

RICHARD HUNTER. *Critical Moments in Classical Literature: Studies in the Ancient View of Literature and Its Uses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. vii + 217. Cloth, \$95.00.

These essays treat a heterogeneous group of texts: alongside *On the Sublime* and *How the young man should listen to poetry* are an Attic comedy, a satyr play, a Plutarchan fragment, and the epitome of a lost work by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. It is a mixed bag, which is the point. Hunter offers “moments” in the history of criticism because we lack evidence to write a linear narrative (7). Given the lacunose record, he suggests the best way forward is to lower the barrier separating “literary” from “critical” texts and to look for general patterns of similarity. Thereby he hopes to explain antiquity’s predominantly “utilitarian” approach to literature, its “concern with what literature was *for*” (8). Although individual chapters show Hunter’s characteristic inventiveness and wide range of reference, this reviewer found many of his claims overbroad. Indeed, the general approach recommended here seems less likely to enrich “our understanding of the ways in which the ancients sought to explain and use creative art” (168) than to impede progress toward that worthy goal.

Aristophanes’ *Frogs* leads off the work and recurs throughout as “a foundational text for western criticism” (42). Hunter highlights its social-aesthetic critical language (19) and the history of tragedy it “adumbrates” (36). Most radical, however, was Euripides’ expanding the critical franchise by making *oikeia pragmata* the stuff of tragedy (*Frogs* 956–61): one implication is that poetry should be about “things close to home” and so open to be judged by anyone. The *Cyclops* follows to show that criticism should be broadly conceived to include mimetic revision of literary predecessors. Hunter brings out metapoetic moments in its multifaceted *agon* with Homer and reads the whole as a Hellenistic or Roman work, a literature of the present constructed out of critical reflection on the literature of the past.

Explicit theory enters in chapter 3, on a syncretism of Aristophanes and Menander in Plutarch. This paragraph-long text exhibits a pattern, widespread in ancient literary histories, that balances Old Comedy’s crude power against the orderly refinement of the New (or Middle). Hunter recognizes Platonic and Peripatetic influence, but *Frogs* recurs as crucial: “Aristophanes himself is a primary witness to, and source for, the developmental narrative of Old Comedy which Plutarch turns against him” (79). The narrative pattern was adaptable, serving to focalize attitudes towards democracy and political change and, because of its ethical underpinnings, toward “Greekness” (83). At Rome, Hunter shows such ideas influencing Horace when he constructs a genealogy for *Satires* 1 in which he “both distances himself from Old Comedy and parades his attachment to it” (106).

Having brought out the literary-historical orientation of the *Satires*, Hunter then argues for literary allusiveness in a rhetorical treatise. The prologue to the second book of Dionysius’ *On Imitation* included two anecdotes, and fireworks

go off in all directions as Hunter brings out their intertexts. The first, in which an ugly peasant manages to beget handsome children by having his wife gaze on beautiful art, is given a Platonizing reading to show how Dionysius “normalises” the extraordinary biology of the *Symposium* in which the male gives birth” (113). Dionysius’ second anecdote, how Zeuxis painted Helen, receives similar treatment to suggest that behind our epitome was an essay on rhetorical *mimesis* that was itself a work of allusive *mimesis*.

The *Frogs* comes back in chapter 5’s discussion of *On the Sublime*. Because “Longinus” (“L” in Hunter) is one of the earliest authors to consign the poetry after Alexander to a distinct period, Hunter focuses on his distinction between “sublime” writers with their occasional flaws and the flawless but essentially “small,” a distinction he traces to Aristotle and the Aristophanic Euripides. To understand why L elevates a Homer over an Apollonius, Hunter analyzes sublime and non-sublime passages (using Theophrastus to argue that the amount and kind of detail is crucial [136–7]). He concludes that the latecomer fails because his epic world is “marked by familiarity and ‘ordinariness’”—*oikeia pragmata* (153). Hunter then argues that L’s essay challenges the division between “literature” and “criticism” because it “dramatises” and exemplifies the issues it discusses” (for him as for Pope, L “is himself the great sublime he draws” [168]). With his deep connections to *Frogs*, Plato and Aristotle, L is best seen beside such writers as Callimachus in the *Reply to the Telchines* or Theocritus in *Idyll 7*.

