

‘CONDENSATION’ OF LITERATURE AND THE PRAGMATICS OF LITERARY PRODUCTION

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Abstract: Literary genres of abridgement and compilation organise and access the store of knowledge in literate societies. The forms a society uses to organise and transmit the knowledge available in its era, and the strategies it devises to accomplish this, can reveal the communication patterns of the educated and the importance accorded to tradition and education.

In the period from the 4th century BC to the 4th/5th century AD, the development of a range of literary forms for condensing information can be observed. These include texts characterised by their brevity (e.g. handbooks, epitome, excerpt), and text corpora based on thematic selection (e.g. florilegium, anthology and gnomologium). Until now, study of these forms has mainly focused on their sources, using the ‘secondary’ texts to reconstruct prior texts that are often no longer extant.

This volume presents key results of a new direction in research which examines the cultural and socioliterary conditions that create the need for these formats for presenting literature and specialist knowledge. It investigates the social context and media practices that promote, or even permit, the creation of these forms. The volume makes it evident that strategies of abridgement and transmission share common aesthetic principles and mnemotechnical mechanisms, used across generic boundaries, from poetry to technical treatise, and in different subject areas.

This chapter first gives an outline of the sociological theories which form the framework for historical and philological research on abbreviating genres. It then presents a short overview of relevant scholarship. Third come some observations on the historical development of abbreviating genres, and finally it offers an outlook on possible areas for research in the future.

1. CONDENSED TEXTS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Generating, disseminating and preserving knowledge are not autonomous processes, but are subject to their social context. The social conditions of knowledge have been examined philosophically, by figures such as Gianbattista Vico, Friedrich Hegel,

Wilhelm Dilthey, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who all proposed theories, on the basis of their various philosophical positions, of the factors that constitute socially constructed knowledge and ‘truth’. From the 20th century on, the sociology of knowledge (initially as a sociology of thought) has systematically investigated the inter-relations of social structures, forms of consciousness, and the interests of both individuals and social groups.¹ In more recent years, the focus has been less on the relation between social existence and consciousness, and more on the interpretative schemes drawn on by different areas and systems within society to produce, represent and transmit knowledge.² In these debates about the social conditions of knowledge, the form in which knowledge is presented has rarely been accorded a major role, but, in our opinion, it is of central importance.³

Ever since the posthumous dissemination of Maurice Halbwachs’ works in the 1950s, ancient and mediaeval societies, too, have been characterised as commemorative and narrative cultures.⁴ Interpreting them in this way requires that the formal strategies for transmitting knowledge be placed at the heart of investigations of literary communication.

In recent years, narrative theory has provided a context in which a range of theoretical approaches to historiography has been developed.⁵ However, none of these approaches has explicitly investigated the phenomenon of abridgement and selective compilation as an interest-driven, and hence socially conditioned, form of transmitting knowledge and engaging in literary communication.⁶

¹ Cf. e.g. Mannheim 1925.

² On this development cf. Meja/Stehr 1982; Knoblauch 2005. Recent approaches, especially in German research with its focus on communications theory, systems theory and social constructivist approaches, are presented in Knoblauch 2002, Frieß 2000, and Luckmann 2002, a collection of essays by one of the leading proponents of present-day sociology of knowledge, Thomas Luckmann.

³ Discussions of the form of dissemination as subject to social interests are found already in the work of Karl Mannheim; Luckmann 2002 addresses this aspect in the category of ‘communicative genres’, in which he includes literary genre theory as developed by Hans R. Jauss.

⁴ Halbwachs 1950; 1952. On the terminology and its use in modern literary and cultural studies, see Echterhoff/Saar 2002. For the ancient world, terms like ‘collective memory’ and ‘commemorative culture’ have become established above all through the work of Aleida and Jan Assmann, e.g. Assmann 1992, Assmann 2003, Mulsow/Assmann 2006.

⁵ The examples of White 1973 and Ricoeur 1983 illustrate the wide variety of approaches that have been adopted to illuminate historical narrative.

