

Introduction

VERENA SCHULZ / CHRISTOPH PIEPER

1 The scope of this book in the context of studies on forgetting

Forgetting pervades Greek and Roman culture: its Underworld, divine spheres, and human life. Forgetting stands at the beginning of life when the souls of the dead drink forgetfulness from the river Lethe in the Underworld before they are reborn. Lethe (Forgetfulness) is a goddess, the daughter of Eris (Strife), in Hesiod. Lovers who want to forget an unhappy love affair seek the help of the god Amor Lethaeus in Ovid. Forgetting can be ordered for groups and collectives and it can be orchestrated by official institutions, as we learn from several amnesties from Athens to Augustus and from processes of what we call today *damnatio memoriae*. Forgetting is also sought by some individuals such as the Athenian statesman Themistocles who suffers from hypermnesia. His memory is a burden. Since he cannot forget anything, he longs for an *ars oblivionis*, an art of forgetting.

In several of these cases, forgetting is closely connected with power: divine power, erotic power, emotional power, poetic power, imperial power, physical and mental power. Ancient stories and histories tell us that it can be powerful to be able to forget something, and that power also lies in the ability to make others forget. This relationship of forgetting and power is at the heart of our book. It presents various forms of forgetting from the three perspectives of (I) textual power, (II) authorial power, and (III) political power. (I) Ancient texts take forgetting as their topic, they describe and integrate different forms of forgetting, their figures are consciously or unconsciously forgetful. Forgetting can be a crucial motif or the driving force of a narrative. (II) But texts can also become active parts of processes of forgetting and can apply literary strategies that aim at oblivion. Authors can draw attention to information that is (almost) forgotten, to the gaps in their accounts, and to processes of selection in their own work. (III) Such textual and authorial power of forgetting can be used with political purposes by those in power or against the powerful. Societies and individuals can apply strategies of forgetting and present (nearly) forgotten information in order to shape collective memory according to their own needs and wishes.

Our chapters on forgetting and textual, authorial and political power build on research from memory studies both in general and in Classics. While the focus has always been on memory and on processes, media, and strategies of remembering there are some important studies that deal with forgetting more explicitly. In the last two decades, modern theories of forgetting have been developed in psychology, sociology, philosophy, and within interdisciplinary approaches (Esposito 2002; Butzer/Günter 2004; Della Sala 2010; Frise 2018). Two general points that are made in some of these theories are also important for our volume. First, forgetting is not always and not only an obstacle that people have to overcome. Rather, it plays a crucial role in memory formation of both individuals and collectives since it helps to organize knowledge and to focus on important memory items. Forgetting can have positive effects on minds, for example in learning processes. It is a creative force that is essential to functioning memories. Second, forgetting can – to a certain degree – be controlled, initiated, or supported. It does not only happen to people unconsciously, passively, and unwillingly. Memory can also be disturbed actively which may result in forgetting, as modern interference theory points out (Bjork 1992).

In the humanities, various forms of forgetting have been identified – such as ‘suppression’, ‘repressive erasure’, ‘re-semanticization’, ‘exemplification’, ‘canonisation’, and ‘structural amnesia’. To collect types of forgetting has been more influential than the creation of theories of forgetting in the strict sense (Lachmann 1991; Flaig 1999; Conneron 2008; A. Assmann 2012). Such collections do not claim to be complete and do not focus on literature but can be very inspirational for the interpretation of ancient texts that depict or apply these forms of forgetting. The textual power of forgetting is perhaps best illustrated in Weinrich’s learned journey through central pieces of world literature and the topic of oblivion, including Homer, Kant, Goethe’s *Faust*, and Proust (Weinrich 2005). That every narrative is the result of selection and focusing, and hence the product of processes of forgetting, is underlined by Ricœur (2004). Several chapters in our volume investigate these strategies as components of forms of forgetting in ancient texts.

