

# REVIEW ESSAY

## Old Wine in New Critical Jars: Re-Examining Literature between the Classics and the Early Middle Ages

### Norman Simms

Sara R. Johnson, Rubén R. Dupertuis and Christine Shea (eds), *Reading and Teaching Ancient Fiction: Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman Narratives* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2018); pp. xv + 320.

This collection of sixteen essays on how to read and teach ancient fiction, is divided into three sections: 1) Early Christian Narrative; 2) Jews, Greeks, Romans, and Others; and 3) Pedagogies, Ancient and Modern. At first glance this is all exciting and innovative. It is also encouraging to see that students and teachers work so hard to keep up the learning of the literature that stands between the texts of Greek and Latin Classics and the formation of a Christian canon in Hellenistic Greek and Latin. The huge gap between the sixth century BCE and the sixth century CE is now filling up outside the most esoteric of specialist scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For older scholarship, see William R. Schoedel and Robert L. Wilken (eds), *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant* (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979) and J. W. van Henten, H. J. de Jonge and J. W. Wesseliuss (eds), *Tradition and Re-interpretation in Jewish and Early Christian Literature. Essays in Honour of Jürgen C.H. Lebram* (Leiden: Brill, 1986). More recent studies include Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.), *Greek Literature in Late Antiquity: Dynamism, Didacticism, Classicism* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006) and Helen Rhee, *Early Christian Literature: Christ and Culture in the Second and Third Centuries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

## *Old Wine in New Critical Jars*

Part 1 contains five essays, two on non-biblical texts and three on New Testament narratives, all falling within the “horizon” of narratological analysis. This opening section, as will be noted below, gives this reader the most trouble because of the new style of academic discourse it uses and the implications of such jargon-ridden language. As can be told by the titles to the contributions here, the key themes discussed have to do with women, love and the reactions for and against the rise of Christian ideas on these subjects. Thus we see Virginia Burrus deal with “Desiring Women: Xanthippe, Polyxena, Rebecca”, Christy Cobb’s contribution “Madly in Love: The Motif of Lovesickness in the Acts of Andrew,” and John W. Marshall’s “Trophy Wives of Christ: Tropes of Seduction and Conquest in Apocryphal Acts.” The titles of these essays suggest a somewhat anachronistic wit, or at least a penchant for American popular television comedies and soap operas. The last two essays in the section suggest a more serious studious approach. Scott S. Elliott and Eric Thurman’s “Unsettling Heroes: reading Identity Politics in Mark’s Gospel and Ancient Fiction” and Ute E. Eisen’s “Narrative Pathology or Strategy for Making Present and Authorization? Metalepsis in the Gospels” offer two approaches to what constitutes “gospel” in New Testament writing—forms of truthfulness, modes of legal argumentation, and problems in the psychology of rhetorical persuasion. Again, as we shall look more closely later, this way of reading back into the ancient world our own post-modern concerns and pre-suppositions about why authors wrote and audiences read leads to obfuscation and distortion, at least in the medium the essayists provide as stylistic models for their own students.

Part 2 has six essays, only one of which deals with a biblical text, the *Megillah* or Scroll of Esther; the rest focuses on Hellenistic documents by Jews, Christians, and others. Here, especially in two of the essays, the main objections to the first section seem answered, and contemporary scholarship redeemed, as it were. Then the final section, Part 3 has five essays, mostly extra-biblical, and stressing the pedagogy of reading in ancient and modern times. The chapters here are uneven, but do manage to achieve a high level of clarity and integrity, with a subtext that seems to come to the surface, whereas it is usually obscured by jargon; that is, it wrestles with the pedagogical problem of how to deal with students and, by implication, young academics, who are advanced in many ways (for example, they are assumed often to be able to handle on a technical level one or more of the ancient languages in Late Antiquity) and yet are held

back by the blinders of so-called faith-based prejudices and a lack of familiarity with sophisticated historiography and literary analysis.

In this section, there seem to be similar stylistic problems associated with the cluster of transitional literature between the late classical world and the early formation of a Graeco-Roman imagination attempting to evaluate itself in the midst of these almost clearly recognizable shifts in reason and emotional responses. Donald C. Polaski's "'And Also to the Jews in Their Script': Power and Writing in the Scroll of Esther" and Richard I. Pervo's "History Told by Losers: Dictys and Dares on the Trojan War" seem to mirror each other on a Foucauldian problem in historiography: how power and identity relate to one another when confronted by authoritative and virtually canonized bodies of texts whose superficial arguments can no longer be accepted in a transformed world.

