



SUBJECT REVIEWS

Greek literature

How do we read Greek literature? In the original language or in translation? With a theoretical lens or without? Bringing in our modern perspectives or trying to track ancient approaches? Identifying with characters or exercising supposed academic detachment? How we read Greek texts affects what we read in those texts. And who we are affects how we read. A number of recent publications prompt us to interrogate our reading practices by drawing on theories ancient and modern and reflecting on who we are and how entangled we are with other entities (from the objects we use to the poetry we embody to the narratives in which we are immersed).

Jonathan L. Ready's book, *Immersion, Identification, and the Iliad*, is personal.¹ It invites introspection. Who do you identify with in the *Iliad*? 'I used to lament what I called the students' desire to find characters they would want to have a beer with. . . I now see my mistake.' 'Talking with students about how they find themselves drawn into the storyworld and about how they identify with the characters validates their actual responses to the poem' (251). If we allow and indeed encourage immersion in and identification with the *Iliad*, 'we give them the chance to like the poem on their own terms'. But this is not to simplify our readings, nor is it limited to undergraduate study. On the contrary, Ready offers an extremely nuanced and detailed examination of how identification and immersion work, drawing on the latest research from across narrative studies. He showcases all manner of identifications, from perceptual, cognitive, and affective to motivational and epistemic, and of immersion that might be temporal, spatial, or emotional. We are drawn in by physical descriptions, by time spent with a character, by side-taking. Crucially, we do not have to *relate* to characters in order to identify with them. We can identify with the gods, for instance, whether generally in the sense that the external audience might share a gods'-eye view of 'detached appreciation' (113) enabling cognitive identification; or in specific moments such as the deception of Zeus in *Iliad* 14 when the poet takes us into Hera's mind and keeps us there for thirteen lines, engaging us in what she sees, feels, and thinks; or in the case of certain characters such as Thetis, a 'plurimedial' and 'transtextual' character whose maternal concerns have an eternal resonance (the repeated references to Achilles' death throughout the poem are a way to see through Thetis' eyes). By pointing out the criteria for (or features that facilitate) identification and immersion in a range of Iliadic passages, Ready shows not only that the *Iliad* is immersive but also *how* the poem encourages such strong engagement.

¹ *Immersion, Identification, and the Iliad*. By Jonathan L. Ready. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. ix + 306. Hardback £83, ISBN: 978-0-192-87097-1.

What, then, do we bring to the text? First, Ready argues that the moral framework within which we are working when we identify with characters in a text is both that of the storyworld and our own (30). We find contact points, cross-overs, moments of understanding – though importantly these do not need to be constant, consistent, or wholesale (we can take sides in the Achilles/Agamemnon quarrel on the basis of honour dynamics without having to condone the passing around of war slaves). Second, ‘undergraduate students reading the epic in translation are far more likely than their professors to experience identification and immersion’ (251). This is a crucial point in terms of accessibility. Yes, Ready offers detailed philological readings of the Greek text at the micro level, and this advances our understanding of the poem, but he also makes clear that Homer is not just for the specialist, and indeed the non-specialist (or at least, the non-Greek-reader) can bring something equally valuable to the text. When we read Greek literature in translation we are more likely to approach it as something like *Game of Thrones* (Ready’s example), allowing ourselves to be drawn into the storyworld. And with a wave of new high-profile translations and popular literary interpretations of the Homeric epics and their characters, now is the time to encourage any and all access points to Classics rather than insisting on hierarchies of engagement: it might just save Classics one day. Third, and perhaps most important, we can bring multiple facets of ourselves in all our intersectional complexity. One of Ready’s key points is that ‘demographic similarity and self-concepts do not determine with which characters we identify’ (133). The political risks of identification (pigeon-holing oneself under one characteristic; colluding with those in power; perpetuating our own oppression) are mitigated by the fact that identification is only ever partial, temporary, and oscillating. Identification does not necessarily reify our identities: it might actually allow us to explore different aspects of ourselves (131–42).

