

*Introduction*  
*Walking the Wire: Towards an Inclusive Approach to*  
*Latin and Greek Late Antique Poetry*

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In the past few years, it has been possible to notice parallel developments in the study of both Latin and Greek late antique poetry, two neighbouring and growing scholarly fields. Recently published studies reveal an increased focus on the contemporary context and, in relation to that, on the ‘otherness’ of late antique aesthetics, when compared with the poetics of earlier periods that classically trained scholars have been taught to admire.<sup>1</sup> Long considered poetry of bad taste from a period of decline, late antique poetry fascinates classicists today mainly *because* of its otherness, its productive reception of the classical period, its innovations in terms of literary forms, and the creativity with which it responds to the ‘seismic cultural changes’<sup>2</sup> of late antique society.

Although similar problems and questions arise in research on Greek and Latin poetry from Late Antiquity, a real dialogue across language-bound research specialties is today still conspicuously missing. Only a few scholars with exceptionally broad perspectives, like the late Alan Cameron, have in the past decades been able to stimulate an exchange of ideas across this invisible ‘border’.<sup>3</sup> Monographs that integrate insights in the Greek *and*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., on the Latin side, especially the monograph of Peltari (2014) and the volumes edited by Formisano and Fuhrer (2014) and Elsner and Hernández Lobato (2017) – all on the specificity of Late Latin poetics. On the Greek side, cf. the volume edited by Carvounis and Hunter (2008), the important survey of Agosti (2012), and the more general contextualising approach of Miguélez-Cavero (2008), Agosti (2016), and the ‘Nonnus in Context’ conference series.

<sup>2</sup> McGill and Watts (2018: 26).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the recent compilation of his work with revised and updated versions of his influential articles (Cameron 2016a).

the Latin tradition, like the work of Robert Shorrock and Karl Olav Sandnes, remain exceptional in their bilingual approach,<sup>4</sup> while collective volumes that shed light on both traditions (e.g. *Texts and Culture in Late Antiquity*, *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity*, and the *Blackwell's Companion to Late Antique Literature*)<sup>5</sup> mostly do not initiate true dialogue between individual contributions that, with only a few exceptions, deal exclusively with either of the two languages.

How can we explain the limited interaction between these two neighbouring fields of study? Several factors reinforce one another. The first one is related to the marginal position of Late Antiquity in school and university curricula. There are exceptions to this pattern, and their number is growing, but, overall, classics programmes still tend to focus almost exclusively on the canonical authors of Classical Antiquity. Consequently, late antique authors are approached mostly by scholars who indeed have received background and training in both language traditions but limited to the classical period. Most scholars will only become acquainted with the late antique context at a later stage of their education, as part of their personal specialisation trajectory, which often results in a more selective focus on only one of the two late antique language traditions. A second factor, firmly rooted in the research tradition itself, is the so-called Latin Question. This delicate question concerning the degree of direct interaction in Late Antiquity between the two poetic traditions has become an obstacle to rather than an impetus for further investigations. The general hesitation as to whether it is plausible – let alone possible to prove – that late antique Greek authors knew of classical and near-contemporary Latin poetry thus far seems to have prevented a fruitful exchange of ideas.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Shorrock (2011) and Sandnes (2011). More recently, Goldhill's *Preposterous Politics* (2020) discusses works not only in Latin and Greek, but also in Hebrew and Aramaic.

<sup>5</sup> Scourfield (2007), Greatrex and Elton (2015), and McGill and Watts (2018).

<sup>6</sup> From the classical Latin poets, Vergil and Ovid are at the centre of the discussion, especially in combination with Quintus of Smyrna (probably third century) and Nonnus (mid-fifth century), respectively. For both authors, lively debates (e.g. Braune vs. Maas in 1935 for Nonnus; Keydell vs. Vian in the 1950s and 1960s for Quintus) have resulted in few decisive conclusions and a general tendency towards caution (e.g. Knox 1988 for Nonnus; Gärtner 2005 for Quintus) regarding the 'proven influence' of the Latin classical authors on the late antique epics, notwithstanding their apparent and widely recognised congeniality (e.g. Vian 1976: xxviii and Shorrock 2001: 20 for Nonnus; Maciver 2011 for Quintus). More recently, scholarship has started to explore alternative methods of reading these texts next to one another in meaningful ways (e.g. Paschalis 2014 for Nonnus; Carvounis 2019: lvii–lxv for Quintus). Cf. also Carvounis and Papaioannou (Chapter 1) and Schoess (Chapter 11) in this volume. From the body of late antique Latin poets, the author who is mentioned most often as a potential source of inspiration for near-contemporary Greek-writing authors is probably Claudian (ca. 400, Alexandria-Rome) (e.g. by Cadau 2015).

