

Regina Hoeschele
(University of Toronto, Canadá)
regina.hoeschele@utoronto.ca

Abstract

This article offers an overview of Niklas Holzberg's work, with a particular emphasis on his efforts to make the texts of the ancients accessible to a wider audience.

Keywords: Niklas Holzberg, Classical Studies.

Looking at the vast list of publications by Niklas Holzberg, which to date comprises over 350 items and is ever increasing, one might be tempted to see in this German Classicist a twin-brother of Didymos Chalkenteros, the notorious grammarian of the Augustan age who is said to have written 3500 books or more. "Bronze-gutted" though he may be in his scholarly endeavors, Niklas Holzberg is neither a *bibliolathas*, nor could one say of him "I'd pity the fellow, if he had *read* so many superfluous things", as Seneca did of Didymos (*misererer, si tam multa supervacua legisset, Ep. 88.37*). For Holzberg does not deal with obscure data in his scholarship or with problems of interest only to a small group of specialists; rather it is his professed aim to make classical texts accessible to a wider audience. While his bibliographies on Greek and Latin literature are an invaluable resource to all scholars in the field (they are available online at <http://www.klassphil.uni-muenchen.de/extras/downloads/index.html>), his *Einführungen* to Roman elegy [1], the ancient novel [2], the ancient fable [3] and Martial [4] offer the student of classical literature pithy introductions to various ancient genres. It is, indeed, no coincidence that his books have been translated into several languages (English, Italian, Dutch, Polish and Slovenian, though a Spanish version is still missing), as Holzberg always manages to convey the essential features of a text, author or genre, no matter how limited the space.

His four monographs on Roman poets, Ovid [5], Catullus [6], Vergil [7] and Horace [8], which are now joined by a book on the Greek playwright Aristophanes [9], are addressed to the specialist and non-specialist alike, presenting the oeuvre of each poet with a particular emphasis on its underlying humor and, in the case of Catullus and Aristophanes, obscenity. It is one of Holzberg's great merits not to gloss over the obscene,

¹ Recibido: 30/09/10. Arbitrado: 01/10/10. Aceptado: 10/10/10

but to give his readers an impression of the delight that the ancients took in crude jokes and erotic ambiguities. Nobody will deny the fact that vulgar terms do appear in iambic poetry or Old Comedy, but for the longest time translators shied away from using equivalent “four-letter words” in their own language and tended to offer bowdlerized versions of the texts. This is a practice which Holzberg emphatically rejects, and rightly so. His Catullus, for instance, does not dream of nine “Seligkeiten” (“blissfulnesses”), as that of von Albrecht,² but of nine “Fickereien” (“fucks” = *fututiones*, c. 34.8); he talks about giving blow jobs, not about playing the flute – so much so that the book made it both into the German magazine *Der Spiegel* (14/2002) and onto a late-night TV show called “Wa(h)re Liebe”.

One might think that there’s hardly anything scandalous or even remarkable about literal translations of this sort – for do we not live in an age without taboos? –, but at least in Germany, and no doubt elsewhere as well, one can still discern a certain reluctance to openly acknowledge this aspect of ancient culture. While Anglophone scholarship in particular has done a lot to open up discussion of ancient sexuality and Greco-Roman obscenities – one need only think of Jeffrey Henderson’s *The Maculate Muse*³ or Amy Richlin’s *Garden of Priapus*⁴ –, German academia has tended to either avoid such topics or to treat them in a strictly matter-of-fact way. It is, after all, one thing to observe from a purely philological perspective that the word *peos* in Aristophanes denotes the *membrum virile*, another to convey the tone of such expressions and to laugh along with the ancients, who obviously enjoyed this form of humor and liked calling a “dick” a “dick”. It is telling that numerous translations currently available on the German market are either outdated or surprisingly prudish for modern renderings, perpetuating a purified vision of Antiquity that keeps blatant vulgarity at arm’s length. The reasons for this are manifold and here is not the place to enter into a discussion of the historical role of classical education and its traditional focus on the edifying and moralizing aspects of ancient literature. Suffice it to say that Holzberg’s scholarship and his translations (he has just published a new *Lysistrate* [10], which will be followed by other Aristophanic plays in the *Reclam Universalbibliothek*) break loose from this tradition and serve to remind us that – speaking with Tom Lehrer – dirty books are fun.