Within the field of Classics, a historical perspective on forgetting has been prevalent. Social and historical contexts that supported the forgetting of literature have been analysed (Bowersock 1998; Hose 2002). Historical phenomena that involve processes of oblivion have been studied intensely such as amnesties, censure, *damnatio memoriae*, and other memory sanctions (Flower 2006; Harter-Uibopuu/Mitthof 2013; Hedrick 2000 for late antiquity; Bernstein 2023). Historiographical literature depicts and reacts to such processes, not least by writing against them (Levene 2012; Schulz 2022). Physiological and epistemic foundations of forgetting have been analysed in medical texts (Julião 2018) as well as in philosophical and theological works, with a focus on Plato (Cook 1992) and Augustine (O’Daly 1993; Kann 2009; Donato 2013 on Boethius). Some individual authors have been interpreted with an eye on the role of forgetting, to mention only Homer (Minchin 2006), Alcaeus (Kantzios 2019), Catul-

lus (Heil 2007; Tamás 2018), and Juvenal (Geue 2018). A fruitful field for the study of historical and literary forgetting has been Augustan poetry. Augustus' official interpretation of his monarchy as a restitution of the Republic involved elaborate strategies of forgetting and historical amnesia. Augustan poets mirror such strategies and engage with the Roman Republic in their works (Farrell/Nelis 2013). Political, poetic, and narrative forgetting plays an important role, for example in Vergil (Quint 1982; Hardy 1990; Most 2001; Silva 2021) and Ovid (Hardie 2006; Schulz 2019).

Within this broad scope of research on forgetting, our volume has its own specific focus. It analyses Greek and Latin literary texts spanning from Homer to Roman imperial literature and including a huge variety of genres: epic and elegiac poetry, the Athenian funeral oration, Greek and Roman tragedy and comedy, historiography, declamation, and letters. All chapters have in common that the processes and instances of forgetting that they focus on were not completely successful. Forgetting can, of course, only be studied if there are still at least traces that point to it. The types of forgetting that the chapters treat are multifaceted: they range from unconscious to conscious ignorance and fading out of unwanted memories to more aggressive forms of imposing forgetting like over-writing (thereby creating a political or cultural palimpsest) and active suppressing, as well as including marked forgetting that results in un-forgetting (thereby creating a meta-discourse of forgetting and commemoration on top of the described acts of forgetting). Within this broad spectrum, active forgetting plays a major role in most chapters. This means that they have a special interest in the agency and agents of forgetting, in the sense that they concentrate on mechanisms that impose or counter (collective) forgetting – which makes forgetting a powerful tool of public discourse.

Our chapters think about this agency within the boundaries of literature, often with explicit reflections on it being a literary strategy. Characters, narrators, or authors can assume the role of master of forgetting as well as the historical figures that are being treated in their texts. Some chapters explicitly ask which specific literary techniques enhance or undermine the theme of forgetting (Gretlein on forgetting as an important motor of a narrative, Schulz on intertextuality, Novokhatko on humour, and Kirstein on ambiguity). It is important to note, as well, that the theme is not always treated in a serious way: playfulness and irony are important literary strategies of questioning alleged certainties. Perhaps no ancient author shows this with more virtuosity than Ovid, as he openly combines it with a claim of authorial control that has the power to change the extra-literary discourse (as analyzed by Schulz and Kirstein). A literary way of dealing with forgetting that is especially marked is when forgetting in the texts becomes self-referential and draws attention to itself, thereby inviting the recipients to engage actively with omissions that are made visible and with the depicted forgetfulness, with the aim of supplementing it with their own memory and filling gaps of information in the texts (Poulsen, Pieper, Ginsberg, and Jansen). This enables new discursive fields in which alternative scenarios and new ways of dealing with what seemed to be fixated firmly within cultural memory can be negotiated.

The fact that forgetting and memory are closely interrelated concepts and often form each other's counterpart is illustrated by many authors in this volume. It becomes especially visible in chapters dealing with a kind of forgetting that adds new perspectives to well-studied discursive strategies of commemoration, like processes of canonization or the formation of *exempla* (Jansen and Pieper). The same interference of forgetting and memory can, however, also become resolutely political. This is shown in our volume with regard to dramatic texts of Greece and Rome, where the staged forgetting of characters makes the audience perceptive to normally forgotten or marginalized groups of society and to the social injustice they have to suffer as individuals (Puetz on women in Athens; Janzen on enslaved people in Rome). Seeing these themes played out on the dramatic stage can become a catalyst for the spectators to reflect on alternative ways in which a social interaction could be organized. Similarly, by staging contorted versions of what the audience knows as cultural or historical truth can lay bare the ridiculousness and slipperiness of such common ground and thereby unmask broadly accepted and publicly commemorated elements as ideological constructs (Novokhatko). Specifically comic laughter can be such a destabilizing factor. At the same time, it can also serve as a social unifier between elite and other parts of society who agree on blending out uncomfortable realities in order to form consensus among them (Novokhatko, Janzen).

