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SUBJECT REVIEWS

Greek Literature

When I started writing these reviews I presaged aggravated grumpiness in reaction to proliferating guides, handbooks and companions (*G&R* 52 [2005], 250). Subsequent experience has disconfirmed that prediction. I am not quite megalomaniac enough to believe that my threat cowed editors into raising their standards, nor modest enough to believe that my own standards have been subverted by mere habituation. Perhaps, then, proliferation itself has raised standards by increasing competition. However that may be, the current crop illustrates two ways in which specimens of the genre can earn their keep. The *Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy*[1] achieves success by combining consistent excellence on the part of the contributors with a well-conceived and well-executed editorial plan. Martin Revermann's introduction is a model of how it should be done: he sets out the agenda (approaching the Greek comic tradition as a continuum, and moderating as far as possible the Aristophano-, Menandro-, and Athenocentricity of our evidence) and provides an overview, giving lucid summaries of individual chapters that also highlight their interconnections and their contributions to the overall structure ('Setting the Stage', 'Comic Theatre', 'Central Themes' 'Politics, Law and Social History', 'Reception'). Andreas Willi, on 'The Language(s) of Comedy', does an especially fine job on a difficult brief; I was also impressed by Ralph Rosen's thoughtful essay on the 'comic hero' (a category with which I feel uncomfortable). But, in singling out those two for mention, I do not mean to detract from the high quality sustained throughout.

Nor, therefore, am I disparaging Mark Beck and the contributors to his *Companion to Plutarch*[2] if I say that it does not sustain the same level of excellence. But it stands out for a different reason: it provides something for which there was a need, and does so very well. Approaching a corpus so large and diverse, produced in such a complex social and intellectual context by such a remarkable individual, is challenging. There are good introductions. Beyond the introductory stage, however, achieving a more detailed and comprehensive acquaintance with Plutarch requires a resource of greater range and depth. Until now, that has been lacking. Beck's introduction is very brief – understandably, given the volume's scale and scope. Part I puts Plutarch in context (Rome, the 'Second Sophistic', and social and intellectual aspects of philosophy in this period). Part II covers the *Moralia* from various perspectives. Part III looks at Plutarch's biographical projects (not just the *Parallel Lives*). Part IV, on reception, is predictably the weakest: no clear plan is visible from the sporadic coverage and the disproportions in length

[1] *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy*. Edited by Martin Revermann. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xviii + 498. Paperback £23.99, ISBN: 978-0-521-74740-0.

[2] *A Companion to Plutarch*. Edited by Mark Beck. Malden, MA, and Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. Pp. xviii + 625. Hardback £120, ISBN: 978-1-4051-9431-0.

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between chapters; some chapters are too close to a catalogue to be useful. Compression is, indeed, a threat throughout the volume. One could not hope for a more expert guide to Plutarch's Platonism than John Dillon, nor a more skilled expositor: yet his treatment of complex material is at times condensed to the point of obscurity (curiously, his is the shortest of the five chapters on Plutarch's relation to different philosophical schools). Even so hefty a volume as this, therefore, struggles to meet the challenge which Plutarch poses. But the job needed to be done, and has now been done remarkably well.

Nor does this sizeable companion encompass Plutarch's full scope. His commentary on Hesiod's *Works and Days* gets only a single mention: 'it seems unlikely that Plutarch's four-book commentary on Hesiod's *Works and Days* had much if anything to say about the work's literary excellence' (188). Richard Hunter's *Hesiodic Voices*[3] makes a 'strong circumstantial case for learning from these extant Proclan scholia more than we thought we knew about Plutarch's discussions of the *Works and Days*' (215). This, which was (for me) one of the book's high points, does not by any means exhaust its riches. Taken as a whole, however, the volume was also frustrating as well as rewarding. Hunter speaks of 'various "moments" of reception' (34): compare his *Critical Moments in Classical Literature* (2009). The risk is that, if it is left to the reader to join the dots, a book may be no more than a suggestive miscellany. Hunter does, of course, do more than that. But the nearest thing to an introduction comes at the end of the opening chapter, thirty-two pages into the text: that is symptomatic of a pervasive lack of attention to framing and signposting. And an annoying symptom of Hunter's sometimes elusive manner of writing is the compulsive use of scare quotes. If Hunter had told me that 'Babrius was certainly no illiterate storyteller', I'd be puzzled as to why that needed saying; but when he tells me that 'Babrius was certainly no "illiterate storyteller"' (229), I'm not even sure what he's saying – what refinement of meaning does the additional punctuation aim to convey?

