

## GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS' EPISTOLARY

STORIN (B. K.) *Self-Portrait in Three Colors. Gregory of Nazianzus's Epistolary Autobiography*. Pp. x + 261. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019. Cased, £74, US\$95. ISBN: 978-0-520-30413-0. doi:10.1017/S0009840X20000219

Despite its rhetorical development and historical significance, epistolography is not an easy literary genre and has not yet attracted all the attention it deserves. Fortunately, recent scholarly endeavours such as the present one carried out by S. are filling this gap. The collected epistles of Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390) come to 245 pieces, some of which are authentic theological treatises, as is the case of letters 101, 102 and 202 against the heretical doctrine of the Apollinarians. Gregory also wrote letters to female addressees such as Thecla (*Epist.* 56–7, 222–3), Simplicia (*Epist.* 79) and Basilissa (*Epist.* 244), reflecting the female empowerment characteristic of late antique society. The collection as a whole concludes with a letter to Basilissa, to whom Gregory sent a number of didactic sayings on philosophical life.

In this book S. focuses on one of the main characteristics of Gregory's epistles, the self-conscious autobiographical dimension, and disregards the remainder. Its main asset is to provide the reader with a study of the internal motivations driving Gregory to organise and publish his epistolary corpus and with an analysis of how this Father of the Church achieves his objective. The arguments made by S. about which interpretation to give to the texts and the way they are presented are convincing.

Letters always contain biographical elements; this explains that autobiographical scenes and data are inexorably included in them. Gregory's voluntary decision to publish and disseminate his epistolary implied a selection and edition of the existing material in order to offer a positive and specific image of his literary culture and authorial image.

It is true that his nephew Nicobulus had requested some of Gregory's epistles to use as rhetorical models. However, this was probably more an excuse for the bishop of Nazianzus to publish his corpus than Gregory's ultimate objective. The intended target readership of this autobiographical collection is identified on p. 12. S. provides in the first chapter a detailed biography of Gregory of Nazianzus according to his own textual self-presentation. He also discusses the similarities and differences between these contents in the epistolary and Gregory's previous texts: *Carmen* 2.1.11 or *De vita sua* and his self-defence *Oratio* 42, both addressing a Constantinopolitan audience.

As S. mentions, Gregory's biographers uncritically repeated many of his autobiographical claims, in the tradition established by Gregory the Presbyter, who wrote the earliest hagiography to honour the bishop of Nazianzus between 543 and 638 (*BHG* 723). Some readers will probably miss some pages proving the *Vita's* debts to Gregory's epistolary and will be disappointed with the mere references given in note 112 (p. 200) to the critical edition of the first hagiography (X. Lequeux, *Vita sancti Gregorii Theologi* [2001]).

The second chapter is devoted to the architecture of the collection of letters. The result is a valuable effort to reconstruct as closely as possible the original order and selection desired by Gregory himself. Scholars have created modern critical editions by mixing the contents and structures of the earlier manuscripts, rearranging the letters in the interest of an alleged chronology and inserting spurious letters. S., in contrast, has checked the six manuscript families to recover the original principles of organisation, i.e. dossiers centred on the addressees: Nectarius, Philagrius, Gregory of Nyssa etc. This makes it easier to appreciate the unity and coherence of the collected epistles, understanding them as a single literary text shaped by authorial design. Twenty tables containing the structure of the modern critical

editions (tables 1–8), the position of the letters within each manuscript family (tables 9–16) and the addressees in the main epistolary clusters (tables 17–20) make the entire argument easier to understand. Finally, Figure 1, ‘The dossier-based architecture of the collection’ (p. 100), shows the epistolographical interconnections of Gregory’s recipients with Basil of Caesarea.

Each of the following chapters surveys Gregory’s letters grouped together according to their main biographical dimension: his great eloquence (Chapter 3), his development of philosophy and Christian orthodoxy (Chapter 4) and his close friendship with Basil of Caesarea (Chapter 5). As S. points out, these are the three ‘self-fashioning colors with which he [Gregory of Nazianzus] would paint his epistolary self-portrait’ (p. 12). This is a good approach for sorting out the riotous chaos of the epistolographical pieces inserted in a collection that otherwise confronts the reader.

It is well known that Gregory of Nazianzus was recognised as the most eloquent intellectual by his contemporaries as much as by later authors. At several points the collection draws attention to Gregory’s training in Athens and his subsequent elite network of addressees, which were important figures of late antique society. In S.’s words ‘eloquence, as a cultural tool, empowered Gregory to remain relevant and influential’ (p. 120).

The second colour derives from Gregory’s self-description as ‘the father of philosophers’ in *Epist.* 174.1.3. His letters were more than a reliable form of communication and also disseminated the image of Gregory as a virtuous philosopher who embedded *par-rhesia*, *karteria* and the Christian Scriptures in his own discourse. Rhetorical expertise was enriched with moral authority before and after the Council of Constantinople, when he returned to his homeland of Cappadocia following his resignation as head of the church of Constantinople in June 381.

The third colour is dedicated to the role of Basil of Caesarea in the epistolary. After his death in 379 Basil had become a regional saint in Cappadocia and, through their correspondence, Gregory claimed to have had a special relationship with Basil. His intimacy with the new saint, as proven by the letters, legitimated the authority of the bishop of Nazianzus even during his retirement years on the family estate. The integrity of the Basil letter dossier is strongly established and endures through all the six manuscript families. Moreover, its situation at the beginning of the epistolary reveals its fundamental importance in Gregory’s conception.

A short, but thought-provoking epilogue closes the volume, followed by the notes, bibliography and indexes. The bibliography is long and comprehensive, although it could have been enriched by the articles by J. Mitchell, *Hermes* 96 (1968); A. Cataldo, *Sileno* 5 (1979); G.T. Dennis in T. Halton and J.P. Williman, *Studies in Honour of R.T. Meyer* (1986); B. Fragkeskou, *Μνήμη Ἀγίων Γρηγορίου τοῦ Θεολόγου καὶ Μεγάλου Φωτίου* (1994); and A. Pliucas, *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 9 (2003).

Many of Gregory’s letters are obscure, as are the connections between them and their correct interpretation, but this will no longer be the case. This book arranges an important epistolary and proposes a challenging methodological approach so that any Byzantine collection of letters can now be studied in a more systematic and historically-based manner.

The volume reflects the labour of a scholar with an unrivalled knowledge of these texts. As a matter of fact, S. also produced the first English translation of the complete epistolary of Gregory of Nazianzus, which was published only three months after this book by the University of California Press in the same series. These two important contributions will undoubtedly have a remarkable influence on new developments in epistolography and late antique studies.

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