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As a reaction to this situation and in an attempt to open a dialogue between the two fields, this volume wants to show that – especially in a collaborative setting – it is indeed possible to overcome the barriers created by personal specialisms, and that crossing these barriers is always valuable. The question whether and to which extent there was direct interaction between the two language traditions is only one of the possible lines of investigation. As we will explain later, it is never a prerequisite. Rather, and more broadly, this volume aims to shed new light on literary developments that can or have been regarded as ‘typical’ for Late Antiquity and on the poetic and aesthetic ideals that affect individual poems from this period. It is an exploration of the possibilities created by a bilingual focus seeking a deeper understanding of late antique poetry as a whole, and it aims to stimulate further such explorations in future research. Our goal is not to show late antique poetry as one unified literary current – which it is not – but rather to give a nuanced account of this complex reality.

A key question, which has repeatedly been raised but not fully answered, is whether and how the Greek and Latin poetic traditions are ‘un-classical’ in similar ways. Possible connections with the changing aesthetic ideals in the visual arts, which are not bound by language barriers, are suggested on both sides. For this reason, Michael Roberts’ ground-breaking work *The Jeweled Style* on Late Latin poetry and late antique visual arts is also often quoted in studies on Greek poetry.<sup>7</sup> The popular metaphor of the ‘jeweled’ and ‘mosaic’ late antique style is indeed helpful to describe and understand aspects of style and poetic composition of both Latin and Greek poetry, but a closer investigation makes it equally clear that the interpretation and application of this metaphor varies significantly from study to study, depending on the specific qualities of the late antique poem it describes. What do they all have in common? Can we speak of a Greek ‘jeweled style’ with distinctive properties compared to the Latin ‘jeweled style’ defined by Roberts?

In order to answer such questions, a stronger dialogue is needed between scholars working on late antique poetry in both languages. Only then it is possible to come to a better understanding, not only of the shared developments, but also of the subtle differences between the two traditions, which are now often overlooked or simplified because of the lack of any comparative studies. Combined, they show the richness and creativity of the varied corpus of late antique Greek and Latin poetry.

The initiative for this book was taken at the 2015 Edinburgh conference ‘Poetry and Aesthetics of Late Antiquity’, organised by Aaron Peltari,

<sup>7</sup> Roberts 1989, cited e.g. in Agosti (2012 and 2014) and Chuvin (2016).

Calum Maciver, and Catherine Ware. As is well known, the success of any dialogue depends on the zeal and ability of conversation partners to truly explore each other's perspectives. This is precisely what we as editors challenged the authors in this collaborative volume to do. In every chapter, Latin poetry and Greek poetry are discussed together. For most of the authors (both promising early career researchers and established scholars), adopting a bilingual perspective meant leaving the *terra firma* of their own research specialism. This idea was captured in the 'walking the wire' metaphor that became the motto of this book project and the preparatory Ghent workshop (2016). A 'safety net' in the form of a strong collaborative set-up provided working conditions for exploring the much less familiar 'wire' of the other language tradition. As editors of this volume, we want to thank all contributors for making this collaborative process possible and for their thorough and constructive feedback on each other's chapters.

### Organisation and Scope

The scope of this volume is determined by three parameters: language (Greek and Latin), period (from ca. 200 to ca. 600 CE), and the opposition of poetry and prose. Each of these may seem to introduce unwelcome restrictions in a volume that, as a whole, pleads for abandoning hard divides between neighbouring fields of study. However, when applied to the particular divide between the study of Latin and Greek late antique poetry referred to above, these parameters define a domain that affords a stable common ground for starting the dialogue.

Late Antiquity is here defined with a broad scope in order to include early examples of certain late antique tendencies as well as late examples of continuity with the classical period. Cases in point are Nemesianus and Triphiodorus, both third-century poets writing in Latin and Greek, respectively, discussed in Chapter 3 as exemplary of late antique poetic self-reflexivity, and the sixth-century Latin poet Corippus, discussed in Chapter 5 as a late example of continuity with the classical period in terms of genre awareness. Whereas certain trends can be traced throughout the 'Long Late Antiquity',<sup>8</sup> it is also – perhaps primarily – a period of constant change. Juvenecus' and Nonnus' biblical epics illustrate this point very well. They are similar along many lines, but in order to understand the subtle differences in their representation of internal audiences (Chapter 9), their

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Brown (1971). For reflections on the periodisation of Late Antiquity cf. Cameron (2002) and Marcone (2008).