Hunter's impressively wide range of reference encompasses Dionysius Periegetes, an author with whom I can claim only the slightest acquaintance. Jane Lightfoot provides a remedy.[4] Her edition of Dionysius comprises introduction, text, translation, and commentary, with an appendix (guaranteed incomplete) registering echoes of and allusions to earlier poetry. The book-length introduction covers the nature of the *periegesis*, its sources, language, and relation to the tradition of didactic poetry, and the processes underlying Dionysius' transformation of geography into literature ('geopoetics'). Dionysius' undeniable skill as a versifier shows Lightfoot's blank verse translation in a less flattering light than the clunky hexameters of the *Sibylline Oracles* (*G&R* 57 [2010], 126). Otherwise, this is another impressive achievement.

Stephen Kidd's *Nonsense and Meaning in Ancient Greek Comedy*[5] offers a new angle on the long-running and seemingly intractable debate between interpreters who look for seriousness in comedy, and those who (like me) are content to acknowledge a

[3] *Hesiodic Voices. Studies in the Ancient Reception of Hesiod's Works and Days*. By Richard Hunter. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 338. Hardback £65, ISBN: 978-1-107-04690-0.

[4] *Dionysius Periegetes. Description of the Known World*. Edited with a translation and commentary by J.L. Lightfoot. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xviii + 575. 6 maps. Hardback £130, ISBN: 978-0-19-967558-6.

[5] *Nonsense and Meaning in Ancient Greek Comedy*. By Stephen E. Kidd. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. vi + 208. Hardback £55, ISBN: 978-1-107-05015-0.

(complete or partial) absence of seriousness. Why has this debate been so resistant to resolution? The presence of humour is obviously insufficient to settle the issue: Kidd suggests nonsense as a more useful category. He argues that comedy is receptive to passages that resist interpretation. Though no passage is inherently beyond interpretation (since it is always *possible* to attribute meaning), sustained refusal to acquiesce in comic resistance to interpretation incurs a loss of something fundamental to comedy. This idea, sketched in the introduction, is worked out over five main chapters. The three central chapters explore different categories of comic nonsense (absence of reference, of serious sense, and of sense). The first chapter contextualizes these explorations by providing a survey of terms in ancient Greek which express concepts related to our 'nonsense', and of their pejorative and non-pejorative uses. The final chapter analyses the ways in which characters within comedy respond to comic nonsense, and the significance of these internal responses for the theatre audience. Kidd does not provide a recipe for either resolving or dissolving the debate about seriousness. But his subtle and illuminating diagnosis suggests a new way of understanding the questions at issue in the debate. It should prompt more intelligent ways of approaching them; and, in particular, it should generate close textual analyses of the processes by which nonsense is exploited as a comic resource, and of the ways in which spectators and readers are implicated in those processes.

On the subject of nonsense... The editors of *Dithyramb in Context*,[6] observing that 'the longest-surviving type of collective performance in Greek culture' (2) has 'evaded all attempts at simple definition' (3), connect that elusiveness with its 'apparent and abundant...ability to change its shape' (1). Hence 'its elusive nature is an important part of what makes the dithyramb such a culturally productive phenomenon' (3). But to speak of dithyramb's 'continually changing shape and *self*-renewal' (3, my emphasis) raises two questions in my mind. First, what are the criteria of identity? We cannot conclude that two disparate things are instances of the same phenomenon simply from the fact that are called by the same name (especially when they are not: the name is absent from official records of 'the dominant context of performance, the Athenian City Dionysia' – 'a strange and striking paradox', 2). So how do we know that there was a single 'it' behind the changing shapes? Secondly, does it make sense to talk of dithyramb as a 'self'? Kowalzig and Wilson speak of dithyramb as a living thing (leading an 'engaged, hyperactive life', 23). It is not just 'prone to change and self-renewal' (18): a 'drive to self-innovate' is 'inherent in the form itself' (12); the 'propensity to continuous self-innovation...seems essential' (13); it is, indeed, inborn ('innate to the form itself', 23). But it is more than an innate reflex: dithyramb's psychological profile includes a 'predilection for self-reflection' (14), a 'consciousness of its changeability' (13), and a 'commitment to self-renewal' (13). That is nonsense. People do things; over time, they or their successors do things differently or do different things. Our understanding of those differences cannot be advanced by representing change as the activity of an autonomous ('self-renewal') and self-aware ('reflecting') living organism ('innate'). The rest of the volume, I am happy to say, is an improvement on this woolly-

[6] *Dithyramb in Context*. Edited by Barbara Kowalzig and Peter Wilson. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xviii + 488. 35 illustrations. Hardback £115, ISBN: 978-0-19-957468-1.

