

Nicolas Cavuoto-Denis: *Vsus scribendi. Le projet littéraire de Symmaque dans les Lettres, les Discours et les Rapports*. Turnhout: Brepols 2023 (Recherches sur les rhétoriques religieuses 37). 480 p. € 129.00. ISBN: 978-2-503-60494-7.

The volume aims to offer a comprehensive study of literary strategies in Symmachus' oeuvre. Since Symmachus' writings have mostly been read by scholars as sources for documentary information rather than as literary works, the book seeks to broaden our understanding of Symmachus' profile by investigating his status as a learned writer as well as an influential politician. Furthermore, the study wants to replace the common opinion on Symmachus' style, which has been widely judged as repetitive, monotonous and affected by obnoxious pedantry. The ultimate objective is to find consistent stylistic features that characterize Symmachus' corpus as a whole, identifying a unitary poetics (the "projet littéraire" mentioned in the title), thereby giving an insight into the author's approach towards literary practice. To achieve these goals, Nicolas Cavuoto-Denis examines the literary forms, the structure of the texts and corpora, the meta-poetic statements, as well as Symmachus' relationship with previous literary tradition. The author complements the close reading of texts with an analysis of their social and cultural context, offering an insight into the criteria that defined aristocratic identity in late fourth-century Rome.

The objectives of the investigation are praiseworthy, although Cavuoto-Denis acknowledges the difficulty of achieving them due to the diversity of Symmachus' texts and the many problems related to their transmission ("Introduction générale", pp. 11–39). Our understanding of the editing phases and dynamics of circulation of Symmachus' works is still limited, but we know that to some extent the making of the corpus was heavily affected by posthumous interventions. This clearly challenges any attempt to isolate the author's intentions and stylistic choices: how to find a consistent strategy in writings that had been only partially gathered and planned for publication by their author?

For this reason, the approach towards the texts in the book is rightly cautious. Cavuoto-Denis analyses the meta-poetic statements and literary features in the corpus, and examines Symmachus' way of interpreting the literary genres, but he never tries to determine the editing phases of the letter collection, the *Relationes* or the *Speeches*, nor does he consider them as

unitary, self-contained and perfected works. In this respect, the title of the book is in some way both appropriate and misleading. On the one hand, it perfectly catches the spirit of the volume, its purpose of outlining Symmachus' style and approach towards the literary past. On the other, the mention of a "projet littéraire" evokes the idea of an author who carefully meditated the making of his works with a view to future publication, which is true only for very limited parts of Symmachus' monumental corpus. Even the expression *usus scribendi* is ambiguous. Cavuoto-Denis uses it in both the title and in the book to indicate the concept of literary practice or, as on p. 17, the literary tradition. In its three occurrences in the *Letters*, however, Symmachus never uses the expression *usus scribendi* to define how he writes the letters, that is his way of conceiving epistolary practice, but rather to indicate the act of writing in its material, practical aspect. In letter 3,83 he expresses the hope that the addressee Rufinus will start writing again after a long journey, rediscovering the long neglected *usus scribendi*;¹ in letter 5,46, Symmachus underlines the necessity of using letter writing to communicate with Neoterius, since the two friends cannot meet in person;² in letter 8,69, Symmachus wishes to recover from a period of crisis thanks to the letters of a friend, and hopes to be able to write again soon.³ Therefore, *usus scribendi* indicates here the purely physical activity of taking a pen and writing to a friend. Cavuoto-Denis, however, is influenced by how *usus scribendi* is employed in modern philology, i.e. to define the distinctive stylistic and linguistic features of a given author or period. On his side, Symmachus follows Quintilian, who uses *usus scribendi* when referring to the very act of drawing letters in the first phase of any students' education⁴.

The book is divided into three sections that follow the general introduction: the first chapter, "Portrait de Symmaque. L'aristocrate, le païen, l'homme de lettres" (pp. 43–134) analyzes the socio-cultural background of Symmachus' work, with the aim of shedding light on how and why Symmachus shapes

1 Symm. epist. 3,83,1: *Iter, ut opinione metior, expedisti, quod solum tibi ad silentii veniam suffragabatur. Nunc stativa requies stilo et animo tuo scribendi ad nos usum reformet, licet oris tui facultas, et cum viam carperes, luculento potuerit adfatu sitim nostram rigare.*

2 Symm. epist. 5,46: *Sed ubi dierum processu rumor intepuit, animadverti mihi hoc genus superesse solacii, quod ad scribendi usum moremque remearem.*

3 Symm. epist. 8,69: *Unum quippe hoc litterarum genus superest, post amaros casus orationum mearum, quod me ad usum scribendi possit adlicere.*

4 Quint. inst. 10,2,1.

his strategy of self-representation according to the expectations of the possible intended audience. The second chapter (“L’écriture de la lettre: les *mores epistulae*”, pp. 137–270) seeks to outline Symmachus’ idea of epistolary practice; the closing section (“Rhétorique et culture dans les textes officiels de Symmaque”, pp. 273–441) focuses on the tendencies and patterns followed by Symmachus in the editing of the *Relationes* and the *Orationes*.

