

D. J. BUTTERFIELD and C. A. STRAY (eds.), *A. E. Housman Classical Scholar*. London: Duckworth, 2009. Pp. x + 288. Cloth, £50.00. ISBN: 978-0-715-63808-8.

“A. E. Housman was a startling phenomenon,” wrote C. O. Brink, phenomenal in what appears to everyone from A. S. F. Gow to Tom Stoppard as maintaining two vastly disparate personae in the same figure, as if he spent his days writing *poemata* with his left hand and *stemmata* with his right.¹ Stoppard’s Charon says to the embarking Housman, “poet and scholar sounded like two different people,”² but classicists know the name Callimachus and so can easily conceive of a scholar extraordinaire and a crafter of small gems of characteristic verse in the same skin. In fact, as this book reveals in rich and admiring detail, the overwhelming bulk of his life was spent preparing for and practicing (even from the depths of the Patent Office) his “trade” (Housman’s word), that of a “textual diviner” (also Housman’s words). The best of his poetry, *A Shropshire Lad* (1895), which “gestated” “during a period of mild ill health” (he had lost a protracted public battle with Postgate in 1895–6: see Hopkinson, 179), represents a relatively brief interval. So Brink gets his phenomenon just the wrong way round by dividing his study into “Life and Poetry” and “Critic and Scholar.”³ In fact his scholarship was his life; his poetry was something else.

Housman’s biographers have, to a man (women are not by and large fans of his poetry or criticism), set full sail into the biography of this figure with little more than a lay knowledge of his trade. Imagine writing a biography of Nabokov with only an amateur’s knowledge of butterflies, chess, or Russian. Imagine biographies of Yeats, William Carlos Williams, or Wallace Stevens that outsourced discussions of Irish politics, medicine, and the law. Yet “protobiographers,” (Carol Efrati’s word), like Keith Jebb in *A. E. Housman* (1992) and Jeremy Bourne in *The Westerly Wanderer* (1996), are more interested in which rentboys he considered the best in France than which manuscripts he thought the best in the Bodleian, and more serious authors have passed off discussions of Housman’s life-work to others: Richard Perceval Graves in *A. E. Housman: The Scholar Poet*

¹ C. O. Brink, *English Classical Scholarship* (Cambridge: James Clarke; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 150

² Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997) 2.

³ E.g., George L. Watson, *A. E. Housman: A Divided Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958); Norman Marlow, *A. E. Housman, Scholar and Poet* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

(1979) to an all-star committee comprised of Otto Skutsch, Shackleton Bailey, and George Goold, the latter also the sole re-assessor of Housman's scholarship in *A. E. Housman: A Reassessment*⁴ (and that limited to his Manilius); Norman Page's "critical biography" relies on the judgments of Bailey. At least these proto-biographers avoided the fate of Leslie Mitchell's recent biography of C. M. Bowra, which had little understanding of Bowra as a classicist.⁵

Thanks to this objective full-length assessment by leading text critics touching nearly every facet of the legendary scholarly career, no aspiring writer of a "definitive" biography of Housman⁶ can now approach his subject unaware that the genius he brought to his intermittent outbursts of poetry is not so different from the talents he brought to his day job. The editors have divided the subject matter into three parts: Housman and individual authors by those who have edited the same texts (Propertius by S. J. Heyworth, Manilius by E. Courtney, Juvenal by R. G. M. Nisbet, Lucan by S. P. Oakley, Ovid's *Ibis* by G. D. Williams, with essays on metre and prosody by Butterfield, and palaeography by M. D. Reeve); Housman and his fellow classicists in the era in which he said he was "forced to live" (the delicate sensibilities of Jebb by Stray, the dispute with Postgate by N. Hopkinson; the difference of approach to W. M. Lindsay by Butterfield, A. S. Hunt by L. Lehnus, and those addressed in his correspondence by J. H. C. Leach); to close, reflections on Housman's legacy by G. Luck, E. J. Kenney, and J. Diggle. By modestly aiming only "to describe in what his uniqueness consisted," these studies show how these important scholars practiced their philology with the master always before them. This volume is timely in two ways. First, it is late enough that none of the contributors ever laid eyes on Housman (though J. Diggle confesses to wearing his hat) and so have some distance from those wounded directly by his venomous disapproval or indirectly by what many consider his malign influence on the profession.⁷ Second, it is early enough in an age

⁴ Alan W. Holden and J. Roy Birch, eds., *A. E. Housman: A Reassessment* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000) 135.

⁵ G. W. Bowersock, "Unquiet Flows the Don," review of L. Mitchell, *Maurice Bowra: A Life*, in *The New Republic*, October 7, 2009, pp. 48–51

⁶ "[T]he definitive Housman biography is yet to be written": Carol Efrati, *The Road of Danger, Guilt, and Shame: The Lonely Way of A. E. Housman* (Madison & Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002) 16.

⁷ "[Housman] created within our literary studies a strange rarefied atmosphere of intellectual snobbery and so prevented the development within classics of a literary discipline which would produce not simply more scholars and textual critics but educated

in which textual criticism is in decline, that one cannot imagine such an assembly as this in fifty years, this number of accomplished text critics who can speak with such authority and experience of their *aemulationes* with this surpassing figure. To read these essays after attending random sessions at APA or Classical Association meetings is to have the vague sense of dinosaurs contemplating a Tyrannosaurus Rex in the days when their kind bestrode the earth.

