Versions of Varro*

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WOLFGANG D. C. DE MELO, *VARRO:* DE LINGUA LATINA. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 2 vols. Pp. xvi + 1,322. ISBN 9780199659739. £250.00.

DIANA SPENCER, *LANGUAGE AND AUTHORITY IN* DE LINGUA LATINA*: VARRO'S GUIDE TO BEING ROMAN*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019. Pp. xxix + 387. ISBN 9780299323202. $118.49.

VALENTINA ARENA and FIACHRA MAC GÓRÁIN (EDS), *VARRONIAN MOMENTS* (*Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 60.2) London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2017. Pp. ix + 147. ISSN 00760730. £35.00.

ALESSANDRA ROLLE, *DALL'ORIENTE A ROMA: CIBELE, ISIDE E SERAPIDE NELL'OPERA DI VARRONE*. Pisa: ETS, 2017. Pp. 257. ISBN 97888467459190. €22.00.

Is this the Varronian moment? After decades of comparative neglect, especially in Anglophone scholarship, the late republican polymath is suddenly everywhere. There are conferences and conference panels dedicated to his work, some subsequently published as edited volumes.[1] Varro is the subject of dissertations and monographs, either on his own[2] or as a prime exhibit in discussions of such diverse subjects as ancient agricultural writing[3] and late republican religious scholarship.[4] Much needed new editions of his work have appeared[5] or are in preparation. Thus we can look forward to Robert Rodgers' OCT of *De re rustica*, Giorgio Piras' Teubner of *De lingua Latina* and a Loeb edition of Varronian fragments by Joseph McAlhany.

Why this renewed interest in a writer on obscure topics, whose crabbed style is not made easier to penetrate by the fact that nearly all his many works survive only in fragments? In addition to the cyclical nature of scholarly fashion and the desperate quest especially of the dissertation-writer to discover untrodden academic paths, the current appeal of Varro would seem to be connected to what one might describe as a self-reflexive turn in classical scholarship. As scholars of antiquity, we want to find out about the scholars *in* antiquity, to see how knowledge was produced and shared in Greece and Rome, how books were written, handled, stored and read by the men (and sometimes women) who are both our intellectual ancestors and the objects of our study. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of publications on ancient constructions of knowledge, on antiquarianism and encyclopaedism, on the history of libraries, reading and the

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1 In addition to *Varronian Moments*, reviewed here, note Butterfield 2015.

2 In addition to Rolle and Spencer, see Nelsestuen 2015 and Leonardis 2019.

3 Kronenberg 2009.

4 MacRae 2016.

5 In addition to De Melo's commented edition of the entire *De lingua Latina*, see Flobert 2019 (Book 7) and Duso 2017 (Book 9), as well as Pittà's 2015 edition of *De uita populi Romani*.

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production of material texts.[6] As the Roman scholar par excellence, Varro has the potential to play a starring role in any such inquiries — and has often done so, including in what remains the most important recent work of Roman intellectual history, Claudia Moatti's pathbreaking *La raison de Rome* of 1997, which in 2015 received its long-overdue translation into English as *The Birth of Critical Thinking in Republican Rome*.

I

Of the Varronian publications under review here, the one most eagerly anticipated and most obviously impressive is Wolfgang De Melo's massive edition, translation and commentary of *De lingua Latina* (that is, of the six books of this twenty-five-book treatise that have survived to the modern period and the few fragments of the remainder). Completed (so D. M. informs us in the Preface) in the record time of a little over five years, the two volumes with their total of 1,322 pages present the first critical edition since Goetz and Schoell's Teubner of 1910, the first English translation since Kent's Loeb of 1938 and the first extensive commentary on the entire text ever to be published. D. M.'s *De lingua Latina* is certainly a milestone in Varronian studies. It is also a highly idiosyncratic and frequently infuriating production.

As D. M. states explicitly, he approaches Varro's text 'as a linguist, not as a historian of culture' (viii) and attempts to present it 'in such a way that it is not just geared towards the handful of Varro specialists worldwide, but so that anyone with an interest in Latin or in linguistics can read it' (vii). In other words, D. M.'s own focus on *De lingua Latina* is extremely narrow, and he is writing for an envisaged readership with the same interests (though not the same high level of expertise) as himself. Those who would like to find out about Varro the antiquarian, the late republican politician-intellectual, the philosopher of language, the adapter of manifold Greek sources or even just the fountain of information on Roman *realia* will largely be frustrated by D. M.'s treatment. His book is about Varro the linguist, and Varro the linguist only.

