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Reading Classical Myths in Late Antiquity: Macrobius' Proposal of Literary Identity in Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis.

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According to these premises, the present proposal studies three *loci* in particular in the macrobian text: **the theory of fiction (1. 2), the interpretation of the dreams experienced by Aeneas and Agamemnon (1. 3), and the interpretation of the myths of Orpheus and Amphio (2. 3).** Our analysis attends to demonstrate that through his readings Macrobius builds a roman identity concerned with a *lector* paradigm, and through this process of reinterpretation of the past the commentator legitimates and establishes the Late Antique cultural present.

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Short biographical note:

I am a PhD student at Universidad de Buenos Aires, being my areas of interest Latin Language and Literature, Classical Antiquity and Late Antiquity. I have just submitted my PhD thesis, entitled: "Commentary as a Late Antique Genre: Macrobius' *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*" ("El comentario como género tardoantiguo: *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* de Macrobio"), and I am waiting for the defense, planned between February and March, 2012. I am also an Assistant Professor in Latin Language and Literature in the Department of Classics at the same University. Once I

get my PhD my work will be dedicated to Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Mercuri et Philologiae.*

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1) Introduction

The fictional was an early concern of poets and philosophers at the Antiquity. It was considered important, in those times, to establish its relationship with truth and to investigate whether it was or not an appropriate discourse to reach knowledge. In Late Antiquity the dynamics that ruled those elements (fictional narrative / truth / "objective" discourse) began to change and, thus, discursive forms that were formerly regarded as mere amusement and not as valid ways to reach the truth arise now as legitimate and useful instruments of knowledge. As a result of this, fiction broke into a wide range of genres, a fact that modified old reading and writing patterns. "Fictionalization" [1] is, then, a critical feature of the literary changes that took place in Late Antiquity.

Let us examine the three ways in which the fictional was considered throughout the Antiquity. In the first place, the search for the past and the dialogue with ancestry (the means by which Late antique men were building their present) called for a system for processing the tradition. The allegorical reading provided then an underpinning by means of which the myth and the fictional could be re-codified according to new ideologies and values and, thus, be reattached to that area of the literary universe in which discourse and truth hold a closer relationship. On the other hand, the notion that discourse (in general) is valuable when it leads to good actions had a long tradition and was already present at the writings of Plato, who rejected the Homeric narratives because of its immorality. This ethical reading was still a criterion of value in Late Antiquity. Finally, the narrative can be read and analyzed from its structure or internal composition without regard of its relationships with the external reality, as Aristotle proposed. This is what we may call genre criticism.[2] Among the three ways of reading

[1] FONTAINE (1977) points out the "poetization" of objective genres as an essential feature of the literary aesthetics of Late Antiquity. In the same sense is shaped the expression "third sophistic" (cf. QUIROGA: 2010).

[2] Instead of well defined positions, they are but tendencies that can be found mixed together at some degree according to each author's purposes. The allegorical and ethical readings were clearly practiced by Plato and the philosophical schools that followed him, while Aristotle – interested on the construction of the literary work—employs often a generic reading in its analysis. Cf. COULTER (1976).

mentioned above, the allegorical exegesis had preference among philosophical and religious schools, whether inclined to the symbolic interpretation of allegory or to that of a more rational spirit ("evemerist"). It is of no surprise, then, that Macrobius employs predominantly this form of exegesis in his readings of Cicero.

Notwithstanding, as Macrobius is not exactly a commentator-philosopher, he employs other ways of reading for his purposes, since his *Comentarii* are a sort of propedeutics to the study of philosophy adressed to the education of his son Eustacius, to whom the work is devoted. That is why the ethical interpretation and the *exemplum* take such importance in his writings. Though in a lesser extent, Macrobius ponders also on the elements inherent to the literary work and brings the genre criticism in his expositions. This original combination reflects the transitional spirit of those times: as the world changes and becomes more diverse, the ways of representing it must adapt themselves. As a result of this process the fictional becomes significant in the comprehension of reality, and fictionalization becomes a central aspect of the Late Antique aesthetics.