The last category implies that the theme of forgetting in literature often reacts to another form of forgetting, one that is ordered in a top-down manner in order to legitimize, control, and guarantee political power and social cohesion. We see this in the Athenian funeral orations, where public commemoration comes at the cost of blending out many elements that would disturb the univocal version of the past and of a present resulting therefrom (Steinbock), and even more so in the consequent use of forgetting by the first Roman emperors as a tool to guarantee their legitimation and ruling power (Gowing). When these acts of ordained forgetting are reflected in literature, this can happen on very different levels. On the one hand, texts can participate in the same *damnatio memoriae* that is wanted by political leaders; on the other hand they can punish these very same political agents with a subtle form of *textual* oblivion (Kirstein on the extinction of Domitian in Pliny's letters). Writing about ordained forgetting can thereby liberate the victims from being forgotten and thus turn the process of writing into a powerful tool of un-forgetting (Gowing about victims of the imperial system; Ginsberg on Nero's victim Octavia).

Finally, forgetting is closely connected with human emotions. The social impact of forms of forgetting recorded in literature and their conciliatorily abilities can perhaps be seen most clearly in funeral orations in Athens, a classic example of a society deeply disrupted by war (Steinbock). In traumatic moments such as these, the allowance and ability to forget is of crucial importance for the community's social cohesion (see the afterword by Nelis on Augustan Rome). Amnesia can close off political turmoil, just as it can also function as a means of literary closure; even more specifically, literature

itself can become a means of bringing forth such salutary forgetfulness (Grethlein on the end of the *Odyssey*). The close connection between real life and literature with regard to this final aspect shows why it is so promising to look at literary representations of forgetfulness and forgetting in antiquity: interpreting the literary diversity of the theme offers us rich glimpses into the ancient societies of Greece and Rome, thus showing how powerful a tool forgetting has been then and ever since.

2 Content of the chapters

I. Textual power: The book starts with a section on textual power which highlights cases in which forgetting is an important literary motif and part of the story. The chapters focus on individuals' forgetting in the narrative and on forgetting as a driving force of the narrative.

(1) **Jonas Grethlein's** chapter argues that Homer's *Odyssey* contains multifaceted reflections on forgetting and its intricacies. It first explores oblivion as a prominent obstacle to Odysseus' *nostos* in the *Odyssey*. Then, it is shown that forgetting is by no means envisaged solely as a menace – it can also play a positive role. Notably, Helen's drug in *Odyssey* 4 permits a partial and temporary forgetting that, while not without ambiguities, is salubrious and has attracted some thought-provoking interpretations in antiquity. Oblivion is also necessary for the *Odyssey* to come to a closure. The forgetting ordained by Zeus in *Odyssey* 24 highlights the political dimension of oblivion; it also raises questions about the status of epic and invites comparison with the later historical practice of amnesty.

(2) **Babette Puetz** discusses three tragedies about couples in dysfunctional relationships where forgetting is an issue and is interrelated with power or its loss: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Euripides' *Medea*, and Sophocles' *Trachinian Women*. In each case the husbands feel that they are in power, which leads them to forget important matters, such as their wife's intelligence and cunning, or their spouse's vulnerability and desperation, as well as their own past crimes. This forgetfulness becomes dangerous for these heroes, as it causes disempowerment and disaster. Tragic women generally seem to have better memories than their husbands. They choose not to forget events from the past, which leads to terrible acts of revenge. An exception is Deianeira, who only once briefly forgets to consider the possible consequences of her actions and so unwittingly kills her straying husband. All three dramas employ concepts of 'forgetting' in a gendered way to depict characters' status of power or its loss.

(3) **Darrel Janzen** draws on social epistemology to examine how memory failure in Plautus' *Poenulus* fosters ignorance about gender, ethnicity, and civic status. He makes a threefold argument. First, the comedy can explicitly stage the relationship between forgetfulness and an ignorance that reflects the unequal structures of Roman society. Conversely, *Poenulus* also draws attention to how marginalized characters can resist

and sometimes fail to overcome such forgetfulness in their effort to preserve a modicum of respect and memories of freedom, family, and native language. Second, the ignorance-forgetfulness nexus can itself serve less frequently as an epistemic tactic for the disempowered. Third, however, the comedy itself also forgets the causes and consequences of other instances of unequal power relations within the play. By the ignorance that they foster about these issues, these neglected narrative threads help reinforce dominant social structures. Whether or not they are explicitly dramatized, memory failure and the nescience it produces help Plautus to reproduce the epistemic rhythms of Roman society in comic form, revealing how they helped Romans reproduce, resist, or simply navigate their society's hierarchical norms and conventions.

