

BOOK REVIEW

Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities. By William A. Johnson. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. x + 227. Hardcover, \$65.00/£40.00. ISBN 978-0-19-517640-7.

William Johnson begins this outstanding study of ancient reading practices by taking issue with scholars' typically narrow focus on the question of whether the Greeks and Romans were technologically and/or cognitively inhibited from reading silently. Thus, as he reviews the scholarly debate about Augustine's famous description of Ambrose reading silently (*Conf.* 6.3.3), Johnson's purpose is less to prove that silent reading is known much earlier (though he lucidly presents the evidence for this) than to draw attention to Augustine's expectations and the reasons for his surprise at Ambrose's habit. Ambrose's silent reading is just one "reading event" in what Johnson calls "ancient reading culture," which he proposes to examine as a "sociocultural system" (11): "reading is not simply the cognitive processing by the individual of the technology of writing, but rather *the negotiated construction of meaning within a particular sociocultural context*" (12, emphasis original). In Ambrose's case, the sociocultural context is one in which the attending students would normally have been able to listen to the *magister* reading and commenting on the text—a norm that Johnson's book will go on to illustrate and analyze in its various shapes and forms.

In the opening chapter Johnson introduces his theory of reading culture, laying out some basic parameters for assessing each event: the type of text being read; the context in which it is read; the community (real or imagined) by whom it is read; the inherited traditions that shape the reading event; and the role played by the reading in defining the readers' sense of identity. Chapter 2 introduces the physical book and situates it within this cultural system, showing for example how certain general characteristics of ancient reading and ancient bookrolls, such as the absence of spaces between words (*scriptio continua*), are not signs of a technological lack, but are consistent with an elite culture in which reading from a bookroll with full articulation and comprehension is a marker of education and status, and often an act of connoisseurship.

In the nine chapters that follow—packed with detail, but written with a light touch—Johnson presents case studies in Pliny’s letters, Tacitus’ *Dialogus de oratoribus*, the writings of Galen, Aulus Gellius, Fronto, and Lucian, and the papyri from Oxyrhynchus (drawing on Johnson’s earlier and more specialized work, and supplemented with a catalogue of instances in which ancient readers have annotated papyri with variant readings explicitly drawn from other copies or versions). Taken together, the case studies demonstrate an emphatically social reading culture in which an elite group engages in a “culture of sharing” (listening together, discussing texts, borrowing books, etc.) at the same time as it excludes others. But each case study is attentive to the particulars, and Johnson’s observations on each author are likely to be of interest to experts on each. For example, Johnson shows, through a meticulous analysis of the directives that Galen gives to readers within his texts, as well as to his descriptions of scenes of reading (often also scenes of debate or medical demonstrations, attended by friends and rivals), how Galen “seeks to influence the philosophical and educational priorities of the elite-at-large as a part of establishing his own importance” (101). Gellius, by contrast, “insists upon his own little world, a comfortable, exclusionary space that smacks of the ‘scholarly’” (101)—though Johnson goes on to dissect the social machinery of Gellius’ reading scenes, too. Similar comparisons emerge in the cases of Pliny, Fronto, and Lucian, where Johnson teases out the social valence of the reading practices imagined by each author, and its tight connections to the author’s literary program. These literary programs can provide essential context for a piece of information about ancient reading that would otherwise have seemed like a factoid, such as how reciters of poetry were expected to read in such a way that a listener could (and indeed would be expected to) memorize sequences that could be shared with friends—here anchored in a detailed survey of the literary *contubernium* dominated by Fronto (149). The result is a nuanced history of reading practices in one well-defined era with a clear social and political backdrop.

Johnson’s theoretical model, although it is persuasive and is helpfully correlated with modern sociologies of reading, will no doubt need to be expanded and/or refined when new evidence or new aspects of ancient reading are studied more closely (as the author himself concedes, 206). But he has helped us, through an exemplary synthesis of theory and evidence, to recognize how social considerations are indispensable for thinking about how people read in the ancient world, and in determining what their reading practices, real or imagined, could be made to mean.

The book also facilitates a mutually instructive encounter between ancient reading practices and a close modern correlate: the reading of texts in the context of a college humanities class, where students struggle together over a difficult text such as the *Aeneid*, yet in a mood of excitement and endeavor. “As I see it,” Johnson writes, “[the classroom reading] has far less to do with cognition than with the construction of a particular reading community, one that validates itself through texts deemed important to a shared sense of culture and cultural attainment” (12). If, however, we take seriously the larger argument of the book, with its emphasis on Roman elites, the purpose of our own reading emerges as a somewhat disquieting question that we will always need to address.

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