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Reviews and Annotations
Рецензии и анотации

BEYOND EPITOMIC DIMENSIONS

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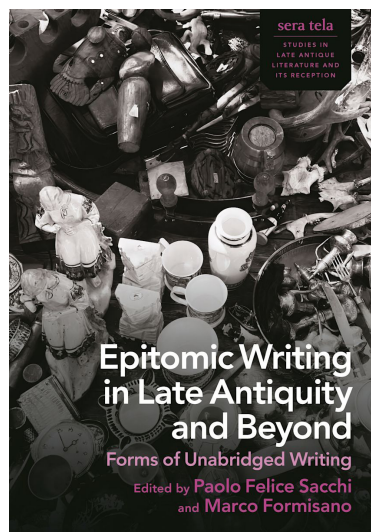
Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Paolo Felice Sacchi and Marco Formisano (Eds.)

Epitomic Writing in Late Antiquity and Beyond: Forms of Unabridged Writing.
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Epitomes – texts that condense, abbreviate, and transform larger bodies of knowledge – have long played a crucial yet often underappreciated role in the history of literature and intellectual culture. *Epitomic Writing in Late Antiquity and Beyond: Forms of Unabridged Writing* brings together a diverse group of scholars to examine the significance of epitomic practices across different historical, literary, and artistic contexts. Through fourteen chapters, the volume investigates how epitomes function both as instruments of preservation and as mechanisms of transformation, shaping the transmission and reception of knowledge in Late Antiquity and modernity.

The book is structured into five thematic sections, each exploring epitomic writing as distinct hermeneutic category. The first section, “Epitomic Dimensions”, addresses theoretical approaches to epitomes, examining their diversity in literature, semiotics and cultural memory. “From the Whole to the Fragments?” explores the dynamic of textual dismemberment and the reconciling of fragmented experiences. “Silence and Enigma” interrogates the epistemological boundaries of epitomes, questioning their limits and interpretative potential. “Materiality” shifts focus to the physical aspects of epitomic writing. Finally, “From the



Fragments to the Whole?” investigates how epitomes facilitate dialogue between different literary forms and structural paradigms.

The volume encompasses a wide-ranging exploration of epitomic writing across literary, philosophical, and visual domains. While many chapters focus on late antique epitomizing practices, the book also traces their afterlives in contemporary thought. The contributions engage with a broad spectrum of figures, from Ausonius, Cato, and Clement of Alexandria to Pascal Quignard, Roland Barthes, Vladimir Nabokov, and Antonin Artaud, seeking to demonstrate the persistence and adaptability of epitomic writing as a cultural phenomenon.

The key thematic concerns of the volume invite readers to investigate and detect ‘textual and discursive mechanisms’ that, despite their broader framework, might collectively suggest a possible unabridged conception of epitomic writing, as Sacchi and Formisano argue in the introduction. This approach fosters for a network of associations. These associations might somewhat seem counterintuitive and even controversial yet prove methodologically challenging. The necessity of redefining epitomes leads to an understanding of epitomization not merely as a process of summarization but as one of fragmentation, reconstruction, and reinterpretation. Rather than adhering to a linear model of derivation, epitomic writing generates new relationships between original and epitomised texts. The volume critiques traditional views that regard epitomes as imitative or inferior, instead emphasizing their transformative and innovative potential. This shift in perspective redirects scholarly focus from the primary source to the secondary product, a shift that is, in turn, linked to changing audiences in Late Antiquity and beyond. The volume thus seeks to rehabilitate the ancient epitomic form by demonstrating how it disrupts its antecedent, aligning this disruption with modern understandings of textual and discursive fragmentation. Such fragmentation of discourse, while generating discontinuity, simultaneously calls for the construction of continuity at another different level.

Some of the studies included in the volume engage with subjects that align with conventionally recognised conceptions of epitomic processes or products, whether or not they possess a clearly discernible antecedent or referent, whether physical, material (e.g. textual) or immaterial and conceptual (thought, concept, notion, faith). These include works such as Ausonius’ corpus, Nonius Marcellus’ lexicon *De compendiosa doctrina*, Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromateis*, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the Dionysian corpus, the ‘Twelve Wise Men’s *Argumenta*. Other works, such as Nepos’ *Cato* and Symphosius’ *Aenigmata* engage with the epitomic framework by exemplifying key features such as *brevitas* and the aesthetics of ‘*concordia discors*’.

