

Recognizing Persius. By KENNETH J. RECKFORD. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. x + 240. Cloth, \$45.00 / £30.95. ISBN 978-0-691-14141-1.

Don't even think of recognizing Persius from the gaunt Louvre Chrysippus glowering from the dust jacket; and as a likeness of Kenneth Reckford, forget it, that's just as bad a joke. Persius surfed briefly on the youth surge of glitzy Neronian Rome; R. is the old-and-new emeritus of Chapel Hill, playing drama queen down the decades and perennially funsome. Neither of *them* match the icon. Pooh, Oz and Tolkien have kept as firm a grip on R.'s literary soul as the grand chain Homer-Virgil-Dante-Eliot-Housman. Trying to get Old Comedy right on stage as a student kicked off a life project in and on theatre, taking in Euripides and Plautus, translation, scholarship, teaching, direction, production, in thoroughgoing performativity. R. hasn't stopped getting Latin poetry to leap from the page and into everyone in the vicinity, and doesn't aim to any time soon. This latest instalment on the offbeat verse of the Roman satirists sits beside the *Horace* of 1969 (one product seeded by the 1957 PhD, *Horace, Augustan and Epicurean*), and I dare say R. has a *Juvenal* in his grasp; but dry old stick? Never.

It's easy to recognize in this perpolished *Persius* a teenager's formative induction into early '50s Harvard humanism, specifically inspired by Satire lectures from RAB (Robert A. Brooks), and then catalysed by (Cedric) Whitman, whence R.'s specially distinctive twist on artistic pedagogy through Aristophanes-accented theatricality. The 1962 essay "Studies in Persius" has been a big landmark for me since I started in showbiz, and so it will be for Latinists to come, through its good-as-new incarnation as first chapter in the just published bulging volume *Persius and Juvenal* in the *Oxford Readings* series (edited by Maria Plaza, and hailed in Susanna Braund's introduction). *Recognizing Persius* represents the honed version of the *Martin Classical Lectures* of 1999, "In Search of Persius," retaining the title for the "Prologue" and the original quadripartition, but energetically re-thought since, in the book's final phase of gestation. Thus the notes for Chapter 2 at p. 193 n. 1 record in full the press reader's "critical advice," to stoke up the "performance theme" apparently then in danger of subsiding after Chapter 1: music indeed to R.'s ears! If R. were his own reviewer, he'd be honour-bound to let us know how much we readers are missing from the original gig at Oberlin; he always jovially loves up "presence," to the point where he might pass as less than enthused with verbal ebullience in the dance of print. Between them, revelling in the lecture-room scenario and packing away close reading into endnotes could risk suggesting

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that philology isn't where it's at—but that (if literary biography is back) would mean seriously mis-wrecognizing R.

The *Prologue* sets out the book's critical project. R. supposes there are such things as "cycles" in criticism. Recent postmodern distraction and fragmentation "may ... help us find our way back ... to a reconsideration of older, still vital questions about poetry and poets" (p. 10). Running past reader-response, reader-reception, and esp. performance theory leaves R. longing to "be there," juggling enjoyment at first encounter, letting Persius grow on him as both parties change through reengagement, and "...if we will just read Persius' *Satires* aloud as they were meant to be read..." (p. 13). It's R.'s privilege to decide what impact all the deals that've gone down since "that course back in Spring 1951" have made on his version of Persius, but I have to say right away that "specialists" won't miss the recuperative drive powering this "intuitive and empirical" presentation. R. has stayed receptive through the variously discomposing efforts submitted since he took those first steps towards what became body criticism ("Hogarthian scenes of decay, suffering, and death," p. 87), but the postulates re-emerge here just as was *olim*. To reward attention, the verse satirist must write a poet's poetry, belong in the company of Dryden, Pope, Gray, Eliot, and (you guessed) Housman. "What poets want, what they have always wanted, is immortality" (p. 42). All that jive. Let's write sincerity into self-improvement and through morally grounded spirit offer good-hearted readers the opportunity to re-appraise their own processes of self-recognition. Literature, art, civilization play with wit, charm, rhetoric, but they stage dramas of personal progression. Skits on cynicism, disgust, self-condemnation check us out, but phew, yep, they too shall subserve healthy, reflexive, self-awareness. The author is hero, the scholar plays stuntman, the audience takes heed, is entertained. Here's a feast, so imbibe.

There are easier texts to pick for this. Any novice author of convoluted satire gives you every chance to relish iconoclasm, bad ideas, sanctimonious malice; and at the same time to see through all this to smart sarcasm in swish verse specially tailored for a sophisticated market. The worst-case scenario could well be the writer who kicks off by staking his whole enterprise on recitative sketches deriding the institution of literary performance, including sketches like these. Surely this dis/agreeable dilemma puts authorship in double jeopardy, specially devised to quiz authoriality: what certainty would here sponsor "re-performance" as an exquisite ordeal-structure for the precious "integrity" of the writer-critic dyad? If *kinda* angry

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punks just starting out know they can only ever suck up to the patronal-professorial establishment, even when they step out and tell everyone so, then what price revulsion at implication? "There's nothing on the TV nothing on the radio that means that much to me | There's nothing on the TV nothing on the radio | that I can believe in | All my life | watching America | All my life | there's panic in America...." Dear boy!

