

10-2011

Some Homeric Hymns [Review]

Corinne Ondine Pache
Trinity University, cpache@trinity.edu

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



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Pache, C. (2011). Some Homeric hymns. [Review of the book *Three Homeric Hymns. To Apollo, Hermes, and Aphrodite*, by N. Richardson]. *Classical Review*, 61(2), 360-361. doi:10.1017/S0009840X11000722

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.

SOME HOMERIC HYMNS

RICHARDSON (N.) (ed.) *Three Homeric Hymns. To Apollo, Hermes, and Aphrodite. Hymns 3, 4, and 5*. Pp. xvi + 272, ill., maps. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Paper, £19.99, US\$34.99 (Cased, £55, US\$99). ISBN: 978-0-521-45774-3 (978-0-521-45158-1 hbk).

doi:10.1017/S0009840X11000722

R. offers a new edition of *Hymns* 3, 4 and 5. The volume follows the typical Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics format and includes a broad discussion of the Homeric *Hymns*, individual introductions for each hymn discussed, a section on the Homeric *Hymns* and Hellenistic poetry, a chapter on the transmission of the text, and three maps. R.'s text is based on previous editions, and he uses Càssola's apparatus criticus as his 'base' (p. 33). In his general introduction, R. elegantly deals with questions of dating, authorship, the order of the poems and their function as preludes. The individual introductions for *Hymns* 3, 4 and 5 offer excellent summaries and discussions of the poems' structure and themes, and R. thoroughly and admirably presents the ancient testimonia.

R. is at his strongest and most compelling in the Introduction and where he considers the *Hymns* in comparison with other poetry and places them within their historical and religious contexts. No parallels between the *Hymns* and Homeric, lyric and Hellenistic poetry go unmentioned, and discussions of parallels with ancient Near Eastern myth and the religious background in particular present a welcome improvement over such now outdated works as Allen, Halliday and Sikes's *Homeric Hymns*. The commentary is ostensibly directed 'primarily at undergraduate and graduate students', as per CUP's description of the series, but, to judge by the paucity of notes devoted to explaining difficult grammar and vocabulary, R. assumes a reader who has already mastered Homeric forms and syntactical quirks. Even when providing explanations, R. can be rather cryptic, as in his discussion of the adjective *χαροπός* at *Hermes* 194, which 'later came to be used as a colour word of eyes'. Does R. not believe, as the consensus seems to be, that it means light blue or grey, or does he assume that the reader already knows which colour is denoted by this word?

Another problem is a certain reluctance to treat these poems as literary artefacts that require interpretation. What, to begin with, is the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* about? Like Andrew Faulkner in his recent edition of the *Hymn*, R. revives the idea that it is meant as praise poetry for descendants of Aeneas. I am not alone in finding this notion unconvincing, but, even were it the case that the poem is a kind of genealogical eulogy, is this really all there is to be said about this wonderful meditation on the tangled web linking mortals and immortals and the ambiguities of desire, seduction and love? R. states in the preface that he kept his commentary on *Aphrodite* brief because of the recent publication of Faulkner's edition, but one would expect more discussion of other interpretations of this poem. R. alludes briefly (on 247–51) to Clay's theory that the *Hymn* describes how Aphrodite lost the power to join gods and human beings, and concludes that her understanding of these lines 'is not a necessary interpretation of the text'. Agreed, but this hardly does justice to Clay's argument (which is not simply about these lines but about the meaning of the *Hymn to Aphrodite* as a whole), and the discussion stops before it begins; the reader is given no sense of the very different approaches other scholars have taken to this poem (de Jong's and Bergren's essential articles appear in the

bibliography, but their interpretations of the poem are ignored in the commentary, where Bergren is cited once on a matter of detail on the *Hymn to Apollo* [140] and de Jong is not mentioned at all).

This silence turns out to be typical. R. is not only often unwilling to present his own or other scholars' opinions on difficult passages, but he sometimes elides the questions themselves. About the famously confusing sequence of tenses in the opening of the *Hymn to Apollo*, R. states, 'the shift to aorist and past tenses is paralleled elsewhere in opening or closing scenes of hymnic type' (p. 82). This may be a fact, but it is not a satisfactory elucidation of what is happening in this particular episode. R. is characteristically hesitant to take a position on matters that are open to debate, but here he silences the debate itself with an assertion that ignores both the real difficulties of this passage and some of the most interesting answers that have been suggested to solve them (Egbert Bakker's 'Remembering the God's Arrival' in *Arethusa* 35 immediately comes to mind).

I am sure that R. knows full well the secondary literature on the *Hymns* he selected for his commentary, and so his silence on these issues has to be interpreted as a statement of sorts, which seasoned scholars will understand as the dismissal that it must be. But this raises the question of the work's nature and purpose. The students who will be the primary audience for this text are, by definition, not equipped to know what is missing. Finally, R.'s over reliance on his edition of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* can make for a frustrating experience. Readers who want to know more about epiphany and the reactions it provokes in mortals, or the *Hymns*' traditional closing formula and its possible interpretation, to take just two examples, are repeatedly sent to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. The new work is thus very much in dialogue with the earlier one, and while this will not be an issue for scholars who happen to have a copy of the 1974 edition on their shelves, its dialogic nature makes the book impossible to use in the classroom as a stand alone commentary (this problem is of course compounded by the prohibitive price of the earlier text).

This commentary, in summary, will be a welcome addition for scholars and advanced graduate students, especially those who are interested in parallels between these *Hymns* and other Greek authors and the historical and religious contexts of the poems, and who will use it in conjunction with R.'s earlier work on the *Hymn to Demeter*. Those looking for help on how to read and understand these poems and for pointers towards the most exciting recent interpretations of these works will have to wait, or look elsewhere, for guidance and inspiration.

Trinity University

CORINNE PACHE
corinne.pache@trinity.edu