2. Macrobius and the reception of *fabulae*

Classification of *fabulae* (1. 2. 6- 21)

Before examining Macrobius' readings I want to consider the theory on the fictional that he proposes. In 1. 2. 1-21, Macrobius faces the problem of the defense of Plato and Cicero against the epicureans, who criticize the presence of fictional narratives in the philosophical discourse, specifically, the myth of Er at *Republic* and Scipio's dream as ending of Cicero's treatise. In order to legitimate both fictions, Macrobius performs a series of complicated hermeneutic manoeuvres in which both narratives are interpreted through a mixed key (a combination of allegorical, ethical and generic criticism).[3] In this context (specifically, the need for a philosophical validation of dream narratives) the author poses an intrincate classification of *fabula*e:

[3] As is well known, the matter is ambiguous even since Plato, who does not discard entirely the possibility of including the fictional into a philosophical discourse, unless the fictional is immoral. However, he leaves the employ of the fictional to basic stages and forbids it in the education of the philosopher. The Homeric and Hesiodic narratives were condemned and considered useless for education as early as the presocratic times, as is mentioned by Pseudo-Heraclitus (*Allegoriae* 1.1-2) and Proclus (Commentary to *Republic,* 6. 76. 17- 18). Of course, the allegoric reading was not a neoplatonic invention: it was contemporary to the first attempts of understanding the Homeric poetry, but acquired high relevance at Late Antiquity and later in the Middle Ages (cf. HUIZINGA 2001). It is supposed to be born with Theagenes of Rhegium (c. 525 B.C.), who explains the theomachy through the idea that gods are symbols of natural forces and moral concepts. Anaxagoras, the cynics Antistenes and Diogenes, Metrodorus of

Fabulae, quarum nomen indicat falsi professionem,[4] *aut tantum conciliandae auribus voluptatis aut adhortationis quoque in bonam frugem gratia repertae sunt. auditum mulcent velut comoediae, quales Menander eiusue imitatores agendas dederunt, uel argumenta fictis casibus amatorum referta, quibus vel multum se Arbiter exercuit vel Apuleium non numquam lusisse miramur. hoc totum fabularum genus quod solas aurium delicias profitetur e sacrario suo in nutricum cunas sapientiae tractatus eliminat. ex his autem quae ad quandam virtutum speciem intellectum legentis hortantur fit secunda discretio. in quibusdam enim et argumentum ex ficto locatur et per mendacia ipse relationis ordo contexitur ut sunt illae Aesopi fabulae elegantia fictionis illustres, at in aliis argumentum quidem fundatur veri soliditate sed haec ipsa veritas per quaedam composita et ficta profertur et hoc iam vocatur narratio fabulosa, non fabula, ut sunt cerimoniarum sacra, ut Hesiodi et Orphei quae de deorum progenie actuve narrantur, ut mystica Pythagoreorum sensa referuntur. ergo ex hac secunda divisione quam diximus a philosophiae libris prior species, quae concepta de falso per falsum narratur, aliena est. sequens in aliam rursum discretionem scissa dividitur: nam cum veritas argumento subest solaque fit narratio fabulosa, non unus repperitur modus per figmentum vera referendi. aut enim contextio narrationis per turpia et indigna numinibus ac monstro similia componitur ut di adulteri, Saturnus pudenda Caeli patris abscindens et ipse rursus a filio regno potito in vincla coniectus, quod genus totum philosophi nescire malunt – aut sacrarum rerum notio sub pio figmentorum uelamine honestis et tecta rebus et vestita nominibus enuntiatur et hoc est solum figmenti genus quod cautio de divinis rebus philosophantis admittit*.[5]

Lampsacus and others continued later the allegorical reading of myths. The stoics (especially Chrisypphus) will endure in the attempt of reconciliation between their philosophical system and the myth. Their works are lost today, but we know some of their thoughts by third-party references: Lucilius Balbus at Cicero's *De natura deorum* and Chrisyphus at Macriobius' *Saturnalia*. This aside, we know Heraclit's *Allegoriae* and the work of his contemporary Cornutus: *Compendium theologiae graecae.*

[4] This is a wrong etymology: *fabula* is not related to *falsum* nor *fallacia,* the latter derived from *falli.* Cf. ERNOUT- MEILLET (1967) *Dict. Etym*. Varro (*LL* 6. 55) derives instead *fabula, falsum* and *fallacia* from *fari.* Only the first attribution is correct.

