

## New Perspectives on Greek and Latin Literary Ekphrasis

The panel of papers here proposed is dedicated to the device of ekphrasis, that is, the literary description of buildings, clothing, weapons, and works of art. Recent decades have witnessed a remarkable increase of interest in ekphrasis, and numerous studies of the theory and practice of the device (e.g., Heffernan 2004) have served to deepen our understanding of the nature and function of it. In recent years various theoretical approaches and methodologies have been applied to ekphrastic passages in literature as early as the Archaic age and as late as the Imperial period (e.g., Webb 2009). Theories of narratology, intertextuality, intermediality and cultural poetics have been employed in the study of ekphrasis with considerable benefit (e.g., Becker 1995). Consequently, while a century ago it was not uncommon to consider ekphrases as excursive digressions that are irrelevant to the thematic, literary and other concerns of the text, it is now recognized that the descriptive mode performs an integral function within the immediate and general contexts of the literary work, and indeed within the social and cultural settings in which the text is found (e.g., Dufallo 2012).

This panel will focus on a series of Greek and Latin ekphrastic texts ranging from the Archaic age on the Greek side to the Imperial era on the Latin one, and follows a diachronic approach. The first paper, on the Pseudo-Hesiodic *Shield of Herakles*, examines the role of depiction in presenting an apotropaic image in words. Adopting not only the main features of apotropaic imagery, the shield-description also takes on its magical function of deflecting misfortune and redirecting the powers of evil. In this way the poetic ekphrasis also problematizes the relationship which the verbal representation has with the visual representation, particularly in the matrix of their roles within society.

The inter-relations between art and text became the focus of a wide range of literary genres in the Hellenistic era, including prose works of history, technology, and science, as well as poetic works of mime, epigram, and the pastoral mode. In an era when the record and remembrance of the past was widely reflected in Greek literature, the verbal depiction of real or imagined works becomes a subject of literary innovation. The second paper in the panel draws attention to the role of description in preserving the visual memory of the past, in particular in the poetry of Callimachus. As *aetia* sought to codify the past by their accounts of origins, they relate to ekphrasis through their common aims of recording and conserving specific elements of culture and society in the literary construct. By examining specific instances of aetiology within Callimachus' ekphrases, this paper exposes an important sociological function of description.

Moving to the Latin side, the third paper explores the reception of Greek works of art in the Roman world of the Republican period. Seeing the visual markers of Greek culture, society and history with Roman eyes, Latin poets were confronted with questions of their own identity, and so represented the cultural past in new ways and to new ends. This paper, which focuses on Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, explores the role which ekphrasis plays in this transmission and appropriation of the Greek cultural heritage. As the poem questions the value of adopting Greek social and philosophical values, Lucretius uses the ekphrasis of the golden statues (*De Rerum Natura* 2.24-6) in order to point up the ambivalent stance which the philosopher-poet adopts throughout his treatise.

The engagement of the viewing audience with the object displayed is the focus of the final paper. Exploring the cognitive actions which are invoked in the act of the gaze, this paper draws parallels between experiments of thought (which employ mental images) and the visual appropriation of an image. One purpose of literary description is to engage this realm of

cognition, and several Greek and Latin texts illustrate to the reader / viewer how the experiments of thought may be effected. While concentrating on scientific and technical descriptions, this paper reveals that the mental processes that are invoked therein may be applied to other ekphrases with similar benefit.

The general goals of this workshop, then, are to provide new perspectives on the social, cultural and literary functions of ekphrasis in Greek and Latin writings. The audience may expect novel explorations into the subject which seek to expand our understanding of the complex relationships between art and text. This panel is sponsored by the Waterloo Institute for Hellenistic Studies.

#### Bibliography

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