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The Trouble of Fitting in

Yasmin Haskell, Prescribing Ovid. The Latin Works and Networks of the Enlightened Dr Heerkens, London etc.: Bloomsbury, 2013, xii+268 pp. £ 70.00 ISBN 978-0-7156-3723-4.

The Latin Enlightenment is still a largely neglected subject. On the one hand, scholars in the history of learning tend to steer clear from the literary (rhetorical and poetical) approaches associated with the discipline which has established itself as Neo-Latin. On the other, the eighteenth century has long been neglected by Latinists themselves, due to the allegedly poor literary quality of Latin writing. But since aesthetical considerations have been joined more and more by historical considerations (in particular the history of knowledge) and sociological and anthropological contextualisations, Neo-Latinists are ideally positioned to father the neglected Latin sources of the eighteenth century. After all, lack of fame and quality are no standard to measure the interest of a historical subject.

The general idea that after the Battle of the Books, Latin yielded to French as a vehicle for philosophical thought should, of course, be reconsidered. Latin remained the language of much of the knowledge taught at universities, and much of that knowledge was, in fact, ‚Enlightened'. As the history of learning moves towards the study of reception and circulation of knowledge, a study of the use of Latin in the eighteenth century has long been overdue. Latin journals, for example, are largely overlooked in favour of vernacular journals. And *Historia literaria* has only recently begun to attract the attention of intellectual historians. Haskells's book, then, moves appealingly into this literary wasteland. This is literally true, also, because her anti-hero is not some would-be fashionable Parisian socialite, but a somewhat grumpy physician from Groningen, who chose Ovid as a vehicle for his literary autobiography.

Heerkens was a member of the small Catholic minority in northern ‚Frisian' flatlands. Posing as an angry young man, he tried to fight his way into the local intellectual arena by dashing of one critical poem after the other, attacking the local literary establishment. But this provincial coterie quickly closed its ranks against him, and ever since, Heerkens looked to Paris, where he spent some protracted periods. At some point in his life he even considered settling permanently in the French capital. Paris might have been Catholic, but Heerkens did not feel quite at home there, either, in particular because he kept on defending Latin in a time that d'Alembert ridiculed Latinate culture. Heerkens remained in Groningen, for his grand tour through Italy made him aware that even there, he could never live: his sympathy for Jesuit poetry did not match well with the establishment's growing critique of the Society of Jesus. Throughout his life, Heerkens identified with the exiled Ovid. He was a restless man, always finding too much fault with others to fit in, and making himself not very popular. (Indeed, I must admit I myself started to develop an antipathy for the man as well. At some point I even noticed myself agreeing with one eighteenth-century reviewer who wrote he found Heerkens' *Iter Venetum* not very entertaining or instructive: ‚One encounters nothing really interesting', 120). Still, the fun is in the details.

Heerkens was educated as a physician, and his first period in Paris inspired a *De valetudine litteratorum* (1749), a long didactic poem which he revised and published anew in 1790. More interesting than his verses are the long footnotes which Heerkens supplied as the foundational stuff of his remarks on philosophers, poets, historians, theologians and physicians throughout the ages (he leaves out the natural historians and scientists, sadly). Intriguingly, the book seems to have been directed more to his Groningen countrymen than to wider European audience. Other main works of Heerkens were his commentary of Einhard's *Vita Caroli Magni*, his *Iter Venetum* and his *Icones*. Another interesting work was his *Aves Frisicae* (1787), which seems to dovetail with a growing interest in a nationalist ornithology, current near the end of the century.

On p. 32 the goal of the book is announced as to draw attention to the ‚uniquely derivative, captivatingly composite, late humanist Latin subjectivity' of Heerkens. Indeed, it is hard to tell if Heerkens was representative of anything at all. The treatment of his life is not a case-study of any larger historical question. This should warn historically minded readers that this is not a book on intellectual culture. Haskell introduces Heerkens and his works by giving extensive quotations with translations, and by paraphrases, illucidating and commenting on the text. She helps her readers by ad hoc explanations and comments (p. 128: ‚we shall follow the conscientious note-taker as he records his experiences and observations'), and by a consistently playful tone, her style often saturated with colourful idiomatic expressions. She points at too many interesting new subjects to be treated in the compass of a sympathetically modest monograph which favours description over such broader historical questions on eighteenth-century antiquarianism, the Grand Tour, Latin vs. French, the concept of the Enlightened Republic of Letters, *politesse* vs. polemicism, confessional sociology in literary circles, network analysis, ornithology and nationalism, the shifting relations between medicine, natural history and the new sciences, or literary modelling as such. Most of these contexts are briefly touched upon, but of course, one first has to become acquainted with texts before one can contextualise systematically. This study, then, contributes to drawing a map of a largely neglected Latin literary Enlightenment.

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