[5] *Comm. in Somn. Sc.* 1. 3. 1: "*Fables, whose name means that they tells false things, were invented to amuse the hearers or also to encourage them to good actions. Comedies like those that Menander or his imitators used to stage are pleasant to the ear, and so are the stories full of imaginary love adventures that Petronius used to write often and that –surprisingly for us— even amused Apuleius sometimes. The philosophical treatise dismiss from his sanctuary this kind of fictions whose sole purpose is the pleasure of the hearers, and leaves them to nursemaids. However concerning those fictions that help the intellect of the readers to obtain a certain idea of the virtues, a second distinction must be placed. In some of them the entire plot is fictional and the very scheme of the events is woven out of lies: this is the case of Aesop's fables, which are famous because of its elegance. In some other tales the plot is based on a solid truth, but this truth is displayed through fictional elements. This is called "mythical narrative" and not "fable" v. g. the sacred rituals, the Hesiodic and orphic narratives on the genealogy and acts of the gods, or the mystic thoughts of the pythagoreans. Thus, of the two categories of fictions mentioned above the first one is not suitable for philosophy. The second one --when the core of the fable is true and only the narrative is fictional-- may be divided also in other two types, since in this cases there is more than one way to express the truth. There are narratives where the plot consists of obscenities, monstruosities unworthy of the gods, just as adultery or Saturn mutilating his father's genitals, and later himself being unthroned and put to chains by his own son. Philosophers prefers to ignore such tales. But there are other narratives where the truth is covered by a decent and respectful invention. This is the only kind of fiction that the prudence of the philosopher who deals with the divine can allow*."

The first division of *fabulae* is based on the purposes that they may have: to amuse or to inspire good behavior. While the first ones are useless for philosophy, the second ones may be of some value. This reading level is tropological[6] and ethical, because the narrative moves our spirit to action. The next division obeys to allegory, and the criterion here is how tightly the narrative and the truth are linked. Obviously, *fabulae* are always fictional, but if its theme is true, the truth will remain hidden in the text weaving. Thus, the narrative will point to the truth indirectly, through an interpretation. Even within this category of *narrationes fabulosae*, Macrobius establishes yet another distinction, based on morals. The narrative is legitimate if it is decent and respectful; on the contrary, those that call for obscenities and despicable things are to be discarded. In this point Macrobius employs a genre criterion, and the ethical imperative radically determines and commands the whole narrative plot, both in spirit and structure: it will have no other ending than the proper one and no other consequence than to induce good morals.

Finally, it's in the very aim of philosophical discourse where the reason for including fictional lies, since Nature refuses to show herself naked:

> *de dis autem ut dixi ceteris et de anima non frustra se nec ut oblectent ad fabulosa convertunt sed quia sciunt inimicam esse naturae apertam nudamque expositionem sui, quae sicut vulgaribus hominum sensibus intellectum sui vario rerum tegmine operimentoque subtraxit, ita a prudentibus arcana sua voluit per fabulosa tractari. sic ipsa mysteria figurarum cuniculis operiuntur ne vel haec adeptis nudam rerum talium se natura praebeat sed summatibus tantum viris sapientia interprete veri arcani consciis contenti sint reliqui ad venerationem figuris defendentibus a uilitate secretum*.[7]

If read through this mix of criteria, myths are valuable for the philosophical discourse because they reveal the hidden truth to the good reader. To this category belong both the Myth of Er and Scipio's dream:

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[6] On "levels of sense" cf. LUBAC (1964: II 131 ss.)

[7] *Comm. in Somn. Sc. 1.* 2. 17- 18: "*But when we consider the other gods, as said before, or the soul, they do not employ fictional elements without a reason or merely for pleasure: they do so because they know that Nature refuses to expose herself without garments, and just as she kept herself out of the ordinary human perception by covering the reality under various disguises, so did she want the wise men to handle her secrets by the means of fiction. Thus, the mystery rests hidden in the core of the symbol, so that those who looks for it can never see it naked. Only eminent men have knowledge of the hidden truth by wisdom, while the rest are allowed to worship the truth only through the symbols that protects the mystery from the vulgar*".