Another crucial element of Holzberg’s work is his persistent emphasis on the importance

² *Catull: Sämtliche Gedichte, Lateinisch/Deutsch, hg. und übers. v. Michael von Albrecht*, Stuttgart, Reclam Verlag, 1995.

³ J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, ²1991.

⁴ A. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, ²1992.

of linear reading that informs both his scholarly (i.e. footnoted) treatments of poetry collections and his presentation of the above-mentioned authors to a wider audience. Since ancient texts were written on papyrus rolls, which, unlike modern books, cannot be opened at specific pages, the reader necessarily encounters the texts contained in such a roll one after the other, as the poetic universe gradually unfolds in front of his eyes. In structuring their collections, Hellenistic and Roman authors took great care to interweave their poems in a meaningful way by creating verbal and thematic links between the book's individual components. As Holzberg notes, the successive reading of such an ensemble can resemble a "journey of discovery" ("Entdeckungsfahrt"⁵), the poets invite their readers to detect the various connections and to piece together the narrative(s) inscribed into the textual sequence.

Indeed, the idea of a story or stories being told over the course of a book, plays a major role in the analyses of Holzberg, who regards, for instance, the works of the Roman elegists as *Liebesromane* of sorts (cf. [1]). The poems, of course, do not present us with a straightforward, gapless, authoritative narrative, but on a syntagmatic level one may observe the evolution of certain themes and trace the development of the relationship between the poet and his beloved, with all its ups and downs. Notably, Holzberg has not only studied well-known poetry collections from this perspective, but also minor works such as the *Carmina Priapea* [11], the Pseudo-Vergilian *Catalepton* [12] and the epigrams ascribed to Seneca [13], showing in each instance that the arrangement of the texts is indeed purposeful. In the case of the *Priapea*, for example, he convincingly argued that the ithyphallic garden god undergoes a serious change in the course of the collection, increasingly suffering from impotence and bewailing his fate more and more lamentably. Holzberg's linear reading thus offers support to Buchheit's hypothesis⁶ that the *Carmina Priapea* were written by one (anonymous) author and do not constitute a more or less random anthology of works by different poets, as was commonly assumed.

Similarly, Holzberg has approached the Greek epistolary novel by looking at collections of (fictional) letters and examining their narrative structure. The volume he edited on the *Griechische Briefroman* in 1994 [14] brings together essays on a variety of epistolary corpora and constitutes one of the first attempts at a systematic investigation of the genre, just as his edited volume on *The Life of Aesop* from 1992 [15] was intended to open up discussion on another of the fringe novels. As a matter of fact, it is a characteristic feature of Holzberg's scholarly endeavors that he tries to bring to the fore understudied, non-

⁵ *Catull: Der Dichter und sein erotisches Werk*, Munich, C.H. Beck Verlag, ³2003, p. 67.

⁶ V. BUCHHEIT, *Studien zum Corpus Priapeorum*, Munich, C.H. Beck Verlag, 1960.

canonical texts, and a lot of his work in this area has been pioneering. Martial, for instance, is a rather popular and widely read author today; but this was certainly not the case when Holzberg published his first slim introduction to the oeuvre of the Flavian epigrammatist in 1988 [16]. Among the dissertations written under his supervision are two groundbreaking studies on Martial, one by Hans-Peter Obermayer dealing with homosexuality,⁷ the other by Sven Lorenz dealing with the role of erotic and panegyric elements in Martial's poetry.⁸ Significantly, Lorenz opposes the hypothesis, put forward by Holzberg in 1988, that Martial's epigrams contain hidden criticism of the regime. Instead he argues that the Emperor is firmly integrated into the epigrammatic discourse and part of a poetic universe, which in turn led Holzberg to revise his previous assessment of Martial's implicit *résistance*, as can be seen from his second introduction to this author published in 2002 [4]. This mutual influence is witness to Holzberg's ongoing engagement with the texts of the ancients and his readiness to overcome preconceived notions, including his own.

