Fulkerson, L.


“Je ne regrette rien”, sang Edith Piaf, and Laurel Fulkerson (LF) can hum the same tune. She has written a rich, intelligent and elegant book on the topic of remorse in Greek and Latin literature. After an introduction of forty-nine pages we get nine chapters (pp. 50-212), a conclusion (pp. 213-219), a list of works cited (pp. 220-244), and three indices (pp. 245-263: Index Locorum, Index of Greek and Latin, Subject index). Throughout, LF writes with both clarity and panache, and the book is a pleasure to read. One of the big points she is at pains to make is that because we think we know what remorse is we can get it quite wrong when we unthinkingly apply modern assumptions to ancient categories and vocabulary (p. 6): “The remorseful individual in antiquity is, first and foremost, a person who has failed to act well rather than one who has learned a lesson. So where the modern observer is likely to privilege progress over initial mistake, the ancient observer sees the error much more vividly.” LF knows that generalisations of this kind can be at best useless, at worst completely erroneous, but throughout the book she argues closely and lucidly in defending her basic position about the differences between ancient and modern constructions. She argues again (p. 8) that since the ancients put a high value on consistency in terms of character and behaviour they see remorse as a bad thing, whereas today we tend to see remorse as basically positive and redemptive. She believes that high-status individuals in the Greco-Roman world dislike admitting to error and that change of mind or behaviour is seen as inherently problematic (p. 12). She adopts this position despite acknowledging the existence of a small number of philosophical texts that do put a positive evaluation on the emotion of remorse (see pp. 9-11). But she says that she prefers to focus on the statistically more numerous cases to be found in the non-philosophical tradition, because they are more likely to help us see what a majority of ancient people actually believed. She finds these cases in a wide array of texts, both Greek and Latin.

She begins with the Iliad and the clash between Agamemnon and Achilles, obviously concentrating on books 1 and 9, but also looking at Achilles’ behaviour after the death of Patroclus and Agamemnon’s second apology in book 19. Overall, she sees their confrontation as establishing a recurring pattern for displays of remorse in later texts (p. 59), but she also finds Achilles’ remorse to be almost unique. The only other case that comes close to it is studied in chapter 2, devoted to Sophocles’ Philoctetes, in which she tries to show how (p. 79) “Neoptolemus is almost the only person to claim remorse for himself in the
ancient world”, following his deception of Philoctetes on the orders of Odysseus. LF believes that we are here very close to modern conceptions of how remorse works, and she takes us in detail through the play in order to back up her reading. In chapter three we are again dealing with Greek tragedy and Euripides’ Andromache. As before, we get close readings of key scenes and detailed analysis of language and plot development, here put to use in showing how Hermione feigns regret for her cruelty towards Andromache. The broader point she makes here (p. 81) is that once the rules for display of remorse have been normalized, whether in a society as a whole or just in the audience watching a play, the sincerity of any individual’s performance of remorse can always be called into question. In chapter four we move to Alexander the Great’s murder of Cleitus, as recounted by Arrian, Plutarch, Curtius; Justin is treated separately and very briefly. This is perhaps the weakest chapter in the book; the decision to combine different authors leads to a slight lack of focus and one ends up wondering what it all really adds up to. Again we are dealing with trying to figure out whether there is real sincerity or merely the performance of remorse and in the end insincerity, but the whole concludes with the surprising admission, given the argument of chapter three, that (p. 113) “ancient sources are not terribly interested in the distinction”. Presumably she means here mainly the ancient sources discussed in this chapter. With chapter five we move to comedy and to Latin. We have here a nuanced discussion that sees different strategies at work: in the case of young men we can see remorse trivialized by acceptance of the idea that “boys will be boys”, but for parents it can be a more serious matter, since public expression of regret can lower their status in society; but LF also looks at a few cases in which adult males, by showing remorse, can help to recreate intimacy in a family setting, and in doing so she emphasizes that this positive aspect may arise from the fact that comedy sheds light on the private sphere, in comparison to the more public examples studied hitherto. With chapter six we move to Ovid in exile and, as one would expect from an expert on this poet, it provides an elegant and convincing demonstration of how Ovid presents himself as the victim of an Augustus who is so cruel that he is not human enough to regret his misdeeds. Chapter seven, rather like chapter four, deals with a single historical figure, Nero, and three different versions of the murder of Agrippina, by Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio. Differences between the three are brought to light; for Tacitus Nero’s remorse is a character flaw; for Suetonius it can be used as a mitigating factor in any attempt to measure Nero’s cruelty; for Dio it is a sign of weakness that is totally ineffectual. Chapter eight, again dealing with multiple sources, shows how Roman historians use regret as a theme in accounts of mutinies by the army. The cases handled are Fabius Maximus and his master of the horse, Scipio’s army at Sucro,