

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

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All Greek and Latin quotations are translated into English and technical matters are carefully explained for general readers, with scholarly details in the notes.

– Back Matter of *The Matter of the Page*

an tali studeam calamo? Damn! How much damage can you do with a pen?

– Persius *Satires* 3.19

The Matter of the Page is a slender book of suggestive essays that show how we can picture certain Classical and Medieval authors at work through a self-consciously materialist reading of their texts. It is a great little book to grapple with, not only for its streamlined main thesis or its knotty close readings, but also for Butler's ambitious and experimental methodology that engages with how Classical texts (and by extension, Classical scholarship) are read, written and reproduced in our digitalized age. While a reader may object to aspects of Butler's book (e.g. its basic argument, particular readings or stylistic idiosyncrasies), this reader is convinced by the vitality of the debates he intervenes in and by his methodological handselness. In this review, after the briefest of summaries of the contents, I shall dwell on Butler's methodology, both as outlined in its introduction and also in how it operates

throughout the course of the book. Butler has taught me to pay close attention to my own role as a reader who writes, especially here, in the act of reviewing for an online journal, where I feel a heightened responsibility to objectify the material limits of scholarly writing.

Butler's introduction ('Presenting the Author', 3-12) initiates the reader into his dual thesis: 'the question of the author and the emblem of the page' (11). After three dense pages on the former, to which I shall return, it is the latter that takes up the majority of his attention. After a flashback to his previous book on Ciceronian textuality¹, Butler describes two tensions at work in what he calls the 'material question' (5): between book and draft and between historicist and universalist conceptions of writing (i.e. between the materiality of writing of a specific time and place and 'a more general "thingness" that has been writing's product across centuries of its use', 6). (Here I was especially intrigued by how Butler (too?) neatly juxtaposed two Catullus poems (1 and 50) to distinguish publication from poetizing). These tensions quickly mutate and multiply into several polarities (draft/book; book/word; composing/copying; author/reader; contingency/universality), which Butler admits he will not attempt to reconcile, but instead focus on the page as one of the 'middling architectures of the text' (6).

After an excellently distilled survey of the history of writing media, Butler traces his steps back to the question of the author that opened his introduction. He claims that: 'what may matter most about the material text is that it is the most obvious place where writers become their first readers' (11), in what Butler dubs 'our theoretical back door into our long unfashionable subject',

¹ S. Butler (2002). *The Hand of Cicero*. London and New York: Routledge.

whereby the search for the author is made a search for the reader who ‘will be (or will just have been) writing’. It is by this ‘back door’ that I wish to enter when I expand on Butler’s methodology, but first let me offer the swiftest of summaries of the substance of the six chapters that follow.

The Back Matter of *The Matter of the Page* describes the six self-contained chapters as ‘portraits of authors at work’, either as fictional recreation (e.g. ‘Thucydides struggling to describe his own diseased body’ or ‘Cicero mesmerized by the thought of erasing his entire career’) or standards of ancient biographical fiction (e.g. Virgil wanting to burn the *Aeneid*, Lucretius’ madness). Yet there is so much more to Butler’s rich readings than can be gleaned from the Back Matter’s sensationalizing biographism. The first chapter, (‘The Backward Glance’, 13-27) – the only part of the book that has been previously published² – reads the myth of Orpheus, the ‘first poet’ and his Eurydice as it is replayed in Virgil and Ovid as the ‘turning point’ (pun intended) for the myth of the author and *his* reader. Tracking this couple’s appearances in Virgil’s *Georgics* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Butler shows how a half line in Virgil’s Nisus and Euryalus episode in *Aeneid* Book 9 can tease out the dynamic between the author of the unfinished *Aeneid* at work and the textual space of the page as a hellish forest, as we ‘[e]nter the woods...we are in the poet’s workshop’ (18) back onto a reading of the passage from the well-licked *Georgics*.

The second chapter (‘Myself Sick’, 28-36) is a neat treatment of Thucydides and his dual role in reporting on and suffering from the Athenian plague and the idea of text as body, written on by the marks of disease. When we reach the third chapter (‘Latin

² S. Butler ‘The Backward Glance’, *Arion* 17.2 (2009) 59-78.