There is some overlapping in these essays but no redundancy and there is no substantial disagreement between the contributors on their subject's faults and foibles. No less than five contributors discuss his well-known blast, "*Überlieferungsgeschichte* ... is a longer and nobler name than fudge."⁸ Lindsay's and Postgate's text criticism was a science which trusted that correct readings were nearly always present in some manuscript or other and were discoverable by sufficient collation and ascription of authority. Housman followed his "inspiration,"⁹ Hugh Munro (1819–85), editor of Lucretius (1864), in that palaeography was his assistant, not his master; he relied like a scientist on his own wit, learning, and intelligence, but like an artist on his imagination to uncover the "truth" (by which, Goold informs us, he meant "accuracy"), even if he had to make it up himself.¹⁰ Thus Housman calls his trade by the mantic phrase "textual diviner," just as his beloved Horace called himself a *vates*. He was no prisoner to method but addressed each *crux* as unique, helping to save British and German classics (in Bailey's view) from the slavish dependence on a chosen manuscript authority rather than the exercise of sensitivity and judgment by the textual critic. The problem is that Housman was an inimitable genius, and the young were more likely to be seduced by the passion of his invective than by the acquisition of the broad learning that led to his arrogance toward other distinguished men.¹¹

What the contributors understand (as Auden famously did not) is why Housman spent nearly half his three-score-and-ten on so "tedious" a poet as Ma-

men." J. P. Sullivan, "The Leading Classic of His Generation," in Christopher Ricks, ed., *A. E. Housman: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 161.

⁸ *M. Annaei Lucani Belli Civilis Libri Decem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1927) xiii.

⁹ Hopkinson's word, 181; see also Kenney, 256.

¹⁰ "The faintest of all human passions is the love of truth." *M. Manilii Astronomicon Liber Primus* (London: Grant Richards, 1903) xliii. See Goold, n. 4 above.

¹¹ "It may be that textual criticism at its highest demands a combination of talents and knowledge beyond any other classical activity." L. P. Wilkinson (not a text critic), in Marlow, *A. E. Housman Scholar and Poet* (n. 2 above) 41.

nilius:¹² Housman's "technical interest" in Manilius was the same as Ted Williams's technical interest in Fenway Park: it offered him a ground on which to compete against the best. Housman could strap on his elastic-sided boots and dig in against Bentley and Scaliger, the only men he considered his equals (he never claimed superiority to them); that the playing field was often messy and irregular was irrelevant.

Tanto ingenii acumine tantis doctrinae copiis
Editorum socordiam
Tam acri cavillatione castigavit
Ut horum studiorum paene reformator exstiterit.

Thus A. S. F. Gow on the memorial plaque in Trinity College, Cambridge, with which none of the contributors to this enlightening volume will disagree. With Gow's next line the duality issue begins: "idem poeta."¹³ These contributors largely shy away from the issue, but thanks to them we are better able than ever to confirm George Goold's view that "the characteristics of his scholarship are reflected in his poetry and vice versa;" the poet and scholar wore not two but the same *calotte*.¹⁴ Housman helps us in a letter to the classics-loving American poet Witter Bynner in 1903: "My trade is that of professor of Latin in this college: I suppose that my classical training has been of some use to me in furnishing good models, making me fastidious, and telling me what to leave out."¹⁵ Perhaps the kind of truth we faintly seek in Housman is not his accurate transcriptions and brilliant conjectures but the fictions of his Shropshire, an area he knew not well, with its aggrieved adolescents, its mortal seasons, and its comforting malt. Nevertheless the same romantic sensibility scrupulously but hopelessly pursued both the error-free text in one realm and the perfect expression of human agony in the other. This volume is a giant step toward filling in the imperfect portrayals of

¹² Auden's words. F. L. Lucas compared Housman's editing Manilius to Apollo picking the oakum of Admetus: "divinely—but oakum" (*ibid.*).

¹³ Gow said, "There is ... a real link between the critic of Latin texts and the poet and poetry-lover": *A. E. Housman* (New York: Macmillan, 1936) 35.

¹⁴ Housman's, acquired after an accident required the partial shaving of his head, was of black velvet and "brightly embroidered with multicoloured silk threads in a floral pattern," with "a rich tassel of similar threads."

¹⁵ Henry Maas, ed., *The Letters of A. E. Housman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) 65.

Housman's life that we have had so far, and does much indirectly to help with the vexing question of "duality." Perhaps there are further clues in his scant but masterly translations, where his scholarship and poetry combine.¹⁶ Or maybe the "definitive biography" will be written by an accomplished and gifted poet who is an equally accomplished and gifted philologist. *But whaur's Douglas Young?*

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¹⁶ B. Otis, "Housman and Horace: A Cautionary Essay on Early 20th Century Literary Criticism and on the General State of Classical Scholarship Today," *Pacific Coast Philology* 2 (April 1967) 5–24.