II. Authorial power: The second section of the book moves on to study literary strategies of forgetting in detail and the active role of literature in processes of forgetting. Chapters focus on the attention that authors and their texts can draw to processes of forgetting and to information that is (nearly) forgotten or not to be forgotten. The lack of information and intentional gaps in texts play a crucial role for the analyses.

(4) **Verena Schulz'** chapter is about the literary power of texts studied from the viewpoint of intertextual relationships that are marked by terms of forgetting. It focuses on texts that recall certain pretexts by talking about forgetting, and it examines the poetic effects that are created through this technique. An introduction into the relationship of intertextuality and memory is followed by three case studies on Valerius Flaccus and Apollonius of Rhodes, on Ovid's exile poetry, his earlier texts, and Homer, and on Tacitus' *Agricola* and Cicero's *Brutus*. They show different forms of effects that are achieved when terms of forgetting create poetic memory. Pretexts can present different versions of stories about forgetting and create paradoxical effects (as in Valerius Flaccus), they can contradict the claim that someone has forgotten or that someone cannot forget – thereby unmasking an alleged form of forgetting as false (as in Ovid), and they can support texts in their struggle against forgetting without any paradoxical or contradicting implications (as in Tacitus). In all these cases, talking about forgetting draws attention to remembering.

(5) **Robert Kirstein** deals with literary techniques of controlled remembering and forgetting by the use of 'gaps'. A distinction is made between those gaps that necessarily result from literary writing processes per se and those gaps that have a salient character in that textual markers refer to them implicitly or explicitly. Ovid's *Tristia* (3.1) and Pliny's letters serve as examples from the Augustan and early imperial periods. Based on Iser's *Act of Reading* (1976; Engl. 1978) and more recent approaches that deal with the relationship between *text* and *context*, it is shown how both authors either deliberately 'conceal' or 'reveal' particular events or circumstances to raise their readers' awareness strategically of the respective 'deficiencies' of contemporary or past power systems. It can be observed how Ovid and Pliny, using the means of literature, bring different 'meaning-systems' into collision with each other and thus put them up

for debate. This applies in particular to such powerful and hierarchically high-ranking 'meaning-systems' as those associated with the rule of Augustus and Domitian.

(6) **Aske Damtoft Poulsen** explores Velleius Paterculus' deployment of counterfactual thinking in his *Roman History*. In the first part, he demonstrates how Velleius – by designing his counterfactual scenarios around individuals and their personal fortunes rather than the fate of the state – manufactures the forgetting of selected 'futures past' entertained by those who lived through the tumultuous last century of the Roman Republic. By suppressing the existence of alternatives to what would grow into and in due time be readily recognised as an autocratic regime, he implicitly represents the establishment of one-man rule as inevitable and entrenches the power of said regime. In the second part, the chapter demonstrates how Tiberius' entry into the narrative causes a change in the nature of the counterfactuals deployed by Velleius. Now the fate of Rome is at stake, and only Tiberius can save her. Whereas the path from origins to the tutelage of Augustus is implicitly represented as inevitable, it is argued, Tiberius' accession to the purple is explicitly represented as a necessity for Rome's survival.

(7) **Leanne Jansen's** chapter examines Appian's account of Hannibal's invasion in Italy in his *Hannibalic War*. Previous studies have found Appian's report lacking in order and accuracy. Applying the concepts of Canon and Archive, this chapter suggests instead that the historiographer is reevaluating the public, canonical image of Roman conquest in the third century BCE. In line with the overall aim in the *Roman History* to study the interaction between Roman rulers and conquered peoples, the *Hannibalic War* offers a balanced account of both Roman and Italian (local) contributions to the defeat of Hannibal. The book uses the celebrated deeds of Fabius Maximus 'Cunctator', who defeated Hannibal in Italy, as a template for a second story, taken from the archive of the historiographical record, about a hero from the Italian town of Salapia. This chapter explores how Appian confronts the reader with the one-sidedness of Roman commemorative culture, filling in gaps in the canon of imperial leaders and writing against the forgetting of less-known but equally important contributors to the empire. By opening up the debate about the question of who gets a share in Rome's power, Appian also exercises his own authority as a historiographer to uncover viewpoints not publicly remembered.

