

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

[BMCR 2017.07.09](#) on the BMCR blog

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2017.07.09

Christopher Pelling, Maria Wyke, *Twelve Voices from Greece and Rome: Ancient Ideas for Modern Times*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv, 274. ISBN 9780199597369. \$29.95.

**Reviewed by Massimo Gioseffi, Università degli Studi di Milano
(massimo.gioseffi@unimi.it)**

Preview

[The reviewer apologizes for the late delivery of this review.]

There are at least three categories of readers for this book: those who studied Classics in their youth and now want to recapture the spirit of the ancient authors; those who are wondering why they should read the Classics and will look here for an answer; those who teach Classics and hope to find suggestions about how to present the ancient authors to an audience often unwilling to pay them much attention.

Two modern scholars divide between themselves twelve ancient *auctores*: Pelling writes about the Greeks and Wyke writes about the Latin authors. The book is elegant and easy to read. Each author is introduced by a brief foreword; there are no notes and no pedantic discussion. At the end of each chapter a selective bibliography is provided, mostly in English. The two scholars often refer to their personal experience. Pelling, the son of a sports journalist, draws a parallel between Herodotus dialoging with the Egyptian priests and his father's interview technique, and remembers when, as a sixteen-year-old, he first read the *Odyssey* during a family trip, mixing together the Welsh sentiment for nostalgia, a juvenile longing for adventures and the yearning for a familiar landscape. Wyke, who was educated in a London convent school, was introduced to reading Caesar by a (female) teacher by means of a broad overview of the Roman military world. Quite unexpectedly, the idea facilitated the assimilation of the text in an audience of girls, because it was made "alien, dangerous, masculine, and adult". Such notes make the book attractively personal. The choice of the twelve topics is also very personal. The two authors make no secret that the chosen ones are not necessarily the most important authors of the classical canon (Catullus, for example, does not feature). There is chronological progression; there is attention to different literary genres. Above all, there is the experience gleaned by the two authors in the BBC Radio 3 series "Greek and Latin Voices".

The book makes no claim to be a comprehensive guide to Classical literature. It is designed instead to be suggestive, offering “a palatable taster of what ancient literature and culture can do for us in the present day”. Each author’s work is presented along with their possible value to 21st-century readers, with examples of how they have been read in previous centuries, thereby demonstrating the role that each of them has played in modern times. There is also an overall presentation of the authors, with a few quotations (in English) from their works, and occasional readings of individual texts not always immediately related to the subject concerned.

I shall now consider Thucydides in some detail to show how the book works. In the chapter devoted to him we find a brief biography; then, there is a *synkrisis* with Herodotus. A long quotation from the beginning of Thucydides’ work introduces a schematic narrative of the Peloponnesian War and an appreciation of Thucydides’ narrative skilfulness, exemplified by a very long quotation, from 7.70.5 to 7.71.4. Here is the core of the chapter: we usually appreciate Thucydides as a political thinker, but Pelling emphasizes the idea that he is also a brilliant storyteller. There is no explanation about what is so striking in the quotation: Pelling is confident that every reader will understand Thucydides’ greatness by himself and simply lists more examples. There are other innovative insights within the chapter: Pelling stresses Thucydides’ definition of war as movement, *kynesis*, i.e., social, political, ethical disturbing movement within a world previously governed by order and laws. Civil war is war at its bloodiest; human hopes are always disappointed, while fear is the strongest reason for action. More focused on Thucydides’ words are the discussion on the absence of gods from the *History*, and the mechanism by which troubles start from the weakest part of the population (the Athenians’ allies), are then endorsed by the leaders and ultimately still fall on the weakest part of the population (the Athenian people). Near the end of the chapter we find two well-known quotations: the speech by Diodotus, referring to the fate of the Mytilenians (3.45), and the Melian Dialogue (only 5.89 and 5.91-95 are quoted). They are useful for clarifying the contrast between hopes and fears in human behaviour, a central element in Thucydides. Then Pelling quotes Pericles’ last speech in Thucydides, emphasising the importance of power in Pericles’ words (only 2.64.3 is quoted). Pelling ends the chapter with Pericles’ affirmation that “future generations will retain in perpetuity the memory of [Athenian] power”. According to Pelling, this is the real idea that Thucydides wanted to pass on to posterity, even if, he comments, it is difficult for the contemporary reader to accept that a people’s greatness is defined by its strong power over other peoples.