The last essay puts to *Quomodo adulescens* “the insistent question which the *Frogs* bequeathed to the Greek critical tradition, What is poetry for?” (169). Following Tim Whitmarsh, Hunter sees Plutarch as aiming to reproduce “an élite class whose cultural power depends on shared values” (171). The point of reading poetry therefore is not pleasure but to create a “resistant” reader, fortified against all ignoble thoughts. On a deeper level, the essay is read as closely, almost obsessively engaged, with Plato’s strictures against poetry’s seductiveness. Using Plato to find a way out of difficulties raised by Plato (179), Plutarch requires his reader (though not, interestingly, the *adulescens*) to know the Platonic intertext intimately (183). But the most “fundamental principle” governing Plutarch’s readings is the idea voiced by Aristophanes’ Euripides, that characters in literature are “like us” and so fully intelligible (198). Hunter collects ancient attempts to explain Odysseus’ mysterious sleepiness in *Odyssey* 13 and finds in their very irreconcilability perhaps “the ultimate triumph of Euripidean *elenchus* and [his] attitude of critical suspicion toward everything” (201).

Uniting the essays is a search for a “more fruitful way of studying critical traditions than the more usual narrative history” (8). Of course, Hunter has a narrative of his own to tell, with *Frogs* in a leading role. Usually, he qualifies assertions of Aristophanic influence: the history of a given idea “begins, at least for us, with the *Frogs*” (2, 163); to say the Aristophanic Euripides “usher[ed] in” (19, 29) an idea is not to say he invented it. Yet *Frogs* also “bequeaths” terms and ideas to the critical tradition (19, 50, 169); it has “descendants” (128) to whom it transmits an “inheritance” (109, 130). I point this out not to open the debate about whether Aristophanes should be seen as an original contributor to

criticism (as Snell argued in chap. 6 of *The Discovery of the Mind*). My point is that, in the absence of a narrative, the alleged foundational role of *Frogs* cannot even be discussed.

Hunter allows that the *Frogs* may loom as a more central work for us than it did for the ancients (2, 7): he notes that Aristophanes wrote amid an “explosion of critical terminology” (6) and concedes to Plato and Aristotle “a rather than *the*” founding role in criticism as it is practiced today (7). He observes, however, that we cannot trace in detail what went on before Aristophanes or (saving Philodemus) after Aristotle. The gaps in our evidence are real; indeed, they preclude us from assuming that *Frogs* was more important for criticism than, say, *Gerytades*, or Aristophanes than Cratinus. The way to understand *Frogs* in this study, then, is as a metonymy for its time, “what we might term the ‘invention’ of literary criticism in the later fifth century” (22).

If the history of criticism cannot avoid narrative, the question then becomes what to narrate, and here the search for “patterns of similarity” (3), “currents” (7) and “dichotomies” (8) often lead to soft-focused readings. Hunter is prepared to find “a remarkable shared body of ideas which speak across centuries” among texts that have no “actual critical language” in common (133). This is not only an extremely high level of generality but also an open-ended one: it makes all academic critics today, wittingly or not, heirs of Aristophanes. But if we ask where a particular critic “is coming from,” attending to the entirety of his language makes finer discriminations possible and reveals more definite lines of affiliation.

