
When Erasmus and his fellow workers published editions of classical and early Christian authors, claiming as they did so to reproduce them—in the texts that were their truest “images”—more faithfully than they had been presented either by manuscript traditions or previously in print, they also contributed directly to the production of the historical and disciplinary classifications by which “ancient” writers and texts were henceforth set apart from their “medieval” and “modern” counterparts. In philology, the process of critical-temporal distinction led in the course of time to the phenomenon of literary classicism. In theology, it was straightaway an engine of movements of reform and confessionalization that gave rise to the discipline of patristics (Irena Backus, Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378–1615) [Leiden: Brill, 2003]).

In our own time, classical scholars have generally taken care of the continuing reproduction and interpretation of classical Greek and Latin authors, while patristic scholars have performed a similar service for the ancient Christian “classics,” texts originating in the period of Graeco-Roman culture immediately following that claimed by literary classicists as “classical” in the strict sense (and with allowance made for the already Hellenistic date of the Latin classics). So far as the work of these largely distinct societies of classical and patristic scholars touches upon the Nachleben of their texts of primary concern, it has traditionally been understood to deal with tradition. Doctrines of both Christian theological and European literary tradition were given a major impetus by the historicist “turn” of the Enlightenment and its Romantic reactions (see now Stephen Prickett, Modernity and the Reinvention of Tradition: Backing into the Future [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009]). They have since been partly undone, and hurriedly reframed, under the stress of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century anxieties about the sustainability and legitimacy of “western traditions” of letters/learning in an age of global markets, digital media, and heightened intercultural awareness.

One symptom of a general adjustment of perspectives within contemporary, “post-traditional” academic humanities is the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of late antiquity, whose exponents—classicists, historians of religion, sometime patristic scholars—have succeeded in removing the cordon sanitaire that formerly kept classical and early Christian texts from intermingling. Another is the huge recent investment by classicists in the study of classical reception in all its guises and periods, “reception” in this context being understood to differ from “tradition” in conceding more agency to the user and less influence (another dis-
credited term) to the original producer of a text. A third symptom of the same post-traditional condition is the flood of studies in book history that seek, by drawing attention to commercial, technological, and physical aspects of human traffic with texts, to demystify and re-historicize processes of transmission otherwise studied by intellectual, religious, and literary historians. A fourth is the concern of historians of those stripes and others with the sociology and organization of knowledge.

Arnoud Visser’s adventurous and quietly impressive new book is very much of this scholarly moment. Published in the series of Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, it models a style of inquiry that, if ever generalized among professors and students of Christian theology, might have far-reaching consequences. Visser himself teaches Renaissance literature at the University of Utrecht; he has previously published on Latin emblem-books of the period and has a fine appreciation of the role of typography in culture befitting a compatriot of Erasmus. The triple aim of his new study is concisely expressed in its title and subtitle: to “ground Augustine’s reception in the history of reading and the material culture of books and manuscripts,” to “offer a cross-confessional account of Augustine’s appropriation in Reformation Europe,” and to “contribute ... to a more advanced understanding of the uses of intellectual authority in the early modern period” (pp. 6–7). In essence, Reading Augustine in the Reformation is a contribution to early modern European religious and intellectual history, written in the key of book history. It also draws upon a growing body of work on the “reception” of Augustine, a late antique Christian classic whose posthumous career to date has probably been more eventful than that of any of the figures/oeuvres currently obtaining new leases on life through the study of classical reception. Before returning to the Netherlands in 2009, Visser was for several years a member of the editorial team responsible for the forthcoming Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine, led by Professor Karla Pollmann at the University of St Andrews. That association is reflected in the present work by the high quality of the documentation provided in the notes on all aspects of Augustinian Nachleben.

Visser begins by sketching a selective narrative of the printed “life” of the opera Augustini between the advent of printing and the late sixteenth century, focused on the three collected editions by Amerbach (1505–1506), Erasmus (1528–1529, etc.), and the theologians of Leuven (1576–1577, etc.). (An earlier version of the chapter on Erasmus’ edition appeared in ERSY 28.) Those who know Hilmar Pabel’s Hercules Labours: Erasmus and the Editing of St. Jerome’s Letters in the Renaissance (Leiden: Brill, 2008) and related studies by the same author will need to adjust their expectations in turning to this partly parallel account of the editing of Jerome’s most famous epistolary interlocutor. As Visser’s scope is wider, his treatment of the subject matter is of necessity less detailed and exhaustive. His