As Ready shows, consideration of identification and immersion (that is, questions of how we read, and engagement with texts on a personal level) can provide the perfect lead-in to critical theory (252). Of everyone in Greek epic, I would want to get a beer with Pandora. What that says about me, I am not too sure – but it does mean that I want to learn more about her, through whatever theoretical lenses are available and applicable, using scholarship both ancient and modern. Jonas Grethlein’s book, *Ancient Greek Texts and Modern Narrative Theory. Towards a Critical Dialogue*, starts us off with a relatively comfortable theory: (structuralist) narratology, ‘one approach that even conservative Classicists have embraced’ (1).² Narratology is technical, descriptive, ‘non-threatening’ (2), though sometimes criticized for the formalism that can make it seem ‘antiseptic’ (2). Narratology is best seen as a tool that propels the reader to further interpretation, rather than an end in itself – and indeed this is the case for many theoretical approaches. As Grethlein puts it, ‘Theories are neither legitimate nor illegitimate per se; they serve heuristic functions – their value depends on the questions raised and the texts to which they are applied’ (15). Theories cannot be imported indiscriminately, but need to be used critically, and Grethlein critiques the narratological approach because of its formulation on readings chiefly of modern

² *Ancient Greek Texts and Modern Narrative Theory. Towards a Critical Dialogue*. By Jonas Grethlein. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. viii + 199. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-109-33959-9.

novels. It ‘epitomizes our general tendency to view texts through the lens of our own time’ (6). This is not in itself a problem (I refer back to Jonathan RReady: we can and do bring ourselves and our times to our readings), but in terms of heuristic methodologies it does need to be flagged, acknowledged, and handled with awareness.

The key question in this book could be formulated as: what is *specific* to how ancient Greek narrative works? Grethlein tackles the question through a combination of modern narrative theory and ancient literary criticism, a triangulation that allows him to zero in on the fault lines ‘where the ancient sense of narrative does not map onto our categories’ (13). Ready, too, incorporates ancient perspectives, as ‘Some readers may feel more comfortable with the application I propose if they can be shown some points of contact between the modern research on identification and ancient responses to characters’ (34). This is to avoid what one of my teachers called the ‘meat-grinder’ use of theory (pushing a text through a theory and seeing what comes out) and rather finding continuity between modern and ancient thought. Or, in Grethlein’s case, finding *discontinuity*, and the value in that. So what are some of the markers unique to ancient Greek narrative? First, Grethlein argues that ‘while antiquity was familiar with the notion of fictionality and produced fictional literature, the idea of fiction was far less prominent than it is for us’ (26). Second, ‘ancient literature and criticism share common ground in their privileging of plot over psychology’ (147). This is not, however, to dismiss how the mind works. On the contrary, the biggest take-away from Grethlein’s book is perhaps the claim that ‘cognitive approaches turned out to provide a better framework for capturing the ancient understanding of narrative’ (81). Again, theory is used selectively, as Grethlein steers away from Theory of Mind, which he sees as less central to how ancient narrative works than more experiential cognitive approaches, from the ancient concept of *enargeia* to modern embodied and enactive cognitive theories.

Focusing even more directly on cognitive approaches to literature is Felix Budelmann and Ineke Sluiter’s volume, *Minds on Stage. Greek Tragedy and Cognition*.³ It has more time for Theory of Mind, with Evert van Emde Boas’ chapter ‘Mindreading, Character, and Realism: The Case of Medea’ and Sheila Murnaghan’s ‘Reading the Mind of Ajax’. But, as van Emde Boas shows, there are contact points between Theory of Mind and embodied approaches, for instance in ‘interaction theory’ which posits that our mind-reading is influenced by embodied actions and expressive behaviours in social interactions (29). This is just one example of the combination of cognitive psychology and social psychology pursued throughout this volume, with the important rationale that ‘The world of Greek tragedy is an essentially social one’ (6) in which the prominent place of the minds of characters is created through social contact. Interaction theory also refutes the Cartesian idea that the minds of others are inaccessible (29), and again this is just one example of a broader theme in the volume as the latest cognitive approaches are shown to have debunked Cartesian dualist models. Theory of Mind, then, meets so-called ‘second-generation’ cognitive theories, specifically the ‘4Es’ (embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive cognition) that situate cognitive processes in a wider social, material, and historical context.

