



paideia. As in Roman times, education – especially for the elites – linked a Greek heritage of grammar and rhetoric as part of the standard curriculum with the specific legal contexts of the Roman Republic, this link had huge ramifications for rhetoric as a whole and in its deliberative and forensic *genera*, which became rather toothless since the elite’s political influence was massively reduced and recalibrated in imperial times. An entire, at the time thriving, genre at the fringes of literature and law – the declamations as educational tools for practising rhetoric in a growing fictional manner according to the loss of real political and legal influence – mirrors changes, which might be worth further exploration and seem to be a field where Classics in its methods and time-focus can provide insights of further relevance for the field of Law and Literature.

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VEHICLES IN LITERATURE

HUDSON (J.) *The Rhetoric of Roman Transportation. Vehicles in Latin Literature*. Pp. xvi + 353. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Cased, £75, US\$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-48176-2.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X23000185

The name of this book is both very narrowly accurate in its title and slightly misleading in its subtitle. The book concerns Roman rhetorical practice in Latin literature surrounding travel and transport, but readers will learn little about actual vehicles or Roman transportation. Comprising five chapters on specific vehicular terms (*plaustrum*, *currus*, *essedum*, *carpentum* and *lectica*), a long (67 pages) introduction and a short (4 pages) conclusion, the book is organised as a series of close readings, foregrounding H.’s careful analysis and interest in clever composition. These selected texts comprise nearly all the evidence considered, creating an opportunity for others to engage with this work via art, numismatics and archaeology, including especially the argumentation about these objects. This singular focus on Latin literature is not an oversight, as H.’s project concerns rhetoric and is explicitly designed to explore the tension between vehicles as subjects of mundane instrumentality and metaphorical intentionality (p. xiii). Therefore, there are only textual carts of the literary imagination, necessarily skewing the discussion to the second half of that tension, because fictive carts ‘can never not, for instance, also signify something about their role in the text’ (p. xv).

H.’s method is to read for meaning ‘backwards’, by which he means that he considers not (primarily) what meaning the vehicle brings to its context, but instead asks how the context reveals the vehicle’s meaning. While I am unqualified to evaluate H.’s claim that this reversal constitutes a new method for reading Latin literature, the results in this book constitute its fatal flaw, creating a tautological framework. Specifically, the vehicle can only ever take on the meaning of the story in which it is embedded; and so, when stories have different meanings, the vehicles can only become multivalent. Contradictions reflect the term’s flexibility rather than prompting methodological reflection. This tautology is further supported by terminological vagueness and deliberate avoidance of actual vehicles. However ingenious it might seem at the outset to exclude any

extratextual information in order to play with a (mundane vs metapoetical) duality that can hardly ever be pinned down (p. xv), the resulting output can never matter beyond the text(s). And while it might be true that rhetoric can only be observed to function in and in between texts, it is not the case that all the meaning necessary to understand that rhetoric is enclosed within them. The Roman imaginary was not based on the imaginary. By sidestepping the hard work of understanding the actual thing being referred to and thus which of its properties are being activated, ignored or exaggerated, H. has robbed himself of the ability to evaluate or extend his claims.

This criticism is not avoided in the introduction's lengthy (but under-sourced) discussion of vehicle types, but this is hardly H.'s fault: scholarship has not provided the necessary evidence of what vehicles looked like. Admirably, H.'s analysis does note evolving vehicular forms and functions in the texts, such as the humble *plaustrum*, which was 'any rural land vehicle' (p. 78), but also eventually an oversized urban wagon, having 'long since left rural carting behind' (p. 114). It was the mobile home of the Scythians (p. 110 n. 85) and yet equivalent to the Greek Hamaxa (pp. 121–2). Similarly, the *lectica* was a wartime stretcher and then an elite bed of many types (p. 251), rare in the late Republic, but common by Neronian times. The analysis does not, however, map these differences onto the meanings that such a vehicle is said to have carried, leading to flawed reasoning. For example, the *plaustrum*'s many meanings – from 'a symbol of religious devotion to an emblem of state survival' (p. 121) – ignore both the range of functions above and the debate as to whether the *plaustrum* was a particular kind of vehicle, a class of vehicles or even a synonym for vehicle itself. Thus, the term *plaustrum* appears to carry so much meaning, not due to its metapoetical utility, but because it is not the single thing the analysis pretends it is. The tautology reaches a breaking point when, in describing the moral context of the *essedum*, H. is forced to assume that the form of the *essedum* changed from a chariot to a general vehicle (for how else could Vedius stand and Cynthia ride?). The bifurcated *essedum* thus appears to bridge cleverly the chapters on the *currus* and the *carpentum*, but it is in fact an admission-by-organisation that a vehicle's physical reality matters more than a little to understanding its literary context.

