



“Horatius reading his Satires to Maecenas”, 1863, by Fedor Andreevich Bronnikov

How the Romans read

GAIL TRIMBLE

Shane Butler

THE MATTER OF THE PAGE

Essays in search of ancient and medieval authors
168pp. University of Wisconsin Press. \$29.95.
978 0 229 24824 6

William A. Johnson

READERS AND READING CULTURE
IN THE HIGH ROMAN EMPIRE

A study of elite communities
250pp. Oxford University Press. £40.
978 0 19 517640 7

In a world of e-books and online newspapers there are pressing reasons for thinking about how the physical form of what we read affects the ways in which we engage with a written text. The change from paper to screen, and from reading “straight through” to following hyperlinks, is only the latest in a long series of changes in typical reading practices, any of which can raise fundamental questions about the nature of reading. These two books ask such questions about reading in the Roman Empire.

Traditional accounts of ancient Greek and Roman reading have tended to stress two points. First, that the book as we know it, the codex of leaves bound along one edge, was not standard until the very end of Roman antiquity. Instead, an ancient book was a roll of papyrus paper which was most easily read in sequence, by unrolling each new section with the right hand and rolling up what had just been read with the left. A finished roll had to be rewound, like a VHS tape, before it could be used again. The second traditional idea is that it was usual to read out loud, even when alone – perhaps because it was otherwise difficult to make sense of the continuous stream of letters, with no punctuation or even spaces between words, typical of ancient writing.

Shane Butler’s *The Matter of the Page* begins by complicating the first of these notions. William A. Johnson’s *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire* the second. Butler challenges the idea that the ancient bookroll characterizes its text as essentially linear, and that it should be contrasted in these terms with the codex, which was easy to flick through and index and therefore suited to simultaneous comparisons of multiple passages. Instead, Butler shows that the bookroll had columns of text and therefore, in its own way, pages: like the manuscript or printed codex and like the electronic screen it offered “a bounded space set out for writing”. This two-dimensional page is what most insistently draws the reader’s attention

to the synchronic, non-linear aspects of the text: the fact that checking back and skipping ahead is possible because the process of writing is over and “all of these words are here together, at the same time”.

Johnson’s introduction, meanwhile, asks why so much work on ancient reading practices has addressed the narrow question “Did the ancient Greeks and Romans read aloud or silently?” Johnson shows that ancient readers could read silently, and that doing so was not considered extraordinary. However, the evidence that reading aloud was normal in certain contexts should, he argues, make us ask more interesting questions about those contexts. Who exactly was reading, to whom, where and when and alongside which other activities, and in what manner? Was it continuously from one text, or with interruptions for debate and cross-references to other books? Johnson aims to situate ancient reading in “reading events” in order to understand the role played by “reading culture” in the lives of certain groups – the “elite communities” of his subtitle.

Butler’s subtitle – *Essays in search of ancient and medieval authors* – indicates a different concern: the author. Butler writes with a sense of belatedness, as one who was born after Barthes’s famous essay “The Death of the Author” and so “raised to keep

his authors safely buried”. Here he proposes the resurrection of the author in one straightforward sense, not as God – the authority against which Barthesian readers have rebelled – but as a writer, working on a text. When the texts considered by Butler draw attention to themselves as material objects, they often exploit a tension between the page which the author writes – part of a draft in progress – and the different page which the reader reads – part of the finished book. *The Matter of the Page* investigates the author’s relationship with what he or she has written as it becomes a page of text and the author becomes that text’s first reader.

The book’s six case studies are essays ranging flexibly across the distinctions involved in this approach to writing and reading, offering close critical discussions of selected texts. They privilege “materiality as trope”, and some do little more than present the authors’ own admittedly intriguing metaphors. In the case of the book’s one medieval author, Dhuoda, a Carolingian noblewoman who wrote an educational “handbook” for her captive son, most of Butler’s chapter is simply a showcase for interesting passages in an unfamiliar work, as Dhuoda imagines her page first as an angled mirror and then as her own tomb. Butler is more impressive when he treats better-known texts, such as the story of Narcissus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Seneca alludes to Ovid in his tragedy *Thyestes*, which depicts a hero tricked into eating his own sons in a bowl of soup: using both texts, Butler produces a powerful meditation on surfaces, reflections and depth, both in the page and in individual identity.

The experiment in reviving the old habit of talking about the author “as a real person” probably finds greatest success in the chapter on Thucydides, who, describing the devastating plague at Athens during the Peloponnesian War, mentions that he was “himself sick”, so introducing himself into his history and inviting Butler’s subtle discussion of the boundary between an author and the text with

which he comes to be identified. Conversely, many may be sceptical of Butler’s use of St Jerome’s statement that a love potion drove the poet Lucretius to madness and suicide. This seems too close for comfort to the way the author appeared in old-fashioned biographical criticism: Lucretius’ sickness is here not quite metaphorical enough.

Readers and Reading Culture is an engaging work of cultural history. It uses prose texts from the first two centuries AD, together with some papyrus finds, to reconstruct “reading communities” among the Roman elite. Johnson weighs evidence, allows for the idealizing or satirical slants of the texts and draws conclusions about real societies. Particularly vivid are the glimpses of the younger Pliny and his friends, celebrating their daily lives of reading, exercise and public duties, and of the scholarly circle of Aulus Gellius, arguing with passionate pedantry about the details of the antiquarian texts they read, memorized, quoted and checked. Johnson’s investigations present reading as an essentially communal activity, both in the typical processes of reading aloud with interested friends, and in the use of such reading to construct social worth under a monarchical government where there were reduced opportunities for gaining status by political means.

The most serious limitation of both books, though one acknowledged more explicitly by Johnson, is that they focus only on literary texts, which mark themselves off to both ancient and modern readers as permanent, published and to be read in certain careful ways. The great majority of the ancient texts we can read today have survived precisely because they are literary; but a fuller picture of reading and writing in any culture would identify not only what makes the literary realm distinctive but also what brings it into continuity with the rest of written communication. Maybe there are, in fact, some texts whose writers are so unself-conscious or irrecoverable that Butler’s focus on the author would cease to apply – even if the page might still persist.

TLS JULY 1 2011