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0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

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This book applies some of the procedures of modern critical theory (in particular reception-theory, deconstruction, theories of dialogue and the hermeneutics associated with the German philosopher Gadamer) to the interpretation of Latin poetry. Charles Martindale argues, against the positivistic and historicist approaches still dominant within Latin studies, that we neither can nor should attempt to return to an 'original' meaning for ancient poems free from later accretions and the processes of appropriation; more traditional approaches to literary enquiry conceal a metaphysics (of the text-in-itself) which has been put in question by various anti-foundationalist accounts of the nature of meaning and the relationship between language and what it describes. From this perspective the author examines different readings of the poetry of Virgil, Ovid, Horace and Lucan, in order to suggest alternative ways in which those texts might more profitably be read. Finally he focuses on a key term for such study: 'translation', and examines the epistemological questions it raises and seeks to circumvent. He thus proposes a revised programme for the study of what we term 'antiquity', and a 'postmodern' poetics.

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ROMAN LITERATURE  
AND ITS CONTEXTS

**Redeeming the text**

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# Redeeming the text

**Latin poetry and the  
hermeneutics of reception**

Charles Martindale

*Professor of Latin,  
University of Bristol*

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Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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This book  
is  
dedicated  
to  
D.F.K.  
for minding, for arguing,  
and  
(above all)  
for making me laugh.

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0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

**Redeeming time when men think least I will.**

Prince Hal, *Henry IV pt I*

**Redeem the time, redeem the dream**

• • •

**And after this our exile.**

T.S. Eliot

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0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)


---

## Contents

<i>List of plates</i>	<i>page</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>		xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>		xvii
<b>1 Five concepts in search of an author: suite</b>		1
1 Two short (tall?) stories		2
2 Are you receiving me?		2
3 Framing contexts		11
4 Telling stories about the past		18
5 Firing the canon: tradition or treason?		23
6 Recovering dialogue		29
<b>2 Rereading Virgil: divertimento</b>		35
1 Prelude: the critic as artist		35
2 Breaking the well-wrought urn		40
3 Dante-reading-Virgil		43
4 Lucan-reading-Virgil		48
5 Postlude: the artist as critic		53
<b>3 Rereading Ovid and Lucan: cadenzas</b>		55
1 Ovid received		55
2 Lucan restored		64
<b>4 Translation as rereading: symphony in three movements</b>		75
1 Allegro ma non troppo: praising metaphrase		76
2 Adagio maestoso: untying the text		85
3 Allegro vivace: unlocking the word-hoard		92



Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

CONTENTS

<b>Postscript: Redeeming the text, or a lover's discourse</b>	101
<i>Bibliography</i>	108
<i>Index of names</i>	114

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Plates

(between pages 60 and 61)

- 1 Claude Lorrain, *The Landing of Aeneas in Latium*, 1675. Oil on canvas, 1.75 × 2.25 m. Anglesey Abbey, National Trust (Lord Fairhaven Collection). *Photo*: NTPL/John Bethell
- 2 Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556–9. Canvas, 1.88 × 2.06 m. Edinburgh, Duke of Sutherland Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland. *Photo*: National Galleries of Scotland
- 3 Titian, *The Death of Actaeon*, 1570–5. Canvas, 1.79 × 1.98 m. London, National Gallery. *Photo*: National Gallery.
- 4 Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, 1570–5. Canvas, 213 × 2.075 m. Kremsier, Archiepiscopal Palace. *Photo*: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Preface

The aim of this *libellus* is to outline an alternative approach to the positivistic modes of interpretation (with their teleological assumptions) still dominant in Latin studies, which reflect the certainties and settled procedures of the 'Enlightenment' – trust in measuring and observation, commitment to a single rational method, belief in progress, and so forth – certainties and procedures which, during this century, have come under pressure from various sources, including new scientific and philosophical models. I shall in particular argue that the interpretation of texts is inseparable from the history of their reception. It follows that the classical world cannot be coherently studied in isolation, if we are to try to articulate the history and status of our current goals and assumptions. Accordingly I attempt to make a case for a broadly-conceived, dialectical classics, rescued from its current partial ghettoization.

Much of my previous published work has taken the form of investigations into the influence of Latin on English poetry. I would like now to put this mainly practical enquiry onto a firmer theoretical footing. The reader will notice a number of principal strands in my current thinking, in addition to the traces (and more) of the traditional classics within which I was initially educated: the New Criticism, with its commitment to close textual reading which still seems to me invaluable; deconstruction, in its Derridean guise; theories of dialogue, in particular those of Bakhtin and Gadamer; reception theory. At times my argument will take a metaphysical turn; several of the problems discussed by modern theorists are also at issue, if in a different form, in classical theology. The widespread refusal to take metaphysical questions seriously has, unsurprisingly, led to much bad (and occluded) metaphysics, in literary analysis as well as elsewhere. It is thus appropriate that T.S.

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE

Eliot's is a name which will recur; his great meditative sequence *Four Quartets* is, to my thinking, among the profoundest treatments of time and place and history and memory we have. Despite recent attempts to dismiss or ignore him, he remains one of the most influential figures of our century, one whom, far from having outstripped, we have yet to catch up with.

