

VOL 3 · 2016 Rediscovery  
and Canonization

*The Roman Classics  
in the Middle Ages*



Alberto Burri, *Sacco L.A.*, 1953: burlap and acrylic on canvas, 101 x 87 cm – inv. 5337  
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# Rediscovery and Canonization

## *The Roman Classics in the Middle Ages*

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# Contents

The Editors	Introduction to <i>Interfaces</i> 3 7–12
Birger Munk Olsen	Comment peut-on déterminer la popularité d'un texte au Moyen Âge? L'exemple des œuvres classiques latines 13–27
Jaakko Tahkokallio	Manuscripts as Evidence for the use of Classics in Education, c. 800–1200: Estimating the Randomness of Survival 28–45
Karin Margareta Fredborg	Interpretative Strategies in Horatian Commentaries from the Twelfth Century: The <i>Ars poetica</i> in the Carolingian Traditions and their Twelfth-Century Developments 46–70
Monika Otter	Medieval Sex Education, Or: What About Canidia? 71–89
Mia Münster-Swendsen	December Liberties: Playing with the Roman Poets in the High-Medieval Schools 90–108
Wim Verbaal	Loire Classics: Reviving Classicism in some Loire Poets 109–128
Francine Mora	Auteurs affichés, auteurs dissimulés. Le recours aux citations dans le <i>Commentaire sur l'Enéide</i> attribué à Bernard Silvestre 129–142
Venetia Bridges	Antique Authorities? 'Classicizing' Poems of the 1180s 143–161
Jean-Yves Tilliette	Une collection de commentaires aux classiques latins, le manuscrit de Bern, Bürgerbibliothek 411. Textes et contextes 162–178
Filippo Bognini	"O terque quaterque beati" ( <i>Aen.</i> 1.94). Aperçu d'une lecture séculaire 179–199
Irene Salvo García	L'Ovide connu par Alphonse X (1221–84) 200–220
Marek Thue Kretschmer	L' <i>Ovidius moralizatus</i> de Pierre Bersuire. Essai de mise au point 221–244
Rita Copeland	Behind the <i>Lives of Philosophers</i> : Reading Diogenes Laertius in the Western Middle Ages 245–263



# Introduction to *Interfaces* 3

The present issue of *Interfaces* explores the theme of the rediscovery and canonization of the Roman classics in medieval Western European literary culture, beginning in the eleventh century and reaching a wide impact on literary and intellectual life in the twelfth century. It is headed by an article by Birger Munk Olsen whose immense and comprehensive work of cataloguing and analyzing the entire record of manuscripts containing Roman classics copied before 1200 is nearing completion.<sup>1</sup> Within our journal's scope of medieval European literature we have found it both rewarding and fitting to take Munk Olsen's work as a prism for what is a striking literary phenomenon across most geographies and chronologies of medieval Europe: the engagement with the pre-Christian classics.

Credit is usually and rightly given to the Carolingian age for canonizing a number of classical Roman texts and saving them for posterity. Without Carolingian access to old libraries and books written in majuscule, very little Roman literature would have survived – a point made abundantly clear in Munk Olsen's study which fully acknowledges the crucial transfer of texts into minuscule in the eighth and ninth centuries. A similar point about survival, however, can be made about the paradigm shift in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the period which Munk Olsen set out to study. What would have happened to the few Carolingian copies of classics had the school curriculum not developed the way it did in the eleventh and twelfth centuries? In terms not only of numbers of manuscripts, but also of intellectual engagement and literary inspiration, classical Roman authors were truly discovered and canonized in the eleventh century on a level from which there was no return. In this period the *auctores maiores* were solidly established in the curricula: Cicero, Sallust, Terence, Horace, Virgil, Statius, Juvenal, Ovid, Lucan, and Persius; these were accompanied by a host of *auctores minores*, among whom especially Seneca and Solinus can be singled out as favourite reading. It is unfortunate that the ninth and the twelfth centuries have both been labelled 'renaissances' on account of their classicism, because they perform very different functions in the longer chronological perspective: the first period made the reading of the classics possi-

1. *L'étude des auteurs classiques aux XI<sup>e</sup> et XII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (4 vols. in 6 parts, 1982–2014, plus a forthcoming vol. 5 with addenda and corrigenda). Abbreviated *L'étude* throughout this issue.

ble (though precariously so), the second made it necessary. It is therefore difficult to underestimate the impact of the rediscovery and canonization in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: an impressive selection of Latin pre-Christian authors have enjoyed a continuous mainstream reception in European (and later, to some extent, global) literature since then.

This story obviously only covers Latin, or papal, Europe. By 1200 this 'western' world of books included Scandinavia as far the Baltic coasts, present-day Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, the eastern Adriatic, and the Frankish territories in the East. The Byzantine Empire was hardly penetrated by Latin book culture before the thirteenth century, but before that it had had its own 'renaissances' of classical Greek reading much in the same waves as had taken place in the latinate world (and for which a basic work like Munk Olsen's is a clear desideratum).

