Introduction

This book is written for anyone interested in the pleasures and challenges involved in reading Latin literature from its origins in the Roman republic to the age of Augustus. We begin at the beginning, with the fascinating origins of Latin literature in the second century BCE, and end more or less when the millennium does. We lay out our subject in chapters structured around related (sometimes loosely related) genres. In a few cases, we separate out writers of the Augustan period from their republican predecessors: we believe this lends clarity to what can become a complicated story. No prior exposure to the Romans' literature or history is assumed, nor any familiarity with Latin or Greek. Our discussion encompasses survey and summary of writerly trends, critical reactions and contexts, and close readings of individual passages, always with the goal of encouraging the reading of Latin literature itself. And – not least since we don't agree about everything – we are suggestive rather than prescriptive in our interpretations: arriving at definitive, authoritative verdicts on the texts we discuss is not our aim.

A Cautionary Tale: Let the Reader Beware?

Every introduction is a literary history, and literary histories entail hazards for the reader, especially in an unfamiliar area. The first hazard lies in taking too seriously the significance of the periods into which we divide this history of Latin literature. It is obvious why we begin with Livius Andronicus: his career constitutes the beginning of literary Latin. But why do we end with Ovid, with the literature of the Augustan age? In part, because the Augustan age marks a significant change in Roman society: instead of a (more or less) aristocratic republic, Rome becomes (more or less) a form of autocracy modelled on the appearance of the old republic. This transformation to empire ushers in a new and different context for Latin literature which can be seen in almost every genre. We also consider

this slice of literary history appropriate for newcomers because Augustan writers so conspicuously look back to their earlier predecessors – and do so in ways which often influence our perceptions of their earlier predecessors. This is a dynamic of Latin literature we try to bring out throughout this book. But it is not the case that, during the Roman republic, Latin literature developed and improved until it reached a kind of perfection in Augustan writers – something we must bear in mind because Augustan writers often put forward that very claim.

Readers will quickly discover that more than a few of the writers we talk about survive as little more than names attached to reputations, and many more subsist only in fragments. Their works survive but not in their entirety: instead, we get at them only by way of quotations in other writers (or, very occasionally, bits of texts on scraps of papyrus). The fragmentary survival of so many writers, especially early writers, creates interpretative difficulties. Consequently, our discussion of these writers and their works can only be provisional.

But it is important that we keep in mind just *how* provisional. Filling in the gaps in fragmentary texts entails speculation and guesswork – and that very speculation and guesswork rely on our expectations of what the original work *must have been like*. It is all too easy, however, to overlook the contexts in which we have these fragments, and their implications. Sometimes these writers are cited because they said something unusual. More often, they are quoted because a later writer could put the earlier writer to some purpose of his own. Cicero, for instance, may recall a poet in order to make a political point, even if that means distorting a passage's original context. Or Horace may allude to or quote from an earlier figure in order to disparage his style or observe his primitive poetics: of his predecessor Lucilius, for instance, Horace writes, 'had fate allowed him to drop into our own age, he would polish and cut much of his work, and he would trim its excesses (Hor. *Sat.* 1.10.68–69). Horace's point is clear enough: Lucilius, he insists, never arrived at an Augustan condition of technical artistry. This is an ancient perspective which all too easily colours our modern reading of the fragments of Lucilius.

And Horace was not the only Roman writer who looked back at his predecessors in order to position himself as the culmination of their (imperfect) efforts. Early on, in the second century, Ennius, in announcing his epic, the *Annales*, pegged Livius Andronicus and Naevius as primitive: he distinguished himself from old-fashioned poets of their ilk and described himself as the first of Rome's scholar-poets (Enn. *Ann.* 206–209Sk – see Chapter 1). Cicero, too, in his *Brutus*, analysed early orators by

way of metrics, and ended up concluding (implicitly) that he himself was the best of all possible speakers. The literary past, for writers like these, is merely prelude to a glorious present. Noticing this kind of teleology matters because it is seductive for modern critics too: it is all too easy to look at Naevius or Ennius as poets who were mostly just preparing the groundwork for, say, Vergil's genius. Indeed, it is this habit of mind which often animates the division of the history of Latin literature into periods: it begins with an archaic (warm-up) period reaching from Livius Andronicus and lasting into the first century; then comes the (better) literature of the late republic; and, at last, we arrive at the excellence of the Augustan Age, after which, according to this outdated schema, Latin literature descends into a Silver Age (so-called because it is judged to be less good than the Golden Age which preceded it).