> *cum igitur nullam disputationi pariat iniuriam vel Er index vel somnians Africanus sed rerum sacrarum enuntiatio integra sui dignitate his sit tecta nominibus, accusator tandem edoctus a fabulis fabulosa secernere conquiescat.*[8]

Once established the link between *fabulae* and reality (being that the constitutive darkness of the latter demands for the illuminative powers of the former), the fictional obtains a new ontological status and may become an *exemplum* to be followed. This implies a new kind of reader that must have specific abilities.

3.- "Bad" and "good" readers at the *Commentarii*

According to this, Macrobius delineates along his whole work some reader models taken from literature and reflected in the reality beyond literature. An example of those reader models can be found at the analysis of two *fabulae* that, conveniently to Macrobius' aims, are onirical episodes. First he discusses the dream sent by Zeus to Agamemnon (*Illiad* 2. 8- 15, 23- 33 y 60- 75) after which the hero goes into battle expecting for a victory that will never arrive. This poetical fiction was judged by Plato as a proof that gods can be deceitful (*Republic* 2.383a). However, Macrobius thinks differently:

> *ut ecce Homericum somnium a Iove, ut dicitur, missum ad conserendam futuro die cum hostibus manum sub aperta promissione victoriae spem regis animavit: ille, velut divinum secutus oraculum commisso praelio amissis suorum plurimis vix aegreque in castra remeavit. num dicendum est deum mandasse mendacium? non ita est, sed quia illum casum Graecis fata decreverant, latuit in verbis somnii, quod animadversum vel ad vere vincendum vel ad cavendum saltem potuisset instruere. habuit enim praeceptio ut universus produceretur exercitus, at ille sola pugnandi hortatione contentus non vidit quid de producenda universitate praeceptum sit, praetermissoque Achille, qui tunc recenti lacessitus iniuria ab armis cum suo milite feriabatur, rex progressus in proelium et casum qui debebatur excepit, et absolvit somnium invidia mentiendi non omnia de imperatis sequendo*.[9]

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[8] *Comm. in Somn. Sc.* 1. 2. 12: "*Er, by his narrative and the African by his dream are not to be blamed, since the sacred (keeping untouched the dignity of its being) covered herself with these names in her exposure, so that the prosecutor, trained to discern the fictional from the fable itself, may consider that there is no quarrel*". At *Saturnalia*, Macrobius compares the fictional with other writings that apparently shows more respect for reality, v. g. the historical works. He points out that the fictional usually disrupts the chronological order of the facts as it is given in the reality. This idea seems ruled by a genre/typological criterion or, at least, by a principle that takes in consideration the internal structure of the narrative. We find here a sort of "time of the fictional" that obeys its own rules and is independent of the chronological order external to the narrative. An oracular dream (as Scipio's) implies such time disruptions since it displays some events that haven't happened yet.

[9] *Comm. in Somn. Sc.* 1. 7. 4- 6: "*Homer tells us that a dream sent by Jove (as it is said) encouraged king Agamemnon, under an explicit promise of victory, to fight his enemies the next day. The king obeyed the oracle which he thought divine, and doing so he lost the majority of*

Certain kind of fictions sent by the gods to the mortals has always some truth in it. The receiver may fail in the interpretation of the message, but the truth of its content remains intact no matter how distorted the message itself may seem. Going one step forward from the thoughts of Plato on this subject, Macrobius states that gods do not deceive: it's the humans who often misinterpret their signals. [10] Then Vergil is invoked to reinforce the foresaid argument: Aeneas' meeting with *fatum* was delayed not because the dream prophesies were not clear enough, but because he was a slightly uncaring interpreter:

> *parem observantiae diligentiam Homericae per omnia perfectionis imitator Maro in talibus quoque rebus obtinuit. nam apud illum Aeneas ad regionem instruendo regno fataliter eligendam satis abundeque Delio instructus oraculo, in errorem tamen unius verbi neglegentia relapsus est. non quidem fuerat locorum quae petere deberet nomen insertum, sed cum origo vetus parentum sequenda diceretur, fuit in verbis, quod inter Cretam et Italiam, quae ipsius gentis auctores utraque produxerant, magis ostenderet et, quod aiunt, digito demonstraret Italiam. nam cum fuissent inde Teucer hinc Dardanus, vox sacra sic adloquendo: Dardanidae duri, aperte consulentibus Italiam, de qua Dardanus profectus esset, obiecit appellando eos parentis illius nomine, cuius erat origo rectius eligenda*.[11]

