

Winter 2010

Critical Moments in Classical Literature [Review]

Lawrence Kim

Trinity University, lawrence.kim@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/class_faculty

Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Kim, L. (2010). [Review of the book *Critical moments in classical literature*, by R. Hunter]. *Hermathena*, 189, 131-135.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Classical Studies Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classical Studies Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

the cosmos (v) the self-revelation of the cosmos (vi) contemplation of heaven as way of approaching divine (pp. 225-6).

However, other categories are over-determined. Volk speaks of ‘... the expository problem of *how to break down Manilius’ poem into the expository categories that I have devised*’ (p. 12, my emphasis). For the sake of clarity, it seems we must squeeze this recalcitrant text into boxes. The definition of ‘didactic’, for instance, suffers from an excess of tidiness. On p. 178 the four criteria for didactic poetry are reproduced from Volk 2002: 34-43, the author concluding, ‘the *Astronomica* is a typical didactic poem according to this definition’. If it is students in particular at whom this book is aimed, such categories should be used with extreme caution. Time and again the present reader has seen in undergraduate essays the ready translation of the traits of didactic writing laid out in Volk 2002, from categories which *we* impose on ‘didactic’ texts, into categories within which *the poet* was working.

Ancient authors define themselves above all by their relationships *with works, not categories*. The problem with the ‘soft focus’ methodology is that, in interpreting antiquity, we need the individual, the detail in the picture. A pertinent example is Aratus’ relationship with Hesiod, through diction, form and substance, already recognized by Callimachus, who names Hesiod (*Epigram 27 Pfeiffer*). In giving a genealogy for Aratus, Callimachus specifies author, not genre. The relationship is with the author and his work; although genre may be implied, it is a construct imposed on the text to cue the modern reader. By doing away with the imposition of external (modern) definitions, we are left exposed to the intertexts the poem uses to construct *itself*. Such a position is more vulnerable but more rigorous. It is the job of Classicists to present through close reading the recalcitrance of our texts, and let the reader face their contradictions in freefall.

EMMA GEE
University of St Andrews

Critical Moments in Classical Literature: Studies in the Ancient View of Literature and its Uses.

RICHARD HUNTER.

Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Pages: vii + 217. Price: £50.00 (US\$95.00).

ISBN: 978-0-521-51985-4.

Critical Moments in Classical Literature is a curious book; deeply learned, elegantly written, and filled with subtle observations on a vast array of texts, but also somewhat diffuse, elusive, and in the end frustrating. On the face of it, the subtitle, *Studies in the Ancient View of Literature and its Uses*, is a good

description of the book's six chapters, each focused on a text constituting a 'critical moment' in ancient literary criticism: (1) Aristophanes' *Frogs*, (2) Euripides' *Cyclops*, (4) Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *On Imitation*, (5) Longinus' *On the Sublime*, and (6) Plutarch's *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry*. The one exception is (3) 'Comic Moments', which looks at Plutarch's *Comparison of Aristophanes and Menander* and Horace's *Satires*. Upon closer inspection, however, the chapters range much more widely than the titles suggest and reference a far more expansive roster of writers: not only Plato and Aristotle (as one might expect), but also the author of the *On Style* attributed to 'Demetrius', the Homeric scholia, Apollonius of Rhodes, Aulus Gellius, Quintilian, and many others. Moreover, the frequent cross-references to critics who are the focus of other chapters (especially Dionysius, 'Longinus', and Plutarch) creates the sense of a densely interwoven network of literary critical ideas.

This amalgam of critics and material is essential to Hunter's aim – to suggest 'a more fruitful way of studying critical traditions than the more usual narrative history ...' by showing 'how themes and ideas constantly reappear over time and in different genres' (p. 8). The literary-critical 'themes and ideas' that Hunter traces in the book are those initially (at least for us moderns) raised in *Frogs*; here again Hunter is less interested in 'trying to establish clear lines of descent' to the subsequent tradition than in 'seeing whether patterns of similarity can have an explanatory power for both the comedy and the later texts' (pp. 2-3). To this end, in the excellent first chapter Hunter identifies several interrelated critical dichotomies that inform the debate between Aeschylus and Euripides in *Frogs*, and links them to later formulations: the poet's social and moral responsibility vs. the desire for mimetic realism; impressively grandiose characters and subject matter vs. ordinary, down-to-earth ones; a magnificent, but sometimes obfuscatory, verbal style vs. a more clear, simple, and normal manner; "greatness of genius" versus "technical proficiency" (p. 50) (less persuasive is Hunter's speculation that nascent ideas about *psuchagogia* and fictionality are reflected in Euripides' critiques of Aeschylus' irrationality).