Take D. M.'s Introduction, which at 253 pages might raise expectations of comprehensiveness. In fact, a mere thirty-five pages are dedicated to an extremely bare-bones summary of Varro's life and works, the text of *De lingua Latina* and D. M.'s editorial principles, and the history of Greek and Roman grammatical studies. The vast bulk of the Introduction consists of detailed discussion of etymology and morphology — exposition not only of Varro's ideas about these fields, as found in *De lingua Latina* 5–7 and 8–10 respectively, but also of modern approaches to the same subjects. It now becomes clear what D. M.'s aim as a commentator is. He is out not only to reconstruct his ancient author's beliefs and arguments, but also to hold them against what linguists today think of the same issues and, indeed, to determine whether Varro got it 'right' or not. D. M.'s exhaustive account of the basics of historical linguistics (including fifty-five pages on sound changes in individual branches of Indo-European, from Albanian to Tocharian!) serves next to no purpose for the explanation of Varro's etymologies and ideas of inflection; what it is, one suspects, is what D. M. thinks Varro *should* have written, and what, if he had any sense, he *would* write if he were penning *De lingua Latina* today.

For, of course, by modern standards Varro's explanations and hypotheses more often than not fall woefully short. D. M. is trying to remain fair to his author: he rightly criticises the work of Daniel J. Taylor (1974 and 1996) for anachronistically casting Varro as a linguistic genius even by modern criteria and instead tries to judge his author

[6] See König and Whitmarsh 2007; Johnson and Parker 2009; Johnson 2010; König *et al.* 2013; König and Woolf 2013; Houston 2014; and Frampton 2019. This list makes no claim to completeness.

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according to the standards of his own time. Thus, D. M. concludes that 'on the whole he achieved what was achievable in the first century BC, and for that I cannot help but respect him' (36) and generally makes an effort to give credit where he thinks it is due: thus, for example, 'we have to give it to Varro that he understood the difference between derivation and inflection' (137), and 'Varro shows that he can handle' cases of inflectional syncretism (146). Even so, D. M. on not a few occasions cannot help being exasperated with Varro's obtuseness, and we can see him virtually cringe at the Roman author's silly mistakes. As a result, the commentator finds himself in a veritable love-hate relationship with his author, which is expressed in D. M.'s envoi at the end of the Preface: 'And now, Varro, my friend and foe over half a decade, farewell!' (ix).

As these examples show, D. M.'s approach to his subject matter is not one of clinically objective distance. He takes Varro personally, and his writing about him is genial, chatty and highly opinionated. This makes for an unexpectedly entertaining reading experience; if one is willing to follow D. M. on his idiosyncratic guided tour of *De lingua Latina*, one is treated to fascinating factoids (thus, commenting on Varro's etymology of *umor* at 5.24, D. M. takes it upon himself to explain to the reader the semantic development to English 'humour') and expressions of like and dislike that are as forthright as they are unmotivated by context (e.g. 'What I like particularly about Apollonius is his approach to syntax', 30). One also has to follow the author on his digressions, including a brief introduction to Latin metre (55–60), which D. M. apparently thinks his uninitiated readers need in order to understand Varro's quotations of Latin poetry. In its zany meandering, D. M.'s discourse ends up being not unlike that of Varro himself.

The only aspect of *De lingua Latina* besides its linguistic content that D. M. deems worthy of extended comment is Varro's own peculiar language and style, discussed in the last section of the Introduction. As D. M. shows in some detail, Varro's writing exhibits 'broader usage than some of his more restrictive contemporaries' (238), most notably Cicero and Caesar. Here D. M. might have referred to the recent treatments of this phenomenon by Adams 2005 and Chahoud 2016, who attractively suggest that Varro's non-streamlined style may have been a conscious choice based on his linguistic ideas, in particular his belief that individual usage is subject to the *consuetudo* of the larger group of speakers. D. M. is generally sparing in his engagement with secondary literature (the Introduction has no footnotes, only parenthetical references). He explains himself that '[w]hat is not cited was not accessible to me, or was not relevant for my purposes' (viii) — a statement that more than once raises the question, 'Why not?'.

The Introduction is followed by the text and facing translation. Here it must be said that from an editorial standpoint, D. M.'s *De lingua Latina* is a disappointment. It is not that the edition does not provide what is by and large a fine text of the treatise. It is that D. M., in his efforts to produce a text for readers not editors, and to keep his apparatus criticus 'neat' (24), reports suggested emendations only when he himself adopts them or otherwise considers them adoptable, which is hardly ever. There is thus but little to be found at the bottom of D. M.'s generously spaced pages, with the apparatus' few entries cued to the text not by line numbers but as actual footnotes.