But this is an approach to Latin literature which is not merely unfair but anachronistic and misleading. Naevius, as has been pointed out, was once – like Ennius later and Horace much later – a serious poet who did not compose solely to give later writers something to react to.[1] So we must be cautious. Throughout our discussions of fragmentary authors, we endeavour to help readers to understand what we believe we *can* understand. If we cannot always unsee the refracted image imposed by later writers, we can at least be aware of the phenomenon. And we must make every effort to understand each writer on his own terms, avoiding the Romans' own emphasis on a teleological trajectory in Latin literature. Readers, however, should remain alert for lapses.

A final word on our choices. This introduction, like any literary history, presents its readers with an unavoidably restricted reception of works which (in most cases) are nearly inexhaustible in their literariness. Our choices about which authors and which works to discuss at length and which to treat more cursorily unavoidably imply a canon. There is nothing especially radical about the authors or texts we highlight, but it should be underlined that other choices were possible: again, our goal is to be helpful, not prescriptive in orienting readers to Latin literature. As for specific themes or stylistic features on which we concentrate, while we feel we have chosen well, we also acknowledge that there is always a degree of arbitrariness and exclusion in any choice. Our choices give shape to an account of Latin literature which, because it comes between two book covers, appears authoritative or final. Readers are urged to view our

[1] S. Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge 1998), 58.

treatment of Latin literature as an introduction and certainly not the last word on the writers and works we discuss.

The literature of Rome, like every other literature, was populated by talented and distinctive personalities who were creatures of their times but also shapers of their society. Consequently, tradition and originality are recurrent themes here. So, too, is the tension created whenever one wants to understand a literary work in its historical context without confining its significance to a dim past. We believe the historical situation of each text matters greatly: but literature takes on a life, perhaps an afterlife, of its own. We wrote this book because, we, each in a different way, relish Latin literature and are fascinated by the culture in which it was written. We very much hope that, after reading this book, you too, in *your* own way, will share our enjoyment in this marvellous subject.

Some Features of this Book

This book presents the history of Latin literature by way of thematic slices. A premise of the book is that its readers will begin at the beginning and carry on until the end. Most readers, of course, will not but will instead dip in wherever curiosity leads them. Consequently, they will sometimes encounter names and ideas which have been explained elsewhere in the book. For these readers we have included cross-references which should direct them to a fuller discussion if they require clarification or more details. There is also a detailed index, which can furnish readers with guidance. Some names which recur, like Herodotus or Suetonius, are not explained in the book. In case these names are not familiar to readers, we provide a glossary which offers a very brief introduction. Major historical and literary events are conveniently gathered into a chronology.

Several chapters in this book include sidebars. Each of these offers a concise introduction to an issue, possibly one unfamiliar to newcomers to Latin literature, which is pertinent to its chapter but is also relevant to the whole of the book. And, at the end of each chapter, we offer suggestions for English translations of the authors we discuss and a selection of further readings for readers wishing to go further in their experience of Latin literature. For the most part, we list works in English. But we also include a sample of scholarship in other languages. These are either fundamental works or relatively recent, helpful publications which can help to orient readers to criticism originating outside the Anglophone zone. Classics is a global discipline, and we encourage readers to engage with every point of view for understanding Latin literature.

