

## Malcolm Heath

*Ancient Philosophical Poetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

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This book is in a series 'Key Themes in Ancient Philosophy', 'designed for use in a teaching context', and the author notes in his preface that he has used the material in a course entitled 'Should we ban Homer?' Anyone devising such a course, or writing such a book, has to take difficult decisions about what to include and how to approach the material. As Heath notes in his Introduction, selectivity is unavoidable: clearly, Plato and Aristotle 'select themselves', as H. says (p. 2), but deciding how much pre-Platonic material to include and which post-Aristotelian thinkers to discuss is much harder. Thought needs to be given also to which themes to focus on. Here H. is less explicit about his selection: his concentration on the Platonic tradition in the latter, post-Aristotelian part of the book leads him to concentrate on the relationship between poetry and truth but his chapter on Aristotle pays less attention to this issue than the rest of the book might lead one to expect. A book which focused, for example, on ancient discussions of the effect of poetry on the emotions would look rather different from this one.

Another of the challenges to be confronted in writing a book designed for teaching is how far one should repeat standard views of a topic. H. has firm and original views of his own on some of the authors discussed and, very properly, gives the impression of not wanting always to follow well-trodden paths. The first two chapters of this book are clearly aimed at undergraduate students who would find them very helpful. It should also be noted that throughout the book H. uses footnotes to give useful references to fuller treatments of the topics and authors under discussion. From Chapter 3 onwards, as we come to subjects with which H.'s own research is concerned, the book becomes of greater interest to experienced readers but risks becoming correspondingly harder for beginners to follow.

H.'s focus on poetry's relation to truth is evident in the short first chapter which simply sets the scene for discussion of Plato by offering a brief account of Homer, Hesiod and Xenophanes, with a couple of paragraphs at the end about Parmenides and Heraclitus. Chapter 2, on Plato, is very largely devoted to the *Republic*. Other dialogues in which Plato discusses poetry are mentioned only in passing here but come to the fore much later in the book, in the final chapter where three 'case studies' illustrating later Platonist approaches to poetics—Maximus of Tyre, Plotinus and Longinus—are prefaced by a dozen pages on the 'Platonic resources' on which later Platonists drew when they attempted to reconcile Plato with Homer. In its context the treatment of these Platonic

resources works well in helping the reader to understand how Middle and Neoplatonists approached Plato in a very different way from, say, the Oxford undergraduate studying 'Greats', for whom Plato is primarily the author of the *Republic*. Of course it is also true that the critique of poetry in the *Republic* posed a challenge to which all later apologists for poetry in antiquity had to respond. Nevertheless, the division in the book between what one might call 'Oxford Plato' and 'later Platonist Plato' is a bit unsatisfactory. It might have been better to put all the material on Plato at the same point in the book so that the reader could appreciate the full range and diversity of Plato's views from the start and then refer back as required in order to understand how later Platonists could hold the views that they did.

H.'s approach to Aristotle, discussed at length in Chapter 3, is quite different. Since 2008 H. has published a number of papers on the *Poetics* and has completed a monograph entitled *Poetical Animals*. He is now working on a philosophical commentary on the text. The chapter in the book under review gives a foretaste of his forthcoming substantial publications, which will undoubtedly be well worth reading. H. is rightly keen that we should read the *Poetics* in the context of Aristotle's philosophical work as a whole, particularly his biology. The result is a thought-provoking discussion of aspects of the *Poetics* which are sometimes overlooked, such as the implications of Aristotle's assumption that poetry is a natural phenomenon, and a less full treatment of some traditional issues of interpretation: Aristotle's view of plot as the 'soul' of tragedy is well treated but both *hamartia* and *katharsis* are rather swiftly dealt with.

The last two chapters of the book attempt a selective survey of ancient poetics after Aristotle. Chapter 4 is built, rather successfully, around the work of Plutarch, using his *How to Read Poetry* as a way in both to brief discussion of Epicurean views of poetry and to a rather fuller account of the allegorical tradition, including Stoicism. Discussion of allegory and symbols leads back to Plutarch and his treatment of the Egyptian gods in *On Isis and Osiris* which is then used as a starting point for considering views about divine images in Dio Chrysostom, Philostratus and Porphyry. At this point some difficulties which become more evident in Chapter 5 start to emerge. The Platonists of late antiquity understood poetry, visual art and music in the same way and saw no distinction between aesthetic and religious phenomena. These trends are already present much earlier, as is clear in H.'s Chapter 4, and they complicate his selection and discussion of the authors treated in Chapter 5. Maximus of Tyre is, as H. himself admits (p. 2), a surprising choice for a book about *philosophical* poetics although he does serve as a representative of the approach to poetry common in his time. Discussion of Plotinus has to deal with his aesthetics in general since, as H. recognises, he has little to say specifically about