Against these models of "bad" readers, Macrobius opposes Scipio as an example to be followed. Beyond the uncertainty lying within every prophesy, he managed –thanks to his *diligentia*—to understand rightly the meaning of those words addressed to him and, in consequence, to act appropriately as also occurs with "*lectores diligentes*":

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his soldiers and hardly managed to return alive from the battle. Shall we conclude of this that the Divinity sent him a false oracle? No, because Fate had arranged such disaster for the greeks, but hidden between the words of the prophesy there was an element that could induce the victory --or at least mitigate the defeat-- should it be noticed by Agamemnon. The divine order was to advance with the whole army, but the king, paying attention only to the encouragement to advance, didn't notice that Achilles and his men had left the field because of a recent affront. Thus he marched into a defeat that was fated to him. The dream, however, is absolved of falseness because Agamemnon did not follow strictly the command given in it".

[10] Proclus (*Republic* 1.115) and Silesius (3) attempt a similar defense of Zeus.

[11] *Comm. in Somn. Sc.* 1. 7. 7- 9: "*Virgil, who scrupulously imitates the perfection of Homer, had such perspicacy in similar cases. Though Aeneas received from the oracle of Delos directives more than enough to choose, according to fate, the place where his realm was to be established, he fell notwithstanding in error because he forgot just one single word. The prophesy didn't mention the place where Aeneas had to go, but it commanded that he should look for his ancestor's origins. Between Italy and Chrete (the native countries of Aeneas' forefathers), there was a hint that pointed clearly (with the finger, as is used to say) to Italy. Teucrus was natural of Chrete, while Dardanus was born at Italy. The sacred voice referred to those who interrogated them as 'rude dardanians', which was pointing Italy clearly before Aeneas' eyes: the voice was naming them after the ancestor whose birthplace was the chosen land*". Cf. *Aen.* 3. 84- 191. For "*Dardanide duri" cf. Aen.* 3. 94.

> *divulgatis etiam docemur exemplis, quam paene semper, cum praedicuntur futura, ita dubiis observantur, ut tamen diligens – nisi divinitus, ut diximus, inpeditur – subesse repperiat apprehendendae vestigia veritatis,*[12]

To this model of reader belongs Macrobius himself: like Scipio, he reads the prophesy of the African "rightly", and explains it through the analysis of its textual utterance. Despite the fact that there are some elements of doubt ("If…"), the meaning becomes clear at "*summam fatalem*":

> *et hic certae quidem denuntiationis est quod de Scipionis fine praedicitur sed gratia conciliandae obscuritatis inserta dubitatio dicto tamen quod initio somnii continetur absolvitur. nam cum dicitur circuitu naturali summam tibi fatalem confecerint, vitari hunc finem non posse pronuntiat. quod autem Scipioni reliquos vitae actus sine offensa dubitandi per ordinem rettulit et de sola morte similis visus est ambigenti, haec ratio est quod, sive dum humano vel maerori parcitur vel timori, seu quia* ***utile est*** *hoc maxime latere, pronius cetera oraculis quam vitae finis exprimitur, aut cum dicitur, non sine aliqua obscuritate profertur*.[13]

Genre reading emerges again: it is "convenient" (*utile est*) that the grandfather remains silent about the fate and death of his grandson because such a disturbing knowledge could interfere with his heroic duty. This explanation is strictly related to the narrative plot of *Somnium* and to the discursive strategies necessary to Cicero's literary purpose.