Roman names are never easy, so we provide an early sidebar on that topic. In English, we usually refer to Romans by their *nomen* or *cognomen* alone, but sometimes the *praenomen* appears too (for these terms, see Sidebar I). In English we usually say or write *Sallust*, not *Gaius Sallustius Crispus*, or *Cicero*, not *Marcus Tullius Cicero*. In some cases, our conventional name for a famous Roman diverges from its Latin form: most of us use *Horace*, not *Horatius*, or *Pompey the Great* instead of *Pompeius Magnus*, or *Mark Antony* (or in some instances simply *Antony*) instead of *Marcus Antonius*. *Vergilius* becomes either Virgil or Vergil: in this book, he is Vergil. If uncertainty arises about names, clarity can be found in the index.

A Note on Sources and Abbreviations

Most of the sources we adduce are also authors in their own right, some from the period we treat here, some later. In the latter case, we often include a phrase by way of introduction, and in the former case, readers are referred to the treatments of those authors in the relevant chapter(s). Not all of these sources are of equal value, but sometimes they are all we have: much of Roman literature and Roman literary history is lost to us. We try to alert readers to the biases of particular authors, and we avoid entirely sources we deem untrustworthy. We sometimes discuss Greek authors influential on the Romans; these are similarly located, and sometimes receive extended attention when their importance warrants it. The glossary also supplies an introduction to some of the authors we rely on as sources.

In referring to ancient texts we use a standard set of scholarly abbreviations. These are useful owing to their precision (regardless of which English translation anyone consults). Some of these abbreviations are clear enough but many will be mysterious to newcomers to the subject. For that reason, we furnish a key: there the reader will find a clear explanation of each abbreviation used here.

CHAPTER 1

Romanised Muses: The Birth of Latin Literature

Peculiar Beginnings

Literature is difficult, perhaps impossible, to define: we know what it is, more or less, but there are always things that don't quite fit into existing categories (such as blogs and comics). For the Romans, however, certainly from the time of the late republic, this was a non-issue. Literature – *litterae* ('letters') – was what was written down, particularly if it conformed to the expectations of poetry and prose familiar from Greek. Indeed, Latin literature, while distinct, always has 'classic' Greek literature within its purview, even once there is an ample tradition of Latin literature. And regardless of which of the two languages a work was cast in, it nearly always fitted into these traditions, sometimes with Roman adaptations. From the start, then, Roman conceptions of literature were bi-lingual and bi-cultural. Latin texts were animated by an intimate, often explicit, relationship with Greek literature. There is no other literary sensibility quite like this, anywhere in history.

And, also unusually, Romans never really sought an explanation for this derivative habit. When they looked back on their literary history, they focused not on originality but on innovations and innovators within the pre-existing (Hellenic) framework. By the late republic it was agreed that the first author of Latin literature – certainly, of Latin poetry – was Livius Andronicus, a freed slave, from Tarentum (modern Taranto). In his *Letter to Augustus*, the poet Horace (see Chapter 9) encapsulates the history of Latin verse by referring to 'poets from the age of the writer Livius down to our own time' (*poetas | ad nostrum tempus Livi scriptoris ab aevo*: Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.62). The Greek-speaking Livius Andronicus became the father of Latin poetry through translating and adapting Greek epic and drama, and it is on his dramatic poetry that Roman literary history chiefly concentrated. (In this volume, we usually refer to this poet as Andronicus rather than Livius in order to avoid confusion with the historian Livy, on whom see

Chapter 6.) This meant that Romans could specify, with a surprising and suspicious exactitude, the moment when Latin letters began: the Roman Games (*ludi Romani*) of 240 BCE (which was also, not coincidentally, the year Rome created its first province outside of Italy).

Literacy and Literature

Literacy, even if not widespread, had been a Roman reality since the eighth century BCE (i.e. since Rome's foundation). Romans set up dedicatory inscriptions, and in 451 they set up the Twelve Tables, a legal code, in the Forum. In 304 the aedile Gnaeus Flavius oversaw the publication and promulgation of Rome's civil law code. So, too, Roman civic religion relied on written texts, to the extent that even oral prayers to the gods were, we are told, scripted performances of established formulae. The administration of Rome's many colonies and alliances also required writing, as did treaties with competing powers such as Carthage. Finally, the government of the city – drafting and passing legislation, for example, or conducting the census – demanded an advanced degree of literacy, at least on the part of some of its citizens. And, as in most pre-modern societies, here too literacy fluctuates by demography: wealthy urban men were much likelier to have basic literacy than poor rural women. The Romans, then, were literate for many centuries before 240, but it does not look like they were 'literary'. And when they did move towards literary production, even their earliest efforts seem to be conspicuously Greek. Why did Greek literature loom so large for Roman writers and readers?

