M. Edwards, *Culture and Philosophy in the Age of Plotinus*. London: Duckworth, 2006, ISBN 0 7156 3563 8, £16.99.

One attractive feature of Platonism is its fusion of philosophical themes with enterprises we would now see as falling outside philosophy: literary criticism, Greek religion, and “science” in the broad sense of the attempt to understand and control the natural world. In *Culture and Philosophy in the Age of Plotinus* Mark Edwards exploits this feature of Platonism, especially as it is exhibited in the third century AD. The book concentrates on four interrelated figures: Plotinus, Longinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus. Porphyry is the nexus here, since he learned from both Longinus and Plotinus, and was in turn the teacher of Iamblichus. There is a rich vein of sources testifying to their interaction. Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* is the main ancient source for Plotinus apart from the *Enneads* itself, and provides evidence about the rivalry between Plotinus and Longinus. Iamblichus and Porphyry both react to Plotinus throughout their philosophical works. And in *On Mysteries* we have Iamblichus’ critical response to Porphyry’s *Letter to Anebo*. The quartet are also well-suited for Edwards’ goal of broadening our sense of what fell under the purview of third century Platonism. The first half of Edwards’ book introduces the four figures (chapter 2), and then surveys Plotinian metaphysics and psychology and the way Porphyry and Iamblichus responded to Plotinus’ thought. In the second half, Edwards discusses topics he considers marginalized in treatments of late ancient philosophy: firstly attitudes towards literature, secondly religion and the “occult.”

As this summary suggests, the first half of the book contains little that will be new for experts. Though Edwards promises in the introduction that he will concentrate on poorly understood texts, those texts are taken up only in chapters 6-9. Prior to that the book presents familiar material in a rather familiar way: the Platonic background in chapter 1, the Neoplatonist system as deriving from Plato’s dialogues in chapter 3, unity and number in chapter 4, and soul in chapter 5. These chapters are not, I think, intended to say anything surprising or original about Plotinus. To the extent that there is any innovation here, it lies in the integration of Iamblichus and Porphyry into the standard overview of early Neoplatonism as a reaction to Plato. In light of this more on Iamblichus would have been welcome. One useful departure from the familiar is a quick overview of the historical and political context at 23-7. Edwards might have done a bit more with this context, though he does make a few suggestive remarks about how political developments at the time affected the practice of philosophy.

The first half of the book thus seems primarily aimed at non-expert readers (as is also suggested by the rather basic glossary of terms at the end of the

volume, which defines such notions as “Peripatetic” and “sophist”). This raises the question of its usefulness as an introductory text. Here I do have a few misgivings. First, it is rarely clear why Edwards emphasizes certain themes at the cost of others, or why he takes them in the order he does. While reading these sections I assumed that they were meant to set up background for the second half of the book, but Edwards seldom refers back to the earlier chapters, even implicitly. Second, his references to secondary literature are not ideal for introductory readers, and are especially scarce for recent work. For instance Edwards’ section on *Enneads* VI.1-2 (p. 61-3) contains no reference to the important recent discussions by de Haas and Chiaradonna, and Edwards neglects the recent work on Longinus by Männlein-Robert (to be fair, some of her work on Longinus is doubtless too recent for Edwards to have used it in time for this book). The preface tells us that Edwards undertook much of the research for this book in the early 1990’s, which may explain the spotty use of subsequent literature. Third, in treating philosophical themes Edwards tends towards the paraphrase of individual texts, rather than trying to explain ideas as responses to clear philosophical problems. The summaries might therefore be difficult to follow for some beginners. Still, his treatment of philosophical issues is mostly accurate, despite an occasional imprecision (for example he treats as unproblematic the conflation of substantial form with secondary substance in the *Categories*, p. 15).

More interesting is the second half of the book, which is heralded by the end of chapter 5, on biographical literature such as Porphyry’s *Life*. Chapter 6 discusses Platonist attitudes towards literature more generally. Here Longinus takes center stage. Edwards argues briefly for accepting his authorship of *On the Sublime*. He moves on to discuss Plotinus and Porphyry on Homer. There is a nice exegesis of *Enneads* I.6 with its Homeric allusions, and a survey of Porphyry’s *On the Cave of Nymphs*. Edwards is disappointingly unimpressed by Plotinus’ own methods of writing, though. He accepts Porphyry’s implication that Plotinus dashed off his writings rather carelessly (Edwards says that Plotinus had “little consciousness of an audience”), which is hard to reconcile with the intricate dialectical argumentation of most treatises in the *Enneads*.

The last three chapters form a thematic unity, with chapter 7 devoted to oracles, chapter 8 to the “occult” and chapter 9 to the relations between pagans and Christians. In these chapters and especially chapter 8, Edwards has an argument to put forth, namely that Neoplatonism, and especially Iamblichus, does not give in to superstition at the expense of reason. His selective summary of *On Mysteries* is supposed to highlight the philosophical basis for Iamblichus’ defense of Greek religious practices. This seems right, but perhaps Edwards is aiming at too easy a target. I doubt that many scholars who work

on Neoplatonism nowadays would write off Iamblichus as an irrationalist. In a recent study, Emma Clark (see her 2001 book *Iamblichus De Mysteriis: a Manifesto of the Miraculous*) even takes herself to be arguing against a current consensus that *On Mysteries* is best understood in the context of standard, rationalist Neoplatonism. In any case I doubt the usefulness of Edwards' central dichotomy between "reason" and "superstition" (a word he uses repeatedly: 112, 121, 127, 130; at 116 he calls Porphyry "the most superstitious of the Neoplatonists"). The claim that Iamblichus is "superstitious" is not so much false (in the sense that it might have been true) as anachronistic. A more interesting question would be: what *sort* of rationality incorporates, for instance, theurgy into a philosophical system? Must Iamblichean rationality revise Platonic, Aristotelian or Plotinian epistemology, to accommodate these "occult" aspects of his belief system?

Still, these last chapters are the best part of the book. Though I may not be the intended audience, I would rather have read a book entirely devoted to these literary, magical and religious aspects of third century Platonism. Such a book could give more space to texts passed over fairly quickly here, such as Plotinus' treatment of magic in *Enneads* IV.4. A deeper discussion of these themes would seem to be a project Edwards is well-suited to take on. Perhaps he will still do so in a future study.

Peter Adamson
King's College London, UK
peter.adamson@kcl.ac.uk