

Michael P. Hanaghan: *Reading Sidonius' Epistles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019. XI, 237 p., 2 maps. £ 75.00. ISBN: 978-1-108-42921-4.

This is a book devoted to the sheer joy of reading Sidonius' letter collection as narrative. It is the first of its kind and does the job masterfully, pointing the way for a new phase of scholarship on the author. The past decades have yielded a rich harvest of novel insights into Sidonius' attitudes and artistry – and into the limits of our knowledge. Reading Sidonius will never be the same since we have started to probe the allusive richness of his work as a late antique author, and read it as a crafted literary ego-document rather than as an imperfect quarry for historical knowledge. Building on these achievements, Michael Hanaghan now is the first to devote a monograph to the *Epistles* in which he innovatively deploys a range of narratological insights aimed to create a consolidated picture of the collection's implications.

Chapter 1, "Sidonius' World" (1–17), gives a brief but well-informed reconstruction of Sidonius' life and times and paves the way for the rest of the book by outlining his epistolarity against the background of the development of Sidonius scholarship. One tenet is that we will always be stuck in a middle ground, craving to find out more about Sidonius and his world, but in vain. When concrete details matter Sidonius mentions them, and then their narratological importance is all the more significant from an author who is generally vague. He does not permit generalisations about his beliefs and policies: his opinions can only be correctly appreciated in context and will differ according to the situation as is particularly apparent in his varying appraisal of the Visigothic court. Another tenet is that distinguishing between real and fictitious letters is flawed because, in the first place, these are texts that self-consciously manifest their epistolarity as an inherent part of their composition, and, secondly, when they are arranged in a collection a second moment of composition is created that invites the reader to consider them on fictional terms. All of Sidonius' epistles are to some degree fictional, even if they were not at the moment of composition, because they portray a second-order reality in which the author aims at self-fashioning.

Chapter 2, "Self and Status: Reading 'Sidonius' in the *Epistles*" (18–57), shows the benefits of a linear reading of the collection as Sidonius invites his audience to read continuities, inconsistencies, contrasts, and comparisons. Teasing out the complex strands of his persona, Hanaghan examines

the staging of Sidonius' wealth and offices: in books 1 and 2 the rich public office holder and successful Gallo-Roman aristocrat who does not hesitate to compare his own magnificent baths (*Ep.* 2.2) favourably to the malfunctioning ones of his relatives Ferreolus and Apollinaris (*Ep.* 2.9). While it is one of the threads running through Hanaghan's book that Sidonius invariably aims at coming out wiser, wittier, more savvy politically, and more brilliantly educated – and he may well be right – this nevertheless brings up interesting questions about the limits of public criticism in writing (even if wrapped up in teasing and humour) and of self-promotion in a segment of society obsessed with status and correct behaviour, and, indeed, if, where, and how this monomaniac 'writing to survive' (if I am allowed to use my own phrase) is significant beyond ego-centrism and in-group rivalry. Hanaghan goes on to discuss the social importance of *paideia* (would it not have been preferable to use the Latin *doctrina*?), which, together with *amicitia*, is increasingly the prop of aristocratic life as imperial career paths dwindle. He also points out that Sidonius importantly represents himself as Gallo-Roman (e.g., the jousting between Lyon and Rimini in *Ep.* 1.8 and the distinctly Gallic features of his Roman villa in *Ep.* 2.2), drawing upon a peripheral identity that is shaped against Italian centrality. Finally, Sidonius' episcopal self is brought to the fore, and the apparent tension between the episcopal office and secular culture. Negotiating this tension by asserting Christian humility, Sidonius manages to pose as a model to his sophisticated audience.

