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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Roman Literary Culture, from Cicero to Apuleius by Elaine Fantham

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ELAINE FANTHAM, *Roman Literary Culture, from Cicero to Apuleius*. Baltimore/London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. XV, 326 pp. (cloth). Pr. \$48,-.

The announcement of a general study by a distinguished scholar tends to make expectations run dangerously high. Fortunately, most readers of this new book by Elaine Fantham will not be disappointed. Her *Roman Literary Culture* is a most welcome contribution to the study of Latin literature.

The book fills part of the gap between handbooks, encyclopaedias, and specialized literary monographs on the one hand, and social and anthropological studies on the other. It contains a survey of Latin literature until the rise of Christianity, but it does not consider the works and authors as isolated phenomena, nor does it focus on factual information. Instead it studies the literary activities and products in their mutual relations and within their general cultural context. Thus F. attempts to come towards "a social history of Latin literature." Consequently, we get a lot of information about authors and works, but also about things often only touched upon in our handbooks: e.g. the way literature was spread and 'published', the general development of Roman theatre, the effects of literary patronage, the school system that produced writers and readers, the role of libraries, public performances, and criticism. F. is at her best when dealing with authors she clearly likes, such as Vergil, Livy, Statius, and Pliny, or whom she seems to find intriguing, such as Fronto or Gellius. Particularly good and helpful are the sections dealing with

periods of transition and change in the cultural climate, such as the last years of Augustus and the reign of Tiberius, the period between Nero and Domitian, or the era of Hadrian¹).

Some of F.'s recurring themes deserve special mention here. Unlike many others, she firmly draws our attention to the lasting importance of Greek language and culture, which clearly is a full-blown undercurrent in Roman culture. On closer scrutiny even such thoroughly 'Roman' authors like Cicero, Pliny, and Apuleius, appear to adopt Greek for private and public purposes. F. also rightly points to the profound influence Greek philosophers and orators exerted upon Rome during the empire. Paradoxically, the Greek element forms an integral part of Roman literary culture. So F. is right even to include Greek authors, like the Second Sophists, and she offers some useful observations about them.

Throughout the book there is a great emphasis on literature in its social function, as a means of expression and even pastime of the Roman elite. F. appears particularly interested in phenomena like public readings (*recitationes*), literary self-portraits, and social obligations of successful poets, and she discusses common ideas and shared values concerning literary genres and fashions. Inevitably, this approach leads to a certain lack of proportion: Tacitus' *Dialogus* is given more attention than his *Annals*, Augustan poets are preferred to Lucretius, and the letters of Pliny the Younger and Fronto receive much more consideration than Seneca's moral epistles. Writers of technical works, like Celsus and Frontinus, are barely mentioned, whereas Ovid is more kindly dealt with. Naturally, not all works are equally well-suited to figure in a socio-literary study such as this. And in itself, such a lack of proportion is not a bad thing. Few will quarrel with F. over her choice to leave Valerius Flaccus and Silius Italicus much for what they are, and to hasten to a rather detailed account of Statius. F.'s mostly tolerant, unbiased, and mild personal views contribute to the stimulating and attractive force of the book.

One might, however, contend with F. about her treatment of some of the major figures in Latin literature. Do Ennius and Cato the Elder, the important innovators and exponents of the ambiguous attitude of Romans towards Greek culture, really deserve no more than a brief sketch of a page?²) Why are Caesar's *commentarii* only mentioned in passing? And is it really fair to devote just a few paragraphs to the 'Caesarean' Sallust, for the greater part devoted to harsh criticism³), while dwelling at some length on Livy? There is a second disadvantage to F.'s approach, which seems less inevitable. Her close interest in the higher social classes seems to have led her

to forget the less respectable, 'lower' forms of literature. Popular song and verse, easy literature like the *Milesian tales*, Curtius' romanticized account of Alexander, or collections of *sententiae*: surely all of this was part of the literary culture just as well. These forms of literature are often barely mentioned by F., or even less than that (one will look in vain for, say, the *Priapeia* and Publilius Syrus).

Of course, no scholar can deal with Roman literature in 300 pages and satisfy all. In such a daring book, every reader will easily find issues to disagree with and minor reasons for discontent. So let me be clear: this is a great and helpful synthesis. F.'s excellently written and stimulating book is a pleasure to read and will bring new ideas to students and specialists alike. The critical remarks made above are only meant to outline the restrictions which F. put on herself and the resulting consequences for her view of Roman literary culture. A book like this must be, on the whole, fair and discriminating in its judgements, bear a personal but not idiosyncratic touch, and stimulate further thought and work. These conditions are more than duly met, and F. deserves our gratitude and congratulations.

Let us hope that this study will be followed by a similar book about a later period, like the interesting but difficult fourth century AD. One wonders how F. would cope with authors like Julian and Ammianus Marcellinus, who still seem to be the domain of specialists only.

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1) However, I felt rather uncomfortable in seeing, among others, the Second Sophists and the impressive Apuleius being discussed in a chapter entitled 'Literary culture in decline'. The very length of F.'s chapter would suggest that this was, on the contrary, a period where 'literary culture' flourished as rarely before.

2) One might object that these writers, important as they are, date from the period before Cicero and therefore, given the subtitle of the book, receive only limited attention. But why does F. start with Cicero in the first place? And if Cicero is the starting point, why then sketch these earlier writers, whereas the end of the book, closing with Apuleius, does stick to the title?

3) In modern times, F. states, Sallust would be a "brilliant journalist" because of his three qualities to adapt ideas of better thinkers, to prefer emotional effect over accuracy of detail ("an apolitical indifference to truth if it might reduce drama and excitement"), and to violate established prose style to demand attention by a personal idiom (p. 97). These points of criticism seem misplaced when brought against Sallust alone: much the same can be said for Tacitus, whom F. admires. Moreover, F.'s rapid conclusion that Sallust "has more merit as literature than history" (p. 97) suggests he would deserve rather much attention in a book on literary culture.