Greece & Rome, Vol. 48, No. 1, April 2001

REVIEWS

Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds: a New Perspective. Edited by Oliver Taplin. Oxford U.P., 2000. Pp. xv + 596, with 40 illustrations and 11 maps. £25.00.

This handsomely-produced volume presents itself as, in the words of its editor, Oliver Taplin, 'not just another collection of piecemeal essays: it is an attempt at an overview of a wide expanse of literature from a fresh perspective' (vii). The book's seventeen chapters, divided between twelve contributors from both sides of the Atlantic, are chronologically arranged from Homer to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. Literary history, therefore, but its unique selling-point is its focus 'on the receivers of the literature, the public, readers, spectators, and audiences' (1). It is to the editor's credit that he has managed so consistently to impose his chosen focus on his contributors, with the result that a literary history that could have turned out very piecemeal, as such multi-authored volumes so often do, maintains a remarkably uniform tone and pace. Although some contributors do occasionally lapse into the unreflective clichés of conventional literary history ('When the tragic flower first blossomed in Attic soil . . .'), these lapses are mercifully few, and some of the more engaging chapters are those which diverge most from the established conventions of literary history: Matthew Leigh's chapters on early Roman literature and Imperial epic, for example, approach their subjects from refreshingly oblique and interesting angles. Inevitably, coverage is somewhat patchy (and, as so often in literary histories, lost works – not always clearly signalled as such and so a pitfall for the uninitiated – can loom larger than even quite important ones that have survived). Thus Herodotos and Thoukydides (sic) have a chapter all to themselves whilst Livy has to be content with a couple of pages (461–3, though he is cited elsewhere), and Tacitus' *Histories* receive no direct attention, only a couple of tantalizing cross-references. So, though the book contains most of the basic information the inexperienced reader will need (including basic bibliographies, maps, and a quite detailed chronology of historical events and literary and related developments), its main contribution is not as a straightforward reference tool to be consulted piecemeal, but rather as an invitation to engage at length with its arguments.

So, what about the volume's unique selling-point? Although it is concerned with the responses of readers and audiences to classical literature, the editor is very careful to specify that it is the original audiences he has in mind, and so distinguishes the focus clearly from the study of the various modes of reception of this literature down to the present day, of which he concedes, however, that 'many, if not all, of them contribute to our contemporary interpretation of the work' (4–5). Most contributors freely confess that we have only patchy information about the responses of original audiences, but the best pieces (and I would single out Taplin's own essay on the Homeric poems and Lesley Kurke's on the 'song culture' of archaic Greece and on the fifth-century historians) do not seek simply to collect what *evidence* there is (or, in its absence, to engage in what has to be rather vague speculation), but to use the notion of 'audience' or 'reader' as a *heuristic* device to develop modes of interpreting the relationship between a

text and the culture which produced it, and to interrogate the changing dynamics of author, text, and audience. The volume's concentration on original context manifests the traditional historicism of classical studies in its latest guise, and pushes its favourite button, the 'otherness' of the past. 'The past, *for all its alienness*, can affect and change the present', Taplin remarks (page 1; emphasis mine), and that 'alienness' is rhetorically emphasized here in a way now widely favoured in this version of historicism: 'I have insisted that Greek names should be transcribed direct rather than into their more traditional Latin spelling.' So we get Thoukydides and Ithake (though not Homeros and Athenai), for example, whilst in later chapters we get Horace and Livy, not Horatius or Livius. Can it be that Homer is not as 'alien' as Thucydides, or Roman culture not as alien as Greek? The point may seem a trivial one, but it has much wider implications. Taplin goes on to explain: 'We have, however, kept the traditional spelling for names from both languages which are very familiar in their Englished forms (such as Homer, Virgil, Athens, Rome, Oedipus [actually the Latin!], Hadrian, etc, etc', vii). The 'alienness' – or 'familiarity' – of the past is thus not a feature of the past-in-itself but the product of that very aspect of reception that this model of historicism, with its emphasis on original context, marginalizes. Are there not dangers in such a methodological emphasis on the 'original' context? Viewed simply as the products of their original context, do the texts of Greece and Rome have any greater claim on our attention than, say, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*? They do, of course (as Taplin says, '[t]he past . . . can affect and change the present', and many classical texts indubitably have), but not if viewed just as the products of their original context. 'The approach taken here is at root historical: it looks, that is, at the literature within the world that first produced it', Taplin remarks (1), but history is as much about *eventuation* as it is about original context: that is what 'Reception Studies' seeks to capture, and what the model of historicism prevalent in classical studies, with its recuperation of the notion of 'reception' for an original audience, seeks to eschew. The editor knows this well enough (cf. the citation from pages 4–5 above), and this reader, at any rate, is sorry he didn't follow up on it. Some contributors (notably Llewelyn Morgan and Philip Hardie on Augustan literature) cannot resist explicit appeals to later tradition to make their points, and all, needless to say, frame their judgements in one way or another (for example by reference to the 'romantic' or 'postmodern' qualities of some of the texts) in terms of what was to be. At the price, the volume is a good investment, especially for school and college libraries; but it could only have benefited from incorporating the challenge of later reception into its arguments and the way it has conceived its task.

