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**Rex Winsbury, *The Roman Book: Books, Publishing and Performance in Classical Rome*. London, Duckworth, 2009. Pp. xii & 236. £18. ISBN 9780715638293 (Pbk).**

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Rex Winsbury's *The Roman Book* is a very readable, if flawed, look at the publishing of Latin literary works from 80 BC to AD 170. Winsbury explores mostly the act of publication at this time, with a focus on the role of the *recitatio* in the dissemination of literary works, and explores in great detail the issues which arise when looking at how literary works (mostly poetry) were received by a wider audience in the classical world.

Winsbury begins by setting out the assumptions and views that will influence his study, focusing in particular on the issue of terminology, the dominance of nineteenth-century theories (especially Birt's *Das Buchwesen in der Antike* (1882), referred to as the 'Birt Scenario'), and the central place Winsbury will give the *recitatio* within his work.

The first section of the work (chapters 2-4) discusses what a Roman book actually was: the materials used, the format, the written presentation, and a brief discussion of how these factors shaped the works written. In chapter two, after a rather lengthy, and frankly unnecessary, description of the cost of the materials needed and the manufacture of papyrus scrolls, Winsbury begins a rather jumbled and convoluted comparison of the *volumen* and codex. The reason for Winsbury's theory of why the codex did not become the standard until late antiquity is determined by his assertion of a link between the changing format of books and 'the spread and ultimate "victory" of the Christian religion in the later centuries of the Roman Empire' (p.25). He concludes from this that the *volumen* retained its primacy, despite the advantages of parchment and the codex, for social and cultural reasons.

Chapter three looks at the alleged change in the presentation of Latin texts in the second century. Unlike many scholars, Winsbury does not see this as a 'cultural regression' as Oliver (1951) does, but rather as a 'deliberate social and cultural choice' (p. 35).<sup>1</sup> Again, the author provides no evidence for this assertion, and continues to provide little to none throughout the discussion of the way Latin texts were written in the rest of the chapter. While the conclusion that reading involved a different set of skills in classical Rome from today would be useful when discussing texts, the process of getting there is unconvincing. In contrast, the use of both primary and secondary evidence produces strong and convincing conclusions in chapter four. This chapter looks at how the size, shape and material of the *volumen* influenced and directed the content of classical Latin literature. Winsbury's view is that given the variations in scroll width and length it is impossible to determine the intentions of the author in structuring the work.

The second section (chapters 5-7) looks at publishing, bookshops and libraries in classical Rome. Chapter five focuses on the misperception, as Winsbury sees it, that there were people who published books in classical Rome in a way similar to how books are published in the twenty-first century. He ends the chapter by linking this to the argument begun in chapter one, claiming that the *recitatio* has been relegated by scholars to 'a preliminary step to, or trial run for, some other mythical act or process of "publication"' (p.56). Winsbury himself argues that the *recitatio* was in fact the primary act of publication for classical Latin texts. Chapter six looks at another alleged misconception, namely that booksellers were part of a 'flourishing and empire-wide book trade' (p.57). Winsbury details the evidence for known booksellers in Rome before moving on to the evidence for booksellers in the wider Roman empire. He concludes that the evidence for both of these is relatively thin, and as such 'over-emphasis on an alleged book trade has confused discussion of the larger and more culturally significant set of questions of how, in the main, texts actually were put around and why' (p.66). This section is concluded by

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver, R. P. 1951, 'Tacitus and the Titulature of Ancient Books', *TAPA* 82: 252, quoted by Winsbury p.35.

looking at libraries in the Roman empire, a topic which Winsbury again argues has been filled with misconceptions due to the grafting of modern concepts onto similar, but different, practices. Winsbury argues that the so-called 'public libraries' of Rome had very little in common with modern public libraries, and that they were more 'statements and instruments of imperial power and prestige' and as such should be seen as the 'upper-class equivalent of "bread and circuses" for the populace' (p.75). The conclusion is that while these libraries may have played a role in literary culture, they were not part of the main system for distributing new works.

The third section (chapters eight and nine) moves onto looking at the specific meanings of commonly used Latin words in relation to books, book production, reading and writing. While interesting, these two chapters feel out of place within the book as a whole. Many of the important points could be made more succinctly, and could be found by the reader in any reasonably sized dictionary.

