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Fake News in Flavian Epic

Fake news is false information intentionally spread in order to influence an audience. The word has acquired great resonance in recent years due to the development of social technologies that facilitate rapid information sharing, but the phenomenon is not new. Deceptive rumors and the dissemination of inaccurate information in ancient societies are well documented in Greek and Latin texts: hearsay and reported information often feature in non-fictional genres such as historiography and oratory, in which their veracity is discussed, as well as their impact on the course of events; in ancient poetry, the idea of fast spreading (mis)information is even embodied in the ambiguous figure of the goddess Fama ('Rumor'), whose task it is to spread both true and false news throughout the world.

Following from these observations, this project aims to investigate the notion of fake news in ancient epic narratives, with a focus on how the information is manipulated and to what avail, thus raising questions about its form, content, origin and circulation, as well as its impact as a narrative device. Specific attention will be given to the way pieces of false information are constructed. Indeed, my argument is that many strategies of deception rely on previous literary accounts of the episode and are therefore only detectable by the learned reader. This is why my interpretation of the texts will be based on a series of close readings of selected passages from an intertextual perspective, combined with rhetorical insights to replace fake news in the wider context of praise and persuasion.

Flavian epic – a group of four Latin poems dating back to the reign of the emperor Vespasian and his two sons Titus and Domitian (69-96 C.E.) – is the perfect corpus in which to carry out this study. Due to their belatedness in the Latin epic tradition, Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica, Statius' Thebaid and Achilleid, and Silius Italicus' Punica are an ideal source of material for applying intertextual analyses, since they can be compared to earlier Latin literature, as well as to their Greek predecessors. Moreover, the presence of fake news in these texts belonging to the same place and period can be historicized, because rumors and deceptive communication played an important role in the succession crisis that led to the Flavian period and were therefore a burning issue at the end of the first century C.E.

Thus, this project will explore the notion of fake news in Flavian epic at both a macro- and microstructural level by first outlining the overarching features of the phenomenon and then exposing the poetic techniques used to compose false pieces of information. The close readings of passages containing fake news from an intertextual perspective will contribute to the explanation of difficult passages and improve our understanding of intertextuality in Flavian epic.