DUNCAN F. KENNEDY

Roman Constructions. Readings in Postmodern Latin. By Don Fowler. Oxford U.P., 2000. Pp. xiv + 350. £45.00.

Before he learned of his fatal illness Don Fowler had planned a collection of a number of published and unpublished pieces. In the event what should have been the occasion for making shape of, or, in one of Don's favourite expressions, telling a story about, a phase in the middle of an academic career, has become a monument to one of the most original and influential Latinists of the late twentieth century. Not his only monument, for before his death he had also managed to put together enough of the materials for his study of

the book in Roman culture and literature to make what will be both an invigorating introduction to its subject and a sophisticated challenge to prevailing views about the relationship in antiquity between the spoken and the written, between performance and reading (*Unrolling the Text*, Oxford U.P.). His massively scholarly and magisterial doctoral commentary on the first part of Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 2 is also to be published.

During the 1980s Don developed an increasing interest in the application of theory to ancient texts. This led to a group of three now classic articles published between 1989 and 1991, which were largely responsible for introducing a generation of classicists to central critical and theoretical issues: focalization (ch. 2: how different points of view are included by a narrator); ekphrasis (ch. 3: on how the apparently specialized device of a description of a work of art opens up the largest questions about the literary work's relationship to the world outside, and about the role of the interpreter or reader of a text); and closure (ch. 11: how texts manage their own progression towards an ending). Typical both of these and of the later pieces is the combination of an unerring scholarly eye and of an unfailing *copia* of detailed insights into the interpretation of ancient texts with a far-reaching vision of the grand theoretical models and their implications. Don simply saw deeper and further than most of us. His writing is always challenging and often provocative, as aficionados of his *Greece & Rome* Roman Literature Subject Reviews will remember, but never pretentious and never obscure, much less obscurantist.

In the 1989–91 pieces there is an acute awareness of the importance of the reader's contribution to the meaning of a text. Through the 1990s Don's thinking developed into a fully articulated post-modernism which holds that there can be no points of reference outside a text and independent of its readers on which to ground a final interpretation; there are only our own and others' 'constructions' of the meaning of texts. This is in acknowledged agreement with Charles Martindale's dictum that 'meaning is realised at the point of reception'. In the end we decide what shape to give to a text; but that never is the end, because you or I may tomorrow tell a different and more persuasive story. Any historical 'facts' about the world outside the text adduced to support a particular reading never themselves come innocent of interpretation, and can always be deconstructed or stood on their head and used to support a different reading. This does not lead to a critical solipsism, however: Don increasingly emphasized the role of dialogue with other members of an interpretative community ('Our primal scene should not be the solitary figure in the dark of the cinema but the group of friends arguing in the pub,' 107). Nor is this a purely arbitrary free play of interpretation; the stories we tell about texts change as we contextualize them in different ways and find different connections within them. The term 'construction' may mean that the reader 'makes it up', but good constructions will be characterized by the pertinence and utility of the building materials chosen by a reader, and by the plausibility with which those materials are fitted together. But however impressive the structure, the post-modern reader is always ironically aware that it is his or her own construction. The collection opens programmatically with a 1994 piece on Romantic Irony, the trope by which an artist reveals his self-awareness of the contingency and relativism of what he has created, and extends it to the ironical stance of the postmodern reader.

The stories that Don constructs about ancient texts are always good ones. My favourites include the reading of the ekphrasis in Silius Italicus' little read *Punica* of

scenes from the First Punic War viewed by Hannibal in a temple of Liternum (ch. 4), further developing the arguments of the 1991 paper on ekphrasis; the reading of Juno's opening of the Gates of War in *Aeneid* 7 within the context of Roman monuments (ch. 8), leading to deconstruction of any simple view of an Augustan ideology based on the ending of wars and establishment of a *pax Augusta*; and the illuminating if unexpected comparison of Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe with Harrison Birtwhistle's opera *The Second Mrs Kong* (ch. 7). In the last two of these chapters, both late pieces, powerful use is made of gender studies, and, in the Pyramus and Thisbe piece, of psychoanalytical criticism, areas in which Don was becoming increasingly interested in the later years. He also continued to help the classics community with further incisive surveys of theoretical topics: chapter 5 on 'Intertextuality and Classical Studies' (1997) is an excellent way in to its subject, and a lucid exposition of why intertextuality is not just a fancy word for allusion.

I spoke at the beginning of monuments, but Don lived his irony too deeply to expect, or wish, that this book would have the monumentality to which Horace aspires in *Odes* 3.30. That poem and many other texts and monuments are discussed in another of the latest papers, 'The Ruin of Time: Monuments and Survival at Rome' (ch. 9), which builds up to a reading of the different kinds of monumentality at play in the Death of Turnus, the ending of Rome's greatest literary monument. A monument aims to stabilize the past, but paradoxically is always the starting-point for new interpretations and new uses (for example the end of the *Aeneid*). In that sense this book is a monument, one that will stimulate and enable others to construct their own readings and interpretations, as Don Fowler so memorably did in life.

PHILIP HARDIE

https://doi.org/10.1093/gr/48.1.87 Published online by Cambridge University Press