Chapter 3, "Reading Time: *Erzählzeit* and *Lesezeit*" (58–90), strangely opts for a methodological faux pas. Setting out to explore time as a narratological tool, Hanaghan introduces Günther Müller's conceptual pairing of *Erzählzeit* and *erzählte Zeit*.¹ He then dispenses with the original meaning ('time it takes to tell/read the story' and 'time taken up by the narrated events', applied by Müller to effects of retardation and acceleration) and redefines the terms for his own purpose as the "asserted moment of composition" and "the discussion of time in the epistle other than the moment of composition" respectively (58), flanked by *Lesezeit* as the anticipated or reported moment of reading. Invoking Paul Ricœur's authority for this switch makes the confusion

1 G. Müller: *Erzählzeit und erzählte Zeit*. In: Festschrift für Paul Kluckhohn und Hermann Schneider. Hrsg. von ihren Tübinger Schülern. Tübingen 1948, 195–212, repr. in: G. Müller: *Morphologische Poetik*. Gesammelte Aufsätze. Hrsg. von E. Müller. Tübingen 1968, 269–286.

even greater as Ricœur, on the contrary, keeps close to Müller while extending the latter's model with a third layer which is projected by the interaction of *Erzählzeit* and *erzählte Zeit*, creating "a fictive experience of time" and, through it, meaning.² As it turns out, Hanaghan largely relies on *Erzählzeit* alone to describe the pivotal moment of any letter, the narrative present sitting between a past that is determined in one way or another and an uncertain future, thus creating suspense and bringing home the author's message to the reader. Time in Sidonius is not about dating (he has no interest in dating his letters or fixing their dramatic dates as such) but about creating a meaningful, pseudo-biographical narrative in individual and consecutive letters. Here, Hanaghan is on his own again and offers virtuoso readings of letters such as 1.5 (Sidonius' arrival in Rome), 1.7 (the trial of Arvandus for treason), and 1.10 (Sidonius' efforts as the prefect of Rome).

Chapter 4, "Reading Epistolary Characters" (91–138), usefully considers the numerous characters occurring in the correspondence "first and foremost as literary constructs, which function within the text as positive and negative *exempla* whose behaviour drives the plot of the epistle forward" (91). Sidonius exerts authorial control, as, for instance, demonstrated in the mingling of real and fictitious elements in the descriptions of 'Gnatho' (*Ep.* 3.13) and Seronatus (*Ep.* 2.1). Similarly, Hanaghan pays ample attention to the character portrayals of Visigothic kings and Roman emperors for the variegated narrative of royal (un)trustworthiness and imperial (dys)functioning which Sidonius creates, encouraging the reader to construct his role as a political survivor amid this turmoil.

Chapter 5, "Narrating Dialogue" (139–169), analyses – on the premise that, as a genre, epistolography is highly mimetic of direct speech – how Sidonius uses direct, indirect and implied speech to vary his narrative speed and shift focalisation. *Ep.* 1.7 is again mustered, now for changes in focalisation from the plaintiffs to Sidonius to Arvandus by means of direct and indirect speech. In *Ep.* 5.17, the narrative is modulated through (in)direct speech and verb tense, resulting in a respectful portrayal of the aged Philomathius which, in

2 P. Ricœur: *The Time of Narrating (Erzählzeit) and Narrated Time (Erzählte Zeit)*. In: S. Onega/J. A. García Landa (eds): *Narratology: An Introduction*. London 1996, 129–142, esp. 130, 133 (from P. Ricœur: *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2. Transl. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer. Chicago 1985, 77–88, 178–182; orig. *Temps et récit*, t. 2: *La configuration du temps dans le récit de fiction*. Paris 1984).

turn, reflects well on Sidonius himself. Slowing down narrative speed is instrumental in, e.g., *Ep.* 4.12 and 24 to emphasise a person's stammering apologies or exact, spelled-out words.

Chapter 6, "Arrangement" (170–184), extends the argument to the collection as a whole and its formative elements: the release of books and groups of books over time, the example of Pliny's nine-book collection, and the desire to bring closure and assert narratological control over the entire undertaking. Hanaghan especially brings out how old age overshadows the last books: Sidonius' own looming death seals "the closed tragic reality of the end of the collection" (180). Interestingly, this challenges the prevailing opinion that Sidonius remains optimistic against the odds, which would distinguish him from Pliny's final pessimism.³

In an Epilogue, Hanaghan offers a reading of *Ep.* 2.13 on the dangers of imperial politics which integrates the various strands of the book. Finally, placing Sidonius' letters in a broader literary context, he poses the question whether Sidonius succeeded in following in Pliny's footsteps. His forceful answer is (188):

Ultimately the relevancy of Pliny's example must be weighed against its irrelevancy; Rome falls, the Visigoths take Clermont, as the events in the background seep into Sidonius' epistles. The pessimism of the final books turns the whole into a performance that is never to be repeated. Sidonius is not just the next Pliny, he is the last Pliny.