Decomposition', 37-62), we find ourselves looking back on Thucydides as background to Lucretius' own reworking of the plague, body, disease themes, but this time via his reception in Cicero's stylistics, woven out of his engagement with Lucilius, Aratus and his own much-maligned poetic output through a series of stylistic images of worms, snakes and bodies. This is a long, often meandering, chapter in which we begin to get the sense that Butler is as much at the wheel of *our* reading of the texts he reads, as Lucretius is of *his* Thucydides.³ The fourth and fifth chapters ('The Erasable Cicero', 63-74 and 'The Surface of the Page', 75-86) on Cicero and Seneca's *Thyestes*, via Ovid's Narcissus, respectively are brief forays into issues of revision and erasure and the ekphrasis of murky pools as the materialized page. In both, while the conclusions are rather sketchy, once again it is the getting there that counts. The brilliant sixth chapter ('The Folded Page', 87-105) on the *Handbook* of 9th Century Carolingian noblewoman Dhuoda, written to her son, loops back to the first chapter and is a nuanced reading of this fascinating text. In the absence of a conclusion to the book, Dhuoda has the last word, in spite of Butler strained attempt to revitalize his Eurydice in terms of female authorship.⁴

As the final chapter snakes back towards the first, let me return to the introduction of *The Matter of the Page* to discuss Butler's methodology. There Butler offers three openings into his book to come: a theoretical response to Roland Barthes' iconic essay 'The

³ Compare Lucretius' rewrite of the first person Thucydidean account into a collective 'we'-narrative (*De rerum natura* 6.1119) to Butler's 'we'-thinking throughout *his* emphatic readings, e.g. '[o]ur attention is at once attracted to *serpere*.' (50). '*monstrat* here cannot help reminding us' (54).

⁴ Compare another view of a Carolingian author at work in John Henderson (1982) 'A room (-) with a view' *Liverpool Classical Monthly* 7.10. December: 142-145.

Death of the Author', an autobiographical aside on the singular conditions for the genesis of his book and an exemplary quotation of a passage of Persius' *Satires*. An understanding of how Butler combines each of these openings to set the scene for his main thesis leads ultimately to his main methodological innovations. After dedication, contents and acknowledgments, Butler opens predictably with the following scene-setting pronouncement: '[m]ore than four decades have now passed since Roland Barthes announced "The Death of the Author"' (3). He then rehearses the lessons learnt in the wake of Barthes' essay and how he will respond by actively 'resuscitating the author' (3) while still heeding Barthes' lesson. Then the autobiographical aside compares the impact of the creative life of the artist on that of the post-Barthesian Classical scholar. From living with an artist, Butler 'learned that making art is a strange and beautiful thing', while his own experiences as a scholar left him 'with fewer and fewer ways to talk about the strangeness and beauty of that making' (3-4). This disconnect between these two lives is reconciled by employing a passage of Persius' third *Satire* as exemplary of the 'scenes of material struggle sometimes embedded' (4) in ancient literature. Since the remainder of the book will sketch Classical and Medieval authors engaged in comparable scenes of 'material struggle', it is worth pausing on this exemplary moment. How does Butler see the struggle embedded in the Persius passage?⁵ On a surface level, it

⁵ Here is Butler's text and translation of Persius *Satires* 3.10-16:

Iam liber et positus bicolor membrana capillis
inque manus chartae nodosaque venit harundo.
Tum querimur crassus calamo quod pendeat umor.
Nigra sed infusa vanescit sepia lympha;
dilutas querimur geminet quod fistula guttas.
O miser inque dies ultra miser, hucine rerum
uenimus?

appears to be Persius' explicit references to writing materials (book, parchment, papyrus, pen, ink) and 'his' authorial struggle to get to work that makes this passage exemplary for Butler's thesis. Yet, methodologically, the real drama occurs behind the scenes in how the text is quoted, translated and explained by the appended (scholarly) note. Here we get a first glimpse of Butler's methodological innovations. While the note warns us (scholars) that there is a (scholarly) debate surrounding the various interpretive options of this passage that depend on the punctuation, there is no warning for the Back Matter's 'general readers' for how the translation takes sides on this debate so as to support Butler's argument. By translating the repeated first person plural *querimur* ('we complain') as an expletive 'Damn!' and the general question *huicne rerum/venimus?* ('have we come to this state of affairs?') as specifically 'has *my life* really come to this?' (my emphasis) we are asked to imagine the voice of the singular author working (or at least failing to). Yet if we follow another fork in the (scholarly) path offered by the appended note, we encounter another interpretation that sees *querimur* as specifically reacting to Persius 'model', Horace *Satires* 2.3.7, in which we find a near stage direction for the Persius passage, as 'pens are blamed in vain' (*culpantur frustra calami*).⁶ Unlike Butler's translation, the

Okay, got a book. And parchment (hair side
yellow, flesh side white). Plus papyrus.
And a knotted reed-pen. Damn! The ink clogs,
hangs from the nib. Add a little water: Damn!
There goes the black, here come thin drops, in twos.
You pathetic loser, more pathetic every day:
Has my life really come to this?