In the sense of modern heritage management, however, the scope of Munk Olsen's *L'étude* is global, with an obvious epicenter in modern Europe where most medieval Latin manuscripts are found today. Most catalogues of western manuscripts are either national or cover a specific library or collection; because *L'étude* is thematic and systematically non-nationalizing in its methodology, it sets a very high standard for global coverage: no archive or private collection is too small to be included if relevant. This means that the work indirectly points to a present-day common global heritage of the Roman classics, which rests on the often unacknowledged impressive philological and intellectual efforts directed towards the Roman classics during the eleventh and twelfth centuries – efforts that, in turn, resulted in the continued, and thousand-year long canonicity of Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Seneca, etc.<sup>2</sup>

2. The philological efforts are at the centre of Munk Olsen's synthesizing vol. 4, part 1–2.

The catalogue and the synthesis by Munk Olsen put many kinds of new studies on a firm footing. In this issue of *Interfaces* we present three 'frontiers' or types of scholarship on the rediscovery and canonization of the Roman classics all taking their cue from the meticulous way *L'étude* has charted out this territory.

1. The first three articles stay close to the manuscripts already described in *L'étude* and deal with its period (before 1200). First Birger Munk Olsen and Jaakko Tahkokallio discuss, from two different viewpoints, some of the statistical lessons which can be drawn from the distribution of extant copies over centuries. Munk Olsen argues that his method is transferable to other groups of texts when assess-



3. Eltjo Buringh, *Medieval Manuscript Production in the Latin West. Explorations with a Global Database*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

ing their popularity and its development over time; in particular that in a comparison between different kinds of measurement (including literary imitation and mentions in contemporary book lists), the number of extant copies of a text remains the strongest indicator. The same result is reached by Tahkokallio through another route. He compares some of the basic schooltexts included in *L'étude* with basic Christian school texts which are not included (Juvenius, Arator, Sedulius, and more); apart from showing how these Christian school texts are eclipsed by the classical *auctores maiores* from the eleventh century, he also engages in a debate with the recent influential (if also controversial) book on manuscript statistics by Eltjo Buringh.<sup>3</sup> He succeeds in bringing the figures presented by Buringh and by Munk Olsen into dialogue by introducing a simple mathematical thought experiment, and finally concludes that the extant number of copies *does* reflect a random selection mechanism and therefore is the most reliable tool of measurement. The long development from the late antique to the early medieval schools, their important legacy, and the paradigm shift in the eleventh and twelfth centuries is documented in another way by Karin Margareta Fredborg, who takes us into realm of commentary traditions (also systematically indicated in *L'étude*). While late antique and Carolingian glosses to *Ars poetica* continued to play a significant role, a new type of free-standing lemmatic commentary was developed in the eleventh- and twelfth-centuries with an emphasis on Horace's authorship, his full oeuvre, and his rhetorical model value for composing new texts.

2. The next section of articles also keeps within the boundary of c. 1200, but focuses on how literary production is reacting to the reading of the classics, in other words how eleventh and twelfth century literature drew discomfort, inspiration, wonder, and issues of debate from the old texts. Two readings, by Monika Otter and Mia Münster-Swendsen, highlight the potential of awkward, sexually explicit, violent and satirical classical poetry (by Horace, Ovid, Juvenal) to create a space for imitation, role-play, and banter within the school environments of the eleventh and twelfth centuries; both papers also show how a sophisticated modern reading of these medieval readings can bring us closer to the social and gendered roles assumed or played out in medieval schools; the disturbing story of the aphrodisiac-cooking witch Canidia (in Horace, *Ep.* 5) triggers an entire illustration in a twelfth-century manuscript where she has been met with silence by many a modern commentator; blatant sexuality and banter is voiced by the late eleventh- and twelfth-century poetic collec-

tion, the *Regensburger Songs*, but carefully ‘clothed’ in ancient references and pointing to a certain carnevalesque moment of the school year around Christmas.

The innovative literary masks and the Ovidianism of the Loire poets around 1100, especially Baudri of Bourgueil, Marbod of Rennes, and Hildebert of Lavardin, already mentioned for their homoerotic (and one could add heteroerotic) positioning by Münster-Swendsen, are explored further by Wim Verbaal who opens up the characteristics of this new poetry. He discusses the potential meanings of ‘medieval classicism’ and introduces a distinction between ‘rewriting’ and ‘reviving’ the classics: the Loire poets can be interpreted as displaying a new and more creative imitation of the Roman poets than their predecessors. One could say that these are the top-end literary products of the energized eleventh-century classical reception.