Sowers underscores how Ausonius recontextualizes classical knowledge within the framework of late antique culture, crafting a uniquely fragmentary yet cohesive literary corpus. He situates Ausonius’ literary output within a deliberate pursuit of

‘brevity without obscurity’ (*brevitas ut obscura non esset*), emphasizing his dual focus on fragmentation and reconstitution – methods that pervade his poetic projects. Particularly illuminating is Sowers’ analysis of intertextuality, which examines how Ausonius repurposes phrases and themes from Homer, Virgil and Horace, thereby revealing the intricate layers of meaning embedded in his poetry.

Payne, in turn, explores the relationships between epitomes and grammatical lexica as reflection of broader cultural attitudes toward knowledge. He sheds new light on how cultural inheritance is shaped by those who transmit it, highlighting the creative tension in Nonius’ work between reverence for antiquity (*veteres*) and the practical demands of contemporary audiences, *auctoritas* (authority) and *consuetudo* (current usage). By drawing analogies between Nonius and modern editors of fragmentary texts, Payne offers compelling parallels to modern editorial practices, underscoring shared methodologies of fragmentation, reassembly, and interpretation. The support for digital humanities tools, as XML markup, for analysing and better understanding Nonius’ organizational methods is particularly timely and forward-thinking.

Paris expands the discussion of the dynamic interplay of fragmentation and reuniting forces by emphasizing another key tension in the interpretation of the ‘epitomic’: the opposition between the product and the productivity. The dismemberment of Pentheus is employed as a metaphor for the fragmentation of truth among philosophical schools, intertwining mythological imagery with theological analysis. One aspect of the analysis of Clement’s *Stromateis*, which is worth noting, is its attention to the readers’ role in reconstructing the ‘dismembered’ text.

Fragmentation remains central in Lobato’s account of *Apophthegmata partum*. His discussion of ‘logoclastic’ tendencies and nature of apophthegms, and Greco-Roman logocentrism adds philosophical weight to the chapter. These considerations lead Lobato to a striking characterization of apophthegms as ‘anti-literature’ and ‘self-deconstructing’ phenomenon – provocative claims that challenge conventional literary classifications. The focus on Christian thematic bridges Lobato’s work with Burrus’ contribution, which regards the Dionysian corpus as a fragment, an epitome *per se*, through the concept of the imaginary library. While the metaphor of an imaginary library may initially seem speculative, Burrus’ integration of Borges’ literary imagination lends it a balanced, fresh and thought-provoking perspective.

The process of epitomic production and the role of the reader re-emerge as a thematic concern in McGill’s analysis of the ‘Twelve Wise Men’s *Argumenta*. He argues that the summarizer functions as a distinct type of reader, whose product constitutes an ‘expression of reading’. By balancing textual analysis and broader theoretical considerations, McGill demonstrates a keen awareness of the sophisticated literary game of compression and its implications for reception studies, intertextuality and literary hierarchy.

Hudson's discussion of Nepos' writing style, while characterised as 'epitomic', raises questions about its thematic alignment with the volume's concerns. By drawing parallels between Nepos' compression techniques and Cato's ethos of austerity, Hudson highlights a deeper synergy between the subject matter and the author's approach, revealing the intricate relationship between literary style and political messaging. This view leans heavily towards justifying Nepos' brevity as an aesthetic and intellectual choice, while leaving open questions regarding its potential shortcomings – for instance, whether this approach sacrifices depth or nuance in historical representation?

Finally, as a product of 'Saturnalian *ludus*', Symphosius' *Aenigmata* – as analysed by Hardie – bears thematic affinities with McGill's discussion of *Argumenta* as sophisticated exercises in literary play. Hardie contextualize the *Aenigmata* within late antique aesthetics of miniaturization and multiplicity while relating them to tradition and classical themes. The most intriguing aspect of Hardie's analysis is his framing of the riddles as a microcosm of the world. By treating humble objects – such as reed pen or a lantern – as metaphors for universal themes, Hardie demonstrates the *Aenigmata*'s capacity to engage with questions of identity, transformation, and perception.