⁶ The topic is currently in vogue: there are a number of projects on the organisation and selection of knowledge from antiquity to the modern period, with various theoretical

While the sociology of knowledge, and its sub-discipline, the sociology of the intellectual, as developed especially by Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu, are crucial in investigating the choice of transmission techniques, a central role must also go to concepts from media theory. Developing the theory first proposed by Marshall McLuhan, a number of individual studies have now examined how different media (papyrus, parchment, codex, print, radio, TV, computer, transport, etc.) influence not only the recipient’s perception of what is communicated, but also its form and content.⁷

Many of these approaches and theories have by now become commonplaces, firmly anchored in our general intellectual assumptions. For instance, the intensive activities of compilation and publication that occur in the Byzantine period are explained by seeing the chosen writing material (parchment instead of papyrus), and the storage and arrangement of texts in codex-format rather than papyrus roll, as a central factor driving the choice of new ways to communicate knowledge.⁸

2. CONDENSED TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP

The contributions to this volume will trace the connections between the form and content of literary communication, and the influence of ancient ‘storage media’ on transmission techniques and content. They aim to develop theory and address general issues in cultural studies, but they are even more concerned to carry out a precise analysis of the object of study, namely the various forms in which abridgement and compilation have been presented. A set of articles on theory and method

approaches and practical aims, see Stammen/Weber 2004, Michel/Herren/Rüesch 2007, König 2007.

⁷ McLuhan 1962 and 1964. Already in the 1930s Walter Benjamin had argued that perception and information are conditioned by new technology and media: see Benjamin 1935. More recent studies of specific aspects include Eisenstein 1979; Giesecke 1998; Neddermeyer 1998; Kittler 2003.

⁸ Thus Piccione 2003: X. Another example of this – rather broad – interpretation is the announcement of a section ‘Memory, Cognition and Technology’ at the 4th European Biannual Conference of the Society for Science, Literature and the Arts (Amsterdam 2006): ‘Our personal and collective memories are increasingly shaped by the technologies we use to inscribe, store and retrieve them.’ The volumes *Lo spazio letterario della Grecia antica* and *Lo spazio letterario di Roma antica* have in contrast laid solid foundations both as a collection of material and in the development of a theoretical framework: Cambiano 1992-2003. Cavallo 1991-2009; cf. also Lizzi 1990, Pecere 1986.

lay the groundwork. The majority of the contributions is devoted to the classification of the ancient texts and the identification of their historical context. By ‘historical context’, we understand the chronology and conditions of development of these texts and genres. The focus is on the discussion of abridgement and re-arrangement as a specific feature that structures the creation and reception of texts. For, to examine genres of abridgement as the result of literary and cultural processes, it is necessary to trace and analyse in detail the various processes of abridging and arranging, and to set them in the context of the ancient literary genres of abridgement and compilation. Various ways to organise and access the established and available store of knowledge exist in a given era or generation. These activities occur at different levels of intensity and scale, and, in terms of content, they cross what we would recognise as disciplinary boundaries.⁹ In the ancient world, this leads to the elaboration of a rich range of genres of abridgement and compilation, such as epitome, periocha, excerpt, florilegium, anthology, hypothesis, lemmatised handbook, and gnomologium.¹⁰

In the transmission of classical texts, these shorter versions have often replaced their more detailed or differently organised parent text. This process is extensively discussed from a new angle in the contributions by Markus Dubischar, Markus Mülke and Jaap Mansfeld.¹¹ Scholarship until now, however, has most often studied the ‘secondary texts’, such as epitomai, with the main aim of tracing the ‘sources’, i.e. the lost texts, on which they are based. A well-known example for this type of approach is the study of the sources of late antique historiographical epitomai (Eutropius, Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus*): as well as Suetonius, a lost imperial history has been hypothesised as a source, known in the research literature as ‘Enmann’s Imperial History’.¹²

⁹ The Groningen Colloquium on Hellenistic Poetry in 2006, organised by Annette Harder 2009 illustrates the current interest in links between literature and the sciences, in its theme of ‘Nature and Science in Hellenistic Poetry’.