What this means is that the edition looks like nothing so much as a blown-up Loeb, and it is, in fact, remarkably similar to Kent 1938: the text differs on a number of occasions but is over wide stretches identical,[7] and the apparatus, too, contains largely the same few items. Many of the divergences from the Loeb concern questions of spelling (e.g. in the transliteration of Greek words), while others are emendations made by editors later than

[7] D. M. does not 'clean up' his text; that is, he retains in square brackets items that he believes ought to be expunged, and indicates even banal suppletions with pointed brackets (for examples of both, see the passage quoted immediately below in the text). Kent is of a similar persuasion, which makes neither text pleasant to read. In addition, D. M. does not normalise spelling but follows the reading of F (the only relevant manuscript) whenever he considers its spelling theoretically possible for the first century B.C.E.

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Kent — most notably Flobert 1985 (Book 6), Dahlmann 1966 (Book 8) and Taylor 1996 (Book 10) — and adopted by D. M. In the entire text, I have counted fewer than twenty original interventions by D. M. himself. Unfortunately, the commentary, too, dedicates but little space to textual questions, with the result that the reader is occasionally left uncertain about why D. M. prints what he does, not to mention being left entirely in the dark about issues that other editors have raised but that D. M. does not consider worth reporting.

Some of D. M.'s departures from Kent strike me as improvements, others do not. To take one single page from Book 5, D. M. adopts Hoenigswald's wacky emendation *stlocus* for *locus* in 5.15, just so that Varro can be credited with something that might at least approach the correct etymology: *Vbi quidquid consistit, <st>locus* ('Where anything comes to a standstill, there is a *stlocus* "place"').[8] As it happens, however, Varro has been talking about *locus* on and off since 5.11 and given no indication that there might be an alternative form of the word; he has also already etymologised it as being derived from *locare*: *Locus est, ubi locatum quid esse potest* ('A *locus* is where something can be *locātum* "placed"', 5.14). This is admittedly a very lame etymology, and it would certainly be more impressive if Varro had made a phonological connection with words that contain the cluster *st*; as it happens, however, his observation that a place is where something has taken position seems to be conceptual rather than phonological.

A few lines later, D. M. is more circumspect in dealing with a crux in Varro's discussion of the etymology of *caelum*. After reporting Aelius Stilo's two suggestions — that the word either comes from *caelare* ('engrave') or *celare* ('hide', according to a *lucus a non lucendo* etymology: *quia apertum est*) — Varro offers some criticism. The text reads (corrected for spelling):

> non male quod posterior multo potius a c<a>elo quam caelum a c<a>elando.

This makes no sense, and Goetz and Schoell obelise *posterior*. Kent makes two changes, adopting *impositor* for *posterior* (a tentative suggestion by Goetz and Schoell in their apparatus) and following Scaliger in inserting an extra *caelare*. His text and translation read:

> non male, quod <im>positor multo potius <caelare> a *ca*elo quam caelum a *ca*elando.

> Not ill the remark, that the one who applied the term took *caelare* 'to raise' much rather from *caelum* than *caelum* from *caelare*.

This makes sense but necessitates two non-trivial interventions into the text. D. M., by contrast, prints Leonhard Spengel's *posteriora* (as also does Collart 1954):

> Non male quod posterior<a> multo potius a *c<a>elo* quam *caelum* a *c<a>elando*.

> It is well observed that the latter forms are much more likely to be from *caelum* than that *caelum* should be from *caelāre* 'to emboss'.

This version has the advantage of barely changing the transmitted text, while also keeping in the game the etymology from *celare*, on which Varro comments further in the following sentence.

D. M.'s English translation, too, is often quite close to that of the Loeb. The major difference is that D. M. tends to translate more literally than Kent, in a manner that may be more strictly correct but often does not aid comprehension. Consider, for example, the following typically twisted Varronian sentence (5.6):

[8] This would still not be satisfactory according to modern historical linguistics: *stlocus* (attested elsewhere) might be derived from Proto-Indo-European **stel-* 'place', while *(con)sistere* comes from **steh*$_2$- 'stand'.

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> quorum uerborum nouorum ac ueterum discordia omnis in consuetudine com<m>uni quot modis [litterarum] commutatio sit facta qui animaduerterit, facilius scrutari origines patietur uerborum.
>
> D. M.: The man who observes in how many ways change has taken place in those new and old words in which there is all manner of variation in common usage will tolerate the examination of the origins of words more easily.
>
> Kent: Now he who has observed in how many ways the changing has taken place in those words, new and old, in which there is any and every manner of variation in popular usage, will find the examination of the origin of the words an easier task.

Here and elsewhere, Kent's pleasing and idiomatic translation helps his readers along by ever so slightly interpreting the text for them (compare his 'will find easier' for *patietur* with D. M.'s 'will tolerate'), while still staying very close to the original. For those with little or no Latin, or even for Latinists battling their way through Varro's prose, Kent's version thus strikes me as considerably more helpful.[9] On the whole, then, while D. M.'s edition will obviously become the new standard in Varronian studies, the audience envisaged by D. M. himself — those who just want to *read* Varro — would be just as well or even better served by the Loeb, which has the added advantage of retailing at less than a sixth of the price.

