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GREEK LITERATURE SURVEYED

T. WHITMARSH: *Ancient Greek Literature*. (Cultural History of Literature.) Pp. viii + 284. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2004. Paper, £15.99, US$25.95 (Cased, £55, US$59.95). ISBN: 0-7456-2792-7 (0-7456-2791-9 hbk).

This is an attractively conceived and packaged survey of ancient Greek literature. Building on the most creative scholarship written in the last thirty years, the author has condensed and distilled it into a little over 200 pages. The result is a connected narrative that is a pleasure to read, informative, and approachable: it has something to offer any reader, from laymen to undergraduates to professional classical scholars. The writing is breezy and energetic, concealing its learning and the enormous task of synthesis that those who know the pre-texts are bound to admire.

The survey falls into three sections: 'Concepts', 'Contexts', and 'Conflicts'. 'Concepts' sets out the author's theoretical assumptions, and the usual suspects appear—Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida (in later sections: Barthes, Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Geertz, Lacan, Vernant)—nicely integrated into a series of short discussions about 'literature' as a concept, then how a literature is constructed by groups within cultures and the epistemological and political assumptions that subtend the idea of a literary tradition. The section ends with a brief consideration of how the texts that constitute the 'Greek literary tradition' were preserved, collected, transmitted, and translated. For Whitmarsh the text is not a fixed entity, but the result of continuous interpretation and reinvention. Writing against the tendency of the field to arrogate scientific objectivity to its construction of authentically accurate texts, he comments: 'the controlling metaphor for stemmatic criticism is genealogical: the family of manuscripts is conceived as a patriarchal dynasty. "Contamination" is, arguably, a highly judgemental term, implying an adulterous pollution of the bloodline' (p. 28). This observation captures the book's style—vivid, penetrating, and clever.

'Contexts' is organized chronologically, running from the conventional origin of Greek literature (Homer) to the ancient novel. The underlying assumption of this section is that the intertwined elements of performance and competition created literary communities. The first four chapters construct literary history in terms of the most significant performance venues for archaic and classical Greek culture—the festival, the symposium, the theatre, and the assembly and law courts. From the Homeric poems through the classical city-state that heroism (indeed, manhood) is performed and that competition was a 'zero-sum game' are familiar ideas. 'Power has no concrete existence: it needs to be evoked and displayed' (p. 41), and when it is displayed in texts we begin the process of creating a literature. In the next three

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chapters: 'Inventing the Archive', 'Building the Archive', and 'Reading the Archive', Whitmarsh extends these overarching assumptions about performance and competition into the Hellenistic and Roman periods, to the archive (competitive collecting) and *paideia* (competitive performance of education) as the salient elements in the creation of the Greek literary tradition. This is a surprisingly helpful schematic. He identifies prose writers like Herodotus as preservers of collective, social memory, self-consciously positioned against the unsystematic, irrational, and fleeting traditions of poetic (oral) performance. The textual 'performance' of the historians and medical writers displays the premises of its own habits of collection and its explicit expectations to be collected. Thucydides' *ktêma eis aei* is an artifact for storage and retrieval ('an *archival* text', p. 109) that sets itself against the ephemera of performance. Hellenistic Alexandria responds to the challenge by the creation of the library—that was both 'an architectural intertextuality with the Lyceum' (p. 126), that is, a replication on Egyptian soil of an Athenian invention, but also a political act—the Ptolemies enhanced their own stature by physically possessing the Greek literary past. 'Reading the Archive' is his deft assessment of the competitive creativity of *paideia* that sought to define (hence limit) and ended up extending who was or could be 'Greek'. Among his most illuminating examples of the process are of Romans out-Greeking the Greeks: Hadrian as 'little Greeky' (*Graeculus*) and Plutarch telling us that Numa was 'by far the Greeker lawgiver' (p. 143).

'Conflicts' takes up cultural identity, gender, sexuality, and status. Whitmarsh illustrates his argument with examples from a wide range of literary texts, though each chapter retains a chronological backbone. This section continues the themes of the previous two—how speech acts (codified as texts) create communities, but now rather more by exclusion than inclusion. Greek can be opposed to barbarian on the basis of speech; women, slaves, and those of low or no status characterized by silence (or lack of access to permissible venues for culturally sanctioned means of expression and transmission). It is by creating the 'other', however defined, that Greek identity and, by extension, Greek literature is formed. Although the basic arguments of the section were familiar, I found parts of it less than satisfactory, perhaps because the topics, although they have a literary dimension, are best understood when approached from historical and comparative anthropological or sociological perspectives, and clearly underwent a certain Procrustean pruning to fit into the survey's agenda. The chapter on women suffered the most in this respect. There is a large and sophisticated discourse on gender and sex-gender systems that has influenced modern gender theory. Most of what nuances the subject of women in antiquity had to be omitted or truncated in this chapter, the inevitable result of tackling the subject from the perspective of women only as they were represented in Greek literature and the fact that very few women can be numbered among its speaking voices.

Aside from this minor caveat, the book is a striking success. Whitmarsh gives us a powerful and integrated reading of the trajectory of Greek literature from its putative inception through its late 'classical' iterations. The brevity of the book works to great advantage: it sketches out a cogent line of thought without overburdening the reader with too many examples or digressions. Not many scholars could pull this off at all, let alone with such insight and charm. Whitmarsh's unified vision is far more intelligible, acute, and therefore usable, than the usual handbook-by-committee approach, which often resembles the seven blind men describing an elephant.

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