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Ennius at the Banquet

Though Ennius' *Annales* stood tall in the Roman cultural landscape, what it was and what it became were not necessarily one and the same thing. This paper will explore the poem's reception in the first century of its existence.

Its first step is to disentangle Ennius' poem from the traditions of the so-called *carmina convivalia* and what the elder Cato may or may not have said about the status of poets at Rome. Discussion centers on the passage at *Tusculans* 1.3 where Cicero associates Ennius' poem with the archaic *carmina*, with Cato's distaste for Fulvius Nobilior's patronage of Ennius, and with the claim that 'poeticae artis honos non erat'. The context of these remarks—partisan politics and sumptuary debates—indicates that not poetry *per se* but luxury and the praise that luxury could buy were Cato's targets.

Yet the *Annales* originally ended with Fulvius' triumph of 187 and his renovation of the Aedes Herculis Musarum with Aetolian spoils. How could such a poem *not* be panegyric? The second step in the inquiry is to consider its last three books as evidence for the poem's initial reception. What encouraged Ennius to continue his poem by bringing a different kind of Roman to prominence (the otherwise unknown Caecili) and immortalizing an event of high politics (the reconciliation of Fulvius and his *inimicus* Aemilius Lepidus)? While the image of Ennius as *poeta cliens* has already been challenged, the focus has usually been on the poet. What does the evolving content of the poem say about the values, concerns, and demands of its readers?

Finally, the paper will consider two recent lines of argument that are difficult to reconcile with current views of Roman aristocratic culture and the reception of epic. One involves the possibility that aristocratic activities, e.g. banquets and the sponsorship of *ludi*, provided the initial audiences for epic. A second challenge comes from the implications of Suetonius' history of early Roman literary study. Some recent work assumes continuity across the middle years of the Republic as the Roman elite appropriated the means of literary production, but Suetonius tells a story of disruption. He counts the *Annales* among those 'carmina parum adhuc divulgata' which had to be rescued from oblivion in the later second century. Is it possible that the Roman elite actually lost interest in the *Annales*, only to be recalled to its virtues by a grammarian? Does Roman literature, not to mention the eventual politics of Roman literature, owe as much to Hellenistic *grammatike* as to archaic *musike*? Our abiding sense of the *Annales*' importance requires us to consider in its full complexity the cultural dynamics of the middle Republic.