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specific temporal (early fourth vs. mid-fifth century) and geographical (Spain vs. Egypt) contexts are important factors, especially with respect to the position of Christianity in society.

The opposition between Spain and Egypt immediately also illustrates the wide geographical spread of the texts discussed in this volume. This spread can be (and has been) used as an argument against direct interaction between the two language traditions in this period of decentralisation, but they certainly did meet in the imperial courts of Rome and Constantinople (and Milan/Ravenna/Antioch). Claudian, as a Greek poet who moved to Rome in 393/4 and continued his poetical career in Latin, is one of the best-known and telling examples, but one might also think of Corippus, who in 566/8 presented his Latin panegyric epic at the Byzantine court of Justinus II in Constantinople. On the other hand, especially when thinking of other flourishing centres of late antique literature and education (e.g. Carthage and Alexandria), the geographical spread also raises the question of interaction with other language traditions and cultures, which could be an impetus to look at Late Antiquity with an even broader perspective.<sup>9</sup> To some, and certainly from some perspectives, Abbot Shenoute's Coptic writings (contemporary to Nonnus and active in the same region of Egypt) will seem more relevant for our understanding of Nonnus than Ovid, Claudian, or Juvencus, with whom he is paired in this volume.<sup>10</sup> These other languages and cultures are for classicists often a real blind spot. A more active scholarly dialogue between Classical studies and the fields of Coptic, Syriac, Hebrew, Persian, and so forth, studies is certainly a desideratum, and recent research projects and initiatives guide the way.<sup>11</sup>

The choice in this volume, however, to focus only on late antique poetry in the two 'classical' languages relates to the specific kind of questions that are asked. An important connecting thread throughout the volume is the previously mentioned creative reception of Classical Antiquity. The common ground of classical *paideia* undeniably links all late antique poetry in Latin and Greek. Dracontius' (late fifth-century Carthage) and Colluthus' (late fifth- and early sixth-century Egypt) treatments of the story of Paris

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Humphries' (2017) plea to look at Late Antiquity from a world history perspective.

<sup>10</sup> Agosti (2020) convincingly argues for taking Shenoute into account in Nonnus studies.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. the Ghent Novel Saints and Novel Echoes Projects (2014–2019 and 2019–2024 resp.; focus on Latin, Greek; Syriac, Persian, Arabic, and Western European vernacular traditions) and a recent conference organised in Turin (La cultura scritta dell'Egitto bizantino: produzione e circolazione di testi copti, greci e latini in una società multiculturale, December 2017). McGill and Watts' *Companion to Late Antique Literature* (2018) centres on Greek and Latin texts, but also includes introductory chapters on Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Middle Persian, and Arabian literature.

and Helen are exemplary: both poems present a very different, but characteristically late antique balance between continuity with and reaction against the literary past (cf. Chapter 10). One possible conclusion of this volume might be that it is the specific, often quite ambiguous relation to classical forms and subjects that makes these texts ‘typically late antique’.

The choice to focus on poetry rather than prose is, in turn, connected to the idea of a late antique ‘poetic revival’ in both language traditions.<sup>12</sup> It also ties in with two other connecting threads in this volume: the late antique use of traditional and innovative poetical forms and the relation between poetry and society. For this period of rapid and fundamental socio-political and religious developments, it is interesting to see the inevitable correlation between this historical dimension and the literary developments, especially with respect to aesthetic ideals and reasons for writing poetry. These three central areas of interest (classical *paideia*, poetic form, and poetry in society) are reflected in the tripartite structure of this volume.