As an example, consider a programmatic passage Hunter quotes from Dionysius’ *Arrangement of words* (3.13–15 Us.-R.). To show that the excellence (*arētē**) of the opening of *Odyssey* 16 is due to Homer’s combination (*sunthesis**) rather than selection (*eklogē*) of words, Dionysius tells us to take away the meter and note that the diction (*lexis**) appears ordinary (*eutelēs**), humble (*tapeinos**), and banal (*phaula**); it lacks well-bred (*eugeneeis**) metaphors (*metaphorai**), uses no *hypallagē*, *katachrēsis* or figurative (*tropikē*) speech (*dialektos**); no archaisms (*glōttai**) or exotic words (*xena**) or coinages (*pepoiēmena**). Observing the mix of social and aesthetic values, Hunter remarks: “We see here that the *Frogs* bequeathed to the critical tradition not just a way of talking about poetic style, but also a critical language which uses sociopolitical distinctions to describe levels of style” (19). Such language is indeed characteristic of ancient criticism, but to what degree is this passage illuminated by Aristophanes? None of the words italicized above is applied to poetic diction in *Frogs*, whereas all the asterisked ones are used in Aristotle’s discussions of style in *Poetics* and/or *Rhetoric*; the others surface in Philodemus or Cicero. And while the idea that a poetic passage appears mean when stripped of its meter has some affinity with an Aristophanic joke comparing grand language to grand clothes (*Frogs* 1057–60), Plato (*Gorg.* 502c, *Rep.* 601b), and Isocrates (*Evag.* 11) can be found expressing Dionysius’ precise thought explicitly. The point is not to disparage Aristophanes’ importance but to say that the study of “poetic imagery and ideas” is most informative when tethered to “the actual language” of ancient criticism (8).

The extract from Dionysius also suggests why we should recognize criticism

as a distinct practice and discipline. Hunter holds that “the modern tendency to treat ‘ancient literary criticism’ as a discrete area of ancient writing, to be studied in isolation from the literature which the ancient critics discussed, has done a disservice to our understanding” (168, cf. 7–8). But the density of Peripatetic vocabulary in Dionysius shows that ancient *kritikoi/critici* (the title is current from late classical or Hellenistic times) were bent precisely on creating a “discrete area” of writing, a body of specialized works that were, unlike the poets’ or orators’, decidedly not books most people were expected or accustomed to read. To do so, critics evolved, apparently during the fourth century with limited modifications thereafter, a complete lexicon of technical and other terms. Mastery of this lexicon showed competence as a critic; the ability to innovate within it showed authority. Isolating criticism from literature would surely be a bad idea, but no less bad is collapsing the distinction between them.

Certainly, poets spoke to “the Ancient View of Literature and Its Uses,” but critics could do then as critics do now and draw their main ideas from the likes of Derrida, de Man, and Deleuze rather than Dickens. Hunter concludes his final chapter by saying, “Homer mattered, and he was to be given no peace until he had yielded up all his secrets” (201). But is this really “mattering”? One might conclude from what has gone before that having something to say about Homer was what mattered; having a view that was clever, knowledgeable, fresh, and suggestive of a richly stocked mind and a well-formed character. Much of the humor in *Frogs* is in making poets pontificate in the absurd language and style of critics.

Hunter is certainly right that “We must resist the temptation to impose firm schemata upon the history of ancient criticism” (161–62). The issue here is not whether to call the poets’ engagements with precursor texts “criticism” but how to define the field of inquiry. What seems key to me is not to lose sight of those who used rigid definitions and fine distinctions to distinguish themselves as experts in literature. To lump them in with those whom they presumed to pronounce upon is to lose the sense of their distinctive and jealously guarded expertise. What is missed, in short, is ancient criticism.

ANDREW FORD

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
e-mail: aford@princeton.edu

KENNETH J. RECKFORD. *Recognizing Persius*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009. x + 240 pp. Cloth, \$45.

Reckford has produced a very serviceable introduction to a very difficult poet. Written with genuine verve and passion, this personal look at what many view as a crabbed and uncongenial writer is a welcome addition to an all too small English bibliography on Rome’s third great satirist, after Lucilius and