⁶ D. M. Hooley (1997) *The Knotted Thong: Structures of Mimesis in Persius*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press. 202-229.

Horatian backdrop intimates a collective complaining about writerly ‘material struggle’ and not the singular authorial experience of Persius’ ‘author-function’ (4). It is essential to recognize here that the Horatian option is offered by Butler without the aid of the Back Matter’s promised translation of *all* Greek and Latin, while his own interpretive route is made explicit through the translation.⁷ This brief interplay of text, translation and notes, in the back and forth experience of the reader, has wide-ranging ramifications for Butler’s use of scholarship and texts. For example, if we compare Butler’s opening engagement with Barthes’ iconic essay with his use of the Persius passage, we see how he simultaneously undermines and underlines its status as a material text.⁸ More importantly, it becomes immediately apparent

⁷ Unlike his explicit interpretation via translation, Butler offers and immediately dismisses an alternative interpretation, besides his and Hooley’s, in paraphrase: ‘note that the narrator is about to study (*an tali studeam calamo?*) rather than poetizing, though for Persius, student of philosophy and philosophical poet, the two activities were never distant.’ (107, n. 3). This is one of several paths not taken in the direction of philosophy in *The Matter of the Page*, in spite of its readings of key exponents of Latin philosophy (Lucretius, Cicero, Seneca).

⁸ Butler uses Barthes’ essay as a bare speech act (‘Barthes announced’, 3), but there is so much more that could be said about how Barthes came to make that announcement and how his later work reacted to that announcement in ways that support Butler’s main thesis, especially in the immediate reception of the essay by Barthes himself. For example, in *Sade Fourier Loyola* (1971) 8, Barthes, like Butler, invites the return of the author through his materiality: ‘The pleasure of the Text also includes the amicable return of the author. Of course, the author who returns is not the one identified by our institutions...he is not even the biographical hero...he is a mere plural of “charms,” the site of a few tenuous details’. In addition, Butler’s emphasis on reading for the author ‘at work’ and his own creative brand of scholarship could be related to Barthes’ own autobiographical musings in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) 159-159: ‘[w]orking on some text which is well under way, he likes to look up details, corroborations, in works of scholarship (*livres de savoir*); if he could, he would have an exemplary library of reference works (dictionaries, encyclopedias, manual, etc): so that scholarship would be in a circle around me, at my disposal; so that I need merely *consult* it – and not ingest it; so that scholarship be kept in

that not all of Butler's texts are presented in the same way as Persius (i.e. indented, Latin + English) and in spite of the blanket reassurances of the Back Matter. For example, two passages of Vergil's *Georgics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are given only in Latin, with selective, interpretive paraphrases (14-15).⁹ Later extended English translations of Virgil are punctuated with bracketed Latin words, either within the main text or indented, including part of the untranslated *Georgics* passage. Butler's variations in how he presents texts on the page ensures that the reader *uses* his book, to parallel the looking back of his authors.¹⁰ In short, if we dwell on the differences between Butler's nuanced methodology and how it is advertised so simplistically in the Back Matter we start to appreciate the force of his materialist argument about ancient authorship. We come to appreciate our own uses of texts (and how our texts are used) at the same time as we attempt to show their own working processes.

While the Back Matter of *The Matter of the Page* sells the contents short by claiming this book *about* access is itself immediately accessible, I cannot deny that it does offer 'timely lessons for the digital age about how creativity works and why literature moves

its place as a *complement of writing*.' In spite of these paths not taken, Butler's very first footnote does lead us to the first edition of Barthes' essay in the artist magazine in a box, *Aspen* 4+5, which, ironically, has 'no pagination'. The fact the Butler chose to reference this version of this much reprinted essay speaks volumes for his own strategies for reclaiming 'The Death of the Author' for his own ends.

⁹ It is worth noting that in its previous manifestation (see my n.2) these extended Latin passages are missing and we are left with the paraphrase.

¹⁰ The same game of translator hide-and-seek is played in the (scholarly) notes. A note appended to a translation of Virgil adds: 'It is impossible to capture in English the drama of the Latin's word order' (113 n. 10), which we immediately interpret to be a comment on Butler's translation, but then the comment is followed by a description of the Latin syntax in Italian!

us' by setting the example. While there is so much that we can learn from this book, perhaps the greatest lesson comes from how it encourages disagreement with its own readings and the readerly (and scholarly) enjoyment of wresting the texts this scholarly writer reads from his own reading. In these terms, for the sake of argument, I cannot recommend *The Matter of the Page* highly enough.