Then, as will be indicated below, the four remaining contributions come closer and closer to recognition of how the turn towards the early medieval period was made along a trajectory that shifted into a Christian sensibility that took the past as a grotesque and ridiculous preparation for the Good News.<sup>2</sup> Brian O. Sigmon's "According to the Brothers: First-Person Narrative in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs" and James M. Petitfils's "A Tale of Two Moseses: Philo's *On the Life of Moses* and Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* 2-4 in Light of the Roman Discourse of Exemplarity" both signal that the various ancient authors feel superior to the classics in moral and psychological terms and thus to recreate past models in what are assumed to be more insightful modes of narration. Then there is a leap into a mode of superiority based on satire and comedy, adapting the classical principles to new circumstances. This is seen in Jared W. Ludlow's "Are Weeping and Falling Down Funny?: Exaggeration in Ancient Novelistic Texts" and Gerhard van den Heever's "Grotesque and Strange Tales of the Beyond: Truth, Fiction, and Social Discourse", about which we will soon have more to say.

Part III, with its five contributions on contemporary pedagogy, is not clear at all, at least since it has been more than a decade since this reader attempted to stand before undergraduate and graduate students and provoke their interest, though that was usually already through the medium of translation and without the structure of a basic sense of ancient history.

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<sup>2</sup> For an intellectual history see John Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers: The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

The chapters in question are Ilaria Ramelli's "Origen and Hypatia: Parallel Portraits of Platonist Educators", Shelly Matthews's "Teaching Fiction, Teaching Acts: Introducing the Linguistic Turn in Biblical Studies Classroom", B. Diane Lipsett's "Signature Pedagogies for Ancient Fiction? Thecla as a Test Case", Dennis R. MacDonald's "Teaching Mimesis as a Criterion for Textual Criticism: Cases from the Testament of Abraham and the Gospel of Nicodemus", as well as David Konstan's "A New Subjectivity? Teaching Ἐπῶς through the Greek Novel and Early Christian Texts". What are these modern professors doing in the university lecture hall or seminar room? Is their project to introduce students to basic literary, rhetorical and cultural terms and techniques using older examples and non-European genres?<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, it seems, the purpose of this pedagogy is to challenge students who bring the heavy baggage of fundamentalist religious backgrounds or the arrogance of some versions of Atheism.

For someone who has taught in these fields and on some of the texts discussed, I was most eager to appreciate this anthology. I had not heard of the participants in the "project", but put that down to a long retirement, being decades from the need to keep up with postmodernist scholarship. The authors of these chapters, as well as the editors who provide introductory, transitional and concluding remarks, along with other scholarly apparatus, are almost all academic historians of theology, religious history, ancient literatures and classical studies, and editors of professional journals. They are mainly based in American universities, though a few are from Canada, Germany and South Africa. The reader thus expects sound scholarship and representative views of diverse schools of thought current today. Yet, from the opening pages, there is a new and bizarre kind of writing style (for want of a better term) prevalent that, even more than the jargon and neologisms of postmodernism, makes normative reading almost impossible. Though the topics discussed are interesting and the general approach rather more stolid than adventurous (as claimed), the very structure of sentences, paragraphs and longer units of organization are clumsy, obtuse and illogical. Why this is so I am not sure, though my suspicion is that this phenomenon is due to the take-over of Humanities subjects by the Social Sciences, while the Social Sciences have conceded

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<sup>3</sup> This may well be an admirable pedagogical technique. The recent extension of the definition of fiction and especially the novel is exemplified by Steven Moore's *The Novel: An Alternative History. Beginnings to 1600* (London: Continuum, 2010).

control over their academic standards to fashionable ideologies. What happens is that what should be proved becomes the grounds for discussion by mere assertion, and the argument (such as it is) proceeds ploddingly towards banal truisms, or at least clunky new assertions.

The writers, proficient as they may be in the classical languages, take up positions outside of the cultures they seek to explain, because these archaic or ancient or classical civilizations do not share the assumptions of the prevalent belief-systems to which scholars now owe allegiance (strategically by virtue of career paths or sincerely in accord with so-called identity politics of gender, ethnicity or perceived alienation from the ruling elites). Not only is the writing usually boring, repetitive, tautological and turgid, but it seems to lack any sense of fun: what is parodic, satirical, witty and jocular—even fantastically silly—becomes serious, morose and flat. One scholar gets as far as calling such texts “arch.” But in the topsy-turvy world of these late antique mocking tales of the Christian saints and martyrs, the post-modernistic scholar’s allegories of gender inversion, sexual politics and victims crying out in pain and humiliation do not make sense as “serious” statements. Comical scenes are taken as equivalent to medical treatises. Knockabout farces become ponderous debates on what for us are real social issues. “That is to say, the woman’s sexual activity is a ground of contest between the apostle of Jesus and the non-Christian man” (p. 43), and slapstick moves are rhetorical and literary “tropes” and form part of “an important template for Christian narrative description of the spread of the gospel through the preaching of the apostles” (p. 43).