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minded start. Among the stronger contributions I would particularly mention Luigi Battezato, on dithyramb and tragedy; Giambattista D'Alessio on nomenclature (cautioning against 'the risk…of transforming the name, and all its vagaries, into an essence', 132); Paola Ceccarelli's exemplary discussion of the definition problem; Mark Griffith's interesting, though confessedly speculative, chapter on satyr-play, dithyramb, and the 'geopolitics of Dionysian style in fifth-century Athens'; and Andrew Ford's account of dithyrambic style, which points in potentially fruitful directions.

Illuminating discussion of dithyrambic style can also be found in Pauline LeVen's *Many-headed Muse*.[7] More precisely, LeVen is concerned with the lyric poetry of the 'late classical' period (i.e. roughly 430–323 BC). The opening pages set three goals: 'to present and discuss a varied body of texts that has never been analyzed as a whole' (1); to analyse the characteristics of this poetry, treating 'singing and song production as activities embedded in a larger network of socio-cultural practices' (2); and to use the reception of late classical lyric as an aid to understanding 'why this material has been the object of neglect or condemnation' (3). LeVen begins by surveying the evidence (more extensive than one might suppose) and the problems which the evidence poses. She next investigates the 'reception filters' which have given this poetry such a negative image in a chapter on the concept of 'New Music', and on later 'reimaginings' of the poetics of late classical lyric embedded in anecdotes about the poets, especially Philoxenus. The latter seemed uncharacteristically laboured, and this was the one point at which my interest flagged. My attention was revived, however, by the exhilarating chapters on language and narrative technique, in which Timotheus' *Persians* serves as a predictably prominent, but not the sole, exhibit. The last two chapters examine poems related to the symposium (including Aristotle's *Hymn to Virtue*) and epigraphic hymns. LeVen combines a strikingly original and intellectually sophisticated analysis with enviable clarity and elegance of style. This is a remarkable book.

Richard Buxton's *Myths and Tragedies in their Ancient Greek Contexts*[8] is based on eleven papers published over a period of thirty years. The introduction sets out six recurrent features of Buxton's approach: structure (in a broadly structuralist sense); context ('I have sought to replace the material which I am analysing *within its ancient Greek contexts*', 2 [emphasis in original]); theme (cross-generic, diachronic, and transcultural); porosity (myth's integration into ancient Greek thought and practice); '(un)certainty'; and the exploration of mythical themes in tragedy. Each chapter has been supplied with a brief prefatory paragraph to orient the reader; an envoi indicates how Buxton would like the book to be read. Buxton is aware of an apparent tension between transcultural themes and an emphasis on ancient Greek contexts (4). He also notes the tension between structural analysis and an extended diachronic perspective (180): his defence is not, to my mind, wholly convincing. More fundamentally, I worry about the idea that 'Greek mythology is like a language, a set of conventions enabling meaning to be created and communicated' (180), and that the underlying structure constitutes a

[7] *The Many-headed Muse. Tradition and Innovation in Late Classical Greek Lyric Poetry*. By Pauline A. LeVen. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 377. Hardback £65, ISBN: 978-1-107-01853-2.

[8] *Myths and Tragedies in their Ancient Greek Contexts*. By Richard Buxton. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 280. 15 illustrations. Hardback £55, ISBN: 978-0-19-955761-5.

'grammar'. Grammar implies the possibility of ungrammaticality. The conjunction of prophecy and blindness (183), however, is nothing like a grammatical rule: though blind prophets may be too frequent to be random (186), sighted prophets are not an error. Buxton tries to illustrate the 'language' of myth by exhibiting the syntagmatic relation of 'Man sees goddess naked' to a paradigm comprising three substitutable complements: 'man is blinded/goes mad/becomes woman' (193). The paradigm is manifestly incomplete: such cases as Odysseus and Calypso or Anchises and Aphrodite (cf. 191–2) demand a fourth option, 'man comes to no harm'. The illustration seems then to lose its *prima facie* cogency. Despite my reservations, I am glad to have this unfailingly stimulating body of work gathered together.

