

Primary Colours

Review of:

Mark Bradley, *Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xiii, 267 pp. No plates or illus. £60.00 hdbk. ISBN 978-0-521-11042-6.

Ancient Rome was undoubtedly a highly colourful society. Even today visitors are struck by the outstandingly vibrant hues of its physical remains: the Pompeian red walls, the grey and red columns of Aswan granite, the multicoloured marble ornament of the Pantheon, or the gold turned green turned gold again of the gilt bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius. Painted terracotta and marble sculptures are painstakingly reconstructed to counter the aesthetic of 'Winckelmann white' and restore the richness of the palette that originally covered Roman art.¹ But it is not only these which linger in the memory. Rome is also famed for the imagined colours of its collective myths, which have equal vibrancy although no longer visible: the imperial purple, the 'tawny' river Tiber, the verdant pastures of Virgil's Eclogues. This second set, colours of the imagination, are the subject of the present book. Just as much as the Pompeian pigments or coloured marbles of Rome, the literary discourse of colour and its conceptualization have received recent scientific attention. Almost contemporary with the work reviewed here, two French conference publications have focused on ancient Greek and Roman notions and categorization of colour.²

Colour in antiquity had a twofold sense: on one hand, the single chromatic shades of red, yellow, green, blue, black and white which strike the viewer of ancient art; but on the other a diffuse variety of intermingled shades, a chromatic richness, observable as much in the natural landscapes or raw materials of marble with diversity of vein as in the artificial creations of man. This combination of monochrome surface (χρῶς) and polychromatic planes (ποικιλία) offered two distinct but complementary ways of conceptualizing colour. In forming and developing such notions the painted presentation of early Greek sculpture, especially the female *korai* statues with their rich polychromies, influenced by techniques and concepts from Egypt and Asia Minor, must have been formative in enabling artists and viewers alike to realize the potentiality of colour.³ It was then that Greek philosophers began to account for the phenomenon. Two alternative explanations were offered. Some such as Empedocles understood different visible colours as the reflection of varying degrees of light within material objects, external and objectively perceptible manifestations of the four elements through the primary colours, *leukon* ('white' fire), *melan* ('black' water), *eruthron* ('red' earth) and *ochron* ('yellow' air) and combinations of these. Others, however, including Democritus argued that the perception

¹ Antonio Pinelli, 'Winckelmann e il problema del bianco', *Archaeo Dossier* 29, 1987, 21-4.

² Jackie Pigeaud, ed., *La couleur, les couleurs: XIes entretiens de La Garenne-Lemot. Quatre contributions concernant l'Antiquité. Aspects artistiques et littéraires*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007; Marcello Carastro, ed., *L'Antiquité en couleurs: catégories, pratiques, représentations*, Grenoble: Millon, 2009.

³ Adeline Grand-Clément, 'L'"inventaire des différences" en couleurs: à la recherche du paysage sensible des Grecs à l'époque archaïque', *Anabases*, 2007, no. 5, 249-56.

of colour was a subjective experience resulting from the interaction between an object and natural light; for Plato, colour was the visible consequence of rays of light emanating from the viewer which gave the impression of different hues.⁴

From this point colour was essentially defined in relation to light. For Plato, 'What separates the sight is white, the opposite is black.'⁵ Thus black (*melas*) and white (*leukos*) stood at the ends of the spectrum, and other colours were defined on a scale between these poles, differing in the relative proportions in which they were made up of these two and the other two primary colours, 'red' (*eruthros*) and 'shining' (*lampros*), which acted as agents controlling brightness and brilliant qualities of colours.⁶ The resulting vocabulary of colour was necessarily imprecise. Aristotle, in *De Sensu*, made the important inference that colour was not visible without light. His view was rather more pragmatic than Plato's, holding, instead of an ideal scale of colours, to empirical observations of how light affected colour, for instance in the changing shades of a bird's feathers at different angles. But the problem of conceptualizing colour has continued until modern philosophy.⁷ A papyrus from Saqqarah (Memphis) (*P. Louvre* inv. E7733 recto) provides a view of the nature of colour and light which follows neither Epicurean nor Sceptic arguments.⁸ In the Roman world Lucretius was the first as far as we know who discussed the notion of colour. For him it was not merely subjective, but real enough as the outward appearance of an object. Yet he presented a relativistic view of this property of objects according to which both *chros* and *poikilia* were an illusion: "there is no colour at all in the elements of matter, neither monochrome atoms nor varicoloured ones" (*De rerum natura* 2.737-8).