But even the Gospels, saints’ lives and other homiletic material, which should be seen within the context of popular entertainments and containing their own comic *sh\_ticks* and ridiculing of pagan superstitions and imperial cult rituals, are viewed too seriously. After all, to the Christian faithful, the whole absurd Roman Empire teeters on the edge of apocalypse, with a Second Coming about to rescue the true believers and whisk the persecuting fools of the illusionary world into everlasting perdition. Those being tortured and mocked can in their hearts—and their writings—treat with scorn the powers that only seem to be. If the early Christians learned rhetorical and philosophical techniques from the Stoics, the Cynics (many of whom formed part of the first “Jesus People”) provided models of popular and shocking displays of virtue, such as how to behave when the Emperor’s tormentors throw you to the lions, pierce your torsos with arrows or pull your limbs apart on the rack, that is, to smile beatifically, or

at least enigmatically, and to laugh scornfully at the crazy delusions; for these primitive Christians know that in a matter of moments their souls will be in Heaven, basking in the light and love of their Saviour.<sup>4</sup> To the common-sense Romans or the ordinary Pagan on the street, however—or the hard-headed popular authors of the parodic texts discussed in this collection of essays—it was the Christians who had lost their grip on reality. Hence, such writers could adapt the frameworks for self-delusion for exposing the madness of the whole world of social and spiritual reform; but at the same time, the satirists pull the rug out from under the boastful and pretentious generals, senators and provincial governors who aspire to godly status, just as Horace and Juvenal threw pie in the face of perverted men and women who try to overturn the laws of nature—in fact, as the clowns keep emerging from the tiny car at the circus—at anyone who disregarded the basic principles of self-control and social harmony. The usual plots of Middle and New Comedy, however, are now perceived by our earnest academic writer as “a simple reflection of a sociological reality [which] glosses over the complex relations of power inscribed in these narratives as well as the adroit deployment by early Christian writers of Roman techniques of wielding and expressing power...” (p. 45).

Then from the very title of John W. Marshall’s essay on “Trophy Wives of Christ: Tropes of Seduction and Conquest in the Apocryphal Acts”, you would think some suspicion of archaic wit would come to the surface. At one point in retelling the plot of the *Acts of Thomas*, Marshall begins, “Several episodes ensue with talking animals, demon lovers, tours of hell and further adventures...” But then he wends his way to the bathetic conclusion: “Here the confluence of colonial ideology and gender ideology is complete; what is the ideology of colonialism but the rule of one group over another by right understood to be natural or divine?” (p. 52). And along this journey, is there nothing that is comical or fanciful or satirical? No, of course, because “The pattern I have in mind as a comparison to the apocryphal acts is well attested in the literary and material remains of antiquity and also in the attitudes to sex and gender that scholars have analysed in the wake of the work of Michel Foucault” (p. 53). A Foucault who has not been discredited over the past few decades? A version of historiography that is flat and empty and overly serious? One

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<sup>4</sup> Examples can be found in Mark Waters (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001).

biographer, the American political scientist James Miller, while having no doubts about his brilliance, acknowledged Foucault as complicated individual: gentle, yet fascinated by cruelty, ironic, a dandy and a gadfly.<sup>5</sup> Or as Roger Kimball expressed it at greater length:

Foucault's focus was Power. He came bearing the bad news in bad prose that every institution, no matter how benign it seems, is "really" a scene of unspeakable domination and subjugation; that efforts at enlightened reform—of asylums, of prisons, of society at large—have been little more than alibis for extending state power; that human relationships are, underneath it all, deadly struggles for mastery; that truth itself is merely a coefficient of coercion.<sup>6</sup>

People, books and ideas are far more complicated than that, and some of the complications are that people are often inadvertently pretentious and ridiculous in what they say and believe, that some books set out to mock their rivals by parodying their weak spots, and dearly-loved ideas slide out of their natural or logical contexts and run amok through reams of absurdity and self-delusion. It is wonderful to see this article build into its discussion surveys of statues, descriptions of architecture and catalogues of numismatics faces and emblems, but disappointing that there is never a counter-hegemony to hegemonic power, never a subversion through exposing the vacuity of the discourses pronounced in word, gesture, stone and coinage. There were always two kinds of fools in the classical and later Christian world: those who took the everything too seriously and would always be disappointed that the state or nature did not yield to human ambitions (the *alazons* or boasters, those blown up by *hubris* and those frustrated by Sisyphean efforts) and those who refused to take the world seriously at all (the Cynics with their practical jokes and the *eirons* with self-deprecating postures and barking mad speeches).