¹⁰ On the terminology and on the growth and elaboration of forms of abridgement, Raible 1995 is essential.

¹¹ Dubischar, ‘Survival of the most condensed?’, Mülke, ‘Die Epitome – das bessere Original?’, Mansfeld, ‘Die Quellen’.

¹² Enmann 1884. For the history of research and an assessment of this hypothesis, see Schlumberger 1974, 9-16, Bleckmann 1997 and the ‘Introduction’ in Festy 1999. Some studies of epitomai in the Livian tradition have addressed the question of abridgement as a structured process and the independence of the epitomising author: on the Periochai (Bingham 1978), on Iulius Obsequens (Schmitt 1968), on Florus (Bessone 1996). With a focus on variants in content, see Sehlmeier 2009.

There is, to date, no comprehensive and systematic examination of the socioliterary conditions, including media and technical possibilities, that created the need for this kind of format for presenting literature and specialist knowledge. There has also been no attempt to describe the literary and mnemotechnical mechanisms at work in abridging, or to ask if the same strategies and mechanisms are found across generic boundaries (for example in historical writing, philosophical treatises, drama, epic, technical writing) and in different areas of knowledge. When examining the practices of excerpting and arranging, research has so far been dominated by a deductive procedure: individual case studies are taken as a basis for more general conclusions, as, for instance, in the results of the two colloquia presented in the volumes *Selecta colligere* I and II.¹³ Case studies also form the starting point for many papers collected in the present collection. All contributions, however, aim to identify larger criteria and mechanisms which are at work in abridgement strategies. The main aim is to go beyond individual instances and ask whether abbreviated forms like epitome, and other similar or related presentation formats, amount to an independent and self-conscious literary genre that follows an editorial plan and develops its own criteria of literary design.¹⁴

3. CULTURAL AND LITERARY PROCESSES IN PRACTICE

As already observed, the ancient world boasted a rich array of genres of abridgement and compilation. Reduced forms like epitome were used as an information pool for lost material. They offer a starting point for the reconstruction of completely or partially lost works,¹⁵ and they have provided a basis for research into book-division and the arrangement of content, for example in the work of T. Birt and his student H. Bott.¹⁶ In contrast, the questions of how we might define and distinguish the different genres of abridgement, and what common features they share, have been left in the background.

¹³ Piccione/Perkams 2003 and 2005.

¹⁴ The issue is posed succinctly in the title of an article on the *Epitome de Caesaribus*: “The ‘Epitome’: an original work or a copy?”, Jarecsni 1997.

¹⁵ An example of this is the reconstruction of Livy’s history from the Periochai of the lost books. Cf. the overview in Jal 1984: p. XXXIX-LXXIX setting out the parallels. He distinguishes the following types of relation between the texts: *divergences*, *regroupement (des mots, des phrases)*, *simplifications*, *interprétations*, *ajoutages*, *élimination*, *choix*.

¹⁶ Birt 1913, Bott 1920.

The difficulty of making such distinctions is underlined by the inconsistency of the ancient terminology.¹⁷ It includes *breviarium*, *liber breviatus*, *epitome*, *ekloge*, *periocha*, but also *encheiridion* and *synagoge*. It is not possible to set out clearly differentiated definitions, but there is probably a basic division between forms that (mostly) present the work of a single author (*epitome auctoris*), and those that (mostly) present a single topic, based on multiple sources (*epitome rei tractatae*).¹⁸

It is possible, and advisable, to analyse the genres of abridgement by a range of different criteria.