The rest of the book expands upon the observations of the opening chapter, but rather than use the various topics identified there as his framework, Hunter structures his chapters around certain later texts that show the influence of ideas adumbrated in *Frogs*, reference to which recurs, like a *leitmotif*, throughout the volume. It is hard not to be impressed by the breathtaking rapidity and remarkable aplomb with which Hunter leaps from text to text. Take the section entitled 'Polish Without Flaws' (pp. 160-8), which concludes the chapter on 'Longinus' (whom Hunter refers to as 'L'). Hunter's starting point is the 'famous discussion' of the difference between 'sublime' writers who admit 'flaws' and the flawless but essentially 'small [writer]' (p. 160): e.g., Homer vs. Apollonius, Sophocles vs. Ion of Chios,

Plato vs. Lysias. Hunter begins by pointing to parallel formulations in Hellenistic and Roman debates about the relative contributions of 'art' and 'nature' to poetry, and particularly to the frequent contrasts made by critics opposing an 'artistic' to a 'natural' author: Cicero on Demetrius of Phalerum vs. Pericles, Quintilian on Virgil vs. Homer. At this point, the topic abruptly shifts to the 'flaws' referred to by L, which Hunter sees foreshadowed in Euripides' criticisms of Aeschylus in the *Frogs*. L's primary example, however, is Plato, whose 'flaws' of stylistic excess had led the critic Caecilius of Caleacte to prefer Lysias. Hunter then takes us through Dionysius of Halicarnassus' critique of Plato, and a series of ancient comments on Lysias by Dionysius, Quintilian, and Plutarch. A final change of gear finds Hunter identifying an implicit differentiation in L between 'unpardonable' errors and those 'inevitable in great, risk-taking writing' (p. 166) that he traces back (with a quick side glance at Sch. bT *Il.* 17.673-5) to Aristotle's well known typology of poetic 'faults' in *Poetics* 25. Aristotle's discussion of 'scientific' errors, such as biological inaccuracies, leads Hunter back to another work judged 'flawless' but not sublime by L, Eratosthenes' *Erigone*, and some brief remarks on the Hellenistic poets' concern to avoid mythological and scientific errors.

In a space of nine pages, then, L's idea of the flawed sublime's superiority over 'polish without flaws' has inspired Hunter to take his readers on a whirlwind tour through the ancient critical tradition and also to demonstrate, impressively, the recurrence and persistence of the ideas across a range of genres, texts, and authors. But I don't think I will be the only reader who might have preferred a more coherent account of the precise relations between the concepts expressed in such a variety of texts. For instance, the 'flaws' of Aeschylus (unclarity) and Plato (stylistic excess) are, as Hunter acknowledges, not of the same type, nor are they related to Aristotle's 'scientific' errors; Plutarch's reference to Lysias seems related but not the same as Dionysius and Quintilian's. A broad similarity links these citations, to be sure, but it is the subtle differences in thought that are arguably of more interest, and that deserve to be charted in a more systematic fashion.

A related concern is that the focus on resemblances risks losing sight of the larger aims of each critic. A case in point: the lengthy analyses in ch. 4 of the two famous anecdotes on *mimesis* preserved in Dionysius' fragmentary *On Imitation*, which Hunter quotes in full. He sees Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium* lurking behind both passages, particularly in regard to Dionysius' concept of 'the beautiful' and his use of 'reproductive' language. Whether or not one accepts his claims, it is a little strange that Hunter makes no attempt to explain why Dionysius might have been channeling Plato, nor how this fits into the *anti-platonic* point Dionysius is clearly trying to make about the superiority of 'artificial' *mimesis* over anything nature can produce on her own. Instead, Hunter is content to identify resemblances of imagery

between the two texts, without taking into account the very different goals for which such imagery is deployed. While intertextual readings like these cohere with Hunter's desire to treat critical texts more like 'literature' and less like treatises (pp. 7-8; cf. 168), the theoretical underpinnings of such an approach need to be set out more cogently; otherwise it will, understandably, encounter stiff resistance from more 'traditional' scholars of ancient literary criticism (cf. the review of A. Ford, *AJP* 131 [2010], 703-6).

