

Reviews

Shane Butler. *The Matter of the Page: Essays in Search of Ancient and Medieval Authors*.

Wisconsin Studies in Classics. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. x + 158 pp. index. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-029924824-6.

This is a smart, insightful, and ultimately persuasive book about the nature of the page from antiquity into the Middle Ages. Taking that space as a conceptual meeting ground between author and reader, Butler here urges us to think hard about the materiality of the page and the unique event that constitutes reading and writing. In this day of the Internet and the current restructuring of the concept of the page as we type into undefined spaces that are beamed across the globe, this topic takes on a particular poignancy, almost tinged with nostalgia: it has become increasingly quaint to turn a page, not to mention talk about recto and verso. What, Butler asks, is the relationship between the author and his page on the one hand and the reader and her page on the other? The page, the author points out, “is the pervasive material condition of literature, for it names the one space authors and readers have in common” (9).

The book is divided into six chapters that focus largely on works of antiquity, including Thucydides, Lucretius, Virgil, and Cicero, the focus of the author’s earlier work, with a final chapter on the ninth-century author Dhuoda. With titles such as “Latin Decomposition” and “The Surface of the Page” these chapters offer meditations on the nature of the page. “Is the page flat?” (75) the author queries, before arguing that before there is text, there is texture, structure, and depth, which leads to an associative string of possible metaphors for literary writing drawn, it is suggested, from the material nature of the page itself. That *silva*, forest, is so often associated in ancient texts with the poetic process is shown, suggestively, to reflect not the more literal notion that the themes of texts are often organically arrayed, but, rather, that the texture of the page itself may give rise to these metaphors.

At times I found myself somewhat uncertain about the type of argument being made: is this scholarship or something else? Or, in these days of Twitter and instant messaging is the role of the critic being functionally redefined to acknowledge more directly his or her participation in the process? Butler himself starts with the question of the author, turning back to Barthes, but revising the notion with arguments about the centrality of the author, in his role as material craftsman and in the often painful, seemingly symbiotic relationship between the process of creation and loss. There is a lot that echoes Montaigne here in methodology and tone, which include meditations of precisely this nature, although angled in a different direction. The comparison between the two is perhaps instructive: what Butler finds on the page is a thread that runs through literary writing, but it is only one. The relationships of author to page and reader to page vary perhaps more than this work allows, and while manmade structures, objects, etc. are indeed one such metaphor, there are others (such as Montaigne’s organic metaphors) not broached here.

Butler has made a bold attempt to break down the blood-brain barrier between ideas and texts, signifiers and signifieds, and to suggest that the very space on/in which the text plays out informs the text that is played out there. I found myself at times charmed by the literalness of it, at others astonished by the leaps of poetic faith I was being asked to make. Yet I was always challenged by the assertions and erudition and so in the end was persuaded by the value of the pursuit. Reinserting the author into the equation, not as controller of meaning, but as participant in the larger drama played out in the space of the page, is a valuable and canny move, especially as the foul lines of that exact play space are being redefined by the nature of the electronic page, itself no longer a page but more an infinite scroll. The page may well become an artifact of the past, and the relationship between author, text, and reader — and the metaphors they invoke — is without a doubt undergoing a sea-change of vast proportions. Butler's exploration of the matter of the page goes a long way in waking us up to these questions.

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