

## BOOK REVIEW

*Work in Progress: Literary Revision as Social Performance in Ancient Rome.* By SEAN ALEXANDER GURD. American Classical Studies. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 167. Hardcover, \$80.00. ISBN 978-0-19-983751-9.

Gurd considers well the practices of a writer's revision, first from a technical point of view: what do the ancient authors about editing and what do the school papyri reveal about typical correcting; and second, his major interest, how is revision, or rather notices of revision in a literary work, a sign of, even the act of, textualization. The first is a succinct précis of the state of our knowledge, succinct but with ample references to ancient texts from the prominent to the papyri—a handy introduction to the actual practices of writing and revision which direct the reader to important recent work (R. Criboire, W. Johnson). A good complement to these would be M. Roberts' 1985 book on paraphrase. The second is a thoroughly interesting exploration of the social nature of Roman literary composition.

The main thesis begins from the observation that Cicero and Quintilian owe to Isocrates the idea that revision of one's writing developed a certain *habitus*. The idea that discourse affects the soul is one of the central insights and perhaps also strong fictions of ancient intellectual culture. In various ancient ideologies, skill and control of speech made one a member of an institution. Free speech, philosophical dialectic, and learned style were media of their institutions but also badges of belonging. What has writing (and its revision) to do with this? Gurd quite properly turns to Plato to discuss the problematic of writing in the formation of the self. This somewhat long section and the treatment of Isocrates establish the intellectual infrastructure for the most compelling section of the book on Cicero's communitarian writing project and purposes.

Gurd's work reflects widespread scholarly interest in the process of composition, here called genetic studies. For Cicero etc. we do not have authorial drafts or records of Tiro telling him to change this or that. So Gurd focuses on the representation of revision. This is done with a sophistication worthy of Latin literature. After all, Ovid instructs to ignore the tear-stained page a reader who was reading a clean copy made by a bookseller. Such notices of the process or even

the physicality or ephemerality of the literary artifact have various literary purposes. Likewise it is not simply a formula of modesty for Catullus to say that his work is trifles just polished or for Statius to title a work *Rough Drafts*. Gurd argues that writing about literary genesis “allowed them to think through problems of selfhood, textuality, and social context.” He has more to say of textuality and even more about the social practice and implications of the rehearsal in the literary work of its own revision.

The chief arguments for literary history are these. Cicero has an innovative practice of social or communitarian revision, wherein the text is not a finished, perfected Alexandrian jewel but a fairly open medium in which an elite to could participate. Indeed, the text being constructed is as much a political community as a literary artifact. Against this republicanism stands Caesar (and the Atticists), with his idea of linguistic analogy and the achievement of his *Commentarii*, which, though titled “notes for others to write up,” are, in fact, a text so spare and perfect that they disallow any rewriting. The homology of literary perfectionism and political hierarchy/autocracy shows a more advanced stage in Horace, for whom (or for the persona of the *Satires*) the world is one of hostile critics, ever ready to denigrate the poet. In the oppressive atmosphere of circulating criticism, the poet’s deliberate and laborious composition elevates him into the circle of the *principes* of culture. (I would stress even more the singularity of poet and princeps: the evasion of criticism puts both above the old republican system of endless writing and of *invidia*). The final chapter devoted to the younger Pliny charts the rise of an anonymous or at least general readership. Pliny presents two different internal audiences, the genetic—those high-status friends who are addressed as if they could make a contribution to his work—and the general, the post-publication “Roman” audience which is created against the political. Thereby, with a very short treatment of Ovid’s exilic letters, Gurd argues that the literary comes to present itself as beyond both the political and revision. He uses Warner’s theory of the constitution of the public by discourse with the stranger to argue that the early imperial authors are constituting a public rival to the political.

The book moves quickly. Indeed I found the treatment of the *Brutus* the only compelling reading of an entire text. Still Gurd provides a coherent reading of the differing representations of audiences and of writers’ responses to those audiences from Cicero to Pliny. I propose one reservation, a complaint about evidence, and a qualification. There is little attention here to stylistic, linguistic, or rhetorical considerations for revision (in the early treatment of the papyri the children’s mistakes are described briefly). Cicero revises not simply to bring his

friends into the game but also to move an audience. I miss here treatment of the literary, social, and political semantics of corrections and revisions. A significant omission is the lack of treatment of the Roman declaimers. Nowhere else do we have so many variations in which the ancient authors are trying to better earlier treatments. The elder Seneca reports the criticisms of leading literati and of the audience more generally. Finally, the categories of revision might have been distinguished more clearly: performance of process, traces of process, and signs of change after a final version (by scribe or actor) are quite distinct. Performance of process, Gurd's main concern, seems to be the representation of getting the text right but can instead be the effort to get the reader to read right. Those signs of writing do not so much suggest the instability of the text as the (hoped-for) ongoing presence of the author's shaping hand.

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