

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Roman Search for Wisdom*. By MICHAEL K. KELLOGG. Amherst: New York: Prometheus Books, 2014. Pp. 364. Hardcover, \$28.95. ISBN 978-1-61614-925-3.

There are quite a number of introductions and companions to Roman literature and culture currently on the market for a general audience, and in pitching the study of the ancient world to modern readers, they are not always easy to distinguish.<sup>1</sup> *The Roman Search for Wisdom* gains its special appeal from the calmly authoritative voice of its author Michael K. Kellogg, a lawyer trained in philosophy at Stanford and Oxford. For the most part, it is an elegant and reliable primer. Aiming to dispel misconceptions that Rome is Greece's lesser in literature and philosophy (9), Kellogg guides his reader through major works, pointing out key themes and their resonance in contemporary society; if the purpose of the book is to stimulate further interest in Roman literature, it is largely successful. In other respects, particularly in the matter of the book's underdeveloped critical assumptions, the prospective reader might benefit from further counsel.

The book is structured around eleven canonical authors in ten chapters, mostly proceeding an author at a time (Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, the roughly contemporary Stoic philosophers, share the final chapter).<sup>2</sup> These are accompanied by a very short preface and a slightly lopsided overview of Roman history (11–30), not quite sufficient to place Roman literature fully in its historical context: with heavy emphasis on Rome's rise to imperial supremacy, everything after Augustus is treated summarily as "Decline and Fall" (25–29), even

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Matsyak (2009) *The Classical Compendium: A Miscellany of Scandalous Gossip, Bawdy Jokes, Peculiar Facts, and Bad Behavior from the Ancient Greeks and Romans*, Thames & Hudson; McKeown (2010) *A Cabinet of Roman Curiosities: Strange Tales and Surprising Facts from the World's Greatest Empire*, Oxford Univ. Pr.; Gray (2014) *Ask the Ancients: Astonishing Advice for Daily Dilemmas*, Bolchazy-Carducci; Pelling & Wyke (2014) *Twelve Voices from Greece and Rome: Ancient Ideas for Modern Times*, Oxford Univ. Pr.

<sup>2</sup> In order, by chapter: Plautus, Cicero, Lucretius, Vergil, Horace, Ovid, Seneca the Younger, Plutarch, Tacitus, Epictetus & Marcus Aurelius.

though five of Kellogg's eleven selected authors are post-Augustan.<sup>3</sup> Outside the main chapters, endnotes are included to reference translations of works by page number (less helpful if the reader is using a different translation). The book also closes with a bibliographical survey and an index.

The arrangement of Kellogg's study by canonical author elicits a reasonably explicit but ultimately unarticulated faith in the integrity of the Western canon and its continuing relevance to contemporary readers.<sup>4</sup> The prevailing sentiment is that great authors should be read because of the resilience of their ideas and the pedigree of their famous readers: so, the rule of and equality before the law, "we owe them most to Cicero" (70, cf. 67), largely because of his influence on the architects of the US Constitution; Plutarch is praised for his impact on literary culture from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare (222); Lucretius both "anticipated modern social science" (84) and was "an early advocate of free sex" (103). But as judicious as highlighting these influences may be, Kellogg effaces other factors affecting the reception of ancient authors, quietly insisting on the transmission of Roman "wisdom" as uncomplicated, even inevitable. It also gives Kellogg's project an air of circularity: at once, we read Roman literature because it provides a basis for contemporary culture and values, and celebrate contemporary society for having been anticipated by such exemplary predecessors.

*The Roman Search For Wisdom* appeals to a nostalgia for a Classical education that has lost its place at the center of liberal education (or a liberal education that has lost its place in accounts of American cultural prestige): while Kellogg's work is a celebration and not polemic, I thought several times that it might have been informed by similar critical impulses as Harold Bloom's famous defense of the Western canon, or Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath's *Who Killed Homer?*<sup>5</sup> Kellogg does not make such views clear, however—which is a shame, because his thoughtfulness elsewhere indicates that he would make an interesting case. In its absence, Kellogg too easily assumes that his readership shares his

<sup>3</sup> An occasionally uncritical approach to Roman history here also anticipates his scholarship in the rest of the work, which is just a little past its best. One theory attributed to "[r]ecent scholars" on Ovid's exile poetry (193), for example, turns out to be mined from the introduction to a 1982 translation (330 n. 148).

<sup>4</sup> Kellogg also maintains traditional disciplinary boundaries: so, Plutarch can be read as a Roman author, but Paul of Tarsus cannot. This is presumably in expectation of Kellogg's future work on Christian wisdom, heralded twice in the current work (30, 291).

<sup>5</sup> Bloom (1994) *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Harcourt Brace & Company; Hanson & Heath (2001) *Who Killed Homer?: The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom*, Encounter

trust in the inherently noble foundations of Western modernity as well as his own patterns of cultural consumption. He will doubtless find many enthusiastic readers in this regard, but risks alienating as many more who might otherwise benefit from the acquaintance with Roman literature that he himself has found so admirably instructive.

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