The fourth section (chapters 10-11) is where Winsbury expands upon his reasons for seeing the *recitatio* as the focus of the distribution of Latin texts in this period. While there is a detailed and enthusiastic argument for the distribution of texts through the *recitatio*, the lack of referral to primary evidence leaves the reader feeling that this is mostly conjecture. It would be much better for the author to have directly quoted (and translated) passages with appropriate analysis of the text, which would greatly enhance the reader's understanding of the argument he is trying to make. The discussion also ignores much of the literature of silent reading and reading in general in the ancient world, such as Gavrilov and Johnson, and is dogmatic in asserting only one way of reading rather than looking at the possibility of there being a multitude of reading styles in the ancient world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gavrilov, A.K., 1997. 'Techniques of Reading in Classical Antiquity.' *The Classical Quarterly*, 47.1: 56-73; Johnson, W.A., 2000. 'Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity.' *The American Journal of Philology*, 121.4: 593-627; Johnson, W.A., 2010. *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The following section (chapters 12-13) again makes for strange reading and does not entirely fit in with the rest of the book. In these chapters Winsbury describes an assortment of methods in which ancient texts have (allegedly) been miscopied, deliberately destroyed, or plagiarised. The chapters mostly describe methods rather than add any analysis, and there does not seem to be any real attempt to connect the descriptions in these two chapters to the previous sections.

The final section (chapters fourteen and fifteen) is an attempt to draw everything together. Chapter fourteen begins by looking at Roman mime and pantomime and argues, following Fantham, that this is the missing link.<sup>3</sup> Again, the evidence seems lacking for the rather large claims Winsbury is making for the primacy of the oral performance of texts as the main method of dissemination, as well as the wide-ranging audience he seems to imagine for them.

The final chapter strives to expand upon the cultural importance of the performative and textual aspects of literature alluded to throughout the book. Winsbury argues that this duality means that the Roman book was both a marker of elite status and a 'key player in the common culture of shared stories and implied values that helped to underpin the empire and to define what "being Roman" meant' (p.162). However, this final chapter continues to suffer from the same problems seen throughout the rest of the book - while a very interesting argument is being made, the lack of primary evidence for his theories makes it difficult for the reader to be fully convinced.

Overall, Winsbury has produced a book which is interesting to read and enthusiastically presents a different way of looking at many of the practices involved with the book in the classical world. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of his work is the reliance on secondary sources. Winsbury does make reference to ancient texts, but these are often through the eyes of other

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<sup>3</sup> Fantham, E. 1988. 'Mime: the Missing Link in Roman Literature', *Classical World* 82: 153-163.

scholars, or references to single poems or lines of text (for example, Martial, who is not exactly the most reliable of sources). In addition, many of the major claims he makes do not follow from the evidence he has presented, and he provides no other sources, primary or otherwise, to back up his claims about book production and distribution in the Classical world. It is unfortunate that this lack of properly supporting evidence and sometimes chaotic presentation are so prevalent throughout the work, as it makes his conclusions much less convincing, and as such it feels that further work is required in this field.

### **Expanded Contents:**

#### Introduction.

1. Myths and anachronism: the need for a new look at Roman publishing.

#### What was the Roman book?

2. Format wars: scroll v. codex, papyrus v. parchment, pagan v. Christian.

3. Don't mess up the aesthetics: marching columns and rivers of letters.

4. Did the medium shape the message? Deciphering the author's intent.

#### Deconstructing the Roman book trade.

5. Atticus and Co. - Roman publishers?

6. Bookshops and copyshops: a trip to Rome's Argiletum and Sigillaria.

7. Books for looks: the library shelves as imperial patronage.

#### What the Latin tells us.

8. Slavery as the enabling infrastructure of Roman literature.

9. Getting into circulation: from private space to public space.

#### Texts in an oral/aural society.

10. *Effecte! Graviter! Cito! Nequitur! Euge! Beate!*: the *recitatio* as act of publication.

11. Literature of the voice: 'toss me a coin and I'll tell you a golden story.'

#### The perils of publishing.

12. The battle for survival: mice and worms, plagiarism and posterity.

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13. Bookburning and treason: 'a time of savagery even in peace.'

Gluing it all together.

14. Scripts for all classes: the theatre of Rome, Rome as theatre.

15. A Unitary culture: elite self-definition and *Romanitas* for all.