BOOK REVIEW

Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus. By STEPHEN HALLIWELL. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 419. Hardcover, £79.00/$150.00. ISBN 978-019-957056-0.

The book under review "is not a monograph which systematically investigates a tightly circumscribed domain. It is a thematically linked set of essays which offer fresh, incisive readings of a series of major texts in the evolution of Greek poetics" (v). These major texts are the Homeric epics (Ch. 2), Aristophanes' *Frogs* (Ch. 3), Plato (esp. *Ion* and *Republic*, Ch. 4), Aristotle's *Poetics* (Ch. 5), Gorgias' *Helen*, Isocrates (various texts), Philodemus' *On Poems* (all Ch. 6) and Pseudo-Longinus' *On the Sublime* (Ch. 7). A summary of the book's arguments, though expected from a review, is virtually impossible. The generally formidable task of pressing several hundred pages into the straitjacket of a few sentences is made even harder (and also less appropriate) in the present case because the "project does not amount—and not only because of its selectiveness—to a history of Greek poetics or 'literary criticism'; in certain respects, it may emphasize why constructing such a history is so difficult" (vi). The qualification of the last clause is something of an understatement because Halliwell's trenchant readings regularly challenge attempts to distill a more or less unified and stable poetics from each of the texts in question. Such a unified poetics can only be gained, Halliwell repeatedly argues, when crucial counter-evidence is either glossed over or ignored altogether. By putting his finger on this destabilizing counter-evidence, Halliwell is keen to show that the true picture is in many cases less neat, less unified, more paradoxical, full of tensions, elusive, etc. than scholars would have it. It is important to note, however, that the untidy elusiveness is almost never seen as a flaw on the ancient author's part (excepting Isocrates and, perhaps, Philodemus) but as an important characteristic of poetry (or art in general) as such.

The following quotation, though dealing specifically with Plato, can be seen as representative for Halliwell's attitude in general. "Critics of Plato sometimes complain that this conjunction of ideas [sc. in *Republic* 10] is a weakness in the case that Socrates makes against poetry, a contradiction in Plato's supposed 'the-

ory of art' as a whole. I have suggested elsewhere, however, that it makes better sense to regard the anomaly as inherent in the practices of 'art' itself, where fabrication, pretence, and artifice are indeed at work, yet can become the vehicles of imaginatively compelling and emotionally irresistible experience. If there is a problem here, it is a problem for aesthetics in general, not an isolated flaw in the thesis of *Republic* 10" (201–2). The quotation is also apt to illustrate the overarching concept (encapsulated in the book's title *Between Ecstasy and Truth*), which the Preface describes as "a recurrent dialectic of Greek ideas between, on the one hand, a concern with poetry as a powerfully transformative agency which carries hearers or readers outside themselves … and, on the other hand, a tendency to judge poetry as a medium of truths 'to live by', a means of expressing thoughts and feelings which can help shape its audiences' views of the world" (vi; cf. Ch. 1).

As far as Plato is concerned, Halliwell argues in what is likely to be the book's most controversial chapter that the *Republic* too is indicative of this dialectic and thus not advocating a clear-cut ban on poetry. Chapter 2 on Homer persuasively qualifies the notion of the bard as a *maître de vérité* who simply lends his human mouth to the divine Muse. Part of the argument in favor of a strong emotional component rests on a remarkable reading of Achilles, Helen and Odysseus. The latter shares with the former two "not only a capacity but also a kind of need to contemplate the turning of his own life (and the world he has lived through) into song" (90). This is a thought-provoking idea, though one wonders to what extent it can be generalized, since it is hardly typical of regular audience members to see their own lives turned into song, at least not literally. Chapter 3 rejects unifying readings of the *Frogs*' notorious verdict in favor of Aeschylus. The verdict is unsatisfactory and is meant to be recognized as such: "a comic travesty—an illustration of how *not* to seek the 'truth' in poetry" (143).

In the chapter on Aristotle, Halliwell further develops ideas expounded in previous works, for instance, that the audience's response to poetry envisaged in the *Poetics* is a combination of moral and emotional reactions or that the notion of an "aestheticist" *Poetics* must be rejected. The cornerstone is a gripping analysis of the vexed chapter 25, which provides numerous insights, the most remarkable perhaps being "an important glimpse of Aristotle as a critical pluralist, even a *theorist* of critical pluralism" (221). Chapter 6 seeks to demonstrate how three prose authors essentially fail to get a hold on the elusive subject of poetry or poetics. In Gorgias' case the failure is a brilliant one, whereas Isocrates is credited with the "narrowed vision of a pragmatist" (285). The final chapter returns to the book's

overarching concept by exposing in *On the Sublime* "an elusive yet highly significant dialectic between the ideas of 'ecstasy' and 'truth'" (330).

Halliwell's analyses are always intelligent, sharp and illuminating, including the cases where readers will be unable to accept his "sometimes heterodox arguments" (vi) and conclusions. Several of these conclusions are essentially negative, with the possible consequence that some readers might feel a certain unease or frustration at the degree of uncertainty or paradoxicality that major texts in the evolution of Greek poetics appear to display.

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