

BOOK REVIEW

Classicism and Christianity in Late Antique Latin Poetry. By PHILIP HARDIE. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019. Pp. viii + 293. Hardback, \$49.95. ISBN: 978-0-520-29577-3.

For almost a century, one of the key critical imperatives in Late Latin studies has been to defend against devaluations of its literature. Yet while the extensive efforts to challenge paradigms of literary “decline and fall” in Late Antiquity have been largely successful, they have also collectively inculcated a set of critical tactics and instincts that have proven somewhat limiting for the field. On the one hand, the concern to demonstrate Late Latin literature’s appeal has often entailed demonstrations of its intimate allusive connections to the Golden Age of Augustan literature and to Virgil above all. As a result, one not infrequently finds scholars explaining late antique literary texts backwards to classicists by treating them as receptacles in a unilateral process of classical reception. On the other hand, the same anxiety has motivated strong interest in literary-historical periodization among students of Late Latin. Experiments in defining a comprehensive late antique aesthetic have been simultaneously fruitful and frustrating: generative of discoveries and reappraisals of distinctive textual patterns, but sometimes at the expense of an appreciation for subtle shifts, delicate changes, and aesthetic repetition in the continuum of Latin literature.¹

Philip Hardie’s *Classicism and Christianity in Late Antique Latin Poetry*—a monograph that emerges in expanded form from the author’s 2016 Sather Lectures at UC Berkeley—provides fresh roads out of these well-worn ruts in the field of late antique poetics. It does so by carefully elucidating, over the course of eight thematically arranged chapters, intricate and multidimensional forms of continuity between classical and late antique Latin poetry, and by attending to the mutually informative relationships that obtain between 4th- and 5th-century poets and their predecessors.

¹ For a complementary review of the state of late antique poetic criticism, but which does not cover the text presently under consideration, see Cillian O’Hogan, “Thirty Years of the ‘Jeweled Style’” *JRS* 109 (November 2019), 305-314.

Hardie's analyses, performed through perspicacious and erudite close readings, revolve around two main questions: whether and how Christian and non-Christian texts respond differently to an earlier poetic tradition, and whether late antique poets revise and repurpose their literary inheritance with distinctly late antique poetics. The most significant advances Hardie makes in this volume result from his pursuit of the second of these lines of inquiry. After laying the groundwork for his approach in a multi-faceted opening chapter on the famous back-and-forth between Ausonius and Paulinus of Nola, Hardie turns to the more nuanced subject of "Virgilian Plots" in Chapter 2. Here Hardie expands the search for intertextual connectivity between late antique and Virgilian poetry, often focused on the imitation of individual verses and phrases, to include "the story lines of the *Aeneid*" (45). His readings show how late antique poets re-scripted key structural patterns of Virgil's epic—plots of exile and return, destruction and renewal—to give expression to late Roman and Christian ideologies of empire (in the case of Claudian and Prudentius), as well as to schematize private life (in the case of Paulinus of Nola and Rutilius Namatianus). Hardie goes on to illustrate how these plots often come with attached poetic idioms, rhetorical procedures, and thematic preoccupations. In Chapter 4, for instance, Hardie convincingly argues that the late antique fixation with the *concordia-discors* opposition, while linked to political tensions surrounding the empire's split and threats of heresy, was often enacted in verse with reference to the Augustan-age aesthetic of unity-in-diversity (126). Similarly, in Chapter 5 Hardie shows how ideologies of renewal and a flourishing poetics of novelty among late antique authors operated with rhetorical protocols (e.g. *Kontrastimitation* through Lucretius) and symbols (e.g. the image of an aged *Roma*, and the phoenix) already used by classical poets to animate an interest in *renovatio*. Hardie's ambitious investigation into allegorical poetics in Chapter 7 contends along similar lines that, while some of the theological work of Christian poets like Prudentius in the *Psychomachia* owes to patristic exegetical practices, "the ways in which the text articulates and connects the various levels [of meaning] are comparable to the workings of the *Aeneid*"; even more strongly, Hardie argues that Prudentian "forms of allegory specific to Christianity are grafted onto Virgilian practices" (208). In these chapters, Hardie therefore widens the parameters of investigation into intertextual affiliations so that the central questions are not simply about borrowed language. Instead, Hardie develops powerful modes for exploring bilateral relationships between classical and late antique poetry in terms of rhetorical dynamics, plot, and imagistic techniques. His interest is not only in understanding the

Virgilian aspects of any given late antique poem, but also in answering (to use one of his own clever formulations as an example): “How Prudentian is the *Aeneid*?” (190).

One notable feature of Hardie’s work is his restraint from over-synthesizing his findings or rehearsing a common polemic across the book. Content to let his close readings speak for themselves at most points, Hardie *shows* rather than *tells* his readers how complex, idiosyncratic and paradoxical late antique poetry’s reuse and innovation of past models can be. To this reviewer’s eye, his methodical juxtaposition of close readings has one striking effect: the production of a mosaic style of criticism that exemplifies for the reader one of the exact aesthetic modes the book critiques. In Chapter 8, Hardie thoroughly rethinks the mosaic metaphor often leveraged in attempts to evaluate late antique poetics, for better or worse. Critics have deployed the concept of the mosaic to emphasize late antique literature’s obsession with the fragment, its connections with visual art and its rhetorical artificiality, among other phenomena. For Hardie, though, the most useful feature of the mosaic model as an application for reading late antique poetry seems to be its “double optic” (229). The mosaic operates in a state of duality, at once both whole and in pieces, and therefore defiant of a single way of viewing. Hardie uses the image of the mosaic to remind critics that their readings of late antique verse likewise hinge on “a matter of perspective, of what one attends to, and what one sees” (249). Readers of this book will find themselves rewarded with similar choices between dazzling perspectives: whether to focus on classical source texts revealed in new contexts, or to reflect on how late antique verses recalibrate our interpretations of their sources; whether to focus on the fineness of Hardie’s mesmerizing close readings, or to appreciate their smooth arrangement into the whole of this impressive contribution to the study of late antique poetics.

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