Mark Bradley's new book, which arises from a Cambridge PhD thesis, 'Concepts of colour in ancient Rome' (2004), is the first major attempt to chart this territory in English. He surveys a range of attempts to grapple with and represent coloristic phenomena and raises epistemological problems in the notion of colour as they are presented to us by a literary élite. The most complex and elusive such phenomenon is the rainbow, which, he shows, defied explanation by a succession of writers from Homer to Isidorus of Seville. Challenged by the chromatic complexity of the meteorological phenomenon which was taken to presage a gathering storm, writers frequently reduced this arch of a thousand colours to a monochrome, sometimes yellow (Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.700-1), sometimes purple (Propertius 3.5.32), sometimes shifting between different shades of green (Claudian, *De raptu Proserpinae* 2.100).⁹ It is worth exploring this naturalistic phenomenon because it lies at the heart of ancient attempts to understand colour, in both its chromatic diversity and its inscrutability. Like the peacock's tail, its incomprehensible range of hues encouraged a fluid notion of colour which B. holds responsible for later elite accounts of the material world. Thus even the description of grass as

⁴ Michela Maria Sassi, 'Entre corps et lumière: réflexions antiques sur la nature de la couleur', in Carastro, ed., *L'antiquité en couleurs*, 277-300.

⁵ Plato, *Timaeus* 67d; Elizabeth James, *Light and colour in Byzantine art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 54.

⁶ White (*leukos*), ochre (*ochros*), yellow (*xanthos*), purros, phaios, grey (*glaukos*), halourgos, prasinus, blue (*kuaneos*), orphinos, black (*melas*).

⁷ Armin Thommes, *Die Farbe als philosophisches Problem: von Aristoteles bis zu Ludwig Wittgenstein*, St Augustin: Gardez, 1997.

⁸ Richard Bett, 'Sceptic optics?' *Apeiron* 40.1, 2007, 95-121.

⁹ Olga Budaragina, 'The rainbow in Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae* II, 98-100', *Hyperboreus* 11.2, 2005, 280-4.

'green' (*viridis*), the river Tiber as 'yellow' (*flavus*) or the sea as 'blue' (*caeruleus*) were not straightforward categories, but implied a subjectivity in the perception of these natural phenomena. B.'s focus is the early Empire at Rome and above all the elite experience of the values of colour through veined marble, body make-up and philosophical speculation about the value and purity of different colours in the cosmopolitan urban environment. By contrast, Roman descriptions of rural landscapes are characterized by much more economical and less colouristic language.¹⁰ In this culture of make-believe and pretence colour emerges as a negotiable category, dependent on changes in light and shadow, its authenticity always already subverted by delusions, its reality concealed by a shifting appearance. This is the world of Seneca and Pliny, Petronius and Martial, within which the learned discourse of Aulus Gellius on the shades of yellow sits so ill that it has to be dealt with separately as an *envoi* to the work, a test case through which to view the principles uncovered earlier in the book. But it is hard to divorce the texts from the monuments, and, just as the first-century authors must be seen alongside the colourful fantasies of Nero's Golden House or the illusions of the Domus Augustana, so Gellius's sophistic elaboration of the murky and elusive qualities of the colour yellow belongs squarely in the context of contemporary architecture as much as philology, as patrons struggled to keep control of the success of artists in creating new fields of vision. When Fronto and Favorinus competed to see whether Latin or Greek could offer more words for the elusive basic primary colours of 'red' and 'yellow', they had half an eye on the artistic possibilities afforded in their baths and villas. It can hardly be coincidence that this was the period of the highpoint of polychrome brick and terracotta architecture at Rome, where uncovered red and yellow bricks were used decoratively in tomb structures. Closer study could be paid to the colour schemes of their painted interiors, as in the Tombs of the Nasonii and the Valerii, or to the white stuccoed images of the 'Underground Basilica' of the Porta Maggiore.

