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Rachael B. Goldman, *Color-Terms in Social and Cultural Context in Ancient Rome. Gorgias Studies in Classical and Late Antiquity, 3.* Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013. Pp. 204. ISBN [9781611439144](#). \$95.00.

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This book addresses color in Roman society, a topic of growing interest in recent years. Rachel Goldman introduces the topic with a brief account of the history of the problem, of the linguistic and anthropological debates it has provoked, and of recent archaeological research.

In the introduction, Goldman (p. 7) finds it difficult to recognize a chronological development for color-terms in the literary evidence or to find a pattern according to literary genre or specific author. She rightly eschews ordering the chapters according to individual colors and prefers a thematic order. The subject areas are chosen among the more frequently attested in literary texts: clothing, physiognomy, and social classes.^{[1](#)}

Chapter 1 is centered on Aulus Gellius's dialogue between M. Cornelius Fronto and Favorinus of Arles (*Noct. Att.* 2.26). The debate about the merits of Greek and Roman terminology is used to sketch the cultural climate of the Antonine period and the attitude toward poetry and the visual arts among members of the Roman upper class.^{[2](#)}

The following three chapters consider the importance of colors for clothing: Chapter 2 is devoted to the dyeing of fabrics; Chapter 3 discusses the garments as a characteristic element of social and personal identity; and Chapter 4 the colors in the *Satyricon*, where they appear as a social code to convey the standards of appropriateness. This is a very important topic, and it is a pity Goldman did not take advantage of the work about color in the Middle Ages by Pastoureau, whose studies focus on this very issue.^{[3](#)}

Chapter 3—on the colors of clothes—is more detailed and is ordered according to the colors, but uses the modern English terms to group together the various nuances of the Latin terminology: purple, red, blue and green, yellow, a single subchapter for white, grey, black and brown, then *pullus*. Unfortunately gold—a very important color for clothing—is excluded, without explanation. This choice leads to some problems: in Roman culture we can rarely clearly identify an unequivocal relationship between the color of clothing and its meaning, just as it is difficult to

interpret a word out of its context. This difficulty could have been overcome, however, by analyzing the code of specific types of clothes in order to move—so to speak—from the vocabulary to the grammar. In her treatment of this topic Goldman is handicapped by lack of reference to the older scholarship, which is mainly French and German.⁴ For example, it would have been interesting to examine as a case study the colors of the toga, an official garment and as such subject to rigid social norms, or even the colors of the *paludamentum*, the military mantle of generals and emperors.⁵

Chapter 5 discusses color in the Roman games, and in particular the chariot teams of the circus, a subject of enormous importance in Rome and Byzantium.

Chapter 6, devoted to physiognomy, is one of the most interesting, if oddly ordered: there is a sub-chapter for the emperors, separate from ordinary men, while women are considered together; then follow non-Romans (Gauls, Germans, and Britons), and Assyrians, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Etruscans and Indians. The reasons for grouping the last two peoples with the others and for separating emperors and ordinary men are unclear. Sometimes there is a projection of contemporary ideas onto ancient culture, as in the case of blue eyes. Goldman (p. 104) accepts the modern appreciation for this feature and consequently tries to give a positive evaluation of Nero's blue eyes although they are called *hebetiores* by Suetonius (*Nero* 51). Among ordinary people the hero of Apuleius' novel "Lucius may be attractive with his blond hair and blue eyes" (p. 110 on *Met.* 2.2) but if we consider more closely the description of the young Lucius, he has *oculi caesii quidem, sed vigiles* and we can translate: "blue eyes—I concede—but vivacious" or—more freely and explicitly—"vivacious eyes but unfortunately blue", not exactly a compliment. Generally speaking *oculi caesii* or *caerulei* do not have a positive connotation: this is the color of the northern barbarians (Vitr. 6.1.3; Tac., *Germ.* 4.4; Juv., *Sat.* 13.164-165; Plin., *NH* 6.88; 8.73; Mart. Cap., *De nuptiis* 6.697), as Goldman rightly notes (p. 127), of the Persians, or they are a sign of death or illness.⁶

Chapter 7 discusses some particular Latin terms (*versicolor, decolor, discolor, bicolor, multicolor, omnicolor, concolor* and *unicolor*).