- (1) Part 1, ‘A “Late” Perspective on The Literary Tradition’ (Chapters 1–4), clusters chapters which focus on the engagement of late antique authors with their literary past. The constant dialogue with the past may in some cases also suggest intriguing patterns of influence (e.g. Nonnus and Ovid in the first chapter), but each poem’s position in relation to this shared past certainly reveals much of its own poetic singularity. This section of the volume tackles issues of canonicity, belatedness, and (non-)referentiality by comparing and contrasting attitudes to the classical (Greek and Latin) past from late antique Greek and Latin perspectives. The last chapter deals with paratexts, a specific type of late antique engagement with the literary past, which reveals the dialogue between late antique practices of text edition (of older, by then canonical works) and contemporary poetical developments.
- (2) Part 2, ‘Late Antique “Genres” and “Genre” in Late Antiquity’ (Chapters 5–8) has a central focus on genre and poetic form. Whether Late Antiquity is considered as a period of generic innovation, flexibility, or instability, or as the period in which classical distinctions between genres were abandoned, the modern notion of ‘genre’, already problematic when applied to classical poetry, becomes even more difficult to conceptualise when late antique developments are taken into account. A general survey functions in

<sup>12</sup> Cf. (among others) Cameron (2004b), Roberts (2017), and Miguélez-Cavero (2008).

this section as an introduction, followed by two chapters which discuss particular poetic forms: cento poetry and epyllia.

- (3) The diachronic perspective of the first section is, in the third and final section ‘The Context of Late Antiquity’ (Chapters 9–12), replaced with a primarily synchronic perspective, highlighting literary, socio-cultural, religious, and/or art-historical aspects of the context of the poems under consideration. The chapters in this section each address a different aspect of this context and contribute to an interpretation of late antique poetry on its own late antique terms by tracing characteristically ‘late antique’ developments. Striking examples are the defining importance of religious and socio-political contexts, but context can also be defined literarily or topically. Two chapters compare and contrast texts belonging to the same ‘genre’ and treating the same subject, while a third focusses on the late antique literary practice of allegorical reading and writing and discusses the development of epic personification allegory (leading up to the first full-blown allegorical epic, the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, early fifth century). The final two chapters investigate the specifically late antique use of a traditional topos or theme (the comparison of a beautiful girl with a goddess; the theme of metamorphosis) in relation to contemporary art-historical and/or religious developments.

### Subjects and Methods

Together, the chapters in this volume cover a broad spectrum of late antique poetic texts, which aims to be representative of the different genres, periods, and geographical contexts defined by the volume’s scope in relation to its three main fields of interest. Critical readers may notice that certain authors are discussed several times and in great detail (e.g. Nonnus, Ausonius) whereas others are only briefly mentioned (e.g. Sedulius, Namatianus, Christodorus) or even entirely neglected in this volume (e.g. Paul the Silentiary). It was never the aim to present a survey of key authors and texts – if this would even be possible. The present selection of subjects was made with the aim of combining as many different approaches as possible, in order to show possible ways of creating dialogue not just between scholars working on late antique texts, but also between the texts.

The volume deliberately starts with the previously mentioned delicate question of direct interaction between the two traditions, the so-called Latin question of whether there is any influence to be discerned of the classical

Latin tradition on late antique Greek poetry (Chapter 1). Certainly, it is impossible to deny the difference between the general practice of Latin authors showcasing their Greek and Latin models alike and Greek authors tending to keep their literary world of reference monolingually Greek. Ausonius and Palladas, both fourth-century authors, are telling examples (Chapter 2). The absence of explicit references (the mentioning of names and works) does, however, not necessarily mean that there was no interaction or mutual interest at all. It suffices to think of the apparent ease with which the Greek poet Claudian became a successful learned Latin poet, or of the prominent position of Vergil as a ‘second Homer’ (416: ἄλλον Ὅμηρον) in Christodorus’ *Description of Statues* (early sixth-century Constantinople). This volume is a plea for further investigation of potential nodes of contact between the two traditions, notwithstanding the difficulty of proving direct influence across language traditions. To achieve this goal, it is essential to look into possible traces of interaction with near-contemporary authors rather than only with the canonical authors of the classical period. Chapter 6, for instance, shows a possible connection within the cento-tradition between the fourth-century Latin centos of Ausonius and Proba and the fifth-century Greek *Homero-centones* of Eudocia.

This volume is also a plea to explore other paths. Even though it may never be possible to prove direct influence, late antique texts can meaningfully be read alongside one another. With variations in scope and method of analysis, roughly three alternative lines of approach are presented in this volume.