In fact, B. says little about the implications of the philosophical and philological discourses for the representation of illusory realities in the built environment. Such an account might have explicated the choice of the *verde antico* and *serpentino* marbles for the pavement of the 'Ninfeo di Egeria' brought within Herodes Atticus's Triopion estate, whose dislocated shades of green might have been too much for Juvenal's Umbricius (*Sat.* 3.19), no substitute for the grassy landscape which they seemed to replicate. The creation of a myriad of shifting greens through the veined forms of these and other marbles was quite as complex as the philological yellows expatiated on by the wordsmiths in Gellius.¹¹ Similarly polyvalent were the material recreations of the Latin *caeruleus*, 'sea-blue': a quality of stormy skies (B., 9-10) may lie behind the use of dark Egyptian blue mosaic tesserae to configure both representations of the sea as in the Quirinal ship mosaic (Rome, Palazzo dei Conservatori) and also celestial backgrounds in vaulted ceilings.¹² B., however, is unrepentant about the absence of illustrations to his work, not solely limited by the text-only format of the *Cambridge Classical Studies* series, but mindful perhaps that the distortions of modern photography might only distract from or falsely

¹⁰ Jean Trinquier, "Quid de pratorum uiriditate... plura dicam?" (Cicéron, "De Senectute", 57): les couleurs du paysage dans la littérature latine, de Lucrèce à l'époque flavienne,' in Agnès Rouveret et al, eds, *Couleurs et matières dans l'antiquité texts, techniques et pratiques*, Paris: Editions Rue d'Ulm, 2006, 213-59.

¹¹ H. Kammerer-Grothaus, 'Der Deus Rediculus im Triopion des Herodes Atticus,' *MDAI(R)* 81, 1974, 151.

¹² Frank Sear, *Roman wall and vault mosaics*, Heidelberg: F. H. Kerle Verlag, 1974, no. 123.

stereotype the essential unfathomability of the Roman chromatic consciousness. While he has dealt elsewhere with material manifestations of colour, in architecture, sculpture and the murals of Nero's Golden House,¹³ the present book is situated firmly at the conceptual level. In Liz James's *Light and colour in Byzantine art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), a model exists for the analysis of visual evidence in the light of written Greek and Roman theories of colour. Yet, although recent and ongoing scientific research has illuminated the pigments of Pompeii and the colours of painted sculpture in substantial detail, B.'s work is less ambitious. He offers no attempt to read the colour symbolism of works of art like the 'Prima Porta Augustus', lately restored to polychromatic glory in the Staatliche Antikensammlung at Munich by Vinzenz Brinkmann.¹⁴ The object of his book is to consider the literary evidence in its own right, rather than in the context of physical remains. B.'s interest here lies not in the material evidence of physical colours, but in the *discourse* of colour.

There is good reason for this limitation. Much of that literary evidence is, as B. often reminds his reader (pp. 41, 82, 168, 232), exceedingly difficult to interpret on its own terms. Quite apart from the convoluted philology of Gellius and the sophisticated hexameter diatribe of Lucretius, even superficially more straightforward texts in Pliny's *Natural History* and Seneca's *Letters* carry such obfuscating messages that they seem hard to relate to the everyday or 'normal' experience of the sensible world. In Pliny what matters is the spectacle afforded by the natural world, vastly superior to man's unnatural exploitation of its resources, except in those 'magnificent works' at Rome where he allows himself to forget that. To the encyclopaedist, colour and its manipulation through marbles and pigments provided evidence of human *luxuria*, of which Nero's Domus Aurea was only the most extravagant form.

