigrams*"

by KATE STEVENS

(Rutgers University)

In a number of epigrams [2.16, 2.40, 9.85, 11.86, 12.56], Martial repeats a scenario: he accuses a man of malingering for the purpose of enjoying unearned social and monetary benefits such as well-wishing and gifts. These men take on similar forms of contrived illness that are aesthetically similar: their symptoms are fevers, listlessness, and coughs, and their illnesses are acute (rather than chronic), potentially fatal (where recovery is cause for celebration), and not visually disfiguring (without perceivable lasting impairment). In contrast, there are two poems where the subject falsifies illness with applications of ointments and bandages [7.39, 10.22]. Martial notably does not attack the greed of these individuals, who utilize a visibly ill aesthetic not to demand sympathetic gifts but to avoid unpleasant social responsibilities to those with equal or higher status. His treatment of men who feign illness is not uniform, but highly dependent upon how they manipulate their presentation of (ill) health to optimize their social position. This paper explores how Martial criticizes men who adopt a particular impoverished aesthetic—that of ill health—to enable their abuses of power, exploiting feigned illnesses to manipulate their social positions for profit.

"Empire of Exhaustion: the Tired Subject of Latin Epic"

by JAMES UDEN
(Boston University)

A number of negative ideas cluster around exhaustion. It exists as the unpleasant precursor to sleep, which, through its connection to dreams, has a far greater potential for sublimity in ancient texts. In aesthetic terms, the 'exhausted' theme or trope is one that is empty of inspiration, waiting for some artistic spark. Something that is exhausted shouldn't really interest us on its own. Yet Virgil opens his epic by emphasizing repeatedly that Aeneas and his men are exhausted. Why? What did it mean for Virgil to fashion a tired subject for his national epic? How was that tiredness reinterpreted by successive poets in the Latin tradition? Could tiredness in literature signal resistance to a political imperative to embrace energy, productivity, work? Why embrace exhaustion?