The first criterion could be the genre's content, such as medicine, law, grammar, philosophy, or history. In our volume, the field of linguistics and grammar is dealt with by Annelie Luhtala, Stephanos Matthaios, Pierre Swiggers and Alfons Wouters. Abbreviating strategies and abbreviated texts in the domain of literature and literary criticism are also present with Homer, Euripides, Aristophanes, Plutarch, Cicero, Greek novels and the Latin cento.¹⁹

Further possible distinguishing criteria are period and authorship. These are addressed, for historical texts, by Guido Schepens, Stefan Schorn, Jane Chaplin and Hervé Inglebert. It becomes evident that they also apply to other genres, like Greek lyric, the cento, and medical texts.²⁰

The criteria of the goal and target readership of a given text plays a role in most of the contributions. They are especially prominent in Hervé Inglebert's discussion of Lactantius, in John Yardley's treatment of Justin,²¹ and in the contributions by Ewen Bowie, Rosa Maria Piccione and Jacques Schamp, dealing with late antique and Byzantine compilations.

The studies as a whole reveal that there is in fact no such thing as an independent genre of abridgment and compilation. The result of the process of condensing a text in each case depends on the criteria mentioned above. Nonetheless, the literary ambition of the author and the level of independence of the abbreviated text should not be separated from its various functional purposes and practical applications. The following are examples of applications:

¹⁷ Thus already Galdi 1922, with an extensive collection of material.

¹⁸ Cf. the fundamental article by Opelt 1962 and the shorter entries by Gärtner und Eigler 1997.

¹⁹ Reitz, Mossman, von Möllendorff, König, Beck, Dyck, Whitmarsh, Formisano and Sogno.

²⁰ Hose, Formisano, Sogno, van der Eijk.

²¹ More detailed, but with a different focus, Yardley 2003.

a) the attempt to make manuscripts in a collection more accessible by prefacing them with a hypothesis,²²

b) the provision of material for further use in other contexts, like the symposium or, for instance, in a collection of exempla that can then be drawn on for rhetoric, historiography, or philosophy, but also poetry, and especially epic,²³

c) the production of a shorter version with no intended permanence, for further use in the epitomising author’s own private literary activities, as is known from Cicero and Florus.²⁴

It is obvious that such different purposes lead to results which differ from those of a summary of a particular work with its own editorial plan. Statements about purpose and goal by the epitomising authors are a rarity. Therefore, to identify the purpose of a work, and the potential readership that it presupposes, it is necessary to investigate its pragmatic context, though without losing sight of the literary design of this kind of condensed text.²⁵ Where both long and short versions are available, e. g. in an autoepitome, it becomes obvious that many creators of an epitome have brought a conscious literary intention to their work and are engaging with the special dynamics of the new form.²⁶ Formats that draw on multiple sources to present a summary of a topic (such as compendium, manual, florilegium) are also seen to follow certain rules, and this is also true of the arrangement of anthologies and gnomologia,²⁷ or abbreviated poetic texts. Here the question arises of whether the abbreviating strategies of different genres, such as the manual and the epitome, are related

²² Mossman and von Möllendorff in the present volume.

²³ König and Beck on Plutarch, Hellmann on biological treatises. Bleckmann reveals the complex reception process which underlies Diodorus’ choice of material. A case study of the exempla in Valerius Maximus is presented by Maslakov 1984; on the use of exempla in an epitome, see Bramming Hansen/Bergquist 1996.

²⁴ Cf. the statements about Atticus’ *Liber annalis*: Nep. *Att.* 18,1-2; Cic., *Brut.* 15. On the other hand, Dyck in this volume comes to different results regarding Cicero’s practice in his speeches.

²⁵ The goals, structure and style of the epitomator are investigated by Schlumberger 1974, Bird 1993: p. XVII-XXXIII; XLIX-LIII. On the problems of identifying intended audiences, see Primavesi 2002.

²⁶ Chaplin, Formisano and Sogno, Hose, Inglebert, Matthaios.