Unlike Kent, of course, D. M. also provides a commentary, which at over 600 pages is extensive. As we have come to expect, however, its purview is highly circumscribed: for each section of Varro's text, D. M. explains the linguistic content and, where applicable, holds it against modern explanations of the same phenomenon. He also discusses Varro's style and, if any poetry is quoted, scans the metre and provides other elucidation. Readers who are in the market for this kind of information will find what they need. Those interested in realia, *Quellenforschung*, intellectual history, any larger ideas behind Varro's observations or the author's rhetoric and argumentative style beyond the purely lexical will likely end up disappointed.

Imagine, for example, that you are interested in the mysterious fourth level of etymology, which in 5.8 is tantalisingly described, in D. M.'s translation, as 'where the sanctuaries and the mysteries of the high priest are' (*ubi est adytum et initia regis*; D. M. adopts Scioppius' attractive emendation for *aditum/aditus*, as does Kent). D. M. dedicates a single paragraph to the matter, on which, as he acknowledges, '[m]uch ink has been spilled'. Already in the Introduction, he opined that 'it is unlikely that Varro gave this passage nearly as much thought as we do today' (39) and now simply states vaguely that the fourth level 'refers to an understanding that is gained in mystic contemplation and surpasses mere rational thought'. But an understanding of what? Schröter 1963 and others have plausibly suggested that this level concerns the etymology of the so-called *uerba primigenia*, the approximately one thousand original roots that signify according to nature, in ways that we can no longer properly understand (see 6.36–9). The reference to the *rex* may have to do with the fact that Varro believes (pre-)Roman kings to have been original name-givers of the Latin language (see 5.9), a connection that is entirely obscured by D. M.'s bizarre decision to translate *rex* as 'high priest'. Even if D. M. considers all this irrelevant, as he clearly does, is it not the commentator's duty at least to inform his readers of what are by no means marginal scholarly opinions?

[9] One improvement, however, is D. M.'s sober translation of the poetic quotations, which Kent renders in the good old Loeb style with many a 'thou' and 'thee'.

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Examples could be multiplied. Sometimes D. M. seems quite oblivious to what is going on in his text. At 8.61, in the middle of the anomalist's speech about why there is no regularity in language, verbs in the third person plural suddenly undergo a switch in subject.[10] While earlier in the book the people whose opinions are reported are always the analogists against whom the speaker is polemicising, the unnamed third-person party is now that of the anomalists themselves. This might at least be worth a note, but D. M. is slow to catch on: he has nothing to say about the third-person *uerba dicendi* of 8.61 (where the switch occurs); remarks apropos of 8.62 simply that the indirect speech continues from the previous section without paying attention to who is speaking; and realises only in 8.63 that '*dīcunt* in the second sentence cannot have the followers of Aristarchus [i.e. the analogists] as its subject'. Even then he declares the verb 'a generalizing third person plural', despite the fact that the speakers referred to are clearly those who argue *against* the followers of Aristarchus, that is, the rabid anomalists.

Even if Varro's inconsistent employment of the third person plural is simply carelessness, it is worth pointing out. As it happens, it has been used by David Blank as part of his evidence in an article that constitutes the most significant recent contribution to our understanding of Varro's anomaly/analogy discussion,[11] a piece whose absence from D. M.'s bibliography and discussion is one of the more incomprehensible omissions. Blank argues that Varro's anomalist is an empiricist sceptic out to deny grammar the status of a *technē*, and that he refers to Crates of Mallus (in the extended passage with the strange third persons) not as an anomalist — as has been believed since Aulus Gellius — but as an analogist who differed from Aristarchus on details, not on the analogist principle. Blank's thesis is as provocative as it is attractive, but you would not know about its existence from D. M.'s tomes.

II

However admirable or even enjoyable, then, D. M.'s work provides but very partial access to Varro's complex text. Luckily, there is another self-proclaimed guide to *De lingua Latina* on the market. In its approach and execution, sentiment and temperament, Diana Spencer's *Language and Authority in* De lingua Latina could hardly be more different from D. M.'s commented edition.

Rather than viewing *De lingua Latina* as an encyclopaedic collection of linguistic tidbits, S. considers the work a literary text that repays both linear reading and re-reading. To those who peruse his book cover-to-cover ('through-readers'), Varro teaches what S. dubs 'Romespeak', a competent, responsible use of Latin that implies a 'deep and rich understanding of what constituted Rome' (11). The acquisition of Romespeak is a process and an experience: '*De lingua Latina* led Varro's audience on a journey of discourse enrichment, at the end of which all successful Romespeakers could contribute actively and consciously to a consensual civic ideal' (42). In a time of political crisis, Varro emerges as a mediator: just as he wisely adjudicates between anomaly and analogy, he also offers his readers a middle path between Cicero and Caesar, Republic and monarchy.