³ *Minds on Stage. Greek Tragedy and Cognition*. Edited by Felix Budelmann and Ineke Sluiter. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. x + 271. Hardback, £83. ISBN: 978-0-192-88893-8.

Budelmann, in his Introduction, joins Ready and Grethlein in stressing the importance of ancient views when dealing with theory. He argues that cognitive approaches are so appealing and relevant to classicists because they have precursors in antiquity (such as Aristotle's interest in mimesis): 'Neither the notion that literature is usefully thought about in terms of mental processing nor the idea that the mind is embodied marks a major change for classicists' (3). This is to follow our instincts and explain them, much like Ready's identification and immersion (we know the *Iliad* is immersive; Ready shows us *why*). Cognitive theory does not work against the grain but offers 'an opportunity for sharpening, testing, and extending long-held critical instincts and adding conceptual robustness' (3). As Michael Carroll's chapter, 'Space for Deliberation: Image Schemas, Metaphorical Reading, and the Dilemma of Pelasgus', expertly shows, cognitive theory can show us both *what* a text means and *how* meaning is achieved.

Ready's book prompts us to reflect on ourselves as readers: how we engage with the *Iliad* and why. Grethlein's book raises questions about how ancient narrative works, foregrounding experience, movement, plot, and how body and mind interrelate. But how exactly are we to understand the 'self', and where do we trace the borders of mind, body, and world? Anne-Sophie Noel's chapter in *Minds on Stage*, 'Thinking Through Things: Extended Cognition as a Consolatory Fiction in Greek Tragedy', explores the role of objects (a house, a lock of hair, a piece of clothing, a bow and arrow) as 'thinking partners' (132), building on Lambros Malafouris' idea of the cognitive life of things. She argues that anthropomorphism is 'a speculative fiction that aims to reduce the otherness of the external environment' (117); a 'framework of make-believe and the consolatory mechanisms of the human mind' (119). But what if vital materialist Jane Bennett is right, and anthropomorphism can actually reveal isomorphism? What if the equation needs to be less anthropocentric and more distributed? Amy Lather's book, *Materiality and Aesthetics in Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry*, convincingly shows that cognitive approaches can productively be combined with the material turn to reveal a dynamic two-way interaction between people and the material world they inhabit,⁴ taking fictionality and literary mediation into account but also taking things seriously.

Body and Machine in Classical Antiquity, edited by Maria Gerolemou and George Kazantzidis, takes up these questions from a variety of angles, many informed by posthumanism and new materialism (3).⁵ The studies in this book explore the interdependence and indeed fusion between the human and the technological, 'shift[ing] the boundaries of the embodied self beyond the skin that envelops it' (3). They look at the metaphorical and literal interaction of the human body and mechanical devices, both when those devices come into contact with the body (from prosthetic limbs to instruments of traction – I learned a lot from Gerolemou about medical contraptions like the Hippocratic ladder) and when machines are used as heuristic tools to help

⁴ A. Lather, *Materiality and Aesthetics in Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry* (Edinburgh, 2021).

⁵ *Body and Machine in Classical Antiquity*. Edited by Maria Gerolemou and George Kazantzidis. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xiii + 331. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-316-51466-5. There are many points of contact with G. M. Chesni and F. Spiegel (eds.), *Classical Literature and Posthumanism* (London, 2019) and J. Draycott (ed.), *Prostheses in Antiquity* (Abingdon, 2019).

