

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



Review: Marxist Interpretations of Greek Literature

Reviewed Work(s): *Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth: Ideology and Literary Form in Ancient Greece* by Peter W. Rose

Review by: Edith Hall

Source: *The Classical Review*, New Series, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1993), pp. 64-66

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/710646>

Accessed: 23-05-2017 07:50 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Cambridge University Press, The Classical Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Classical Review*

for *σπουδαιογέλοιον*, and stresses that laughter is generally malevolent until the benevolent warmth of the Isiac revelation. This seems difficult to reconcile with S.'s emphasis on the conjunction of satirical anti-clericalism with religious joy in Book 11, an honest but perhaps problematic analysis of the oppositions in the novel's final section.

'Curiosity, Spectacle and Wonder' (48–57) justly stresses *curiositas* as a link between Lucius and Psyche and a Platonic theme, and rightly states that the anticipated show of Book 10 is a corrupt form of the Isiac festival of Book 11, while 'Cleverness and Fortune' (58–66) neatly points out that in the novel before Isis human ingenuity without divine patronage is not enough to resist ill-fortune. 'Sex and Witchcraft' (67–81) stresses the essential link between these two ideas in ancient thought, and that Isis and the witches are two sides of the same coin, 'sacred and profane magic' (here one might add Fotis as a negative anticipation of Isis); there is also a fitting sense of the human depravity increasingly displayed in the last few books of the novel (though the careful structure of this, e.g. in the adultery tales of Book 9, could be brought out more fully).

The account of Cupid and Psyche (82–98) is good on the episode's evident mixture of sources, limited Platonic allegory and relation to the main narrative, but might stress more its structural and thematic debts to epic narratives, especially in Psyche's *κατάβασις*. 'Animal and Human' (99–112) makes many good points on the interplay of humanity and bestiality, but might mention Ovid's homonymous *Met.* as a possible source for this and the Platonic association of bestiality and low desires (*Rep.* 588c). 'Man and Goddess' (113–22) stresses the integral nature, moralizing function and residual humour of Book 11, though here again the problem of reconciling anti-clerical satire with warmth towards the cult of Isis recurs.

But this review should not finish with criticism. S. has accomplished a remarkable feat of distillation in discussing so much so effectively in 125 pages; few essential issues are left untouched (though many might be treated more substantially and with a more sophisticated critical apparatus), and most receive a balanced and thoughtful consideration. This volume will surely take its place as the best critical introduction to the *Met.* for the serious student; one can only plead with the publisher for an early paperback of this highly-priced but finely-produced book.

Corpus Christi College, Oxford

S. J. HARRISON

MARXIST INTERPRETATIONS OF GREEK LITERATURE

PETER W. ROSE: *Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth: Ideology and Literary Form in Ancient Greece*. Pp. xii + 412. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1992. \$49.50 (Paper, \$16.45).

This book represents an exciting breakthrough in theoretical approaches to ancient literature. It provides, at last, a reliable and substantial study in English of ancient literature from an explicitly Marxist perspective.

The most useful chapter is undoubtedly the lengthy Introduction, 'Marxism and the Classics', in which Rose lucidly explains his theoretical position. It is a sophisticated amalgam of twentieth-century 'Western' Marxist insights, concepts and arguments, all of which are familiar to scholars of later literatures, but which remain

© Oxford University Press 1993

embarrassingly beyond the parameters of mainstream Classical Scholarship. From Gramsci R. adopts the concept of 'hegemonic discourse', from Bakhtin (whom he classes as 'Marxist' although many would appropriate him to Formalism) his 'politics of forms' – a conviction that the conventions of literary form carry an ideologically loaded message inextricable from 'content', from Althusser a Marxist 'historicising' of Freudian psychoanalytical theory, and above all from Fredric Jameson, the bearer to an Anglophone readership of 'all the insights of the Frankfurt School' (p. 33), the notion of a Marxist 'double hermeneutic'. This is R.'s fundamental methodological tool. To the Marxist all works of art are products of societies characterised by class struggle. In the ancient world literature actively supported aspects of the social status quo, by legitimising the world view of the ruling class. The task of the Marxist 'negative hermeneutic' is to reveal the ways in which texts 'manage', 'contain' or 'suppress' oppositional voices – the poor, slaves, women, foreigners. But alongside this procedure the Marxist critic, argues R., is bound to apply a 'positive hermeneutic', that is, to try to restore to consciousness 'those dimensions of the artwork which call into question or negate the ruling-class version of reality' (p. 36). Literature is no crude 'reflection' of contemporary society or simple weapon in the ideological armoury of the ruling class. It is a form of cultural production aesthetically realising by a process of mediation, problematisation and distortion – a process conditioned by innumerable factors such as the class outlook of the poet, his relationship to the ruling class, and the formal dictates of his genre – a history of unceasing social struggle, contradiction, and dialogue.