The real strength of the volume lies in the first section, which examines the criteria for inclusion in Symmachus’ circle and the dynamics of relationships within the aristocracy of the period. It is impossible to read Symmachus’ work without considering the context framing it. His erudition, the peculiar sense of morality, the respect for the past and the openness towards innovation can only be understood in the light of the aristocratic values that Symmachus shared with his correspondents, relatives and friends. Therefore, the chapter focuses on establishing what determined inclusion into contemporary aristocratic circles and to what extent aristocratic identity affected Symmachus’ strategy of self-representation. Cavuoto-Denis rightly points out that belonging to the “best part of humankind” (p. 68) is not a matter of nobility of birth, religious affiliation or closeness to a specific sphere of influence; rather it is determined by respect for the past, education based on the ideal of *Romanitas*, commitment to office holding, and friendship, which is the only religion that inspires Symmachus and his friends. These are the cornerstone of Symmachus’ strategy of self-representation in the epistles, official reports and orations and therefore constitutes, with the necessary differences between genres, the *trait d’union* underlying the whole corpus. Symmachus’ works are not an expression of the “militantisme religieux”⁵ of the pagans against the Christian political establishment, but are rather a manifesto of the senatorial ideology of the time.

Pages 70–82 highlight the role played by the terminology and images connected to family ties in Symmachus’ representation of his own society. The author vividly depicts his world as animated by two crucial mechanisms, namely the transmission of values and culture from one generation to another, and the sense of brotherhood (*fraternitas*) connecting those aristocrats and learned gentlemen who shared the same cultural and civic values. In this respect, being *boni* means being part of a big close family. Cavuoto-Denis’ arguments are consistent with data emerging from the analysis of both the

5 For this expression, see p. 60 and *passim*.

arrangement criteria and intertextual allusions in Symmachus' *Letters*. The structure of books 1–7 of the letters foregrounds the continuity between different generations within the family of the Symmachi-Nicomachi; the letter collection tells the story of a family going through massive political changes in a period of some fifty years, and the turnover between different generations is represented through the disposition of the letter groups that create symmetries between books 1–2 and 6–7. Furthermore, most of the archaisms and allusive echoes of Fronto occur in the letters referring to, or addressing, Symmachus' father Avianus, Ausonius (who is represented as a sort of 'spiritual' father), the brother Celsinus Titianus, Nicomachus Flavianus *senior* and *iunior*, and Symmachus' children. It is as if his whole family was represented as living in a dimension where past and present blend together. Therefore, if Symmachus' society is conceptualized according to family dynamics and the main criterion of aristocracy is adherence to examples from the past, it is noticeable that the author represents his own family as the core of this wide social network.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on how Symmachus deals with the different literary genres present in his corpus. The comparison with rhetorical rules and scholastic categories is particularly convincing with regard to the analysis of the official reports and speeches. In particular, the section dedicated to the *Relationes* highlights their literary features and the vagueness of technical terminology. This shows that they have been revised for publication and opens perspectives to investigate who was their intended audience. As far as the speeches are concerned, the remarks on the structure of the collection and on interaction between rhetorical rules, official propaganda, reality and literary tradition clearly showcase Symmachus' command of the oratorical art and his self-awareness in this respect.

When considering Symmachus' approach towards letter writing, Cavuoto-Denis concentrates on two aspects, first how letters are conceived as self-contained units, and second, how the differences in themes, dimensions and forms can be considered as aspects of one consistent literary strategy. The main features that characterize Symmachus' epistolary practice are the search for brevity, the tendency to repeat rhetorical schemes and recognizable epistolary topoi, and the typically late antique appreciation for the ideal of *poikilia*. The meta-poetic statements concerning letter writing mainly point to the idea that every text must be as short as possible and have a balanced structure in order to be consistent with the idea of *prepon*. For this reason,

Cavuoto-Denis mainly focuses on the differences between individual letters, trying to read them within the same literary programme: how can the *mos epistulae* envisage both short and long forms, serious and ironic texts, poetry and prose, descriptive and narrative sections? The chapter explains the variety of forms and themes by applying the concept of *spoudogeloion* that is characteristic of the Menippean satire. This does not seem necessary, as *varietas* is one of the main features of epistolography as a genre, as is the coexistence of witty and more serious letters.

Furthermore, Cavuoto-Denis wonders whether the longer letters should be read as an expression of an epistolary subgenre, and considers the existence of the *epigramma longum* as a suitable comparison. Here too this is not necessary. Symmachus' longer letters are roughly the same length as those by Cicero, Pliny, and Fronto, so that they cannot be seen as an oddity. It is true that Symmachus professes his preference for *brevitas*, but this is a common epistolary topos. Any statement by Symmachus on how to write letters, and any choice as far as language, topic or text structure is concerned, should be read in the light of the evolution of the epistolary genre. Since Cavuoto-Denis thinks that epistolography as a genre was still evolving in the fourth century (p. 445: "la légitimité artistique de ce genre reste à parfaire à l'époque de Symmaque"), he tends to see aspects of Symmachus' letters as novelties, without recognizing that he mostly shaped his letters according to previous epistolary models and a centuries-old existing tradition. This undermines the strength of some sections of this, in other ways thought-provoking, chapter.

In conclusion, the volume offers noteworthy insights for scholars interested in late-antique literature, and has the merit of being the first book-length investigation of literary aspects of Symmachus' works. As a result of the analysis of the texts, the volume identifies the relationship with the past, the use of recognizable patterns and their re-functionalization, as well as a certain inclination towards *brevitas* and the display of literary culture, as the essential features of Symmachus' "projet littéraire". The book will certainly be a point of reference for future studies on Symmachus, especially for the range of topics that it covers. Unfortunately, the bibliography (pp. 451–469) lacks many references to existing contributions on the literary dimension of Symmachus' works, as well as to studies on ancient epistolography and late antique letter collections, which would have been useful for better shaping Symmachus' portrait as a writer.

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