

Johnson, William A. *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities*. New York: Oxford UP, 2010. ix, 227 pp. \$65.00.

Johnson's *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire* is one of the most exciting books in classical studies to appear in years. It is both thorough in its scholarship and compellingly readable, but its main appeal is its ambitious conceptual intervention.

Johnson sets out to shift the ground of the debate within classical scholarship over ancient reading. Over the last forty years and for particular intra-disciplinary reasons, this debate has focused on whether the ancients habitually read silently or aloud. Opening his book with a brief history of the scholarship on this question, Johnson then uses this history to illuminate the ways in which classical scholarship, by taking "reading" mainly as an individual cognitive or neurophysiological act, has missed the important and illuminating ways in which ancient reading *culture* differs from our own and thus has missed an opportunity to see it on its own terms. Johnson, contrariwise, defines reading as 'not in fact an individual phenomenon, but a sociocultural *system* in which the individual participates' (11). Accordingly, he goes on to sketch this system--"the sociocultural contextualization for reading events within specific communities" (15)--as it is represented in, and as it tacitly structures, the works of a few interconnected writers in each of three separate periods of the High Roman Empire: Pliny and Tacitus under Trajan (chapters 3-4); Galen, Gellius, Fronto and Lucian under the Antonines (chapters 5-8); and (very briefly, in Chapter 9) anonymous annotators and letter-writers whose writing is preserved on papyrus from the second century CE.

In the introduction, Johnson writes that

each text is chosen for its serendipitous ability to illuminate the subject; I make no attempt at exhaustive treatment. Each text is taken on its own terms and merits: it will not do, in my view, to treat the evidence in Pliny and Galen and Gellius and Lucian as if these texts are all painted with the same brush, and thus in each case I take care to *situate the evidence within the literary text*. The overall result is a series of case studies, vignettes rather than landscapes. By the end, I think we will come to see some of the mountain ranges and valleys, but always somewhat hazily. (15)

This approach, rigorously carried through, gives us, in the six author-focused chapters, six valuable and invigorating close readings of under-read texts (none of them are exactly obscure, at least to classical scholars, but none of them are exactly canonical). Yet the book is by no means simply a "series of case studies." Such a designation understates the way in which the structure of the book, by juxtaposition, comparison, and accumulation, at least implicitly builds a complex and nuanced model of reading as formed by, and forming, communities. After providing a theoretical and scholarly context for the discussion, Johnson thus devotes his second chapter to the "pragmatics of reading" by mapping the forces which conditioned and enabled acts of reading in antiquity, from the materiality of the book as it then existed (a hand-copied papyrus roll or scroll) to educational, economic, and social institutions. The centerpiece of the book is then formed by the six chapters already referred to. These provide detailed analyses of ideal reading practices and communities constructed in two Trajanic and four Antonine authors, showing how these practices and communities both reflect and seek to intervene in elite Roman value systems. The last of these chapters, on Lucian, not only provides an excellent introduction

to this subtle and ironic writer but also demonstrates an important counter-discourse to the normative values and aspirations, reminding us that there is play and the possibility of resistance in every system. Finally, a short chapter on the second-century papyri discovered at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt (written in Greek under the Roman empire) gives us a glimpse of reading practices as they played out with their literary representations.

By the end of the book, we have a strong sense of a coherent system of elite Roman reading as the cultured, "gentlemanly," and communal interpretation of texts. This system coordinates all the levels of "reading" involved in "render[ing] alphabetic text into full meaning" (200), from the level of what we might call functional literacy, through the systems which governed the circulation of texts (both material books and readings or recitations), up to interpretation, scholarly engagement, and even lived response. Hence, if reading as a sociocultural act is, at least in part, a conspicuous display of elite education and virtue, it is no longer surprising that Roman book-rolls are laid out in a way that increases, rather than minimizes, the difficulty of reading at the most basic level, without punctuation, diacritical marks, or even spaces between words.

The book thus provides a great deal of insight into individual authors and into the system(s) of reading that obtained in the High Roman Empire. But perhaps its most fascinating conceptual turn, and the point at which it becomes most open and useful to scholars beyond classical specialists, is the one articulated at the colon between its title and its subtitle: that is, the insight the book provides into the relationship between reading cultures/practices and community formation. From the authors Johnson reads, it becomes very clear that literary study was a core activity for the self-definition of the Roman elite or political class as a coherent community and that elite acts of reading cannot be understood--because they could not take place--outside this cultural valuation or ideological weighting. Moreover, acts of reading were usually communal or public in ways that are hard for us to understand or intuit now, with our understanding of reading as a private, individual act. For example, Johnson relates an incident from Gellius' *Attic Nights* in which a group of school students interrupts a reading of a speech by Gaius Gracchus to demand that one particular sentence be "read over and over again"; the teacher finally intervenes to demonstrate that although the sentence is musically pleasing, it contains major "logical and stylistic problems." Johnson writes, "The way in which a small section of text is held up *by the group* to intense scrutiny, repeatedly, interactively, and at length, is hard to parallel in modern society," adding in a footnote that "perhaps the closest analogue in modern society is the group study of religious texts" (123-24).

Although it is important not to underplay the vast differences between contemporary and ancient reading cultures, which Johnson goes a long way towards demonstrating, it is worth dwelling on this example for a moment by considering his descriptions of ancient group reading practices through the lens of cultural studies scholarship on fandom. Contemporary media fandom provides another case in which intensive reading can be carried on in group settings. Indeed, Johnson's summary of the Gellius anecdote reminded me forcefully of several experiences watching brief sections of episodes of *Blake's 7* or *Deep Space Nine* on repeat in small groups of fans, at one person's house, while engaging in precisely the kind of competitive-collaborative discussion that Johnson argues is typical of Gellius' circle, involving both the close reading of the text at hand and the supplying of abstruse intertextual references from memory of other texts. While Johnson does draw, theoretically and methodologically, on recent work from sociology and cultural studies (e. g., Shirley Heath's study of literacy in more and less privileged communities in the U.S. in the 1970s), he restricts himself to scholarship on reading verbal texts,

excluding the rich seam of work on the active audiences and reading communities of television, film and popular culture.

The book assumes familiarity with some of the conventions of classical scholarship, and although lengthy quotations are given in English only and almost all Latin and Greek is translated, the sheer amount of citation in ancient languages and the careful grounding in classical scholarship may be off-putting to readers from other fields. Nonetheless, one of the things that makes this book such a stimulating read is the way it remains open to drawing parallels or contrasts between ancient and contemporary reading cultures, without ever lapsing into ahistorical or untheorized equivalences. This openness suggests one way in which the book's extremely valuable work could fruitfully be used and extended by scholars in other fields who work on other reading communities. Consequently, this is an exceptionally valuable book for all scholars interested in reception and reading.

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