

William Allan, *Classical Literature: A Very Short Introduction. Very short introductions.* Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 144. ISBN 9780199665457. \$11.95 (pb).

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Preview

There is no shortage of major reference works on the history of classical literature, and large textbooks in English for use in college rooms or classrooms are also readily available. In our department, we have been working for years now with Richard Rutherford's *Classical Literature, a Concise History* (Blackwell, 2005), a useful and reliable guide for newcomers to Greek and Roman literature, particularly non-classicists. In nine of Rutherford's chapters, each one devoted to a major genre, Greek and Roman authors and their works are presented both in their generic context and in a larger historical perspective.

But although Rutherford's book claims to be 'concise', it is still a textbook of some 350 pages. This proves to be quite a challenge to many of our students, who would perhaps prefer a somewhat smaller volume. Now, Oxford classicist William Allan has published a nice little volume that may serve such needs. In no more than 125 small pages, Allan manages to show the highlights of ancient literature, much along the same generic lines as Rutherford.

After an introductory chapter on such inevitable general notions as genre, *imitatio/aemulatio*, Greek influences on Roman literature, and the transmission of texts from antiquity into the modern age, eight truly 'concise' chapters are devoted to what Allan obviously considers to be the most important genres. These are: epic, lyric and personal poetry, drama, historiography, oratory, pastoral, satire, and the novel. An epilogue, a useful list of items for further reading, and a short index conclude the volume. With its modest price and convenient size (two general features of the Oxford 'Very Short Introductions') it seems excellently suited both for undergraduate students and for general readers. Allan writes in a pleasant, light style, with the occasional touch of wit and irony, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of tediousness and abundance of facts and numbers.

Meanwhile, one may wonder how the huge field of classical literature can be encompassed in so few pages. How to deal with, say, the whole of epic (that is: Homer, Apollonius, Virgil, Ovid, and 1st century Roman epic) in less than 20 pages and still produce a text that is instructive and readable? In his introductory chapter, Allan appears to be aware of the difficulty of his task, but he refrains from complaining, and the volume has much to offer that is good, or even very good. Even within the space of just a few pages a scholar may express some ideas with which to open his reader's minds.

For instance, the chapter on drama contains some acute and sensible remarks on Greek tragedy that actually made me reconsider the whole genre. Allan points to 'human suffering' and the intense emotions it arouses as the main connecting elements (rather than to such artificial construct as the Aristotelian 'rules'). He also has some sensible observations on Senecan tragedy. Likewise, one can find fine remarks on Roman elegy giving a Roman male

reader 'the frisson of the loss of power and self-control which was a crucial part of his identity' (p. 51) or on Roman comedy, in which 'normality' always prevails in the end, whatever the absurdity of the action (as with Plautus' clever slaves outwitting their masters) (p. 68-69). Indeed, not much room is needed to catch what is truly essential.

Many other examples could be added here. I mention some fine pages on Greek lyric (Archilochus, Sappho), and some well deserved attention for the historical prose of Cato (p. 83).

It goes without saying that the strict limits of space have forced the author to make clear choices that may often have been rather difficult to make. The exclusion of Christian texts (Greek and Latin), and even of all texts after 200 A.D. may be such a painful decision. One can of course regret the absence of Augustine, Ammianus Marcellinus, or Nonnus, apart from a casual mention, but it does not seem fair to complain here, as the choice seems legitimate. (However, if Christianity is left out, so should be the very last remark in the book, which alludes to Christianity 'rising in the east' in the time of Apuleius, a rather misleading suggestion).

Things are somewhat different, perhaps, if we look at what has actually been selected in this book. For instance, one may wonder why Allan zooms in on 'pastoral' as one of his eight genres. Surely, even with the example of Virgil's *Eclogues* looming large, the genre can hardly be argued to have been so important as to deserve this prominent place. On the other hand, the ancient novel (ch. 9) has very rightly been given a chapter of its own (the scholarly emancipation of the genre finally seems complete), but was it fair to give it just as much, or as little space as the whole of ancient oratory (ch. 6, counting merely 10 pages)?

I hesitate to refer to Allan's academic reputation as a specialist of Greek tragedy and epic, but a reference to this expertise is to be found at the back cover of the book itself. Now does this explain why in this short book poetry seems to be preferred to prose, and Greek literature seems to be dealt with somewhat more lovingly than Roman literature?

In terms of prose, I fail to understand the complete absence of chapters on (Greek) philosophy and (Roman) technical prose. A survey of ancient literature without even a paragraph on Plato's refined dialogues? Nothing on Marcus Aurelius' introspective meditations? No mention of Cicero's philosophical works? And how to explain the total silence on important Roman authors such as Pliny the Elder or Suetonius, to mention some of the most obvious absentees? Even in the smallest of introductions these authors would seem to merit a brief mention.

The list can be prolonged and includes some disturbing names. Let me be clear: the silence on Roman prose authors such as Nepos, Varro, or even Curtius Rufus is a loss that we may graciously accept. But how could Allan leave out a poet of such popularity and influence as Martial? Surely, in the relatively ample and truly fine treatment of Juvenal (p. 112-116), Martial might easily have been named.

On account of these surprising omissions, I find it impossible to prescribe the little volume to my students as their main textbook. It will have to remain a 'recommended' title, a minor companion to larger textbooks such as Rutherford's. That is a pity, since the small volume contains so much that is sound and good. One may perhaps hope for a second version, in

which some of the choices are rethought and some of the imbalances redressed. Out with Pastoral, I would say, and in with a small section on Serious Prose.

As it is, William Allan's short introduction is excellent in what it actually does present: the major names and works of, let us say, the 'highest genres', and with its pleasant style it is likely to inspire readers to look for further reading. This is particularly welcome for beginning readers, who will greatly profit from the thoughtful observations made by Allan. But there is definitely room for improvement too.

[For a response to this review by William Allan, please see BMCR [2014.08.54](#).]