Compounding the problem are claims about vehicles outside of literary contexts, such as in the introduction to the *carpentum*: it 'is striking that Roman culture constantly holds vehicular transport at arm's length – seemingly anxious about both the excessive power it can accord drivers and the softening vulnerability it brings about in its passengers' (p. 208). Yet this claim ignores the thousands of miles of roads built, the expectation for every farm to have at least one vehicle or the densities of traffic requiring regulation. Surely most *carpenta* must have been simple, unadorned vehicles that failed to draw the eye, the ire or the ink necessary to transform it into an object and device of rhetorical disdain. H. does sometimes make such distinctions, understanding that a *plaustrum* is only a 'honey wagon' when it is full of 'night soil', but ignores the idea that what makes a *carpentum* a symbol of female moral failure is the presence of a woman of failing morality. The *carpentum* is not the source of her shame, but the means by which it is actualised; were she riding in an *essedum*, the shame would be unchanged. Indeed, Chapter 3 argues as much. Thus, backward reading fills a vehicle with hermeneutic baggage, but, once filled, it asks readers to look to the cart and away from the baggage. Consequently, H. makes an odd apologia for instances in Cicero's letters when the *lectica* is not a symbol of moral outrage (pp. 273–4). Reading backward has got it backwards: *lecticae* do not always produce moral outrage, even if moralising stories with rhetorical *lecticae* often do.

A related effect of backward reading is the illusion that carts are central rather than circumstantial. By beginning with the premise that vehicles are necessarily signifiers of meaning, each text transforms into a meaning-making machine and each textual cart into a productive ‘gear’. But backward reading, in this analogy, causes the analysis to avoid studiously considering the device’s banality outside of the machine (i.e. real vehicles), its interchangeability within other machines (i.e. other narratives), or that in many cases this gear could be wholly replaced by another device (i.e. another means of conveyance) and the machine would only be minimally different.

While the shifting position of translations (from the body, to the footnotes, to none at all) is confusing, it is a mere quibble compared to the writing style’s impenetrable pretension. First, readers are pummelled by puns: every chapter and subheading is some play on words, as is nearly every verb of the preamble. Throughout the text, readers are overwhelmed by parentheticals: clever asides and innuendo played for effect rather than clarity. It seems H. imagines the book as a joyful dialogue between author and reader, filled with wit, quips, rejoinders and repartee. But as a reader I never get a word in, instead becoming increasingly annoyed with the author constantly interrupting himself. Worse still, this style mimics the method and treats the academic process like a plaything, a theatrical monologue rather than a collective scholarly endeavour. Perhaps this style was a homage to the rhetorical subject matter; but, if so, it arrives on stage like the *pilentum* of ‘hack dramas’ (p. 57) and leaves like the *plaustrum*, exiting empty (at best) before illumination.

Nonetheless, many aspects of the book remain valuable for reuse, specifically H.’s exceptionally keen eye for nuance over an impressive array of literary material. For example, future scholars might apply H.’s observations and other evidence within an explicitly comparative framework, one that parses the textual chronology more closely and which asks how details of form and function impact (or not) the interpretations of a particular vehicle. Such research might resemble the critical approaches to the labels applied to Roman domestic space. In this, H.’s extensive *index locorum* (greater than the bibliography) will be an indispensable starting point.

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ROMAN DEFIXIONES

SÁNCHEZ NATALÍAS (C.) *Sylloge of Defixiones from the Roman West. A Comprehensive Collection of Curse Tablets from the Fourth Century BCE to the Fifth Century CE*. In two volumes. (BAR International Series 3077.) Pp. xvi + viii + 575, ills, colour maps. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2022. Paper, £126. ISBN: 978-1-4073-5931-1 (vol. 1), 978-1-4073-5932-8 (vol. 2), 978-1-4073-1532-4 (set).

doi:10.1017/S0009840X23001488

This volume is part of a long series of publications dedicated to *defixiones* released in the twenty-first century, including corpora, studies and publications of numerous partial