²⁷ On gnomologia cf. Horna 1935, Funghi 2003. A case study of the gnomologion of Stobaeus is presented by Hose 2005; on the same topic, but with different approaches and results, see Piccione and Bowie in the present volume. For the anthology see Cameron 1993, for lexicography von Staden 1993 and Schamp 1995 and Schamp in this volume.

and comparable, or whether, on the other hand, they are fundamentally different in their technique and intention.²⁸

These questions are also relevant to the practice of converting technical details and practical instruction into the form of a manual. The manual is a form that is located at the intersection between literary presentation and specialist technical knowledge, as exemplified by the *Epitome rei militaris* of Vegetius,²⁹ and by linguistic and scientific treatises.³⁰

4. CONDENSED TEXTS AND THE HUMANITIES

Abridging and converting knowledge and information into accessible formats is a process that, on the one hand, constitutes a universal feature of cultural traditions, but which, on the other, clearly occurs with special frequency in particular historical periods. The character of this process can be taken as an indicator of how a given epoch and society engages with its past and its cultural inheritance. In the last two decades, some fundamental theoretical issues have been raised about this process from the perspective of the humanities.³¹

As noted above, practices of condensing text have various motivations. Many forms of collecting and preserving textual material presuppose that the compiling authors have a conscious sense of their role in a continuous tradition, as Bruno Bleckmann demonstrates in the case of Diodorus.³² One motive for abridging is the desire to preserve what has been handed down, though, paradoxically, this may in fact lead to the loss of the original, as convincingly shown by Jaap Mansfeld and Markus Mülke. But more pragmatic goals may exist alongside such desires, for example easy access to extensive material for use in literary work, or a convenient selection of material according to content, as found, for instance, in collections of

²⁸ On the poetic epitome, see Reitz 2007. On the characteristics of summaries of poetic texts see Mossman, von Möllendorff and Reitz in this volume.

²⁹ Cf. Viré 2002, Formisano 2003.

³⁰ Luhtala, Matthaios, Swiggers and Wouters, Hellmann, van der Eijk. Cf. also Hellmann 2006.

³¹ Cf. Assmann 1992; 2003; Assmann/Gladigow 1995, Hose 2002.

³² This creates a point of contact with the issue of the conditions and consequences of canon formation. Some studies that pursue this connection may be noted here: an interpretation of Velleius Paterculus' literary canon is offered by Schmitzer 2000; on the development of a canon in Rome through engagement with Greek models, see Vogt-Spira 1999 and Horster 2005.

exempla. Where literary attainments are ranked highly by a society, and the ‘cultured classes’ strive to show off their learning, these general conditions may favour the production and dissemination of compilations and condensed versions.³³ This is demonstrated for historiography in the Hellenistic period by Guido Schepens and Stefan Schorn.

It is of the highest importance that the purpose for which a ‘condensed’ text was created has been found to determine the abridgement strategy deployed. But the evidence also demonstrates that there are similar schemes of abridgment both within and across genre, period and society. The contributions in this volume explore the aesthetic and intellectual principles and the socioliterary contextualisation of the resulting shorter versions.

5. PERSPECTIVES

One important aspect to be investigated is the link, often proposed in the research literature, between compilation genres and teaching practice.³⁴ Wherever this connection can be established securely, it may open up possible approaches to tracing inter-relationships between genres.³⁵ For instance, exempla collections from Livy’s historical work, or from mythography, that could be used as a repertoire of topics for collections of rhetorical declamations could, to a certain extent, be seen as creating an intersection between genres.

Ancient historiography was enriched by contact with rhetoric (and vice versa) throughout its history, but in the imperial period the practice of declamation brings a new quality to the give and take between the two genres.³⁶ However, this topic is not treated in the present volume.

An assessment of what the papyri could offer for the question of the condensation of literature is still a desideratum, as necessary preliminary work on questions of method is lacking.³⁷ There is still much to be done!

³³ On the changes in readers’ interests and needs and in the demands made on literature in late antiquity, see e.g. Inglebert 1996, Eigler 1999 and 2003, Formisano 2001 and 2003, Jakobi 2002.

³⁴ Cf. Morgan 1998, Criboire 2001.

³⁵ The emergence and development of genres within a society is brilliantly explored by Fantham 1996.

³⁶ Cf. on the question of genre Sluiter 2000.

³⁷ In other fields, reflections on method have already been presented: Dickey 2007.

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