For that we need to look farther back. The Greeks began to establish themselves in Sicily and southern Italy in the eighth century. As a consequence, the rise of Rome occurred in an area in which Greek cities like Syracuse, Croton, and Tarentum were conspicuous for their might, wealth and glamour. In varying degrees and ways, the peoples of central Italy, for all their different languages and cultures, felt the influence of Greek civilisation. Sometimes this took place directly, at other times by way of their neighbours. This eclecticism is most obvious in the different Italian adaptations of the Greek alphabet and in the uses to which it was put. Romans, as we have seen, set up inscriptions, in which practice they followed Greeks: later Romans believed that their Twelve Tables had been drafted in imitation of Greek law codes. Greek influence is reflected in other areas as well, such as pottery. Hellenism had long supplied Italian aristocrats with a universally recognisable form of cultural capital, whether their native language was Oscan, Etruscan or Latin. This preference

remains visible in Etruscan tombs and tomb paintings, in the early presence in Rome of the Greek symposium and in the habit, frequent in central Italy, of rendering the iconography of Greek religion into vernacular art. Greek culture, at least some aspects of it, penetrated central Italy not because its peoples aspired to be Greek but because it was high culture, furnishing elite Italians with the trappings of elegance and privilege. It is no accident that Romans came to believe that their city's mythical founders, Romulus and Remus, must have received a proper Greek education in their youth, or that Romulus' successor on the throne, Numa, was an expert in Italian religion and Greek philosophy. This was wishful thinking, but it shows us what later Romans thought of when they conceived of sophistication, and how they imagined they could best make the case that they were emerging players in the Mediterranean world.

Certain aspects of Greek culture were attractive, and by the third century BCE, Hellenism was conspicuous throughout Mediterranean societies. Indeed, this was one important consequence of Alexander the Great's conquests in the fourth century. Macedonian dynasts from Egypt to the Black Sea, like Greek cities in the west, competed with one another in displays of Hellenic high culture. The political and social significance of the Greek language was not lost on the Roman aristocracy, for whom bilingualism and acquaintance with Greek literature became increasingly important credentials. But reading Greek literature and administering Roman civic life in Latin are practices that could easily have persisted side by side for centuries: it was by no means inevitable that the Romans would create a literature in Latin that was explicitly, even proudly, modelled on Greek literature. Indeed, this literary turn was in some ways counterintuitive in terms of international prestige in the third century, since few outside Italy and not all within it could understand Latin.

Hellenisation and Latin Literature: The Show Must Go On

Theatrical arts were a conspicuous and, for many, an attractive feature of Greek culture. Drama was a feature of civic life in Sicily from at least the fifth century, and by the fourth century the cities of southern Italy were furnished with handsome theatres. The natural environment for Greek drama was a public festival advertising a city's sophistication and prosperity, and this facet of Greek theatre obtained in the Greek communities of Italy no less than elsewhere in the Greek world. Neighbouring non-Greek peoples liked what they saw. Hence the profusion in southern Italy of pottery decorated with scenes from comedy or tragedy, intended for Italian

consumers. Our evidence is incomplete, but shows that the peoples of central Italy, each in their own way, quickly adapted elements of Greek dramatic performances to their own tastes.

The Romans believed that the introduction of theatrical performances (*ludi scaenici*) to their city took place in the year 364. In the previous year, according to tradition, the hero Camillus had fallen victim to a plague. This man was esteemed a second founder of Rome because he had repulsed Gallic invaders in 390 and had brokered a resolution to the domestic political strife which had divided Rome against itself. His death, then, was a momentous event, and the disease that took his life, Livy tells us, ravaged the populace unabated. In 364 the Romans turned in desperation to novel methods for appeasing their gods, one of which was the production of theatrical performances at the Roman Games.

