Mere creatures of a day
The search for permanence in archaic and classical poetry

RICHARD HUNTER

GREEK POETRY IN THE AGE OF EPHEMERALITY
SARAH NOOTER

228pp. Cambridge University Press. £35 ($S110).

WHEN THE FIRST appears in Aristophanes’ Clouds, dangling in a basket, Socrates responds to the entreaties of the hapless Strepsiades, who has come to be enrolled in his school, with “Why do you summon me, you creature of a day? (epímeros)” And when asked to explain what he is doing, Socrates loftily replies that he is investigating “higher” — or indeed high-bloated, “meteorological” things.

The investigation of the heavenly bodies and of the nature of the world around us, here conceptually distorted, was one of the ways in which some thinkers in archaic and classical Greece sought to find permanent structures to set against the inevitable evanescence and changeability of human life. Strepsiades and his colleagues, by contrast, were ephemeral, both “short-lived” and living in a “short-term” world of shifting uncertainty. Socrates’ most famous disciple, Plato, named for such permanence to unchanging metaphysical realities, available to the philosopher who has managed to escape the cage of deceptive shadows in which the rest of us dwell. As for poetry, modes of criticism such as allegory, which sought to uncover unchanging moral and physical truths in poetic utterances, offered another aspect of the search not just for stability of meaning, but for a meaning that pointed beyond the moment to something more lasting.

In her suggestive new book Sarah Noote goes beyond this wider context of “sense-making”, which characterizes both archaic and classical Greece. She looks instead at how early Greek poetry and poets evoked different modes of what she terms “permanence” in far sadder ways than the simple claim, familiar from epic poetry and Pindar’s grandodes to his elite patrons, to be “eternal” or “eternal renown.” She wants to bring out how the changing experiences and emotions of characters and the history of the objects described in poetry point to a meaningful continuity in the face of change. By focusing on largely familiar passages of early Greek poetry Noote finds what she is looking for in the sounds and rhythms of poetry, music and dance, in the poems’ strikingly emotional and the emotional and physical reactions of the human body and with human affect and “presence”; and in the varied temporalities that the poets stress for example, the recurrent presence of the Homeric simile set against the distant past of the epic narrative). The survival of material objects in poetry also plays an important role, whether it be Homer’s account of the past history of the lyre with which Achilles “delighted his own heart” in Iliad 9, or the tombs/cities about, and for which, Simplicius wrote remarkable poems at the time of the Peacean Wars.

As its best Noote’s mode of reading is alive to half-heard echoes and significant silences. The deep self-consciousness of poetic tradition is itself a powerful productive force and renewed, in chorals lyric no less than in epic. Noote listens hard to this poetry and has perceptive things to say — even on familiar territory such as the extraordinary simile in Odyssey 30 of Odysseus “barking heart”, compared to a mother dog protecting her puppies when the hero sees the unfaithful maid in his palace, or Andromache’s fearful response to the bevor of death in Iliad 22 (“my heart leapt to my mouth”). In these cases she points to the apparent absence of any concern with the ordinary, steady human heartbeat in early poetry. It is in timeless poetic events — Odysseus’ final obdurate and “constantly enduring” heart, or Andromache’s everyday female activities (weeping, preparing a bath for Hector) — that “permanence” is to be found.

Much of the second half of the book is concerned with how the practice of writing itself reflects poetry’s resistance to the ephemeral. What is at issue is not so much how the coming of writing affected the way in which poetry was composed, but rather how poets represented the idea of writing as a weapon in the struggle for permanence, and how some, such as Simonides and Aeschylus, prepared the ground for the eventual triumph of writing with poetic images and metaphors that drew on its technology. With the possibility of written survival came also a change in the perception of time. As others have done before her Noote links the poetic representations of writing (and its effacement) to the coming of written and publicly displayed law, both realms seek to legitimate for “the future” and to imagine a time beyond the representatve present.

It goes without saying that this book’s title is misleadingly double-edged. In its own epheeral age every moment is captured on a digital device and, however often deleted, is always recoverable and reproducible. More immediately, the author’s concerns — embodiment, object history, ecology — are undeniably “of the moment” in parts of the academy. Classicists have been at the forefront of the exploitation of these newer disciplines in literary criticism. Like some of the poetry it studies, this book offers a particular version of “the present.” There is a price. Although Noote is alive to how these poems are conscious of the tradition in which they are embedded, she chooses to elude much of the longer critical tradition in which she writes. The majority of the scholarship she cites was written in the past three decades, much of it in the US. It is perfectly possible to discuss Sappho’s 31 ("that man seems to me equal to the gods...") without mentioning the account of the poem in Longinus’ On the Sublime that preserves it for us, some 700 years after Sappho wrote it; but Noote’s reading of that poem ultimately descends from Longinus’ description, and that would have been worth saying.

The layered sediments of reading practice, across different generations, languages and cultures, are themselves markers of a persistent search for a continuity beyond the fragility of the present. w

Richard Hunter is Regius Professor of Greek Emeritus at the University of Cambridge and General Editor of the series Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics

Granny’s guide to antiquity
An American writer of popular books on Greece and Rome

NICK ROMEO

AMERICAN CLASSICIST
The life and loves of Edith Hamilton
VICTORIA HOUSEMAN

528pp. Princeton University Press. £35 ($59.95).

A RECIPROCAL disdain still floats across the academic-popular divide. Some academics share Friedrich Nietzsche’s assumption that any work intended for a general readership is intellectually inferior. Books for a popular reader- ship “are always ill-smelling books, the odor of paltry people things to them”, wrote. Some non- academics assume that any academic work is a morass of jargon and dull detail (Nietzsche too could dismiss this as “anti-like”, clearing the field for himself as the true seer of culture). Both sides are right frequently enough that each can cite supporting examples, yet both are often badly wrong.

Victoria Houseman’s choice of the American writer Edith Hamilton as the subject of a new biography, American Classicist, raises these issues. Hamilton wrote several popular books on ancient Greece and Rome in the early to mid-twentieth century, including Mythology (1942), The Greek Way (1930) and The Roman Way (1952). For decades copies of her books adorned the shelves of many American homes, functioning as a kind of grand- motherly guide to antiquity.

One criticism of Houseman’s book has focused on the fact that Hamilton wrote about ancient Greece and Rome without holding a doctorate in classics. This is misguided: many brilliant writers on antiquity, from Robert Calasso on Greek mythology to Gore Vidal on the world of the Emperor Julius, had no doctorates in the subjects they illuminated. Vidal only finished high school. Yet just because some discrepancies arebióshít, it doesn’t follow that Hamilton merits an entire biography. Any justification of the choice must appeal to some combination of the interest of her intellectual work, her life and the milieu she inhabited. Houseman’s biography is admirably researched, but I finished it without being persuaded that Hamilton warranted such attention.

Some of the more compelling material explores the cultural universe in which Hamilton moved. While a student at Bryn Mawr at the end of the nineteenth century, she befriended a classmate who was Mark Twain’s daughter. Roughly a decade later, while working as the headmistress at the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore, she got to know a medical student named Gertrude Stein. A visit to John Dewey’s Laboratory School at the University of Chicago shaped her views on pedagogy. The philoso- pher Bertrand Russell also makes an appearance, interfering in a romantic relationship that Hamilton was pursuing with a woman nicknamed with Russell. Hamilton herself seems likable, and Houseman has unearthed many humanizing anecdotes and