Again and again he has set out to draw attention to the underdogs of classical literature, to those authors who never made it into the canon or who, though once widely read, have lost their popularity. At the same time he does not shy away from taking the revered classics off the pedestal on which they have been put and to approach them in refreshingly unconventional ways. Among Holzberg's publications, one finds numerous close readings and observations that are of interest to the professional philologist. But his main contribution to the field and its survival lies, I believe, in his untiring efforts to convey the pleasure of reading ancient texts to a larger audience, through lectures in schools, through translations, through his C.H. Beck monographs, which reflect the latest developments in literary criticism, even if they dispense with the usual scholarly apparatus. I could go on – his vast oeuvre would certainly lend itself to a much longer description – but since Holzberg himself is a professed follower of the maxim “In der Kürze liegt die Würze” (“brevity is the soul of wit”), let me end by saying that, even though he is retiring next year (2011) from the University of Munich, where he has taught since 1983, Niklas Holzberg will doubtlessly continue to shape the public perception of the Ancients – and to cause the occasional stir.

References (works by Niklas Holzberg)

⁷ Hans-Peter OBERMAYER, *Martial und der Diskurs über männliche “Homosexualität” in der Literatur der frühen Kaiserzeit*, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998 (*Classica Monacensia* 18).

⁸ Sven LORENZ, *Erotik und Panegyrik: Martials epigrammatische Kaiser*, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 2002 (*Classica Monacensia* 23).

- [1] *Die römische Liebeselegie: Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, ³2006 (first ed. 1990).
- [2] *Die antike Fabel: Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, ²2001 (first ed. 1993; transl. *The Ancient Fable*, Bloomington 2002).
- [3] *Der antike Roman: Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, ³2006 (first ed. 1986; transl. *The Ancient Novel*, London-New York 1995;
- [4] *De roman in de oudheid*, Amsterdam 1998; *Powieść antyczna: Wprowadzona*, Kraków 2003; *Antični Roman. Uvod*, Ljubljana 2004).
- [5] *Martial und das antike Epigramm*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002.
- [6] *Ovid: Dichter und Werk*, Munich, C.H. Beck Verlag, ³2005 (first ed. 1997; transl. *Ovid: The Poet and His Work*, Ithaca, NY 2002).
- [7] *Catull: Der Dichter und sein erotisches Werk*, Munich, C.H. Beck Verlag, ³2003 (first ed. 2002).
- [8] *Vergil: Der Dichter und sein Werk*, Munich, C.H. Beck Verlag, 2006 (transl. *Virgilio*, Bologna 2008).
- [9] *Horaz: Dichter und Werk*, Munich, C.H. Beck Verlag, 2009.
- [10] *Aristophanes: Sex und Spott und Politik*, Munich, C.H. Beck Verlag, 2010.
- [11] *Aristophanes: Lysistrate*, übers. v. Niklas Holzberg, Stuttgart, Reclam Verlag, 2009.
- [12] "Impotence? It Happened to the Best of Them! A Linear Reading of the *Corpus Priapeorum*", *Hermes* 133 (2005), 368-381.
- [13] "Impersonating Young Virgil: the Author of the *Catalepton* and his *libellus*", *Materiali e Discussioni* 52 (2004), 29-40.
- [14] "Impersonating the Banished Philosopher: Pseudo-Seneca's *Liber Epigrammaton*", *Harvard Stud. in Class. Phil.* 102 (2004), 423-444.
- [15] *Der griechische Briefroman: Gattungstypologie und Textanalyse*, hg. von N. Holzberg unter Mitarbeit von Stefan Merkle, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994 (= *Classica Monacensia* 8).
- [16] *Der Äsop-Roman: Motivgeschichte und Erzählstruktur*, hg. v. N. Niklas unter Mitarbeit v. A. Beschorner u. S. Merkle, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992 (= *Classica Monacensia* 6).
- [17] *Martial: Eine Einführung*, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter, 1988.