understand how the body works. Giouli Korobili argues that ‘Aristotle was the first to establish that the lung was the instrument of breathing’ and used the bellows/lungs analogy (181), but already in Hephaestus’ forge in the *Iliad* we see bellows as a ‘supplementary and externalized set of lungs’ (Deborah Steiner, 30). This latter process does not give us an image of a passive, objectified body lacking agency, however – especially since new-materialist approaches foreground the agency of objects themselves, and the interrelation of agencies both human and nonhuman. This network of agencies is expanded also into the natural sphere, with Colin Webster’s chapter dissolving the boundary between humans and plants as ‘the body absorbs medicalized plants, both literally and conceptually’ (164), and Robert Mayhew’s discussion of Theophrastus on the effects of the south wind on both people and things as maintaining that ‘the same fundamental material principles explain phenomena in cases both of living beings and of inanimate things’ (I was reminded of Hesiod’s cold north wind that blows through people and animals alike, *Works and Days* 504–25). Isabel Ruffell’s chapter, ‘Not Yet the Android’, explores a particular potential proximity between people and objects through automata. Yet it focuses on automata that are *not* anthropomorphic, arguing that ‘naturalistic representation is not the highest priority’ (91): rather, *thauma* (wonder) comes from an understanding of the mechanical expertise required, whether it engenders an ‘uncanny valley’ response or not.⁶

Charles H. Stocking’s book, *Homer’s Iliad and the Problem of Force*, provides another angle on these central questions of subjectivity and the boundaries of the self.⁷ He begins with (and repeatedly returns to) Simone Weil’s concept of force as the prime motivator in the *Iliad*, and sets it alongside Bruno Snell’s take on the same mover – a starting point familiar from Alex Purves’ 2015 article on ‘Ajax and Other Objects’ and again resonating with new-materialist approaches.⁸ Stocking summarizes: ‘Rather than treat force strictly as a negation of the self, in Weil’s sense, or as an indication of the deficiency of awareness of the self in Snell’s view, the study of force presented here serves as a further occasion for rethinking the Homeric self beyond the unitary subject’ (6). Weil argues that force transforms the human subject into an object. But it is one kind of universal, transhistorical force – and it conceptualizes objects as inert, which, as Purves shows, was questioned already in the Homeric scholia. Snell, on the other hand, differentiates a number of kinds of force, paying more attention to linguistic expression. And yet, his argument is based on the belief that Homeric man is a ‘prehuman’ incapable of understanding himself as a single unified individual. Stocking’s approach bridges philology and philosophy, offering a detailed reading of the many Greek words for force (the appendix is an excellent reference point) and expressing an ‘embodied economy shared between human and nonhuman’. Stocking comes out with some key findings. That force words are usually found in speech, not narrative. That force claims are often contradicted, whether by other speakers or by narrative events. That the force word most closely equivalent to Weil’s idea is

⁶ It complements the forthcoming volume S. Bär and A. Domouzi (eds.), *Artificial Intelligence in Greek and Roman Epic* (London, 2024) and follows up on some threads from A. Mayor, *Gods and Robots. Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology* (Princeton, 2018).

⁷ *Homer’s Iliad and the Problem of Force*. By Charles H. Stocking. Classics in Theory. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. viii + 275. Hardback £83, ISBN: 978-0-192-86287-7.

⁸ A. Purves, ‘Ajax and Other Objects: Homer’s Vibrant Materialism’, *Ramus* (2015), 75–94.

damazō/damnēmi: subjugation. He asks big questions, such as ‘What is the relationship between physical force and political power?’ (76), and delves deep into negotiations of *timē* and attempts to reach consensus.⁹

We come back to embodiment, and to posthumanism in ‘recasting the Homeric subject as an intersubjective dividual’ (21, using Donna Haraway’s terminology). Stocking argues that the Homeric self is never self-contained. He very much foregrounds one specific entanglement: that between the human and the divine. However, I would highlight some details of the discussion that arguably widen this ostensibly tight focus. Objects and nature feature in the case studies (in the form of Agamemnon’s sceptre and the river Scamander respectively), and *biē* (defined by Stocking as ‘physical, violent action’) is set up in terms of an interdependent subjectivity entangled with material objects (including horses: animals as exchange or status goods). Stocking frames subjectivity in the *Iliad* as a form of ‘co-agency’ shared between mortals and immortals (169). While this can be really useful in, for example, rethinking questions of causation, it might be even more productive from a posthumanist perspective to push this line further, keeping open the possibility of other intersubjectivities. As the details of the discussion show, the ‘permeability’ of the human (169) is not actually limited to interactions with the divine.