The understanding of the solemn epic voice of Virgil also underwent significant developments during the twelfth century. Francine Mora highlights – as does Fredborg – how heavily the late antique commentary tradition weighed on the school readings in the twelfth century, and how something new crystallized at the same time. This is not least the case in the famous philosophical and Chartrian commentary to the first six books of the *Aeneid*, traditionally attributed to Bernardus Silvestris. What Mora demonstrates, however, is that there is no easy or one-dimensional classicism to be taken over by twelfth-century commentators, but rather a contested one in which the emphasis on some authorities (in this case Macrobius) at the same time hides dependence on others (Fulgentius and Ovid). Mora’s observation on competing ‘classicisms’ serves as a point of departure for Bridges’s comparative reading of the most successful classicist epic composed in the twelfth century, the *Alexandreis* by Gauthier de Chatillon, juxtaposed with the contemporary philosophical epic poem, *Anticlaudianus* by Alain de Lille. Both poems are charged with implicit debates about allegorical reading and likewise informed by a thick layer of late antique commentary as well as contemporary literary issues, also found in the French *Romans d’antiquité*. Here we see that the classicist movement is shifting from one or two classical model authors or dialogue partners, to find itself in a web of classical, late antique, and contemporary hermeneutic practices.

3. The third frontier of the scholarship of the medieval reception of Roman classics goes beyond the chronological border of 1200, into the ever-growing complexity of new literatures and languages in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and without an authoritative

guide to distribution, commentaries and textual copying patterns such as is provided by Munk Olsen for the earlier period. The two first papers of this section, by Jean-Yves Tilliette and Filippo Bognini, are still centered on the manuscript evidence from the twelfth century, but extend their chronology into the later centuries and follow, in very concrete ways, the destinies of twelfth-century philological work. Tilliette concentrates on one manuscript, a very dense volume of commentaries on Virgil, Lucan, Ovid, Terence, Sallust, and Statius originating from the pioneering school of Orléans, gathered in this instance from four booklets all copied around 1200. It is the gathering and the afterlife of the combined volume, however, that is of particular interest here as it attests, Tilliette argues, to an active interest in classical Roman texts and the use of twelfth-century commentaries in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century France. This legacy of the twelfth-century schools in the subsequent period remains underexplored, but their interpretations were probably studied widely until the humanist commentaries changed the landscape in the fifteenth century. Bognini's article corroborates this pattern. He concentrates on one detail of Virgilian criticism (how to understand the first words the protagonist utters in the poem), but unfolds its richness by compiling the evidence of a large body of manuscripts and by following the commentary tradition from late antiquity up to the humanists. The characteristic stamp of the philosophical interests of twelfth-century commentators emerges very clearly, and again the eclipse of these readings came with the humanists' access to Greek literature which inaugurated the important changes of the fifteenth century. Bognini's paper also ties in with Fredborg's and Bridges' contributions by displaying the complex entanglement of late antique and medieval hermeneutics.

The next two papers, by Irene Salvo García and Marek Kretschmer, lead our attention to the stunning and unstoppable success of Ovid in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Salvo García deals with the presence of the *Metamorphoses* in the enormously ambitious (and unfinished) world history edited by a team under Alfonso X ('The Wise') of Castile – the *General estoria* (c. 1270–84). Ovid's mythologies were mined as a historical text and adapted for the *General estoria* together with a set of commentaries. Salvo García is able to show that these glosses overlapped with the material at the disposal of the anonymous French translator of the *Metamorphoses* – the *Ovide Moralisé* (c. 1320) – thus demonstrating a shared Ibero-French textual background. A further, and equally striking use of the *Meta-*

*morphoses* is found in the early fourteenth-century allegorical readings by Pierre Bersuire (an acquaintance of Petrarch) in his Latin work, the still unedited *Ovidius Moralizatus*, studied by Kretschmer. The work of Bersuire was destined for the use of preachers, supposedly so well-versed in Ovid that his poem could be used as an allegorical framework for ‘talking points’ for sermons. By tying the *Ovidius Moralizatus* to the earlier commentary tradition and to the encyclopedic trends of the fourteenth century, Kretschmer opens up this little known work.

In the final contribution Rita Copeland offers an analysis of the fortunes of another remarkable fourteenth-century text, the Latin translation of Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Philosophers*. The complicated route of transmission and translation (not without an intriguing relation to twelfth-century textual culture) is being untangled, and Copeland makes a point of showing how this more biographical than philosophical work met with a massive interest: the learned world had been kindled by ancient philosophy mainly through Cicero, Seneca and Aristotle since the twelfth century, and the entrance on the market of easy-to-read stories about ancient philosophers was irresistible. The classicist momentum initiated in the eleventh- and twelfth centuries was now so deeply entrenched and widely spread, that the learned world was more than ready for the wave of humanist translations from the Greek waiting just around the next corner.

As an aid for imagining the rich texture of the medieval legacy of reading the classics, we have chosen a collage by Alberto Burri (*Sacco L.A.*, 1953) as cover illustration for this issue of *Interfaces*. It has layers, fault lines, repairs, and even unexpected intrusions, but it saved a treasured literary canvas for posterity.

*The Editors*