I have dwelt on this example because I wanted to make clear how each presentation is structured. For the other authors, I shall limit myself to a few words. Of Homer, Pelling says that he is the perfect example of what the book will demonstrate repeatedly: namely, that the society described by the poet has always been significantly distant (both in time and mood) from the audience of his poems. Homer’s first audience already conceived of the Trojan War as an old, mythical event. Nevertheless, the human preoccupations shown by Homer’s characters were still familiar to this audience and any other future audience. Trying to make sense of an irrational situation – war –, the grief in seeing loved ones die, the desire for a lost homeland, the ideas of honour, glory,

love, sacrifice (not forgetting anxiety about gods who do not protect their darlings) are all feelings of our everyday life. Nevertheless, the Classics, as Homer perfectly demonstrates, also remain far away from us and escape any attempt to make them our contemporaries. As for Sappho, Pelling remarks that every generation has found its own Sappho, but only our own generation is more in tune with the things that mattered to her. Love, desire, the female body as recipient of love and desire: in these subjects we find what makes Sappho unique and what assured her success in the male circle of the *convivia*, although she created a world entirely lacking in any strong male presence or authority. Herodotus is related to the present struggle between Eastern and Western civilizations. Pelling denies that he should be considered responsible for the idea of an implicit superiority of the West above the East. Herodotus is more interested in everything that originates from the human world. His work is a collection of *mirabilia*, in which he aims to put the Greeks in their place, extolling everything that deserves to be praised in them, but disapproving of everything that deserves to be scorned. The result is an honourable place, because only the Greeks worship freedom; but it is also a blameworthy place, because the Greeks consider foreigners devoid of any wisdom. Euripides is described by Pelling as an *enfant terrible*, aiming at shocking his audience through his ideological challenges. He is not an atheist, nor a pious man; he is not a proto-feminist, nor a misogynist. He likes to make spectators feel uncomfortable not only about their deepest beliefs, but also about their sympathies with the characters challenging their beliefs. Pelling read Lucian when he was 16 and discovered through him that the Classics were not necessarily a “crusty and dusty” discipline.

Caesar is described by Wyke as particularly good at influencing his readers through his prose, which is brief but forceful, organized, fiery. In him an omniscient narrator speaks of a He-Caesar, presenting him as the ideal military and political chief, the idealist who cares about his fellow citizens and is ready to sacrifice himself to them. Wyke emphasizes Caesar’s ability to exploit a point of view that does not focus on Caesar, but forces the reader to feel himself among the soldiers, looking through their eyes and judging their commander with admiration and a progressive involvement in his choices. Cicero, too, is praised for his ability in the art of persuasion. In many languages “rhetoric” is a bad word today; but Wyke reminds us that our world is full of rhetorical devices. Still, Cicero was not only a good speaker: he always thought of his works as full of political and ethical concern. Wyke also honours Cicero as a supreme narrator: his dialogues are perfectly calibrated to convey Cicero’s opinion as definitive; his speeches offer vivid plots and detailed climaxes to destroy his adversary definitively. Horace is often described as an autobiographical poet, but according to Wyke he liked to elaborate fairy-tales about himself; he is neither a good fellow, the man you may easily befriend, portrayed by many scholastic handbooks, nor the Victorian middle-aged man who writes a secular catechism for well-bred boys. His poems are the most vivid picture of Rome at the end of the Republican Era. Following a well-established bibliography, Wyke suggests that Tacitus’ aim was to explain how to survive in a time of crisis. To illustrate the idea, the chapter contains a clever analysis of Calgacus’ speech; a discussion about Tacitus’ (supposed) praise for the past (Wyke disagrees with the idea); a detailed examination of *Hist.* 3.83 and *Ann.* 4.1. The final question is whether for Tacitus reading and writing

about the past are a help or a hindrance in surviving the cruelties of the Principate. The answer is ambiguous, but in the end Tacitus reveals himself as one of the strongest supporters of the importance of knowing our past in order to live our present and build our future. Juvenal's satires are portrayed as a way to attack Roman citizens, because they are no longer true Romans and true males. The comparison with Johnson's *London* and Hogarth's *Four Times of the Day* is instructive: while Johnson is free to attack explicitly any contemporary political target, Juvenal cannot speak freely and he can only hit out at living non-entities and the infamous dead. By the end of the sixteen satires no one is safe, not even the satirical outraged speakers, who are as compromised, greedy and vicious as their targets. Such a situation, according to Wyke, underlines the only significant freedom still surviving in Roman society: the freedom of the reader, who is free to accept or not the ideas and words he is reading.

I have left Virgil until last, because the chapter devoted to him exemplifies better than any other the book's virtues, but also its limitations. Wyke stresses the universality of Virgilian poetry and she points out that the Memorial of September 11, 2001 is engraved with a Virgilian verse. Wyke emphasizes that this is only one of many Virgilian voices and that in the *Aeneid* (the *Bucolics* and the *Georgics* are neglected) there is also an Augustan voice; though she shows little interest in this Augustan voice. This choice certainly makes the *Aeneid* a text very close to us. Is it, however, an effective presentation of Virgil and the *Aeneid*? Is it not a deliberate rewriting of the poem from a partial point of view? Emphasizing the importance of Dido and Turnus (or Euryalus and Nisus), are we not forgetting that for Virgil the hero of the poem was Aeneas? The balance should perhaps be redressed.

In sum: twelve ancient voices, and two modern voices, combine in making sense of the Classics. These voices are certainly praiseworthy; but we can look for others, too.

[Read comments on this review or add a comment](#) on the BMCR blog