Bodies, materiality, and literature are brought together in fascinating and sometimes surprising ways in Sarah Nooter’s book, *Greek Poetry in the Age of Ephemerality*.¹⁰ Nooter argues that poetry offers a way of being in the world, a durable *physicality*, whether it be carved, printed, beat out by a body, or humming in the mind (1–2: we might note again the combination or blurring of body, mind, and world). It is about ‘the body of the poem, and the poem as a body’, but also ‘embodied engagement with poetry’ (3), from composing to remembering to reading it. Embodiment is once again on the agenda, and this time it is very much to the fore. Nooter proposes that ‘The ongoing, embodied presence of poetry is, in essence, a reply to the question that ephemerality asks’ (9). Ideally, *kleos* (glory) is eternal, but even within the Homeric poems it is shown not to be so.¹¹ If people are short-lived, materiality is transient, and not even epic memory lasts forever, how do we manage that? Through embodied forms of ‘conservation and solidity’ (17), Nooter argues. The ship of Theseus paradox is relevant here (7) – or Trigger’s broom, for those of us familiar with it. Poetry changes, passed from body to body ‘in a kind of relay race’ (10), trying to outrun time.

Nooter situates her work within the material turn in theory and Classics, but roots her discussion in the ancient texts, looking at ‘how poems announce that they are of the

⁹ The close readings of scenes of political negotiation resemble the approach of D. Elmer, *The Poetics of Consent. Collective Decision Making and the Iliad* (Baltimore, 2013), with complementary results. Chapter 3 on the funeral games of Patroclus might be read alongside A. Kelly, ‘Akhilleus in Control? Managing Oneself and Others in the Funeral Games’, in P. Bassino, L. G. Canevaro and B. Graziosi (eds.), *Conflict and Consensus in Early Greek Hexameter Poetry* (Cambridge, 2017), 93–116, and indeed it connects up with Ready’s chapter 4, which shows how the external audience are encouraged to pick favourites in this episode.

¹⁰ *Greek Poetry in the Age of Ephemerality*. By Sarah Nooter. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xii + 242. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-009-32035-1.

¹¹ L. F. Garcia, *Homeric Durability. Telling Time in the Iliad* (Washington, 2013) is perhaps the fullest exploration of this topic.

material world even as they acknowledge the ephemerality of their subject matter and makers' (30). The book covers a lot of ground, smoothing the orality/writing dichotomy as it reaches from Homer and the *Homeric Hymns* through Sappho and Archilochus to Pindar and Aeschylus. The case studies are many, so I mention here only a few that resonate with the other books discussed so far. Nooter's discussion of Achilles' lyre-playing, for instance, connects with Ready's immersion, as she argues that aesthetics and biography in the passage help us to linger over 'sounds otherwise fleeting' (78), drawing us in and keeping us there. Nooter categorizes Iliadic music as coming from *objets d'art*, and Odyssean music as stemming from the natural, nonhuman world (and the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* combines the two, with the tortoise becoming the lyre): an observation that once again pushes past the ring-fenced human self to a more entangled model. There are surprising and satisfying connections between Nooter's book and *Body and Machine in Classical Antiquity*. Her discussion of Achilles' shield draws attention to the vibrancy of music, much as Steiner's treatment of the same passage highlights the embodiment of dancing. More generally, Nooter's discussion of rhythm and the *thumos* (heart) connects up with Kazantzidis' examination of Herophilus' elaborate pulse theory or Steiner's analysis of *rhythmos* (rhythm) in Pindar as both architectural and musico-choral. Nooter argues that (conceptually) the ancient Greek heart did not beat in a steady rhythm, which leads to her conclusion that the rhythm of poetry cannot have derived from the heartbeat – 'Rather, the practice of poetry offered the potential for a rhythmic steadiness, or steadfastness, that the body by nature lacked' (54). The reversal of the direction of travel here resonates with the delicate causal balancing act achieved by *Body and Machine's* contributors. And Nooter's presentation of the Homeric heart as a small, internal, separate 'self' (55) that makes itself known only when it is agitated brings to my mind Heidegger's idea of the broken hammer, the object that only grabs our attention when it acts up, or Alfred Gell's idea of the homunculus, the mind or soul or spirit as a little person within a person. We come back to the idea of the self, and, seemingly inexorably, to Snell (35 and 203).