To some degree, the imprecision is abetted by Hunter's well known 'essayistic' style (cf. D. Konstan, review of R. Hunter, *On Coming After: Studies in Post-classical Greek Literature and its Reception* [Berlin and New York, 2008], *BMCR* 2010.03.08). Hunter tends to work via association, rather than argument; a passage in one author reminds him of another, which he connects to a different author's text and another's, after which he might return to a different passage in the original text and so on. While such a method certainly gets across the sense of a complex network of conceptual similarities threaded through ancient texts and is ideal for appending Hunter's characteristically incisive (if sometimes peripheral) observations, it can also leave the reader a bit disoriented. The relative lack of signposting doesn't help; throughout the book, I often felt at a loss as to where I was, where I was going, and where I had come from. This is not to say that the trip hadn't been pleasant, nor that a number of interesting sights had not been pointed out on the way, but precisely *to what end* I had undertaken it was not always apparent.

For instance, I would have appreciated a hint or two at the beginning of ch. 5 that the bulk of it would not actually be about Longinus, but Apollonius of Rhodes and other epic poets, who are examined 'with the Longinian sublime in mind ...' (p. 150) in order to make sense of L's remark that, while Apollonius was 'an impeccable poet', he was not sublime like Homer (33.4). Hunter's observations on epic, as always, are astute, but it is not immediately evident what the point of the discussion is. Is it to show that L is responding to the Hellenistic poets' own reactions against Homeric epic? Or rather that the Hellenistic poets were reacting to similar views of the sublime upon which Longinus was drawing? By the end of this section, I found myself wondering why this chapter focused on L at all, and not, as might make more sense, on the notions of 'greatness' and 'smallness' in ancient criticism.

In fact, the book is at its best when Hunter explicates the intertexts of a single, relatively brief work that possesses a clear affinity with *Frogs*: his sensitive, brilliant reading of Dio Chrysostom's *Or.* 52, a comparison of the three canonical tragedians' versions of *Philoctetes* (pp. 38-48), demonstrates how much Dio's appraisal of Aeschylus and Euripides owes to Aristophanes, as well as the way in which it 'mirrors, and is shaped by, the works it discusses'. A similarly elegant and trenchant analysis is devoted to Plutarch's

Comparison in the beginning of ch. 3. Here, Hunter demonstrates that Plutarch's opposition of Aristophanes and Menander, which associates the former with vulgarity, demagoguery, and excess, turns Aristophanes' critique of Euripides back against the comic poet; the irony is that 'it is comedy itself which had constructed the basic distinction which Plutarch turns against one of its greatest practitioners' (p. 80).

Too often, however, the sheer quantity and exuberance of Hunter's comments overwhelm the reader and obfuscate the larger thesis lurking in the background. In ch. 6, on Plutarch's *How the Young Man Should Listen to Poetry*, Hunter moves methodically through the text, taking each Homeric passage examined by Plutarch in turn, comparing it to other interpretations put forward in antiquity, and demonstrating the depth of Plutarch's implicit dialogue with Plato's criticisms of Homer in the *Republic*. But his discussions take on a life of their own, transporting us far from Plutarch's text; in fact, the chapter often seems like a commentary transformed into running prose (cf. the subsequently published 'Green and Yellow': R. Hunter and D. Russell (eds.), *Plutarch: How to Study Poetry* [Cambridge, 2011]).

A good point of contrast is the first chapter of Tim Whitmarsh's *Greek Literature in the Roman Empire* ('Repetition: The Crisis of Posterity', *Greek Literature in the Roman Empire* [Oxford, 2001], 41-89), which examines three of the texts appearing in Hunter's book: those by Dionysius, Plutarch, and Longinus. Whitmarsh, however, focuses on a single issue common to these texts – the question of *mimesis* – and tracks how each author attempts, in very different ways, to recuperate the idea of *mimesis* from its celebrated battering at the hands of Plato. We learn how a problem articulated in the Classical period was dealt with by later critics, and more importantly, understand what was at stake in this recuperation for Greek Imperial culture. It is this sensitivity to the way later critics redefine and reappropriate the apparently similar critical language and formulations of their predecessors for contemporary purposes, as part of larger critical projects, that appears only intermittently in Hunter's essays. The individual chapters are filled with insightful observations on countless ancient critical passages; it is a shame that the structure and organization of this book will render it difficult for students and scholars to mine its riches.

LAWRENCE KIM
Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas