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Book Review Essay

The Ascension of Authorship: Attribution and Canon Formation in Jewish, Hellenistic and Christian Traditions. By **Jed Wyrick**. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 49. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004. xviii + 509 pp. \$45.00 cloth; \$27.50 paper.

An Ecstasy of Folly: Prophecy and Authority in Early Christianity. By **Laura Nasrallah**. Harvard Theological Studies 52. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004. xii + 225 pp. \$25.00 paper.

Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East. By **Derek Krueger**. Divinations: Rereading Ancient Religion. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 312 pp. \$59.95 cloth.

“Who is the author?” is indisputably one of the first questions that most people ask when approaching any ancient literary work. The modern view that ascertaining authorship provides the key to understanding a text closely follows an age-old schema that in fact needs to be made the object of closer scrutiny. The three books under consideration assay this very task by posing searching questions regarding how and why ancient writers came to validate particular constructions of authorship and literary authority. Through their advocacy for particular methodological and theoretical stances they individually favor, the three scholars invite us to explore several potentially valuable avenues of approach.

The royal foundation of libraries in Alexandria and Pergamum in the Hellenistic age helped institutionalize book collection and cataloging, leading to a call for a set of “scientific” techniques to discern the authorship of hitherto freely circulating works. *Ascension of Authorship* traces the convoluted history of Hellenistic “attribution analysis” (*krisis poiematôn*), the critical literary method that Greek grammarians and scholars progressively refined, which informed how later Jewish and Christian authors would construct their own notions of authorship. Jed Wyrick argues that Jewish traditions of biblical authorship (as first formulated in the Second Temple period) prompted Josephus to articulate in the *Contra Apionem* a strict dichotomy between Jewish and Greek views on authorship and textual authority that invoked the competitive ethos of Greek authors of historical works to discredit their trustworthiness in favor of the anonymous writers of the books of the Hebrew Bible. Josephus and other Jewish scholars were in fact disinclined to represent the biblical prophets as authors since to them authorship connoted self-seeking individualism whereas anonymous authorship was the hallmark of a truth-bearing tradition (*paradosis*). Such issues are shown to be at play in the Hellenistic accounts regarding the retextualization of the Homeric poems under Peisistratus, tyrant of Athens, and the translation of the Hebrew Bible in the Greek (LXX) under Ptolemy II Philadelphus, for the two cognate traditions speak to a shared need to assuage anxieties regarding

authenticity and authority in the course of textual transmission or translation. Christian writers grappled with similar questions in their turn: Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, and Augustine of Hippo, according to Wyrick, eventually synthesized received Jewish ideas regarding authorship and the Greek technique of “attribution analysis” to arrive at their own ideas of sacred texts and canon. Finally, he proposes that Augustine of Hippo, often considered a key figure in the development of “western” notions of self and authorial identity—a view that he largely accepts—adopted many of the techniques pioneered by earlier literary scholars to fashion his own brand of literary criticism and notion of authorship.

Laura Nasrallah examines how references to ecstatic prophecy and accusations of irrationality played a role in certain key disputes regarding the nature of authority in early Christianity, specifically those surrounding the so-called Montanist controversy. The chapters of her book develop the following themes in order: how Plato, Philo, and select Christian authors treated divine/demonic possession and madness; how the apostle Paul laid claims to prophecy in his famous disagreements with the Christians in Corinth; how Tertullian’s references to the soul (*anima*) played a key role in his struggles with the *psychici*, Christians who supposedly claimed to possess especial spiritual gifts; how an anonymous anti-Montanist Phrygian source, Tertullian and Epiphanius, who demonstrated varying degrees of sympathy to “Montanist” Christians, helped construct a particular notion of Montanist prophecy that is still widely accepted among scholars; and, finally, how these representations regarding prophecy necessarily engaged questions of temporal/historical periodization. These book chapters seem to develop in a neat chronological fashion, but the book on no account falls back on a history-of-ideas approach for which clear chronological progression is crucial. Rather, Nasrallah champions an opposite view and regards traditional intellectual history as not only antiquated but also inadequate to the task at hand. The book insistently claims that we cannot recover ancient “beliefs” from textual statements regarding postbiblical prophecy and madness any more than we can use them to demonstrate, for instance, Max Weber’s sociological theory regarding the trend of development from charismatic authority to formal organizations. As the attested claims were made in reference to specific controversial contexts and were accordingly “rhetorically constructed to persuade an audience,” modern interpreters do well to adopt a “model of struggle to read early Christian debates over prophecy” (26). Thus “arguments over prophecy and ecstasy are always also arguments over group boundaries. Moreover, debates over prophecy manufacture boundaries to knowledge” (26). The author thus not only skillfully adapts the anthropological works of Edward E. Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas to explain how particular controversial claims might serve the goals of group and boundary management, but also further suggests that feminist and postcolonial theories may impart further insight to our understanding of the texts. By declining to accept stated ideas in texts as referring straightforwardly to a set of held beliefs let alone communal ideals but rather, through taking a “rhetorical turn” and embracing the idea that we can at best explicate the textual functions of representations, Nasrallah allies herself with notable scholars such as Alain Le Boulluec, Averil Cameon, Elizabeth A. Clark, and Karen King, whose works have already revolutionized the study of early Christianity.