This is the proposition of S.'s monograph, and it certainly sounds intriguing. Here is a Varro concerned not just with grammar, but with the 'significance of grammar for generating Roman community' (184), a member of the late republican elite fully immersed in both the political and the intellectual debates of his time. Sadly, however, the book fails to deliver what it promises, losing sight of its far-reaching claims in its

[10] Laid out clearly in Dahlmann 1966: 150–1.
[11] Blank 2005.

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bewildering slog through Varro's text. S.'s *modus operandi* is to provide readings of large stretches of *De lingua Latina* according to a peculiar hermeneutics that is never quite made explicit, but that seems to work on the assumption that, beneath the surface of Varro's technical discussion of etymology and morphology, there is a secret plot to be discovered.

What S. does is take the words that Varro throughout his text considers *qua* lexemes and morphemes, and read them for their semantics. The idea, apparently, is that if Varro talks about the word *equus*, he must be trying to tell us something about horses. This is, of course, not entirely wrong: Varro is a linguistic naturalist who believes in a fundamental connection of *uerba* and *res*, and who throughout his œuvre uses etymology as a kind of antiquarian master methodology to get at the truth of the Roman world that is his subject. S. thus feels emboldened to engage in what she terms 'imaginative gap filling' (259), but what many readers would probably rather call free association, with the result that her running commentary on *De lingua Latina* reads like a Latinist's version of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. The fact that it is composed in an idiosyncratic style that abounds in puns and neologisms — let's call it Spencerspeak[12] — only adds to the surreal reading experience.

To illustrate this, let us compare the commentaries of both D. M. and S. on *Ling.* 6.35, a short section that signals Varro's shift from discussing words for time to those that denote actions in time. In D. M.'s edition, text and translation run as follows:

> Quod ad temporum uocabula Latina attinet, hactenus sit satis dictum. Nunc quod ad eas res attinet quae in tempore aliquo fieri animaduertuntur, dicam, ut haec sunt: *legisti, cursus, ludens*. De quis duo praedicere uolo, quanta sit multitudo eorum et qui sint obscuriora quam alia.
>
> As to what pertains to the Latin words for time concepts, what has been said up to this point should be enough. Now I shall speak about what concerns those activities which can be seen to be taking place at some time, such as are the following: *lēgistī* 'you have read', *cursus* 'act of running', *lūdēns* 'playing'. Of these I want to say two things in advance, how great their quantity is and in what way they are more obscure than others.

In his commentary, D. M. has this to say about the second sentence:

> The new topic is words which do not indicate time as such, but which have some time concept in them. *Lēgistī* 'you have read' is an excellent example because as a verb it has tense, that is, grammaticalized time. Nouns do not have tense, especially not a noun like *currus* 'wagon', which is what is transmitted in Fv. Following G and H, Müller changed to *cursus* 'act of running', which makes good sense. *Cursus* does not have tense, but is an action noun and thus associated with time in a more indirect way. The last example, *lūdēns* 'playing', is a participle and thus has both tense and case. Participles only have relative tense, unlike finite verbs, which both have relative and absolute tense, but even so, participles can reasonably be classified as words with a time concept.

This is what S. gathers from the same text (119–20):

> Varro chooses 'read' (*legisti*, 'you have read'), 'running' (*cursus*, something having been run), and 'playing' (*ludens*, a present participle) as prime examples for discussing how temporality is evident in vocabulary. As a trio, the verbs represent in microcosm the community of Romespeakers. Who performs these actions? First, 'you' are the (s)electors and readers — educated citizens, playing a part in politics and other weighty business; next a group that might consist of slaves (who 'owns' the field of running in the city?) or those politicos

[12] Spencerspeak appears to be related to Hendersonspeak, the argot (well known to Latinists) of John Henderson, S.'s erstwhile Cambridge teacher and one of the book's dedicatees.

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hurrying up the *cursus honorum* (where a 'race' to the finish is respectable); finally, the players, the devotees of amusement, mockery, dalliance, with *ludo* hinting at the power trips of sponsored games.

If what we are looking for is authorial intention, I am afraid my money is on D. M.'s prosaic rehearsal of tense and case rather than S.'s bustling panorama of Romespeakers in action.

