MARK VESSEY, *Latin Christian Writers in Late Antiquity and their Texts* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005); x plus 352p; ISBN 0 86078 981 0; cloth, £60.00.

A scholar's choice of subject is almost always revealing. He or she may be drawn to issues which resonate with his or her own inner turmoil, or to the complacent exposition of unconscious beliefs. Some are drawn like to like, others to that which they most despise. Still deeper, however, runs the tendency of some scholars to project themselves into their work. This need not be a weakness. The imaginative link between scholar and subject is the basis for the best we can offer. It is fascinating, however, to observe it at play.

This is the case, for example, in the recent Variorum offering by Mark Vessey, *Latin Christian Writers in Late Antiquity and their Texts*. Vessey writes about writers who write as he does. Each of the individuals on whom he focuses, from Jerome and Augustine, through Erasmus and Germain Morin, inhabits an authorial space which, to Vessey, makes perfect sense because it is also his own. Their intellectual worlds, like Vessey's, are somehow extraordinarily broad and deep, and yet restricted. There is incredible learning, profound thought and very little sense of the environment beyond, or of an audience other than a narrow elite. Vessey imagines writers who write for each other first and foremost. His own work adopts a similar tone, engaged as it is with the concerns of his field: definitions of patristics, reviews of recent literature and studies of the impact and intellectual developments of particular scholars. Vessey depicts authors concerned to create, as he himself does, complex layers of meaning and elaborately constructed theories of writing. Literary pragmatics and the science of Christian readership were as important, in Vessey's view, to Augustine as they are to himself. He writes of authors concerned with language, as he is, to a minute and careful degree. Anyone who terms another writer 'dulciloquent' (IV.2) is simultaneously making a statement about himself, while
Reviews

Vessey's description of Brian Stock's style as 'naturally pregnant to the point of elusiveness' (IV.6) could stand as a perfect accounting of his own prose. Finally, his subjects are shown thinking hard, as Vessey clearly has, about authorial persona and the role of the writer and interpreter in relation to his texts. His comments on the 'self-publication' of, especially, Jerome and Erasmus, resonate with Vessey's own very conscious presence within his writing and his detailed self-positioning as a scholar.

From these connections arise many insights. They can lead also, however, to blind-spots. In this respect, Vessey's assumptions are telling. He prefaces the collection with a question: 'How does one explain the abiding formativeness of Latin Christian writing of the fourth and fifth centuries?' (vii) This formativeness, however, is never established nor explained beyond the intellectual circles of which Vessey writes and in which he also dwells. That which looms large in Vessey's world is assumed to loom large in late antiquity too. As a consequence he does not interrogate the stories of reception which Jerome, Augustine, Possidius and others tell, even as he recognises these as stories. Jerome was hardly an uncontroversial figure, yet his self-presentation stands unchallenged. The reaction of the monks of Hadrumentum to Augustine's ideas about free will and grace should remind us of the limits of his authority, yet this is for Vessey a centre-piece in an account of the bishop of Hippo's significance. (VII) On the other hand Augustine's preaching, which found his broadest audience, absorbed so much of his energy and constituted his greatest literary influence in the early middle ages, makes no appearance in Vessey's account. Because Vessey writes of an Augustine who is like himself, he sometimes misses that which sets a late antique bishop far apart from a modern scholar.

The extent to which Vessey connects with his subjects perhaps also explains why he consistently 'steps back' in his criticisms. In relation to Stock's work, for example, he comments in one piece that it would be 'unfair' to pronounce either for or against his thesis.
Reviews

(III.146) and in another that: 'If the reviewer's experience is at all typical, the average reader's sense of the value of these sections is likely to be mixed.' (VI.11) The reticence displayed here is almost laboured. There is a sense throughout the collection of punches pulled. Authors both ancient and modern are allowed to escape the implications of their arguments and the consequences of their ideas. Vessey's concern is to rehabilitate reputations, be they those of Erasmus or Morin, rather than undermine. This derives, however, from an intellectual sympathy which is laudable and elsewhere fruitful. Vessey perceives powerful continuities in literary activity which stretch from Origen, through Jerome, to Erasmus, Germain Morin, Brian Stock and, implicitly, himself. For all that he positions himself at the cutting-edge of his field, he is simultaneously and self-consciously harking back to the oldest traditions he can reach.

This Variorum volume is especially important in light of the fact that Vessey is yet to offer a monograph. It is useful to have so many of his contributions gathered together here and the collection constitutes a sobering reminder of the breadth of his interests and expertise. Vessey's style is well suited to the article format, for reasons both good and bad. The good is that he is able to pursue so many often only loosely interconnected insights. It would take half a dozen books to cover the ground Vessey does here, yet the material is always rewarding and cumulatively contributes to the reader's understanding of late antiquity and late antique scholarship alike. The bad is that some of Vessey's most promising insights are not followed through. He teasingly offers arguments but does not substantively demonstrate them. His beginnings are always stronger than his conclusions, which tend to peter out. This is frustrating, but will serve his purpose of stimulating other scholars. There are ideas enough here to provoke and inspire work in several different fields. Whether his volume will be as 'abidingly formative' as the work of his subjects, however, only time will tell.

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