In escaping one parochial orthodoxy we should not merely exchange it for another, for example some putative 'New Classics' built on a narrow base of 'theory' alone. Among thinkers revered by the 'theorists' are a number whose work has important implications for the study of literature, but there are innumerable other writers, both of this and of previous centuries, of whom this is also the case. As individuals we cannot study them all. As a profession we should not confine ourselves to narrow canons constructed by authoritarians old or new.

The structure of the book is more cumulative than sequential. In the first chapter I set out some of the main areas of concern, paradigms and concepts (in particular issues of reception, context, history, tradition and dialogue), to which I then keep returning, in subsequent chapters, probing them from slightly different angles and within differing theoretical models, and exploring their implication for the interpretation of particular writers and particular poems. Each chapter is also designed to be readable as a separate essay; readers whose taste for exegesis of texts exceeds their interest in explicit matters of theory may prefer to begin with one of the later chapters. My overall aim is less to present a single coherent theory of reading than to explore the implications of certain emphases and modes of procedure within literary enquiry as currently constituted. It is indeed one of the book's theses that there are virtues in recognizing the provisionality of even those procedures to which we are most committed; in the end (indeed at the beginning) we have no choice but to interpret, and the good critic will not flinch from making a virtue of necessity, but not before recognizing the right of other accounts to make themselves heard.

Appropriately a book arguing for the merits of dialogue is itself the locus of many dialogues. I owe a great deal to my three editors, Pauline Hire of Cambridge University Press, Denis Feeney and Stephen Hinds, for encouragement, help and constructive criticism, and for occasionally saving me from myself. I have been singularly fortunate in my colleagues, first at Sussex and then at Bristol. At Sussex, a university committed to interdisciplinary study, I learned from colleagues in many subject areas:

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE

not least from Bernard Harrison, Gabriel Josipovici, Larry Lerner, Stephen Medcalf, Tony Nuttall and Alan Sinfield. At Bristol I have benefited from a number of sites for dialogue: in particular the Classical Departmental Seminar, which explores new intellectual developments in the classical area; the English–Latin Seminar, run jointly between the two departments for both staff and students, at which we have explored many of the issues and poems discussed here; and a third-year special option, ‘The Classical Heritage’, which I taught to a group of students in the 1990/91 session; and here I must mention, in particular, the contributions of Isabelle Burbidge, Fiona Cox, Julia Paulman, Shelley Sanders, Elizabeth Wells. Among colleagues at Bristol I have never failed to learn from dialogue with Tom Mason and George Myerson, from the English Department, with Michael Liversidge from the Art History Department, or with John Gould and Christopher Rowe (whose measured scepticism has had more influence on me than he probably realizes) from my own. I must also thank: other Bristol students, Julia Hoffbrand, Julian Holmes, Alex Langdon, Sarah Loom, Philip Young; colleagues from outside Bristol, Colin Burrow, Don Fowler, Philip Hardie (the author of another book in this series which he kindly let me read in draft), Robert Parker; members of my family, Gabriel Martindale (my youngest interlocutor), Michelle Martindale (who pointed me towards a number of instructive passages and displayed, as ever, finesse in close reading), Joanna Parker. Finally four people, who are both colleagues and friends, must receive separate mention. Terry McKiernan taught me the pleasures (and pains) of merely circulating, with a tact and subtlety of which only he is capable, as well as not letting me get away with all my outrageous assertions. Catharine Edwards (although she may not believe it) has influenced me in multifarious ways, not least in bringing me to a less narrow conception of history and of issues in feminism. David Hopkins has argued with (and not infrequently against) me about literature and life with a persistence and integrity reminiscent of Dr Johnson, his favourite critic, and tried to keep me, I fear in vain, from wandering too far from the Path of Truth. Finally there is the dedicatee Duncan Kennedy, without whom this book would certainly never have been written. He may take this as a doubtful compliment, and will, I expect, dissent from much that I have to say (and even where he might have wished to claim authorship, he will probably feel I have spoiled those ideas of his which I have appropriated and recontextualized). Perhaps, when he reads the results, he may think that all those hours of patient (if at times hilarious) conversation could have

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

been more profitably employed. But I hope that he will agree that, in intellectual matters, as in life generally, it is usually better to travel hopefully than to arrive. The issue of the addressee (or 'implied reader') of these words I leave on one side, although it is one which will re-emerge, obliquely, from time to time, in what follows.

Texts and translations, except where specified, are my own. In accordance with the style of the series, documentation has been kept to a minimum. Apologies are due for any unacknowledged (or unrecognized) intertextualities.

C.A.M.  
Shoreham-by-Sea  
and Bristol  
October 1991

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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## Acknowledgements

I presented some of the ideas explored in this book, in rather more polemical fashion, in an essay entitled 'Redeeming the text: the validity of comparisons of Classical and post-Classical literature', published in *Arion*. In chapter 4 I rework some material from 'Unlocking the word-hoard: in praise of metaphor', in E. Shaffer (ed.), *Comparative Literature* 6, 47–72, published by Cambridge University Press. I am grateful for permission to reuse this earlier material.

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