And for S., just as for D. M., it is about authorial intention. It is striking how these two scholars, so different in outlook and approach, both take Varro extremely seriously as an author and as a person. S. regards *De lingua Latina* as 'very much an authored work' (3) and dedicates her first chapter to an 'imaginative biography' (20), trying to bring to life the man before delving into the text. In her conclusion, she avows that she has 'sought to join in and amplify a latter-day conversation about Latin with Varro' (248), alluding to a passage in Vitruvius, where the architect predicts that 'many later generations will converse with Varro about the Latin language' (*multi posterorum cum Varrone conferent sermonem de lingua Latina*, 9 pr. 17). D. M., of course, does much the same thing, engaging his 'friend and foe' in a virtual debate about the rights and wrongs of his linguistic ideas.

D. M. and S. thus both do something Duncan MacRae warns against in an article considered further below: they treat Varro as a 'colleague'. As a result, their versions of the author resemble no-one so much as themselves. For D. M., the late republican savant is another linguist, working with different parameters but ultimately engaged in the same scholarly study of language. S.'s Varro, by contrast, is the postmodern composer of 'an aspiring hypertext' (4), someone who would no doubt fit right in with the 'academic community of Twitter' (x) acknowledged by S. to have significantly shaped her work. It is fascinating how Varro, of all ancient writers, is suddenly speaking so strongly to twenty-first-century readers — even if they only hear what they want to hear.

III

After the exalted peculiarity of D. M. and S., the volume *Varronian Moments*, edited by Valentina Arena and Fiachra Mac Góráin, takes us down to the firm ground of conventional classical scholarship. The eight papers were originally delivered at a colloquium held at University College London in 2015 and are — unusually in a conference-based volume — of fairly high quality throughout. As the editors state in the preface, the contributors' focus is on constructions of the past: both Varro's own antiquarian endeavours and how they were then (mis)interpreted by later readers.

Giorgio Piras opens the proceedings with a general exploration of Varro's approaches to the past ('*Dicam dumtaxat quod est historicon*: Varro and/on the Past'). The piece is somewhat loosely structured, ranging over a number of Varronian works, but offers valuable observations on Varro's picturing past time as a set of superimposed strata or, to use one of his favourite images, a series of graded steps. The antiquarian's task is to descend to the most remote level or *origo*, using a genealogical-reconstructive method to make visible what has long been hidden from sight.

Grant A. Nelsestuen homes in on one such graded scheme of the past, the development of human (agri)culture as presented in *De re rustica* ('Varro, Dicaearchus, and the History of Roman *res rusticae*'). Varro adapts the anthropological theory of Dicaearchus of Messana (humans were first hunters-gatherers, then pastoralists, and finally turned into farmers) but complicates it by introducing a fourth stage, *pastio uillatica*, which is aimed at producing luxury goods for an urban market. As a result, it is unclear whether we are supposed to read his account as primitivist or progressivist; apparently, the first

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three stages move along a more or less ascending line, followed by a moral dip at the present stage four, when Rome is gripped by a frivolous fashion for aviaries and fish ponds.

Duncan MacRae ('"The Laws of the Rites and of the Priests": Varro and Late Republican Roman Sacral Jurisprudence') admonishes us to take seriously Cicero's claim (in his famous praise of Varro at *Acad. post.* 9) that Varro in his *Antiquitates* revealed, among other things, *sacrorum iura* [*et*] *sacerdotum*. MacRae convincingly sets Varro's work in the context of contemporary research into the *decreta* and *responsa* of the priestly colleges; I fail, however, to see much evidence for his contention that Varro was engaged in a 'normative programme' (44) aimed at systematising sacral law.

In a particularly interesting chapter ('Varro's Writing on the Senate: A Reconstructive Hypothesis'), Elisabetta Todisco considers the evidence for Varro's treatise on senatorial procedure (Gell. *NA* 14.7) and attempts, as far as possible, to reconstruct its content. What is especially fascinating about this work is that Varro wrote it twice: first as a *commentarius* for Pompey, when he became consul in 70 B.C.E., and then as a letter to a certain Oppianus, part of his *Epistolicae quaestiones* composed late in life. As Varro himself explains, the second version is his own reconstruction of the earlier work, which had got lost; Todisco plausibly suggests that his revisiting the topic was inspired by Octavian's reform of the senate in 29/28 B.C.E. Here we get a sense of the full implications of Varro's longevity and adaptability to changing politics: over thirty years and a couple of civil wars later, a work intended for one strongman is rewritten for another. The political situation has changed out of all recognition, but senatorial procedure lives on, and Varro is still the man to explain it.

The fine chapter by R. M. A. Marshall ('Varro, Atticus, and *Annales*') makes an important contribution to the sociology of knowledge of late republican Rome, where intellectual activity was characterised by cooperation and exchange. Through a close reexamination of the sources, Marshall shows that ideas traditionally ascribed to Varro (most notably, the famous 753 B.C.E. date for the foundation of Rome) may instead have first been mooted by Atticus, and that the two friends most likely collaborated on their antiquarian research.