- (1) Several contributions adopt a comparative approach, juxtaposing texts with a certain degree of common ground, in order to lay bare the subtle (Chapter 9 on Nonnus and Juvencus) or not so subtle (Chapter 10 on Colluthus and Dracontius) differences. The added value of bringing these texts together primarily lies in the element of contrast, which helps to pinpoint singularities in each text and tradition (Chapter 2 on Ausonius and Palladas) and to connect these with particular socio-cultural, historical, or literary contexts. In Chapter 7, dealing with reflections on genre in late antique ‘epyllia’, the juxtaposition of Latin and Greek examples shows surprising similarities across the language divide (on the level of poetics they all metaphorically ‘speak the same language’), but the comparison also highlights the variation between, and singularity of, each poem.
- (2) Other chapters trace specifically late antique poetical developments that may be considered as common to both literary traditions and



connected to shared elements of context, like the late antique visual aesthetics (Chapter 11) and the material culture of the late antique Mediterranean (Chapter 4 on paratexts). The most obvious catalyst of change in Late Antiquity is without any doubt the rise of Christianity. It has a direct impact on the literary scene with the introduction of new subjects and new genres, and with the scriptures as a new point of reference *par excellence* instead of/alongside Homer and Vergil. In Chapter 5, the rise of Christianity is put forward as one of the most important factors to explain the ‘implosion’ of the classical system of literary genres. ‘... Christianity increased the potential for literary expression and reached a wider range of audiences, thus easing some of the pressure inherent in the traditional system of poetic expression.’<sup>13</sup> Even in those texts that seemingly least reflect the new Christian world (e.g. Colluthus’ *Abduction of Helen*), it is possible to trace elements that can be connected to it as a reflection of the contemporary Christianised socio-cultural reality (Chapter 10 on the role of children) and of the Christian appropriation of the ‘classical’ visual culture (Chapter 11).

- (3) Lastly, several chapters use theoretical concepts and insights ‘from the other side’ of the scholarly divide between Latin studies and Greek studies in order to apply them, again primarily with a comparative angle, to both language traditions. This volume starts with a re-evaluation of the ‘Latin Question’ regarding Nonnus and Ovid (Chapter 1); it also deliberately ends with (among others) Nonnus and Ovid, but along a very different line of approach. The terminology developed in Ovidian scholarship regarding metamorphosis (e.g. on ‘metamorphic landscapes’) allows for discussing Ovidian metamorphosis in Late Antiquity (Latin and Greek, secular and Christian) without addressing the, in this respect irrelevant, question of direct Ovidian influence in the texts under consideration (Chapter 12). Similarly, Chapter 8 ‘borrows’ from studies on the nature and functioning of personification allegory in Prudentius’ *Psychomachia* in order to describe related (but less prominent) tendencies in Quintus’ *Posthomerica*. The relative chronology in this case excludes Prudentian influence in Quintus, and also the reverse is unlikely, but by deliberately moving away from ‘safe sources’ and ‘certain intertexts’, the author manages to reveal what she calls ‘conceptual nodes of interaction’. In Chapter 3, finally, a broader theoretical concept is

<sup>13</sup> Kaufmann in this volume, p. 114.

tackled (not connected to the study of one particular author, as in the other two cases), that of the ‘nonreferential intertextuality’. This term was developed to describe the practice in Late Latin poetry of ‘reus[ing] phraseology without requiring the reader to to apply any function from the context or content of the alluded text’. This chapter investigates whether it can be applied to the third-century Greek epics of Quintus and Triphiodorus.

Does intertextuality work differently in Late Antiquity, in comparison to earlier poetry? And is there a difference between the two language traditions in this respect? It is only one of several larger questions touched upon in this volume. To what extent is late antique poetry the product of a classicising culture? Can we speak of an implosion of the classical genre system? Do Christian poems and poems with non-Christian content address the same audience differently? This volume aims to raise even more questions than it attempts to answer, as incentives and possible starting points for ongoing dialogue in future scholarship on late antique poetry. At the end of the two conferences that were held in preparation of this volume, there was a strong feeling that bringing together scholars of Latin and Greek Late Antiquity in a collaborative setting was in itself a significant step forward.

These are exceptional times in which to be studying late antique poetry. Never before has late antique poetry received so much scholarly attention: new editions appear (often first editions or after century-long intervals), Late Antiquity conferences and workshops create regular occasions to meet up with specialists in the field, new journals and book series are being launched (e.g. *Studies in Late Antiquity* since 2017, *Mnemosyne Late Antique Literature* monographs since 2015), and Late Antiquity scholars team up in international research associations (THAT, GIRPAM, Late Latin Poetry Network, etc.). Such excellent working conditions are a reason for joy for all involved, but also, and importantly, they create a momentum of reflection on the methods and organisation of our research. This volume will have achieved its goal if it can stimulate this process by offering a variety of angles by which to approach the challenges ahead. Additionally, we hope that it can encourage further dialogue, both on paper and in the form of new conferences and collaborations.