RP is beautifully, persuasively, designed (and produced) [[1]]. Everything here is meant:

Chapter 1, *Performing Privately* runs us through *Satire 1*, with the *choliambics* orbiting around the entrée as *appendix 1*, to heave us through the pain-barrier of scepticism, and push through to a safe place where contact can be established for the fray. R.'s frankly "Modernist" Persius "pursues truth and integrity with a passionate self-honesty that is hard to follow" (p. 51). He talks us into talking his retreat from satire's dramatic stamping-ground out in the marketplace and actual habitat before invited glitterati audiences into the book we are reading, and into the paradoxical lifeline of dramatized "non-performance or metaperformance" of "non-poems," and dialogical authenticity actualized by our reading. R. dearly wishes he could be there, first time around, for what the *choliambics* promise (promised? will promise?) us, "a nonfoundation of critical judgement from which to read what follows"; and if only we could be there for his best recreation of the event ... He's just loved having people round, and around, poetry, to play, for real.

But we are, and he is, (t/here) and nothing is lost, unless you despair of books—whether you, a couple of you, maybe, read to yourself out loud, whether dramatically (in the mind's WiFi—"the private theater of your mind," p. 51) or for real. So many academics think they'd get closer to Rome if they could do it out loud: why keep up such a down on writing, writing as such? R. can show so many *ideas* intricately worked out through intertextual imagistic inventive friction, with Horace, of course, but also diatribe, Lucilius, and mainstream philosophy from Plato through Aristotle to Cicero—and *none* of it even faintly caught at the level of aural audibility or appreciation denied to graphematics. Have you *heard* the Eliot recording murder *The Wasteland*?

Chapters 2 and 3, *Seeking Integrity* and *Exploring Freedom*, present short and straightforward *Satires 2* and *4* as curtain-raiser cues to the definitive coruscations of *3* and *5*. First do the sermon, second apply

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it to self and speak from there, as weak-willed student, as grateful supervisee. (In *appendix 2*, R. goes most translucently preachy-didactic: “students ... people who, we might say, had taken their PhD ... a graduate student protests—he has been writing the most polished philosophical essays at the master’s direction...”, p. 100). Despair of your own regression through boyhood, grow up fast—so fast that your damnation of species and self acquire as you go the right to pontificate and self-valorize like some sage, some jumped-up sage. (“He tricks us, as a friend might, through his art into growing a little ourselves into self-awareness and personhood,” p. 112. Look behind you!) Say thanks to your guru, never resent *his* Chrysippian strictures, stand fortified against the frailties and temptations of mankind, beyond scathing *satire*. Call in the angels, so you (your Per-se-ius) can be one. (*Living in Truth* with Václav Havel, join an imaginary Roman scene where the poet recites in the gardens of martyr Thrasea, for samizdat freedom-daring bravery apt for “our own fearfully overcast days...”, p. 129).

Chapter 4, *Life, Death, and Art* writes the envoi, *Satire 6*, into an internal and internalized (epistolary so, I guess, mute) retrospect on the trajectory through the lifework *libellus*, as the record of an adolescence reaching for maturity, the dividend of graduation through satiric fire; before the book of *Saturae* is done, we’ve already made it here and out, to the haven of exceptionality, surviving stormy passage across “the challenge of personal growth and satire’s response to its almost universal failure” (p. 15: that “almost” ...!). To the haven from, apparently, not of, lunacy. R. has walked us through with chunks of poem with lively translation and exegesis deftly intercut with various contextualizing frames—*iambos* and diatribe, Augustine’s I, Epictetus’ chats Lucretian abyss, and, cometh the *hora*, cometh the man, Horace the byword for honesty, communicativity, and lyricism, in judicious doses; to put Persius up there, we never lose touch with eternal, Shakespearian, heights, and in particular theatre is there calling us always away from our poor old page, to listen “with understanding and enjoyment” to R.’s trademark Aristophanes, the poet, that is, who socks it to his following, so he can “voice a neo-Aristophanic protest against any and all spoilsport attitudes within himself, that might diminish his zest for life” (p. 150). In sum, “(if I may read between his closing lines)... : his business is to write honestly and well, for himself primarily, and then for whatever readers can and will appreciate honest satire—people who can listen, and understand, and maybe in some measure be healed by the further catharsis that this satire, like the Old Comedy long before it, has to offer” (p. 159).

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R.'s "Epilogue" formally wraps up the package, bringing on Juvenal (1, 2, 7, 10) to play the role of *another* "strong reader" who "can still bring us back to Persius with renewed appreciation" (p. 15). Reckognize him?

"I wonder: has the time come round to pay renewed attention to the author?" (p. 16). No, times change; they don't come round. On my reckoning, that is an ideological myth. Behind the "implied author" Persius, right where R. neatly locates the imperious "implicated" author, that's where to find implicated *readers*, sparking all manner of sceptical fractiousness. In the name of disintegrative, disaffective, disenchanting "yoof" who won't be told what they mean, even by themselves, let alone by the likes of us. ("His own right growth as a person," indeed!; p. 150). I agree Rome had a really good one: don't miss him.

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[[1]] There are one or two false stops, pp. 68, 92, 134; Oakley gets the wrong initials; after the frisson pilgrimage to Etruscan Volterra and the Museo, with R.'s Muse, plus Lawrence and Terrenato in tow, I was expecting to meet Aules, not Aulus: pp. 130, 172.