The final three papers concern the reception of Varro in antiquity and beyond. Daniel Hadas ('St Augustine and the Disappearance of Varro') argues that Augustine's use of Varro's *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum* 'was instrumental in condemning the work to oblivion' (76): once the saint in his *City of God* had absorbed what he approved of and disparaged what he disliked, there was no further need to consult the original. This may well be the case, though unlike Hadas, I do not believe that Augustine is (misleadingly) presenting Varro as employing philosophical theology in order to demolish the errors of Roman civil cult. It seems to me that rather than coopting Varro as a critic of pagan religion, Augustine exposes him as a misguided apologete for 'divine' institutions that are, in reality, all too human.

Daniel Vallat's discussion of Varronian quotations in Vergilian commentaries ('Varro in Virgilian Commentaries: Transmission in Fragments') starts out as a straightforward introduction to the topic, but ends with the revisionist claim (directed especially against the work of Alan Cameron) that by citing Varro over and over again, learned late antique writers are reacting against the hijacking of the author by Christian apologetes. By tacitly continuing to present the pagan polymath as an authority on religion, Servius *et al.* are signalling their own stance in the ideological polemics of their time. Vallat even claims, very much in passing, that 'it could be proved that Servius was a pagan' (107); one would very much like to know how.

In the final chapter, we re-encounter Wolfgang De Melo, who presents 'A Typology of Errors in Varro and his Editors: A Close Look at Selected Passages in the *De lingua Latina*'. Written while D. M. was working on his edition, this piece makes the point — no doubt correct — that while editors of Varro through the ages have let their own preconceptions colour their readings and textual choices, Varro too makes all kinds of errors, owing to his

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own prejudices and predilections. D. M. finds this heartening: '[a]t least we are not the only ones who are biased' (122). The history of scholarship, ancient and modern, is to a great extent a comedy of errors.

Like most edited volumes, *Varronian Moments* is little more than the sum of its parts. In the case of an author as multifaceted as Varro, however, the absence of a master argument or overarching narrative seems entirely appropriate, and the collection's pluralistic title is aptly chosen. Even so, the volume is held together by the authors' generally level-headed and nuanced approach, which answers the editors' call for Varronian research that concentrates on 'the evidence and what we really know about Varro within his intellectual and historical contexts' (7). In this respect, *Varronian Moments* fares better than Butterfield 2015, a volume whose title (*Varro varius*) likewise points to the multiformity of Varro's œuvre, but whose chapters themselves differ greatly not only in approach and persuasion but also, unfortunately, in quality.[13]

IV

The final title under review, Alessandra Rolle's *Dall'oriente a Roma*, is narrow in focus, modest in ambition and unspectacular in its findings. Despite these characteristics — or perhaps rather because of them — it strikes me as the best book of the bunch. Tracing through Varro's œuvre all mentions of eastern religious cults imported into Rome (specifically those of Cybele/Magna Mater and Isis and Serapis), R. throws light both on the author's attitude and approach and on late republican religious practice and controversy. Her monograph does not make a splash, but it makes a contribution.

R.'s approach to the topic is rigorously text-based. The book is divided into a Magna Mater and an Isis/Serapis section, in each of which she discusses all Varronian mentions of the god(s) in question, ordered by work in chronological order (to the extent that this can be determined). As it turns out, Varro mentions these cults surprisingly often, in all sorts of contexts; less surprisingly, he is also one of our most important sources for the worship of Magna Mater and the Egyptian gods in the Republic. Since, apart from two passages from *De lingua Latina*, all the evidence comes from fragmentary texts, there is a fair amount of philological legwork to be done. R. is up to the challenge: well acquainted with the textual and editorial history of each fragment, as well as with the relevant scholarly literature, she provides detailed and sensitive commentary before settling on her own interpretation. In doing so, she additionally draws on a wide range of sources and scholarship on the history, politics, literature and archaeology of her period, opening up her meagre textual evidence to a fleshed-out, contextualised interpretation. In its micro-historical approach, R.'s methodology seems to me exemplary, a display of what classical scholarship can achieve by combining philological acumen with interdisciplinary cultural awareness.

Given the spotty nature of the evidence, many of R.'s conclusions are necessarily speculative, something the author herself is upfront about (statements like 'ma naturalmente si tratta di ipotesi' recur throughout). Varro's most intensive engagement with both Magna Mater and the Egyptian gods occurs in his Menippean Satire *Eumenides*, where the protagonist, suffering from insanity like a latter-day Orestes, tries to cure his madness by, among other things, attending various religious rituals, on whose perversities he subsequently heaps much scorn. Even though this is the best-documented of all the Menippeans, its plot and meaning are far from clear. R.'s book must now be considered a major addition to the scholarly bibliography on the text; however, many questions are bound to remain open.