Macrobius also includes himself in the model of good reader, as may be inferred from his interpretation of Amphio's and Orpheus' myths:

> *hinc aestimo et Orphei vel Amphionis fabulam, quorum alter animalia ratione carentia alter saxa quoque trahere cantibus ferebantur, sumpsisse principium quia primi forte gentes vel sine rationis cultu barbaras vel saxi instar nullo affectu molles ad sensum voluptatis canendo traxerunt. ita denique omnis habitus animae cantibus gubernatur ut et ad bellum progressui et item receptui canatur cantu et excitante et rursus sedante virtutem.*[14]

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[12] *Comm. in Somn. Sc.* 1. 7. 4: "*Well known examples teaches us that predictions are always full of uncertainties, but the careful observer – if Divinity does not prevent it, as I said before— may find the hidden keys that will let him comprehend the truth*".

[13] *Comm. in Somn. Sc.* 1. 7. 9: *"Here, the prophesy on Scipio's death is truthful and, though there's some uncertainty, the words at the beginning of the dream dissipates it:* 'when you have completed with this natural cycle the number that Fate has arranged for you' *means that this end cannot be eluded. The reason why Scipio's grandfather tells him all the episodes of his future life in order, but only seems to doubt in that one related to his death is one of the following: because he shows leniency towards human melancholy and fear, or because it is convenient to remain silent particularly about that fact. Oracles are leaning to reveal everything except the end of life, and when they consent to this, it is not done without certain elusiveness".*

[14] *Comm. in Somn. Sc.* 2. 3. 1- 11: "*I consider that the origin of the myths of Orpheus and Amphio –of whom is told that they haunted the irrational animals and the stones with their*

The author poses here an allegorical-evemerist[15] interpretation of both fables, according to which the mythical nature of Orpheus and Amphio comes from real musical deeds whose fame grew until both characters were upraised by collective memory to a divine status. However, for these allegories to work in another dimension and to be understood as *exempla (*let's remember the importance given to the ethical function of myths*)*, it is necessary an element that connects them with a superior sphere: in this case, the power of music. According to the allegorical reading, the divine power of music made divine two mortals, and by the other hand, the complementary evemerist reading allows to consider these men as models to be imitated (*imitatio*) since they were humans firstly.

Thus, the good reader formerly represented by Scipio is embodied now by Macrobius, who can combine different exegetical skills in order to extract truth from fiction.[16]

4.- Conclusions

Macrobius' operation on myths combines two dissimilar kinds of readings and integrates them. This allows him to include the fictional in the philosophical discourse and to read the fictional as a microcosm that represents symbolically the reality outside the text. Thus, the commentary becomes an exegetic guideline that brings to the reader not only an *exemplum* of *romanitas* (and the philosophical contents necessary to follow it), but also the reading strategies that must be applied to traditional texts in order to find these values, to build the myth out of truth and to uncover the truth beneath the mysterious fable tales. Also, the analysis of *fabulae* shows *per speculum* the situation of the reader confronted to reality. All the heroes mentioned by Macrobius are but interpreters of prophesies or exemplary myths and, when they fail to

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singing— is that they were perhaps the first who fascinated and pleased with their music the barbarian peoples, irrationals like animals and incapable of emotions, like stones".

[15] According to Jones (1961: 217) allegorical interpretation may be: 1) "historical" when real character and historical facts are concealed within the narrative; 2) "physical", when gods are represented as forces of Nature; 3) "ethical", when gods represents moral principles, 4) "evemerist", when gods or mythical characters and their deeds are rationalized as common men and human episodes.

[16] This combinatory reading procedure was not a novelty at Macrobius times: Cicero (*De natura deorum* 2. 24-25; *De divinatione* 2. 37) employed allegorism and evemerism on myths. It was also a customary resource in school teaching, as witnessed by Servius, the grammarian (Cf. Jones, 1961). Macrobius' originality lies in the fact that these exegetical practices are employed together with the genre reading, which constitutes a sort of genre theory in which the commentator classifies different kinds of fictions and poses an ideal reader according to this mixed model of representation.

accomplish their goals, it is due to their own misreading. Scipio interprets rightly the prophesy given to him by his grandfather and he acts according to it, just as Macrobius does when reading the tradition of Rome, and just as Macrobius' readers are supposed to do. As Aeneas, who had to train himself in the interpretation of dream prophesies in order to establish Rome, so the roman readers of Late Antiquity must deal with the tradition in order to re-build their own cultural identity.

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