

Freyja Cox Jensen. *Reading the Roman Republic in Early Modern England*. Library of the Written Word 22; The Handpress World 16. Leiden: Brill, 2012. xi + 248 pp. \$146. ISBN: 978-90-04-23303-4.

This book combines intellectual history, literary history, and the history of reading in innovative ways. It is hardly news that the Elizabethans were intensely interested in the history of ancient Rome, but what Jensen offers for the first time is a systematic study “examining both reading and writing in an integrated manner . . . considering education and the processes of thought that shaped reception, as well as the finished written article.” The book thus falls into two halves, the first concerned with reading and the second with writing. Jensen declares her focus to be historical rather than literary, “a study of reception, rather than of rhetoric” (11); Lucan serves as a witness to the historical record as much as Sallust. The focus is specifically on later Elizabethan and early Stuart interpretations of the period of the later Roman republic and the transition to empire. The first part surveys school and university curricula, gives an account of the printing in England of Latin and English editions of the historians who covered the late republican period, presents evidence for the circulation of books on Roman history through inventories and library catalogues, and ends with a detailed discussion of readers’ notes on three key phases of Roman history: the rivalry of Caesar and Pompey, the relationship of Antony and Cleopatra, and Octavian’s rise to imperial power. The second part shows how these same phases were treated in historical and literary texts, original or translated. The main conclusion that emerges is the sheer range of interpretive possibilities. Traditional readings have found in late Elizabethan writing a uniform distaste for republican disorder and admiration for the triumph of Augustus, as parallels to the English monarchy. More recently some scholars have found a coherent republican ideology at work. Jensen argues that neither hypothesis will account for the remarkable range of interpretations, produced partly by the “disintegrative interpretive strategy” encouraged by the practice of commonplacing.

This book makes an important contribution. The tables helpfully document the publication and reception of classical texts. One striking change is the sharp rise and then sharp fall in editions of Caesar’s commentaries, the latter running parallel with a rise in the publication of the anti-imperial Lucan. Another table demonstrates the preference in England for vernacular translations, with five times as many translations as Latin editions — a contrast with the roughly equal balance on the Continent, and indicating the need for substantial imports of Latin printings. There is some fascinating material from commonplace books, with detailed quotations from the classical notes of the future Parliamentarians Sir Simonds D’Ewes and Oliver St. John. Jensen demonstrates with abundant examples the sheer range of attitudes toward figures like Caesar and Octavian, suggesting both a broad spectrum of political perspectives and variant strategies of reading. The quest for ethical exemplarity might be countered by an awareness of the differences between Roman and Elizabethan constitutions that in fact discouraged direct imitation of the past. Her comprehensive approach, while it may flatten the texture

of some forms of writing, does make clearer the occasional disparities between notebooks and published writings, or between historians and dramatists — the latter, she argues, significantly less misogynistic when it came to the treatment of Cleopatra. Jensen is more assured on English than Continental sources, not giving as much information as we might wish on the originals of translated texts — as when she ascribes the views of Lipsius to his translator. Her argument about the awareness of the otherness of the Roman constitution might prompt fuller consideration of antiquarianism in the period. The important question of Tacitism in the 1590s is effectively sidelined by the concentration on the late republican period. That is understandable, however, as a means of providing focus, and both in its general approach and in the fresh evidence it offers, this book advances the subject a great deal.

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