In the body of this book (Chapters 3-6) this theme runs like a constant throughout the discussion of texts. B. reminds the reader of the practice, developed by Cicero and evolving with Seneca and Quintilian, of styling a rhetorical presentation through the addition of a metaphorical *color*. The analogy between rhetoric and cosmetics goes back, of course, to Plato's *Gorgias*, with each art practised in applying external or internal colours of the body or oration, but it was with the Roman oratorical texts that this was developed to be an indication or constituent of character (*persona*). The correlation of these different uses of 'colour' shows a basic similarity, but the very different sense of *color* in each case makes it hard to draw further conclusions about the meanings of particular visual colours in artistic contexts. Similarly, medical and physiognomic texts highlight how the colour of the skin, hair or eyes can reveal ethnicity or behaviour. This was a classification based on colour, not race. Changes in colour through blushing (*rubor*) or paleness (*pallor*) are manifestations of moral character, showing inner physiological changes.

On the other hand, body care and embellishment through artificial colours provided a means of presentation, offering an image that was only skin-deep and concealing the reality below. This manipulative and essentially deceptive art inspired prejudices against artificial colours, associated above all with the world of prostitutes (*meretrices*), yet it was also considered a mark

¹³ Mark Bradley, 'Fools gold: colour, culture, innovation and madness in Nero's Golden House', *Apollo*, July 2002, 35-44; 'Colour and marble in early imperial Rome', *Cambridge Classical Journal* 52, 2006, 1-22; 'The importance of colour on ancient marble sculpture', *Art History* 32.3, June 2009, 427-57.

¹⁴ Vinzenz Brinkmann and Raimund Wünsche, eds, *Gods in color: painted sculpture of classical antiquity*, Munich, 2007.

of the civilizing process. This is presented wholly as élite, Roman behaviour. There is no word here of the make-up practices of foreign peoples that included tattoos for religious or decorative purposes.¹⁵ For Pliny, however, there is little difference in kind between the foreign peoples who use plants to colour their bodies, in some cases making pale British women resemble dark Ethiopians, and the use of berries from Galatia, Africa and Lusitania to dye the military cloaks (*paludamenta*) of Roman generals.¹⁶

Yet there is something of a disconnect between these central chapters, which reinforce the morally ambivalent nature of colour, and the final ones, where colour is regarded as an element of status, not only in the purple and other colours of official dress, but also in the ceremonial and coloristic highpoint of Roman culture, the triumph. What separated the latter from the games of cosmetic deception and make-believe was that they carried profoundly important religious or symbolic aspects. Only in the case of purple is some sense offered of the social and religious meanings acquired by a colour independently of its verbal expression and conceptualization and of its historical evolution towards an abstract ideal which became associated with the material of porphyry in particular. Clothes imbued with this colour showed the special social status reserved for priests, future citizens, censors, senators, triumphing *imperatores*, emperors, or even married women. (One might also add the *trabea*, the characteristic equestrian garment, distinguished from the *toga praetexta* by its purple colour and scarlet stripes.¹⁷) The obsession with this colour justified the lengths to which Romans might potentially go to acquire the *murex* snails from the sea which would yield the dye, exposing themselves to sharks in the process.¹⁸ But other colours too had similarly overriding social or religious imperatives. The blushing bride (B, 152) needed to be concealed by a red or yellow bridal veil;¹⁹ in magic a staff of red wood was used against living enemies, seeking revenge by blood, while a black one of ebony was used against the dead;²⁰ and in Roman religious practice it is well known that white and red clothing had ritual significance.²¹ Besides, purple was not the only colour used as a means of social differentiation. One might consider the role of colour in distinguishing spectators in the theatre or amphitheatre after the Augustan *Lex Julia Theatralis*, let alone the circus factions of the later empire.²²

At the head of that discourse of colour symbolism, and of the language of purple in particular, stood the Roman triumph. So, fittingly, this determines B.'s conclusion. His detailed analysis highlights the meaningful colour combinations in the ceremonials of both the Roman triumph and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. By contrast with the full Technicolor

¹⁵ Christopher P. Jones, 'Stigma: tattooing and branding in Graeco-Roman antiquity', *JRS* 77, 1987, 139-55, esp. 144-6.

¹⁶ Pliny, *Natural History* 22.2-3.

¹⁷ H. Wrede, 'Zur Trabea,' *JDAI* 103, 1988, 381-400.

