Tribute to Martin Litchfield West, 1937–2015

In the field of classical scholarship, as traditionally understood, Martin West is to be judged, on any reckoning, the most brilliant and productive Greek scholar of his generation, not just in the United Kingdom, but worldwide.1

Very few scholars have been elected as Fellows of the British Academy in their mid-thirties, as Martin West was in 1973; and only three other classicists (Richard Jebb, Gilbert Murray and Ronald Syme) have ever been appointed to the Order of Merit.2 These and other distinctions mark West out as an altogether exceptional scholar. He was a man of prodigious learning, with outstanding critical acumen and interpretative flair, whose insistence on the highest evidential standards and on clarity of thought and expression repeatedly led him to challenge established opinions on issues central to classical philology. He read fluently in seven languages. In the case of ancient Greek, his mastery of its structures, vocabulary, history, dialects, metres and styles, together with his encyclopaedic knowledge of its literature, enabled him to write it almost as easily as he read. His editorial supplements and emendations to corrupt manuscripts and lacunose papyri may not always recreate precisely what the original author wrote, but from a linguistic and stylistic perspective they are invariably flawless.3 Similarly, in the course of an important article on Hesiod, he recasts a seven-verse episode from the Works and Days into a 41-verse narrative the manner of Homer.4 If this elegant composition had

1 From the citation accompanying the British Academy’s award of the Kenyon Medal for Classical Studies to Martin West in 2002.

2 West was appointed to the Order of Merit in January 2014. The Order was founded by Edward vii in 1902, to be awarded to ‘such persons, subjects of Our Crown, as may have rendered exceptionally meritorious services in Our Crown Services or towards the advancement of the Arts, Learning, Literature and Science or such other exceptional service as We are fit to recognise’. The honour is in the personal gift of the Sovereign, and the number of living members can be no more than 24 at any one time. (Information from www.royal.gov.uk/MonarchUK/Honours/OrderofMerit/OrderofMerit.aspx.)

3 For one remarkable example of his supplements to papyri, including a meticulous disegno, see West 1992a, 17.

4 West, 1981b, 55-6.
emerged on a scrap of papyrus from the Egyptian sands, many scholars, I suspect, would confidently have assigned it to the poet of the *Odyssey*.5

West's epoch-making contributions in the broader domain of classical philology—on epic, elegy, iambus, lyric and tragedy, on Orphic writings, on philosophy, on the relations between Greek literature and the literatures of cultures further to the East—are not my main concern here, but I would like to draw attention to one of their recurrent features. They display, time after time, his abiding interest in the concrete details of the processes through which things came about, and the means by which things were done. How, when, in what milieu and through what agency did the unusual name ‘Homer’ come to be attached to the epics?6 How was the *Prometheus Vinctus* staged, with its hero chained to a rock, its chorus entering on an air-borne chariot and Oceanus on his bizarre flying steed, and the final disappearance of Prometheus and the chorus in a terrifying thunderstorm?7 Given that certain passages of Euripides’ *Orestes* or of the *Odyssey*, for example, have apparently been inserted rather awkwardly into an existing text, who added them, and when and why?8 In what manner, when, where, by whom and with what accessories were the Homeric epics or the works of Stesichorus performed?9 By what means, by whom and in what form were melodies transmitted through time and space, and how did the relevant processes change over the centuries?10

As the last two examples will suggest, this consistent curiosity about the ways in which cultural phenomena came into being and developed, and about the ways in which performances were presented in practice, helped to stimulate and enliven West’s interest in Greek music, as also, from another direction, did his intricate studies of poetic metres. But what first sparked his enthusiasm for the subject, as he tells us in the Preface to his *Ancient Greek Music*, was his discovery of transcriptions of the two Delphic Paeans in Powell’s *Collectanea Alexandrina* when he was an undergraduate. ‘I committed one of them to memory,’ he continues, ‘and next spring, when I went to Greece for the first time, on arriving at Delphi I sang it at the top of my voice in the ruins of the sanctuary where it had had its première 2,084 springs previously.’11 One member of his

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5 Connoisseurs of such things should not miss his splendid Aeschylean spoof, ‘Cassandra Smells Dinner’, printed in West 2013a, 392-392.
6 West 1999.
7 West 1979.
10 West 2013c.
11 West 1992b, v. Witnesses on other occasions testify that he had an excellent singing voice.