We are immersed in Greek literature. We linger over it. We pick favourite characters, plan our Dream Team for a trip to the pub. We might read characters' minds, or become engrossed in their actions. We can draw on narratology, cognitive theory, social psychology, new materialism, posthumanism to explain how and why, and to answer old questions in new ways. The study of Greek literature is always changing. And that is only but fitting: Greek literature has kept on changing too, in its relay race of orality to stone to the book, in the tides of popularities and specialisms. In her chapter 'Writing the Future', Nooter quotes from Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*. Electra wants Orestes to remember her experience, to *write it in his mind*, and the chorus back her up:

Χο. <γράφου>, δι' ὠτων δὲ συν-
τέτραινε μῦθον ἡσύχῳι φρενῶν βάσει. (Ch. 444–52)
Chorus: <Yes, write it>, let it pierce through
your ears into the quiet base of your mind. (Nooter's translation)

This is physical and mental, material and cognitive. It is an 'embodied process of remembering' (185), a process that is visceral, even painful, 'violent'. The memories are to settle onto a 'base' which 'could refer to the base of a monument', adding a

further level of materiality. Greek literature reflects on its own future, in ways that bring together body, mind, and world. And as the books reviewed have collectively shown, we might productively follow its cues in the way we read Greek literature.

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Latin literature

Let us start with a wonderful book that shows us not only Plautine comedy, but also Republican literary culture in a new light: Emilia Barbiero's fascinating exploration of the role played by letters in Plautus' comedies.¹ In five chapters dedicated to *Bacchides*, *Persa*, *Pseudolus*, *Curculio*, and, finally, *Epidicus* and *Trinummus*, she develops a powerful argument for the intricate metatheatrical implications of the writing, reading, forging, or not-opening of letters on the Plautine stage. Countering a scholarly trend that tends to emphasize the role of improvisation, collaboration, and preliterate forms of theatre in Plautus' comedies, Barbiero shows that the use of letters in Plautus' comedies – without exception employed for amorous affairs – rather points to a deep concern with writing as the basis for acting and that they can be understood as mirrors of the text within the text and as *mise-en-abyme* of the origins of Plautine comedy in a script.

Letters, Barbiero demonstrates in a rich and exciting discussion, are a powerful tool for scheming and deception, and they create intricate constellations of a comedy-within-a-comedy, reflecting the very production of the comedy itself, both its script and its enactment, but also issues of translation, creativity, originality, authorship, and ownership in a highly conventionalized genre that is actually defined by the very repetitiveness of its themes, plots, and characters. In an intriguing 'postscript', Barbiero asks us to rethink the widely-held belief that literacy was uniformly low in antiquity: in Plautine comedy, at least, characters of both genders and all kinds of social backgrounds, including slaves – but, interestingly, excluding freeborn women – very naturally communicate in writing. Some of the jokes of Plautus' comedies presuppose literacy in their audience, and Plautus himself must have worked from textual copies of his Greek models. While allowing for the influence of non-scripted dramatic forms on Plautine comedy, Barbiero makes a compelling case for the role of writing both in the plays' production and in the middle Republican period more broadly. A highly recommended read for anyone interested in Republican literature and the intricacies of letters and letter-writing in general.

Letters are also the focus of a fascinating volume edited by Anna Tiziana Drago and Owen Hodkinson, on ancient love letters.² Noting that there is a clear gap on research

¹ *Letters in Plautus. Writing Between the Lines*. By Emilia A. Barbiero. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xii + 229. Hardback £75.00, ISBN: 978-1-009-16851-9.

² *Ancient Love Letters. Form, Themes, Approaches*. Edited by Anna Tiziana Drago and Owen Hodkinson. Berlin, de Gruyter, 2023. Pp. vii + 331. 4 tables. Hardback £110.00, ISBN: 978-3-110-99969-3.