Karl A.E. Enenkel (ed.)


The title of this collection of essays is emblematic of the excellent series Intersections of which it forms a part: at the crossroads of disciplines, time periods, and texts, it proposes an audacious exploration of the changing nature of the classics through their editions and annotations in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. This book reads like a public dialogue on scholarly dialogues and inspires further reading and research. Meticulously composed and presented, the collection is both a profession and a demonstration of methodology: building on recent typologies and theoretical examinations of early modern commentaries (by Hans Nellen and Karl Enenkel, among others), the volume proposes detailed and in-depth discussions of particular commentaries. This book will be a landmark in reception studies as well as in studies of the genre of the commentary. Its value as a future reference guide regarding early modern scholarship on the classics lies not only in its scope but also in the original approach (most notably formulated in Karl Enenkel's preface and contribution).

Recent studies have focused on the Renaissance commentary as a genre, as a modality for textual reception, or as a cultural dialogue between works and periods. Enenkel's introduction provides an essential bibliography of the latest publications pertaining to the genre. Less than two years after the publication the list is now already longer with, notably, the volume The Unfolding of Words: the Commentary in the xvith century, edited by Judith Rice Henderson (University of Toronto Press, 2012). The success of the topic is not modern-day scholars' vane infatuation with a form that resembles their own critical writings. For many decades the interest in commentaries has reflected the investigation of intellectual history's “supporting actors,” of their role as transmitters, vulgariz-
ers, editors, translators, and, more generally, as mediators and intermediaries. Scholars like Jean Céard or Antoine Compagnon, in the French area, Anthony Grafton and Philip Ford for the English-speaking world, or again Karl Enenkel with this volume, have rightly questioned the implicit hierarchy of traditional literary history, which ranks authors on a scale distinguishing great writers and classics from a crowd of anonymous or insignificant secondary roles. Such ranking, once widely accepted, is based on a definition of the text as a production authored by one individual: the author, first and last creator of a text, which will be then circulated, printed, copied, read, commented, and explained by professionals of the book (or the manuscript) and by readers. Such a configuration of roles relegates commentaries to a mass of secondary productions, changing with each generation of readers, whereas the original text, mythically unchanged, transcends times and interpretations.

This collection of essays convincingly reverses this perspective and brings to the fore the once forgotten actors of transmission. Rather than positing the primary text as a stable and fixed origin, passed down to posterity by servants of the tradition, these studies focus on the supporting roles and show the “transformations” of the original texts. Taking the classics as its point of departure, the book demonstrates that the constant interest in the transmission of Greek and Roman authors must not detract us from their changing nature: the classical works are received through and only through interpretations and mediations, a fact that constantly changes their message, values, and even genre. Whereas reception studies have often accepted the ideal restored classical text as the basis for composite works (commentaries, translations, editions, adaptations), the contributors of this volume chose to consider the ongoing dialogue between primary and secondary writings in its coherence and unity. Contrary to an approach centered on origins, the methodology of this volume follows the metamorphoses of ancient works deemed valuable and made canonical through specific renderings and mediations. This project thus enriches what used to be called “literary history” with many new dimensions. By giving life to the various editions and annotations, which are usually designated by mere anonymous abbreviations in scholarly prefaces, the stage is set for the makers of intellectual transmission. One thus hopes that this volume can inspire further developments looking at other times and places of the classical tradition.

The volume’s methodological scope is skillfully and wittily introduced by Karl Enenkel in a concise preface that outlines the generic variety of commentaries. It also points to the inadequacy of the notion “paratext,” which implies a ranking and fictitiously restores a chronology linking primary texts and secondary annotations. When textual tradition is considered as a continuum, however, with different threads and motivations, there are multiple sources to be