In the following chapters R. applies his double hermeneutic to six mainstream Greek literary texts. His reading of the *Iliad* argues against the view which sees it as a conservative text, preserving traditional formulas, motifs and narrative patterns in a representation of a static 'heroic' world of continuity and homogeneity. On the contrary, the poem reveals the absolute contradiction inherent in an economic system where the expectation of orderly transmission of inheritable private wealth is constantly undermined by the social institution of warfare. R. deftly explores the tensions inherent in the poem's attitude towards the inherited power and plutocratic values embodied in Agamemnon, and the greater meritocracy represented by Achilles. By a subtle examination of the epic poet's own ambiguous class position and consequent perspective on the aristocratic class R. suggests why the injustices and contradictions of 'Homeric society' can be so incisively portrayed. The study of the *Odyssey* is more clearly historicist; it reflects in R.'s view the archaic struggle between monarchy and incipient oligarchy. He concentrates on the complications introduced into the poem by the device of the 'beggar's eye-view' – making the king return as a beggar (p. 106). The 'double hermeneutic' finds fertile ground in the complex figure of Odysseus; he may be socially regressive in looking backwards towards a paternalistic monarchy, but he also projects a utopian projection of an idealised future, by offering a 'hostile critique of the oligarchs' naive and arrogant disregard for the self-respect of less fortunate men' (p. 119).

R. rescues Pindar from post-Bundyesque ahistorical analysis by cleverly showing how Bundy himself emerged from the New Criticism of post-war America, a form of apolitical interpretation which in retrospect can be seen as closely allied to the Cold War (p. 157); indeed, some of R.'s most riveting insights are into the political history of classical scholarship itself. In his close reading of *Pythian* 10 he shows how even such a blatantly reactionary poet as Pindar, whose absolute aim was the demonstration of the inheritability of excellence, the 'positive hermeneutic' can reveal a progressive dimension. In the case of the epinician ode it is the 'utopian image of

the ruling elite as a perfect community' (p. 173); the poet has access to an idealised and painfree human world of beauty and sensuous gratification which in itself negates what must have been the 'limited reality' of the ruling class for whom the poet composed.

R.'s view that the *Oresteia* uncomfortably combines radical politics – a progressive portrayal of historical movement towards a more egalitarian and democratic utopia – with rampant misogyny, mitigated in part by the figure of Cassandra, will be seen as innovational by few. More thought-provoking is his suggestion that the trilogic form itself expresses the dialectical assimilation of the past into the present, in the conversion of the Erinyes in the third and last play into their opposites, the Eumenides. The British critic sympathetic to Marxism at this point longs, however, for greater use of Raymond Williams' important identification of 'residual' and 'emergent' ideological strands within any synchronic analysis of a culture and its works of art. R. is at his best in his deservedly well-known discussion of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, first published in *HSCP* 80 (1976), which concentrates on sophistic debate about education, excellence, and anthropology; he interprets the play as an attempt to mediate the contradictions between a backward-looking image of the inherited excellence of the archaic aristocrat, and an affirmation of Neoptolemus' consciously chosen concern for another human being against established authority and the promise of social prestige. (The reader must be warned, however, that R. seems unaware of the important new papyrus of Antiphon fr. 44 (*Ox. Pap.* lii (1985), pp. 1–5), which requires that the notion of this sophist as a social egalitarian be abandoned altogether.)

Philosophers will not like what R. does with Plato's *Republic*, but his interpretation does justice to the text's contradictory position on the ancient debate on nature versus culture. It provides 'both the most powerfully articulated defense of aristocratic inherited excellence and the fullest demonstration of its fragility and inadequacy before the ideological apparatuses of the state' (p. 369).

Few will agree with all of R.'s conclusions, but it is to be hoped that his careful scholarship, avoidance of jargon, and clarity of argument will open a debate amongst classicists about this most arbitrarily maligned and little understood of literary theories. Students of Classics interested in Marxist criticism will no longer have to be told to use George Thomson 'with extreme caution' or be packed off to read Terry Eagleton.

University of Reading

EDITH HALL

JOURNEYS INTO ECHOLAND

MARIA GRAZIA BONANNO: *L'allusione necessaria: ricerche intertestuali sulla poesia greca e latina*. (Filologia e Critica, 63.) Pp. 304. Rome: Ateneo, 1990. Paper.

Between 'cf. Hom. *Od.* 12.198' in an edition of the *Aeneid* and the heady world of the theory of intertextuality lies a battleground where classicists are becoming increasingly engaged – and with increasing vehemence. It is hard to work in classical literature without thinking about 'allusion'; both the nature of classical literary tradition and our institutional formation require it; but it is becoming harder and harder to think about allusion without becoming embroiled in complex debates on intention, on