

BOOK REVIEW

Empire of Letters: Writing in Roman Literature and Thought from Lucretius to Ovid.
By STEPHANIE ANN FRAMPTON. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xiv + 206. Hardback, \$74.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-091540-7.

Frampton set herself the difficult task of producing an exhaustive overview of all aspects of the material aspects of writing in the Graeco-Roman world, but with emphasis on Latin language, by scouring available literary and epigraphic sources for information. The successful result is this eminently readable volume, which answers questions about ancient literacy that had never occurred to this reviewer, for one, to ask. In six chapters, book-ended by an Introduction (“More than Words,” 1-12) and Conclusion (“Texts and Objects,” 163-70), Frampton covers every conceivable aspect relating to writing by the Classical ancients. She starts with the symbolic role of writing as both marks on flat surfaces of various kinds and as the intellectual content so conveyed, continuing with the origins of Greek and Roman script. Next, Lucretius’ attitude to script as analogous to his postulated “basic elements” of all matter offers an interesting illustration of what went before. From discussion of diverse writing materials, Frampton moves to extant examples of ancient writing, both “palaeographic” and epigraphic, and various ancient authors’ allusions to such. The book ends with close readings of the poet Ovid’s play with the idea of inscriptions within his exilic poetry.

Frampton’s first chapter, “Classics and the Study of the Book” (13-32), considers the “significance of medium along with message,” deploring the relative lack of written evidence from before the age of printing. She goes on to discuss the physical format of ancient books (more often *volumina* than *codices*) but also the amount of cohesive text that could fit onto such a book roll, which gave us the divisions into “books” in ancient literature and the lack, in early times, of any one final shape to a text. Texts might undergo various vicissitudes at the hands of copyist without affecting their substantive features like word order, verb endings or inflections. The idea of a standard orthography was “never the norm” (27).

Chapter 3, “The Text of the World” (55-84), starts with Lucretius’ analogy of

atoms to the agglomeration of individual letters within distinct words, continuing with Quintilian's advice on teaching children their letters, both names and shapes together, with, in passing, a brief exposition (with examples) of "pangrams," sentences containing all the letters of the Roman alphabet (70). Frampton then returns, via Manilius on literacy, poetry and city-building as all made up of a compound of basic elements, to Lucretius' reference to his own poetry-making as a "written product to be seen" (78). This is illustrated with a close reading of *De Rerum Natura* 1.907-14, emphasising Lucretius' subtle play on words and the sounds within consecutive, apparently similar syllables as the "elements" of totally different words (81-2). This chapter ends with a (here illustrated) example of a list of "syllables" in a graffito from Herculaneum, from which individual words could apparently be constructed (83-4).

The fourth chapter, "Tablets of Memory" (85-198), covers, in turn, the use of writing tablets of wax on wood, with several illustrations (86-7), discussion of the concept of the mind as *tabula rasa* (89-90; Frampton prefers "*tabella*," as "*tabula*" was rather a large whitewashed board for public notices). Other theories of the mind are next touched upon, such as Aristotle on memory as a "seal impression" on wax (98). An interesting discussion follows on "Roman twins: writing and memory" (94-8), illustrating the concept of "memory training" by means of mnemonics and use of *loci*. The latter, apparently a popular method with Roman rhetoricians with which to memorize the elements of a speech in logical order by imagining them as placed consecutively within a familiar room or house, was advocated by both Cicero and Quintilian in their rhetorical treatises. Frampton concludes with her view of ancient speeches as, essentially, "writerly and readerly texts as much as they were oral and aural ones," (106), with writing as "central metaphor and set of governing images for the art of memory" (107); hence Frampton's inclusion of memory as an aspect of the "Letters" of her title.

Inevitably, Chapter 5, "The Roman Poetry Book" (109-40) starts with reference to (and an illustration of, 110) the Gallus papyrus of Qasr Ibrim. Next, study of various poets' references to their own works shows interesting variations. Where Catullus uses the image of a manufactured bookroll as a metaphor for its poetic perfection (115), Vergil apparently avoids the **scrib-* words, and throughout seems more intent on emphasising his "bardic" role before a "listening audience" (though clearly fictive) than on his works as written products (128). Horace, again, seemed torn in two in both desiring personal contact with his dedicatees, but simultaneously wishing to be more widely published as writer (130, fn, 81). Ten pages of discussion of Horace's attitude to writing in his various generic

products include reference to the inevitable tension between lyric and elegiac poets' pretension to devotion to their "slender Muse" and their own aspirations to material fame through the 'imagined textual materiality' of their works (128-38). In sum, so Frampton (citing Jörg Rüpke), "Roman literature acquired meaning [only] in the context of their audiences." Here Virgil stands out as emphasising the "perfection of the ideal text above and beyond other instantiations." Thereby he accorded Augustus as his "ideal reader" — in Frampton's almost "Platonic" terminology, the "disembodiment [usually] associated with authority and immortality" (140).

The final chapter, "Ovid and the Inscriptions" (141-170) starts with a discussion of the libraries, cited by Ovid's "little book" as protagonist, as places whence "he" has been banished (*Tristia* 3,1,59-69, 63-72), complete with schematic map taken from Rudolfo Lanciani's 1901 *Forma Urbis Romae*. This leads to a discussion of the poet's "two bodies," both physical and literary, returning to a comparison of the two "book as weary traveler" poems (*Tr.* 1.1 and 3.1). The explanatory superscription above the emperor's wreathed doorposts is next shown as the reason for the poet's own recourse in *Tr.* 3.2 to invention of his own "inscriptions," Ovid's 'epigraphic conversion' (so Frampton, 150-3). The chapter next moves to discussion of private libraries where Ovid's book could still be welcomed (158). Discussion of apparent Ovidian echoes of 3.1.73 both in pre-Vesuvian graffiti and in various Eastern locations, ends with citation of an inscribed *eulogium* from Rome in elegiacs, where "increasingly condensed lines respect prosody and sense, but not strictly line breaks" (160). Frampton highlights the conspicuous borrowings of diction from Ovid in this poem. Her discussion ends with a reference to a Herculaneum graffito (CIL 4.10595) ostensibly projecting [the poet's] demise at Tomis (161).

Frampton's Conclusion begins with an interesting story about the chance preservation of a Greek epigram on Augustus' Actium victory, pasted together with some receipts and orders to make up a papyrus scroll that provided blank writing space on its reverse side. This offers the earliest evidence for the indentation of lines within elegiac poetry, the topic with which Frampton continues (163-5). Next, she deals with 'everyday writing as "genres"', in contrasted pairs: Everyday / Formal; Private / Public; Epigraphic / Palaeographic; Prose / Verse; Colloquial / Literary. These all are, so Frampton, to be seen as comprising a continuum, rather than as formal divisions (165). She ends with a definition of [study of] the Classics as "a practice of engaging with the past through its physical

traces" (170), of which her monograph is an engaging example.

Bibliographical details include "Abbreviations" (171-2), "Ancient sources, single author" (172-3), ditto "collected" (173-4), "Modern works" (20 pages averaging 22 titles per page, 174-93) and a twelve-page Index (194-206).

In all, Frompton's is a beguiling book, a pleasure to read.

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