The Roman Games (*ludi Romani*) were perhaps the oldest of Rome's festivals. They were held in September in honour of Jupiter *Optimus Maximus* ('Best and Greatest'), the chief god of the city. The central concern of Roman civic religion was the preservation of harmony between the gods and Roman people, a relationship the Romans described as *pax deorum* ('peace with the gods'). The *ludi Romani*, then, which included processions, sacrifices, and horse races, were administered by elected magistrates as a sacred duty but also as a celebration for and of the Roman people. These games therefore supplied Rome's leadership with a natural occasion on which to inaugurate an extraordinary appeal to the city's gods in their time of need. As it turned out, the novel performances of 364 did nothing to mollify divine hostility. Indeed, the historian Livy (see Chapter 6) reports that they were interrupted when the Tiber overflowed its banks, and the plague persisted for another year. Notwithstanding this negative verdict on the part of the gods, the theatrical games (presumably some form of staged performances; see Chapter 2) proved popular with the public and the authorities who governed them: from that year on, they remained a part of the Roman Games.

We do not know whether this story is historically accurate, but it is nonetheless telling – and was meant to be. For one thing, it is remarkable that the Romans associated the introduction of the theatre with momentous public events. These new performances were foreign imports and reflected the complicated nature of the influence of Greek drama in central Italy, for it was not to the Greeks directly but rather to their Etruscan neighbours to the north that the Romans turned for aid in incorporating elements of theatrical games. (The usual distinction between 'Roman' and 'Etruscan' is somewhat unhelpful: the two peoples had been entwined with

one another from the very beginning of Rome's foundation.) Performers who were skilled in dancing to music were invited from Etruria. Very soon, we are told, the Romans added their own touches to this Greco-Etruscan art form, including jests delivered in what Livy describes as 'unsophisticated verses'. Over time Roman dramatic technique became more refined and performances less improvisational. Indeed, these events came to rely on careful crafting and, if Livy is right, the use of a script (Liv. 7.2.4–13). The Etrusco-Roman theatrical scene was soon well established and catered to by groups of professional actors who were probably itinerant. The Romans, then, devised their own brand of dramatic art within the context of an important civic festival. Performances of this hybrid kind could still be viewed in Rome as late as 115, and probably even later. And the Etruscan language left a lasting impression on Latin vocabulary for stagecraft, supplying it with terminology like *scaena* ('stage') and *persona* ('mask').

Popular though Etrusco-Roman performances remained, Roman drama was radically transformed when Livius Andronicus 'was the first to be so bold as to compose a play with a plot' (*ausus est primus argumento fabulam serere*), as Livy's version puts it. This took place, we are told by Cicero and Aulus Gellius (though not by Livy), in 240, more than a century after the Romans had adapted the dramatic arts of Etruria. Andronicus' plays were without question written works, and they became a feature of Rome's literary canon down to Cicero's day and beyond.

Remarkably, no ancient writer mentions what seems to moderns the most innovative feature of this event: that Andronicus' 'play with a plot' was a Latin translation of a Greek play. Andronicus did not compose a play in Latin about Roman heroes of the past, though of course he could have. Nor did Roman authorities produce a Greek play in its original language (although by the second century BCE Romans did produce Greek dramas – in Greek – in Rome). Instead, Andronicus adapted the concepts, techniques, and storylines of Greek drama to Latin and to the distinctive circumstances of stage performance in Rome. This was, so far as we know, an achievement unprecedented in the ancient Mediterranean world. Indeed, Andronicus has aptly been described as Europe's first literary translator, and he made a career composing both comedies and tragedies, all in Latin and adapted from Greek originals (see too Chapter 2). He also composed a Latin version of Homer's epic *Odyssey*, using a native Italian versification rather than Homeric hexameters. These are the first Latin poems we know of, and later Romans considered them foundational. Andronicus, although we know little about him, provides