(8) **Christoph Pieper** asks how Seneca the Elder dealt with the political legacy of Cicero that tended to be faded out in Tiberian times. In a first part, he shows that the declaimers quoted in Seneca's collection faded out too explicit mentions of the historical tensions in which Cicero was operating during 44 and 43 BCE, thereby turning him into an almost ahistorical *exemplum* of rhetorical excellence. Subsequently, the chapter argues that Seneca himself explicitly marks this omission of Cicero's political heritage by adding a digression on historiographers' descriptions of Cicero's death. In these descriptions that recall the politician Cicero more clearly, Cicero's status as a *vir illustris* is reconfirmed. Seneca thereby reintroduces Cicero's name into the collective

historical memory of Rome and invites his readers to reflect on his political heritage and how it fits the legacy of Rome's new rulers, the Julian emperors.

III. Political power: The book closes with a section on how forgetting and forgotten information is used by those in political power or against those in power. Chapters shed light on the role of forgetting in the shaping of collective memory and explore different purposes and effects of forgetting.

(9) **Bernd Steinbock's** chapter examines the complex processes of communal remembrance and forgetting practiced in the democratic institution of the public funeral ceremony and in the funeral oration for the Athenian war dead. Using the Athenians' traumatic defeat in Sicily in 413 BCE as a case study, it argues that the customary honorific public burial for the fallen – including those whose bodies had not been recovered in Sicily – offered at least a measure of comfort to their grieving relatives. Both the normative ideological framework of the Athenian funeral oration highlighted by Loraux, Thomas, and Grethlein and the processes of memory-making illustrated by Shear played fundamental roles in creating a meaning-making narrative for the Athenians, which ascribed – in familiar ways – noble motives, bravery, and self-sacrifice on behalf of the polis community to the fallen in Sicily. The public burial and the funeral orations thus provided important coping mechanisms in the aftermath of this traumatic event and strengthened the Athenians' resolve to continue the war and to try to uphold Athens' imperial power. But this came at the price of suppressing the memory of the immense human suffering and the unburied bodies of their friends and relatives in Sicily and of plastering over increasing internal divisions.

(10) **Anna Novokhatko** sets out the patterns and strategies of remembering and forgetting in Old Attic comedy and makes the case that theatrical enactment affects remembering and forgetting. Comedy has a crucial quality of disrupting immersion and re-enactment: laughter provides an alienating, distancing effect. Furthermore, various patterns and strategies, such as the enactment of the underworld and the *katabasis*, the 'father-son' conflict combined with the critique and mockery of forgetting old values and principles, and the manipulation of memory of the 'great events' of the past, shape and determine the perception of these phenomena in the audience. Patterns and strategies of forgetting and remembering serve as an organizing element in the dramatic structure and also as a unifier on the level of cultural and political paradigms in society.

(11) **Alain Gowing's** chapter starts with observations on the well-known phenomenon of *damnatio memoriae*, the large-scale and largely state-mandated consignment of an individual or even an event to oblivion. In his chapter, however, he examines more mundane instances of 'forgetting' on the part of the Julio-Claudian emperors – instances, that is, where the emperor is said to engage in or compel 'forgetting', which then results in some sort of advantage or benefit for the emperor. These instances, signaled lexically by words such as *oblivio*, *obliviscor*, or *immemor* in Latin or in Greek by ἀμνημονέω, ἀμνησία, and the like, are in fact more common in our sources than we

might imagine. The question he then raises (and answers in the affirmative) is this: do our sources suggest a pattern of forgetting on the part of the Julio-Claudian emperors, a pattern that rises to the level of a consistent political strategy?

(12) **Lauren D. Ginsberg** excavates the complicated politics of forgetting, remembrance, and revolution staged by the first century CE historical drama *Octavia*, and the contribution of this staging to the play's shaping of the memories of two of Nero's most famous victims. Using Aleida Assmann's framework of forms of forgetting, she argues that the play stages Neronian Rome as a culture of repressive and complicit forgetting. She then shows, in turn, that the play's imperial women, Octavia and Agrippina, are portrayed as dangerous rememberers who rebel against imperial power structures by refusing to forget the wrongs done to them. Finally, she shows that these same women become catalysts for acts of un-forgetting among the Roman people and, through un-forgetting, for violent revolution. She then turns to the play's composition context to argue that, by staging the year 62 CE, the *Octavia* playwright not only joins a wider culture of un-forgetting occurring in the years shortly after Nero's fall, but also marks acts of remembrance as productive and powerful strategies of political resistance for those living under tyranny – past, present, or future.

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