Liverani and Elsner's contributions expand the cultural spectrum of epitomes toward the semiotic transfer: from text to visual material as a 'kind of pictorial epitomic paratextuality' as stated by Elsner. Both scholars emphasize the dynamic interplay between textual and visual systems, highlighting their dialogue and complementarity rather than treating them as separate or hierarchical domains. By drawing connections between literary practices – such as citations, *centones*, *topoi* – and visual phenomena – such as *spolia*, Liverani explores visual epitomization through examples like *Tabulae Iliacae*, which, he argues, represent synthesized interpretations influenced by oral traditions. He further extends his argument to sarcophagi, mosaics or frescoes in early Christian basilicas, positing that these visual compositions, much like their literary counterpart, often emerge from an oral medium. A key insight of Liverani's study is his argument concerning the distinct functions, audiences and reception contexts of visual and verbal narratives. Rather than mere 'duplication or imitation', he asserts that visual epitomes operate through 'complementarity and interaction', engaging with textual traditions in a way that underscores their interpretive autonomy.

Elsner offers a stimulating investigation of the concept of visual epitome, focusing on its functions in visual art and illuminated manuscripts. Particularly inspiring is his interpretation of the images in the *Roman Vergil*, emphasizing the different strategies of illuminations across the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*: in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* illuminations function as poetic voices and set scenes rather than direct reflections of the narrative, in contrast, in the *Aeneid* they operate as 'pictorial epitomes' of selected textual chunks, i.e. as illustrations of episodes,

serving as both summaries and exegetical tools.

The anti-linearity of texts and time seems to be the connecting thread or common core in Kiffer's discussion of Antonin Artaud, and Noens' examination of Nabokov and Pliny. While essays on Roland Barthes, Antonin Artaud and Vladimir Nabokov are justified within the expanded conceptual framework of epitomic writing, their connections to the thematic focus of the volume warrant particular scrutiny. Although the volume makes a concerted effort to convincingly articulate such intra-textual connections and shared notions within a broader understanding of epitomic writing, these associations may at times demand considerable interpretative effort from the reader. One might question, for instance, whether Barthes' fragmented practice – his use of fragmented and discontinuous writing to capture intimate moments, akin to photographic snapshots, as analysed by Fallah Nejad – constitutes a sufficiently direct and apt parallel to the nature of epitomic writing.

Kiffer's comparative analysis of two major editions of Artaud's notebooks sheds lights on the ethical and methodological challenges of editing such unconventional material. Her preference for an edition that preserves the fragmentary and non-linear nature of the notebooks aligns with her broader argument in favour of embracing imperfection and disjunction in artistic practice. However, the primary – if not the sole – point of connection between the notebooks and the concept of the 'epitomic dimensions' appears to rest on their fragmented form, raising questions about the extent to which they substantively engage with the volume's core themes.

Noens' essay on Nabokov and Pliny is rather debatable. His decision to juxtapose these two figures is ambitious but lacks sufficient justification. The proposed parallel between Nabokov's memoir and Pliny's letter collection does not seem to add significant analytical value to Noens's thesis and hypotheses. While the comparison gestures toward the interplay of literary strategies, autobiographical writing, and epistolography across distinct temporal, generic, and cultural contexts, the structural focus alone does not convincingly bridge the conceptual gap between them.

Kristeva's examination of Pascal Quignard's *Petits traités* departs somewhat from the volume's overarching effort to situate works within an epitomic framework. Rather than force-fitting her subject into an externally imposed model, Kristeva develops a theoretical framework that independently supports an understanding of epitomic writing. Her argument is structured around key themes that define Quignard's project – fragmentation, epistemic distance, and the interplay between tradition and modernity – while reassessing the role of the epitome and the fragment in modern literature as a means of grappling with the disorder of contemporary existence. Ultimately, she contends that the fragment functions as a 'pursuit of meaning', underscoring its epistemological and existential significance.

As a whole, the volume brings together a diverse array of perspectives and approaches to epitomic writing, often beginning from disparate and wide-ranging

points of departure, as noted in the editors' preface. Ultimately, however, these contributions are unified by key conceptual threads, including fragmentation, re-composition, miniaturization, textual dynamics, and encyclopedism.

REFERENCES

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