The volume is rounded off with a timeline, a useful catalogue of the letters, a bibliography, and concise indices. The timeline contains some inaccuracies (Theodosius I emperor: add year 379; Theodosius dies: change year to 395; Valentinian III emperor: delete 'ca.'; Petronius Maximus dies: add day 31; Avitus emperor: June should be July; Vandals sack Rome: rather May-June; Arvandus' trial: add year 469; 469–470 Sidonius circulating his poetry and books 1 and 2 of the correspondence: this is a widely accepted hypothesis, but a hypothesis all the same; Romulus Augustulus did not die in 476). Further to inaccuracies: what induced those responsible to think that copy-editing could be spared out will forever remain a riddle with often more than one typo on a great number of pages.

3 See R. Gibson: Reading the Letters of Sidonius by the Book. In: J. A. van Waarden/G. Kelly (eds): *New Approaches to Sidonius Apollinaris*. Leuven 2013 (*Late Antique History and Religion* 7), 195–219, esp. 211–219.

The book is richer than this review can show as summarising the argument inevitably obfuscates all the detailed observations that make it such fascinating reading. Hanaghan knows his Sidonius and he knows the scholarship on Sidonius. One aspect could perhaps have been better brought out, namely Sidonius' involvement in the religious, ascetic transformation of his age, connected with the Lérins movement among others.⁴ Also, narratological theory proper would not seem to be among this monograph's primary concerns, figuring more as a general inspiration than applied in any systematic way. Besides – and in opposition to – Müller's and Ricœur's hermeneutic approach, it would have been worth weighing the pros and cons of Gérard Genette's and Mieke Bal's structuralistic method, with the triad text-story-fabula.⁵ Part of the problem is, no doubt, that there is so little theory available for this specific type of literature. Theory of the epistolary novel comes closest as a make shift so that Hanaghan has profitably used Janet Altman's book on the subject.⁶ Essentially, the quality of 'Reading Sidonius' *Epistles* is that Hanaghan needs little theory to write brilliant overarching analyses and spot-on interpretations of detail, culminating in crystal-clear conclusions. I kept underlining one striking phrase after another. Indeed, here is an outstanding literary critic at work. The book is obligatory reading for every student of Sidonius and of epistolography in general. It is a landmark in its field and a signpost for new directions that go well beyond existing scholarship.

- 4 See, e.g., J. A. van Waarden: *Writing to Survive. A Commentary on Sidonius Apollinaris, Letters Book 7, vol. 2: The Ascetic Letters 12–18*, Leuven 2016 (*Late Antique History and Religion* 14).
- 5 G. Genette: *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Transl. J. E. Lewin, foreword J. Culler. Ithaca, NY 1980 (orig. *Discours du récit*. In: *Figures III*. Paris 1972); M. Bal: *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Transl. C. Van Boheemen. 4th ed. Toronto 2017. In addition, taking into consideration ancient rhetoric and poetics might also have been helpful. Focussing on the most telling part of a story, for instance, was already praised by Aristotle (*Poetica* 8) as a quality of Homer and dubbed '*in medias res*' by Horace (*Ars poetica* 147–148); see I. J. F. de Jong: *Narratology and Classics: A Practical Guide*. Oxford 2014, 88.
- 6 J. Gurkin Altman: *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus, OH 1982.

Joop van Waarden, Nijmegen
j.vanwaarden@let.ru.nl

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Joop van Waarden: Rezension zu: Michael P. Hanaghan: *Reading Sidonius' Epistles*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019. In: Plekos 21, 2019, 307–312 (URL:
<http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2019/r-hanaghan.pdf>).