¹⁸ Pliny, *Natural History* 22.3.

¹⁹ Lucan 2.360-361; cf. H. Rupprecht, 'Flammeum', *Hermes* 102, 1974, 620-1.

²⁰ F. J. M. de Waele, *The magic staff or rod in Graeco-Italian antiquity*, Gent, 1927, 208-11.

²¹ Eva Wunderlich, *Die Bedeutung der roten Farbe im Kultus der Griechen und Römer*, Giessen: Töpelmann, 1925; Karl Mayer, *Die Bedeutung der weissen Farbe im Kultus der Griechen und Römer*, Diss., Freiburg: Henn, 1927; Gerhard Radke, *Die Bedeutung der weissen und der schwarzen Farbe in Kult und Brauch der Griechen und Römern*, Diss. Berlin, Jena, 1936.

²² Elizabeth Rawson, 'Discrimina ordinum: the *Lex Julia Theatralis*', *PBSR* 55, 1997, 83-114, reprinted in *Roman culture and society: collected papers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 508-45; Alan D. E. Cameron, *Circus factions: blues and greens at Rome and Byzantium*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

coverage of the coronation of Elizabeth II stands the unreliability of the texts trying to represent the Roman triumphal procession. In their own way, however, the triumphs of Aemilius Paullus, Sulla, Pompey, Caesar and, later, the Emperor Titus were every bit as breath-taking and ground-breaking in their challenge to contemporary chromatic sensibilities as the use of colour television to broadcast and represent the later coronation was to a mass audience. The lesson from this is that, without comparable documentary evidence of such ancient occasions, we are at risk of underestimating the range and significance of their colours and colour symbolism. What else emerges from the comparison is unclear. The argument seems almost a victim of its own success. It highlights the malleability of the concept of colour and its interactions between reality and illusion. But in so doing it leaves such a slippery notion of colour that the meaning of specific colours seems hard to recover.

As befits the series in which it belongs, B.'s study is primarily a philological and philosophical one. It presents some complex ancient texts in a lucid and accessible way. Yet it seems incomplete. The exploration of the epistemological notion of colour could have been extended by the role of colours in ancient medical literature.²³ Technical literature is also little covered, but if that is because its verbal economy in describing colours does not fit the picture drawn from other written sources it nonetheless merits explanation.²⁴ No comment is offered on the only major treatise on colour from the Roman period, by Alexander of Aphrodisias, which survives through its later Arabic translation.²⁵ But, more importantly for a work presented as cultural history, there is no place given to the intrusion of colour into civic and social relationships in the empire at large. Even the mutilated evidence sometimes offers glimpses of how the colour of civic buildings was fashioned to reflect the selective chromatic visions of particular commercial groups like the corporation of purple dyers at Hierapolis, who contributed sixty-three feet of Docimian marble, characterized by thick purple streaks, for the stage-building of the theatre.²⁶ That may be a long way from the context of this close study of élite discourse at Rome in the last years of the Republic and the early Empire. But a larger history of colour in the Roman world will need to take account of such wider statements of chromatic identity.

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²³ Tobias Heinrich Duncker, '“Wie nämlich könnten diese einander gleich sein...?“ Zur Hermeneutik farblicher Codierungen in der antiken Medizin', in Dominik Gross and Tobias Heinrich Duncker, eds, *Farbe, Erkenntnis, Wissenschaft: zur epistemischen Bedeutung von Farbe in der Medizin*, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006, 29-38.

²⁴ Michèle Fruyt, 'La lexicalisation et la conceptualisation de la couleur dans les textes techniques et scientifiques latins', in Claude Thomasset, ed, *L'écriture du texte scientifique au Moyen Âge: des origines de la langue française au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2006, 13-47.

²⁵ Helmut Gaetje, 'Die arabische Übersetzung der Schrift des Alexander von Aphrodisias über die Farbe,' *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* no. 10, 1967, Göttingen, 1968, 341-82.

²⁶ Tullia Ritti, *Hierapolis. Scavi e ricerche. I. Fonti letterarie ed epigrafiche* (Rome, 1985), 108-13.