In his sophisticated study, Derek Krueger sets out to find in select late antique Christian works self-references to "authorial practices" that enabled writers of hagiographies to represent themselves as a new type of pious Christians. *Writing and Holiness*, which takes Theodoret of Cyrus's *History of the Monks of Syria* (or *Historia religiosa*) as its pivotal text, traces the philosophical and religious underpinnings of the emerging paradigm of hagiographical authorship in the late antique Greek- and Syriac-speaking east. The main themes are gradually developed in three clusters of three chapters each. The first cluster lays out the themes of writing as a devotional act and the Evangelists as saintly figures. The next examines the first notion in relation (mainly) to Theodoret's *Historia religiosa* by considering in turn hagiography as a form of spiritual devotion, a form of ascetic practice, and a liturgical act. The last triad develops the idea that texts might also have been conceived of as "bodies" by drawing in theological discussions regarding the incarnation of the *logos* and also advances a suggestion that textual/authorial analysis might be combined with contemporary gender theory to good effect in the study of late antique (and other) hagiographical writings. The heart of the book remains the study of Theodoret's self-representation as a writer/author who articulated a "range of writerly subjectivities. . . . This new aesthetic of authorship resulted both in and through efforts to portray the author as a pious Christian. Engaging in literary composition, a writer both displayed and produced authorial piety" (191). He is therefore presented to us as a pioneer who stood at the head of a long-lived authorial tradition that as yet bore no name: "The production of saints' lives made Theodoret a writer of saints' lives, a specifically Christian identity that was relatively new and not yet entirely fixed" (197). While one may quibble with specific elements in the book, such as the easy conflation of "writer" with "author" in a historical context where writing still largely remained the province of scribes and stenographers and the construal of the self-reference of the anonymous author of the *Miracles of Thecla* to his index finger as a synecdoche pointing to his writerly persona (this involves a measure of right-handed chauvinism, see 85), the overall treatment brims with lively intelligence and wit.

The three authors bring to their works divergent premises and concerns. Still, they share not only a laudable degree of scholarly accomplishment but also the ambition to exemplify and advocate a given intellectual paradigm through their respective works. Wyrick's chosen approach has the considerable merit of taking an important, focused theme to present intellectual history on a grand scale. Yet his diachronic treatment necessarily glosses over local complexities and synchronic relationships and interactions. Augustine's career offers a fine example as his ideas regarding authorship, and indeed most other matters, not only underwent changes through time but also were frequently articulated in response to specific controversies and challenges that are now quite well understood. Without a contextual reading of his individual statements, efforts to delineate an "Augustinian" stance on a given topic will remain reductive and ultimately futile. There is yet another, more fundamental critique that merits consideration. By positing opposing Jewish and Greek views on authorship and then proceeding to trace their historical interplay and ultimate synthesis by Christians (culminating in Augustine's formulation), the book unwittingly adopts a virtually Hegelian dialectical model. The problem is compounded when one realizes that the accusation that others forsake the truth on account of their individualistic self-seeking

has long been a part of the standard Greek rhetoric that, to take one of the best-known cases, pits truth-loving philosophers against ambitious and vain-glorious sophists. Josephus was therefore playing a Greek game when he posited aforementioned differences between Jewish and Greek attitudes to authorship. In short, instead of trying to see in this lead-up to a dialogue between autonomous cultural blocs (that is, Jewish, Greek, and Christian), we have before us a set of dynamics that was characteristic of an internal Hellenistic cultural dialogue.

The three works also share in common a measure of reticence in venturing beyond the fields of representation as defined by the particular texts to examine other factors that might have contributed to the construction of authorship and literary authority in antiquity. The latter may include aspects of the material production of texts, the literary market as well as the cultural expectations and horizons of readers. While Wyrick and Nasrallah regard later grammarians, scholars, and commentators as primarily responsible for the creation of particular ancient authorial identities, Krueger's suggestion that an author's deliberate employment of "authorial practices," a form of self-positioning, translated directly into an effective authorial persona, is indicative of a strong textualist approach that focuses more on the interpretation of textual representations than their historical efficacy. Here the generous construction of Theodoret as principally a "writer" and an intellectual based on select references in the *Historia religiosa* invites further questions as to how such a persona accords with his attested roles as a bishop, a prolific author of many different kinds of works, and a man of affairs who was active in ecclesiastical politics (and therefore had to carry out another type of authorial performance: subscribing to conciliar acts in his own hand). In this respect, Theresa Urbainczyk's treatment of the *Historia religiosa* (in *Theodoret of Cyrrhus: The Bishop and the Holy Man* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002]) offers a generally convincing interpretation of some of its peculiar features, such as the generic representation of the individual ascetics and its autobiographical references, in relation to Theodoret's public role and political goals. He was attempting to persuade a wider Greek-speaking audience that he represented an authority figure who had the unquestioned support of a group of illiterate, Syriac-speaking holy ascetics and who therefore, for that reason, deserved far greater respect and consideration than would normally be accorded a bishop of Cyrus, a town of little consequence.

"Who is an/the author?" will remain, in the final analysis, a deceptively simple question to which a thoughtful reader of these three books can offer few definitive answers. Wyrick, Nasrallah, and Krueger each proposes a different path to follow, and there is indeed no greatly meaningful consensus that unites their approaches. What emerges clearly at least is that the topic will remain open to further scholarly discussion for quite a long time to come, and that it would require sustained interdisciplinary cooperation and honest conversations that admit to the strengths and weaknesses of one's own chosen intellectual method in order to grasp the rich complexities that lie behind ancient as well as modern constructions of authorial identity and authorship.

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