In summary, the subject of the volume is interesting and there is a wide use of classical sources (albeit not of the late-antique authors), but the approach remains a strictly literary one: the comparison between written sources and archaeological evidence is lacking, older secondary literature is neglected, and the linguistic and anthropological approach is superficial. Moreover, only 10% of the titles in the bibliography are written in a language other than English, which is unfortunate, since the prevailing discussions have developed in other languages and in different scholarly traditions.

Notes:

^{1.} But this approach is not always closely followed: a dictionary order prevails in chapter 3, and two more chapters (1 and 4) are devoted to single works, a dialogue in Aulus Gellius and the *Satyricon*.

^{2.} Unfortunately, Goldman sometimes falls into error, as in the case of the famous passage of Seneca, *Ep.* 86.6: *in picturae modum variata circumlitio praetexitur*

where she uncritically follows (p. 22) the Loeb translation: “We think ourselves poor and mean (...) if our marbles from Alexandria are not set off by mosaics of Numidian stone, if their borders are not faced over on all sides with difficult patterns, arranged in many colours like paintings”. But Alexandria had no marble quarries and the passage concerns walls decorated with an *opus sectile* in the Alexandrian style framed by Numidian veneers, called in the *Historia Augusta*, *Alex. Sev.* 24.7 as *opus Alexandrinum*.

[3.](#) M. Pastoureau, *Blue: the history of a color*, Princeton 2001; Id., *Black: the history of a color*, Princeton 2009; Id., *Green: the history of a color*, Princeton 2014.

[4.](#) Old but still very useful the *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* by Daremberg and Saglio. Cf. also H. Gabelmann, “Die ritterliche Trabea”, *JdI* 92, 1977, 322-374; H.R. Goette, “*Mulleus, Embas, Calceus*. Ikonographische Studien zu römischem Schuhwerk“, *JdI* 103, 1988, 401-464; Id., *Studien zu römischen Togadarstellungen*, Mainz 1990; M. Pausch, *Die römische Tunika. Ein Beitrag zur Peregrinisierung der antiken Kleidung*, Augsburg 2003; U. Gehn, *Ehrenstatuen in der Spätantike: Chlamydati und Togati*, Wiesbaden 2012.

[5.](#) In this case, too, there are some mistakes or misunderstandings in the sources: the *pectoris aurum* of Statius, *Silv.* 5.2.29-30, is not a “golden pectoral” (p. 44), but the golden *bullā*, the sign of the young freeborn (not necessarily noble) male. The passage of Apuleius, *Met.* 10.20 *stragula veste auro ac murice Tyrio depicta probe consternunt* (“they carefully laid colored covers with gold and Tyrian purple dye”) is not well understood: the term *depicta* does not imply “that the color was painted on rather than woven or sewn” (p. 50). *Depicta* is a generic term (like English “depict”), the gold could not be painted and the purple cloth was dyed. Ovid (*Met.* 9.31-33) mentions the green color of the dress of the river Acheloos (p. 56): according to Goldman it is the only case of a deity dressed in green, and this would be the demonstration that men and women could also wear this color. But there is at least one other attestation: Ismenis—the nymph of the river Ismenus—was dressed in green according Statius (*Theb.* 351), and thus green can simply be the color of the rivers.

[6.](#) V. Brinkmann, “Die Blauen Augen der Perser. Die farbige Skulptur der Alexanderzeit und des Hellenismus”, in: V. Brinkmann (ed.), *Bunte Götter. Die Farbigkeit antiker Skulptur*, (Exhibition catalogue—Frankfurt am Main 2008), Munich 2008, 190-203. See also the *lumina caerulea* of Drusus (Ps.-Ovid., *Epicedion Drusi* [*Consolatio ad Liviam*] 93) or Celsus, *Med.* 7.7.14). P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Studies in Greek Colour Terminology*, I, *Glaukos*, Leiden 1981, 12-16; I. Rizzini, *L'occhio parlante. Per una semiotica dello sguardo nel mondo antico*, Venezia 1998, 170-171; S. Deacy—A. Villing, “Athena Blues? Colour and divinity in ancient Greece”, in L. Cleland—K. Stears (edd.), *Colour in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, BAR Int. Series 1267, Oxford 2004, 85-90.

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