The third and final volume of Martin West's *Hellenica* (see *G&R* 59 [2012], 245; *G&R* 61 [2014], 115) contains thirty-five 'papers' (the term is used loosely, to include an excerpt from a book review, a pair of obituaries, and a collection of *obiter dicta*). Chapter 5, on the date of Zoroaster, is previously unpublished.[9] Some of the items, because published inaccessibly or because of my negligence, I'd not seen before, but are well worth reading: for example, Chapter 12, 'The Transmission of Greek Music: Then and Now'. The papers cover philosophy, music and metre, 'literary byways', and 'varia'. West remarks:

> It is painful to an artistic spirit to have to give a volume so limp and sprawling a subtitle as this one has, but such is the price I must now pay for not having channeled my scholarly output more purposefully and into fewer fields. (i)

Envious readers might, conversely, be pained by the pointed reminder of West's scholarly range and intellectual versatility. How much better, though, to celebrate the wealth he has shared with us.

Finally, Bloomsbury's *Revelations* series has reissued two fine translations in an attractive format; the combination of quality with competitive pricing makes them strong textbook choices. Martin Hammond's *Odyssey*,[10] first published in 2000, 'is written in a prose that aims both to have unaffected directness and yet also to preserve something of the essential epic idiom, including its formulaic phrases; it also has an unusually helpful index' (*G&R* 47 [2000], 238; cf. *G&R* 35 [1988], 202 for Hammond's *Iliad*).

Hugh Lloyd-Jones' *Oresteia*,[11] first published in 1979, comes unusually close to passing my test for translations of the trilogy (see *G&R* 53 [2006], 110): it renders transparently Aeschylus' carefully explicit parallel between the Furies' and Athene's ideologies (μήτ' ἄναρκτον...μήτε δεσποτούμενον, *Eum*. 526 f.; μήτ' ἄναρχον μήτε δεσποτούμενον, *Eum*. 696). Moreover, the point is reinforced in the running

[9] *Hellenica. Selected Papers on Greek Literature and Thought. Volume III. Philosophy, Music and Metre, Literary Byways, Varia*. By M. L. West. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv + 513. 5 illustrations. Hardback £105, ISBN: 978-0-19-960503-3.

[10] *Homer. The Odyssey*. Translated by Martin Hammond, with an introduction by Jasper Griffin. London, Bloomsbury, 2014. Pp. xii + 255. Paperback £9.99, ISBN: 978-1-4725-3248-0.

[11] *Aeschylus. The Oresteia*. Translated by H. Lloyd-Jones, with a new reception and performance history by Ian Ruffell. London, Bloomsbury, 2014. Pp. xl + 305. Paperback £9.99, ISBN: 978-1-4725-2679-3.

commentary that adds to this volume's claim on our attention. Ian Ruffell provides a prefatory essay on the trilogy's reception and performance history: oddly, his brief comments on contrasting translation styles completely ignore the translation to which they are prefaced. Lloyd-Jones himself says that his version 'makes no attempt to be poetic, or even literary', but 'tries to render the sense faithfully and to reproduce the impact made by the idiom of the original more faithfully than a translation with any literary ambitions could afford to do' (9). The following sample seems to me to achieve that goal:

> Taunt is now met with taunt,
> and it is hard to judge;
> the plunderer is plundered and the slayer slain.
> But it abides, while Zeus abides upon his throne,
> that he who does shall suffer; for it is the law.
> Who shall cast out the brood of curses from the house?
> The race is fastened to destruction. (*Ag.* 1560–6)

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Latin Literature

This time last year my review concluded with the observation that the future for the study of Latin literature is fundamentally interdisciplinary, and that we should proceed in close dialogue with social historians and art historians. In the intervening period, two books from a new generation of scholars have been published which remind us of the existence of an alternative tide that is pushing back against such culturally embedded criticism, and urging us to turn anew towards the aesthetic. The very titles of these works, with their references to 'The Sublime'[1] and 'Poetic Autonomy'[2] are redolent of an earlier age in their grandeur and abstraction, and in their confident trans-historicism. Both monographs, in different ways, are seeking to find a new means of grounding literary criticism in reaction to the disempowerment and relativism which is perceived to be the legacy of postmodernism. In their introductions, both bring back to centre stage theoretical controversies that were a prominent feature of scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s (their dynamics acutely observed by Don Fowler in his own *Greece & Rome* subject reviews of the period) but which have largely faded into the background; the new generation of Latinists tend to have absorbed insights of New Historicism and postmodernism without

[1] *Lucan and the Sublime. Power, Representation and the Aesthetic Experience*. By Henry J. M. Day. Cambridge Classical Studies. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. x + 262. Hardback £59.99, ISBN: 978-1-107-02060-3.

[2] *Poetic Autonomy in Ancient Rome*. By Luke Roman. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 380. Hardback £80, ISBN: 978-0-19-967563-0.