[13] For a detailed assessment of Butterfield's volume, see Volk and Zetzel 2015.

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The picture of the 'oriental' cults that emerges from R.'s study is one of both discomfort and fascination with these additions to the Roman religious scene. In the case of Magna Mater, the way the goddess was worshipped at Rome was fraught with a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, the Great Mother had been officially introduced in 204 B.C.E. and was an established part of the Roman pantheon. On the other hand, the cult retained alarming 'Phrygian' elements, most notably its eunuch priests, who (R. argues) in republican times conducted their more shocking ceremonies, including their self-castration, at private rituals that were not part of the sanitised, 'Roman' festival of the Megalesia. Thus, the frame narrative of *Eumenides* is apparently situated during the Megalesia at a respectable upper-class dinner party (fr. 143 B.), while the actual Cybele episode (one of many misadventures narrated by the host to his guests) takes place during the Galli's disgusting private celebrations. On R.'s reading, Varro here and in his other works reflects the status of Magna Mater 'tra rifiuto e integrazione': he disapproves of her 'oriental' aspects while wishing to promote her as a genuinely Roman deity.

Isis and Serapis, by contrast, had no official sanction in republican times and were only worshipped privately. The growing popularity of their cult (and possible championing by *popularis* politicians) led to political repression, most notably in 59/58 B.C.E., when altars to Egyptian divinities were destroyed on the Capitoline, as Varro mentions in *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum* frr. 46a–b C. According to R., Varro has no time for these thoroughly un-Roman gods; while he wishes to naturalise Cybele, he would prefer to get rid of Isis and Serapis altogether. As R. herself points out, however, this did not happen: during the imperial period, both the more orgiastic elements of the Magna Mater cult and the worship of the Egyptian gods were fully integrated into the official state cult.

R. is a perceptive reader of Varro, but I remain sceptical of the larger story she tries to tell. It seems to me that the evidence for Varronian hostility towards the eastern cults is largely restricted to the *Eumenides*, a work whose genre by definition necessitates a tone of ridicule and denigration (as R. of course is well aware). Oriental pseudo-religious debauchery is not the only target of the satire's scorn: philosophy too is mercilessly mocked. Furthermore, even if the work's narrator-protagonist is meant to be 'Varro' (which is not in fact clear), the opinions of a satirical persona can hardly be used as evidence for the views of the author. In his other works, Varro appears more sanguine or at least neutral about Cybele and Isis/Serapis. The only evidence for a strong stance against these deities comes from Servius Auctus, who reports that 'Varro is displeased that the Alexandrian gods are worshipped at Rome' (*Varro indignatur Alexandrinos deos Romae coli*, *ad Aen.* 8.698); however, without any context, it is hard to know what to make of this statement.

A more promising way of understanding Varro's heterogeneous mentions of the eastern cults might be the author's own *theologia tripertita*, as explained in *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum* frr. 6–11 C. There are different ways of talking about the gods, and Varro easily moves from one to the other according to genre and context. Thus we find examples of the *genus physicon* (philosophical theology) in Varro's etymologising and allegorising attempts to explain both Cybele and Isis as earth and fertility goddesses (*Antiquitates rerum diuinarum* frr. 267–9 C.; *Ling.* 5.57) and in his alternative euhemerising aetiology of Isis as a divinised Egyptian queen (*De gente populi Romani* frr. 12a–d, 14 F.). Elsewhere Varro engages in the *genus ciuile* (the history of religious institutions at Rome), as when he mentions the Roman transfer of the Magna Mater from Asia Minor (*Ling.* 6.15) or the repression of the Egyptian cults in his own lifetime (see above). There is little evidence for Varronian theologising along the lines of the *genus poeticon* (mythological tales about the gods), but we might posit a fourth type, a *genus satyricon*, which would represent the satirical trashing of each and every religious belief and worship. Varro is highly adept at all these subgenres of theology, but not necessarily committed to the views entailed by any of them. Rather than reading Varro's utterances about the eastern cults as the expressions of the opinion of a cultural and political conservative intent on keeping Roman religion Roman, I would thus prefer to

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see them as evidence for the many different manners in which a learned late republican Roman could discourse about the many different gods on offer in the religious market place. Ma naturalmente si tratta di ipotesi.

Notwithstanding these disagreements, R.'s book is a well-executed study that is perfectly documented (her indices, for example, put both D. M. and S. to shame), pleasant to read and — in its circumscribed way — a significant and thought-provoking addition to the growing bibliography on our not-quite-colleague from the first century B.C.E. May there be many more such Varronian moments.

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