

**Diana Spencer, *Roman Landscape: Culture and Identity. Greece & Rome, New Surveys in the Classics*, 39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xvi + 228. ISBN: 978-1-107-40024-5. \$21.99.**

The latest volume of the *New Surveys in the Classics* series is Diana Spencer's *Roman Landscape*, in which Spencer argues for understanding Roman landscapes (especially literary ones) as places of identity formation. The *New Surveys* are well-known for offering up-to-date, conceptually ambitious and accessible introductions to key themes and concepts within the Classical world. Spencer's book is intelligent, bursting with good ideas, and fulfils her own ambition of 'enabling readers to use it as a starting-point for developing their own in-depth study'. My main criticism concerns its appearance as part of this particular series.

The structure of Spencer's book is unconventional. After a glossary of critical terminology, she opens with a brief introduction and three short thematic chapters, which offer an overview of approaches to landscape, organised by theme (aesthetics, agriculture, time and space). Two longer chapters then present chronologically organised, extensive case-studies, one focused on the literary villas of Italy, the other on the material ones.

The glossary is designed as 'a tool-kit of key terms that will crop up as we analyse the building blocks of what makes a Roman space into "landscape"' (2). Sixty theoretical concepts and important technical terms are defined, mostly clearly and concisely. In the following chapters, these terms are usually printed in bold to encourage cross-referencing, a very reader-friendly strategy.

The first chapter ('Introduction: Surveying the Scene') unfortunately comes across as less reader-friendly. After a brief history of the term and concept 'landscape' from the sixteenth century until today, Spencer launches into a *tour de force* of theoretical approaches to landscape. While the particular strength of Spencer's book in the later chapters is the use she makes of some of these approaches, the introduction to them is too dense to be of much use to a readership not already familiar with her material. For example, within the space of only one page (8–9), Spencer introduces cognitive linguistics, mentioned only because it uses the (largely unexplained) concept of 'mental spaces', space syntax, and cultural memory. While she tries to connect up these concepts into an argument, her discussion is too allusive to convey her ambitious ideas productively. It has to be said, however, that much becomes clear from reading on – for example, the use of cognitive linguistics in understanding literary space is demonstrated in Spencer's reading of *Aeneid* VIII in chapter 4.

Chapter 2 ('Landscape and Aesthetics') takes as its starting-point the literary *locus amoenus*, focusing especially on the connections between space and the philosophical thought it can inspire. Setting literary scenes of wilderness against the serenity of the *locus amoenus*, Spencer then explores their Bacchic associations through an evocative reading of Horace's *Odes* 2.19. The dynamics of cultivation and wilderness are traced in their 'home-genre' pastoral and further afield, producing some fresh readings of the landscapes of Horace, Catullus and Statius. Again, the argument at times appears over-compressed: very little text is actually quoted, and for Catullus' poem 61 and 62, no suggestion of general content is given. A reader unfamiliar with the marriage-

poems might be led from Spencer's argument to assume that their main subject is gardens.

Chapter 3 ('DIY Landscapes') investigates different ideas about Roman landscapes of farming and agricultural productivity. Spencer charts changes in the conceptualisation of the Italian landscape, from a site of *labor* to 'villas intellectually zoned for cultured *otium*' (46), but also points out that the development is not straightforward: Cato's *De re rustica* already 'conjure[s] up a world perhaps just as imaginary as that of literary pastoral' (39), while the luxury villas of the first century AD are still part of a landscape of production. Catullus 64, and Lucretius' narrative of *Kulturentstehung* are shown to present different versions of the Golden Age as a (problematic) alternative to the life of *labor*.

In Chapter 4 ('Time and Motion') landscape is considered in terms of places which we move in and out of: here, Spencer briefly returns to space syntax (although her use of this space-analysis tool goes no further than occasionally employing its terminology). Movement through landscape is only comprehensible with reference to time, and Spencer demonstrates this by analysing, or 'parsing', the landscape of *Aeneid* 8 and Statius' *Silvae* 4.3 (the Via Domitiana). Spencer is at her best where she combines her larger arguments with close textual analysis. Her reading of *Aeneid* VIII is engaging, her conclusions are eminently sensible, and her argument about the Via Domitiana as a 'text generated by and also redefining movement' is well-made.

In the final part of the book, chapters 5 and 6, Spencer concludes with two extended case-studies both centring around Roman villas and their landscapes. Many of the approaches presented in the earlier chapters are here applied in depth. Chapter 5 ('Italy and the Villa Estate, or, of Cabbages and Kings') discusses a range of authors who describe and scrutinize villa life. Chapter 6 ('Spaces and Places') analyses painted vistas and suburban *horti*, focussing on space-experience and exploring the contemporary cultural connotations of these spaces. In these larger case studies, Spencer can finally take her time to unfold her arguments and to anchor them in in-depth textual and visual analyses. She effectively builds on the foundations of the previous chapters in demonstrating the textuality and readability of villa landscapes.

In sum, this is a genuinely inspiring, ambitious book, which excels in applying a range of 'theoretical' approaches productively to ancient texts. Spencer makes a very convincing case for understanding Roman landscape as a *locus* for identity formation, and her *Survey* opens up plenty of interesting areas for further investigation. Many of her close-readings, both of familiar and of less well-known authors, are suggestive and original. On the downside, the book does not seem to me to fit very well into this particular series. I find Spencer's prose evocative and aesthetically satisfying, but too often unclear. The tantalising vagueness of phrases like 'Melior's plot straddles a range of semiotic systems' (29) is not appropriate to a 'starter' survey. Spencer also makes heavy demands on the reader's knowledge of Latin literature (including that of less well-known authors like Cato and Varro), and too often over-compresses her argument at the cost of readability and comprehensibility, not taking the time to make clear the connections between individual points. While Spencer's investigation is an inspiring read for those already working on landscape, identity or even memory

studies, it is only of limited use for those looking for an accessible introduction to the topic.

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