In the study of metalepsis in the Gospels, the technical term from classical rhetoric is not merely repeated *ad nauseum*, but in those repetitions wrenched out of any recognizable shape, and where previous commentaries have understood the problems with the satirical and cynical figures of thought to be intrusive in the sacred writings—and no one before

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<sup>5</sup> James Miller, 'Carnivals of Atrocity: Foucault, Nietzsche, Cruelty', *Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (1990), pp. 470-491; James Miller, 'The Prophet and the Dandy: Philosophy as a Way of Life in Nietzsche and Foucault', *Social Research* 65, no. 4 (1998), pp. 871-896.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Kimball, 'The Perversions of M. Foucault', *New Criterion* 36, no. 10 (2018), at <https://www.newcriterion.com/issues/1993/3/the-perversions-of-m-foucault>. Accessed 20/08/2018.

this essay would have taken, as the author does, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as anything but a variation on Rabelais's *Gargantua* or Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and a hundred other books in the same genre where the narrator is playfully intrusive and argumentative; and not, alas, considered it puzzling and disconcerting, at least because they were laughing too much to ponder the psychological implications of the joke. Dismissing source criticism out of hand as though it were politically incorrect ("implausible" is the term used) to regard the compilers of the New Testament as uneducated (in regard to Hebrew traditions), unsophisticated (in the finer points of classical rhetoric), and careless in their religious enthusiasms (in velleities often verging on the fanatical), the author forgets that what most troubled the early Fathers of the Church was the poor writing and editing of their foundational documents, until they could rationalize these blemishes away in one manner or another (for example, translations, commentaries and ecclesiastical dogma).

I belabour these points because they are met with in the doctoral theses and review articles I am still asked to assess for one journal or another. Most of all, the stumbling block for a person like myself two or perhaps even now three generations away from the current crop of graduate students and young academics is the over-seriousness of their interpretations. Put this down, perhaps, to the shift of religious studies away from the humanities approach prevalent in the mid-twentieth century, an approach that included respect for theology and moral philosophy, and into the social sciences, with their claim to objectivity and evidence based proofs.<sup>7</sup> If not a mere pose of disinterestedness, which easily slides into uninterested-ness in the significance of the ideas and images of religious patterns of thought, the product of such scholarship seems to see things from outside rather than within, as though only the technical description of texts and events mattered, not their psychological, emotional and spiritual importance.

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<sup>7</sup> Consider the difference between Walter H. Capps' *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995) and Timothy Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).



Two chapters in the second section, as indicated above, salvage the whole collection of essays, and by extension perhaps the whole basis of modern Religious Studies. Jared W. Ludlow's "Are Weeping and Falling Down Funny? Exaggeration in Ancient Novelistic Texts" and Gerhard van den Heever's "Grotesque and Strange Tales of the Beyond: Truth, Fiction and Social Discourse" show that classical and biblical rhetorics could be ironic, satirical and grotesque, that is, that authors composed their works to tease, stimulate and upset preconceived notions of truth, its various verbal and iconographic expressions and practical or juridical application in the real world of social experiences. Various forms of word-play, image manipulation and gestural allusiveness probed beneath the surface of received opinions and beliefs, meaning that readers, professional and official, could not accept words, pictures and dramatic representations at face value and set about, as performing teachers, to prod their audiences into active engagement with the texts they commented upon.

In the third section of this collection, B. Diane Lipsett's "Signature Pedagogies for Ancient Fiction? Thecla as a Test Case" seems to sum up this critique in a nutshell and "showcase" the essential pedagogical and moral problem. Lipsett speaks of her seminar or classroom *practice* of *engaging with* students to help them *engage with* the texts being studied:

For Thecla's is not a text that, in Roland Barthes' words, 'comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable *practice* and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading'; it is not a nondisruptive 'text of pleasure.' As we *work* to situate Thecla's tale within the larger corpus of ancient novelistic texts and within articulations of ancient values and virtues our students may not know, we nonetheless should respect how unsettling it can be to encounter a starkly unfamiliar expression of ancient Christianity. We do well to validate, not merely manage, student readers' responses... (p. 238).

Unfortunately, this validation and management of contemporary students' reading of ancient texts raises two questions, one answered, or almost so, in the essays from Part 2 where a sense of rhetorical fun is recalled, a validation of satirical wit and an appreciation of the grotesque is presented as an acceptance of the irrational and undersigned nature of reality; the other question focused on the modern lecturer who cannot accept the imposed or self-willed ignorance of students as a valid component of

*Old Wine in New Critical Jars*

understanding. In my own experience, I had to walk out of a lecture hall and out of a course once, because I could not bring myself to accept fundamentalist and fanatical objections to the historical and rhetorical approach. The students refused to read, let alone discuss, any books or ideas that challenged their dogmatic beliefs.