

REVIEW

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CANONS

Ivan Matijašić, *Shaping the Canons of Ancient Greek Historiography. Imitation, Classicism, and Literary Criticism*. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 359. Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2018. Pp. xi + 293. Hardback, €99.95/£91.00/\$114.99. ISBN 978-3-11-047512-8.

From undergraduate course design to the wider cultural politics of the Academy, canons and canonicity are a hot topic right now. The observation that our current vocabulary for the concept is comparatively modern does not detract from the fact that it is already present in Greco-Roman literature. However, the formation and operation of literary canons in antiquity have seen surprisingly little recent philological enquiry. The evidence is disparate, scanty, and not always illuminated by the enthusiastic reconstructions of pre-twentieth century scholarship.

In this book, Ivan Matijašić (hereinafter ‘M.’) aims to shed light on ancient canon formation with regard to one particular type of literature: Greek historiography. He is scrupulous in setting out his stall. ‘Canon’, for the purposes of this book, is the ‘selection of the best authors in a given literary genre’ or ‘authoritative list of books’ (1). M., in fact, generally prefers to talk about ‘canons’ in the plural: ‘this terminology highlights the contemporary presence of different selections made by different individuals for different purposes’ (1, once more). This observation is crucial to M.’s methodology. *Shaping the Canons* argues that a fairly stable and consistent short list emerges to define the canonical texts of Greek historiography in later antiquity. However, M. readily acknowledges the role of individual decision-making, and the local exigencies of the particular point that a given text is making when its favoured ‘canon’ is pressed into service, in modifying this list.

The acknowledgment of canon flexibility and the author’s generally judicious awareness of how far evidence may be pressed mean that M.’s case is a largely convincing one. *Shaping the Canons* has a few oddities of structure; very occasionally rambles a little; and is not always equally sure-footed in negotiating the sources (many and various, be it said) with which it has to deal. All the same, it is a valuable and mostly persuasive addition to the literature on this subject.

Chapter 1 (‘Ancient Literary Canons from Antiquity to the Present Day’) offers a brief overview of thinking about canon and canonicity across literary genres, in the ancient world itself, and in the scholarship of the modern. This

chapter nicely evokes the intensity of the scholarly discussions inaugurated by Ruhnken's use of 'canon' in its modern sense for his 1768 edition of Rutilius Lupus *De figuris* (13–18). It is not otherwise one of the stronger sections of the book. Like many 'state of the question' excursuses, it offers, perhaps, rather too much coverage of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars bloviating on topics which the author himself will subsequently handle with more critical rigour (so, for example, 23–31). The treatment of canon formation in genres other than historiography is also rather broad-brush. It is not quite accurate to say of the Dionysus of Aristophanes' *Frogs* that 'his task was to resurrect, as it were, Euripides or Aeschylus' (7); Dionysus, in fact, says at the beginning that he is going to the Underworld for the former (*Ar. Ran.* 66–7), while fending off Heracles' suggestions about other tragedians who are still alive (73–87), and only contemplates the idea of bringing back Aeschylus once he gets to his destination. The *Frogs* does not, then, justify M.'s assertion that 'tragedy had its three canonical poets already in the fifth century' (22). We may further note that, in the fourth century, Aristotle's *Poetics* straightforwardly cites as examples the *Antheus* of Agathon (*Poet.* 1451b), the *Alcmaeon* of Astydamos (1453b), the *Thyestes* of Carcinus (1454b), the *Cyprians* of Dicaeogenes (1455a), and the *Tydeus* of Theodectes (1455a) beside the productions of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Chapter 2 ('Cicero, History-Writing, and Canonical Greek Historians') brings matters back on track. It considers Cicero's treatment of Greek historians in *Brutus*, *Orator*, and *De Oratore*. There is thoughtful analysis in these pages of what determines Cicero's handling of earlier historiography. M. is inclined to a rather minimalist view of the Greek historians that were likely available for Cicero's use. He sees the evidence for the moments at which key Hellenistic libraries were shipped to Rome as fundamental to the consideration of this issue (47–9). There is a logic to this position, but the deep textual engagement with Greek from the very beginnings of Roman historiography perhaps suggests that there was more Greek available at Rome in the Late Republic than a monocular focus on the libraries would suggest. Fabius Pictor's history was written in Greek (*Cic. Div.* 1.43 = *FRHist* 1 T 10). Sisenna found time to translate Aristides (not a historian, admittedly) alongside his own historiographical enterprise (*Ov. Tr.* 2.443–4 = *FRHist* 26 T 12).

Chapters 3 ('Shaping the Canons: Dionysius' Critical Essays') and 4 ('In the Wake of Classicism: Dionysius, Rome, and Classical Athens') are the heart of the book, and by far the most engaging part of it. M. examines the canon of earlier historians expounded by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and relates the historian's choices meticulously to the criteria for sound composition which Dionysius sets out in his critical essays. Moreover, M. explores, in fascinating detail, the ways in which subsequent authors take issue with Dionysius' strictures on Thucydides (97–102). A quibble: Herodotus' proem (however

Dionysius may have interpreted it) does not say that his work ‘is limited to the war between Greeks and barbarians that brought to the Persian wars’ (88 n. 92). To assert such is to misprize the force of the *τά τε ἄλλα* in the opening sentence.

Chapter 5 (‘Canons Before the Canon: From Athens to Alexandria’) takes a rather awkward chronological step backwards, to examine the possible origins of the approximate canon propounded by Quintilian, Cicero, and Dionysius in the Hellenistic era. M. concludes that ‘[u]nless a papyrus emerges from the sands of Egypt or a long-forgotten manuscript shows up from the scaffolds of a library, the early history of the canons of Greek historiography will have to rely on first-century-BC sources’ (160). *En route* to this sensible conclusion, he considers Canfora’s notion of the *ciclo storico* (i.e., the idea of histories being read sequentially, each taking up the story where its predecessor ends, on the analogy of the Epic Cycle) and whether this might have contributed to the durability of the Herodotus–Thucydides–Xenophon succession (123–7). The *ciclo storico* certainly has its attractions as a concept, but it is, perhaps, worth remembering that the analogy of the Epic Cycle has its limitations. This is particularly true for the sort of canonicity argument that M. is making. M.’s historiographical canon is characterised by a firm insistence on the prestige and individual character of the named historians who constitute it. The Epic Cycle, by contrast, was beset even in the ancient world by arguments about who was responsible for which parts of it—as to whether (for example) Stasinus of Cyprus or Hegesias of Salamis composed the *Cypria* (Ath. 15.682d). Nor did the Cycle’s narrative continuity lead to the ultimate preservation of much of it apart from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Chapters 6 (‘Greek Historians in the Classroom: Literary Critics and *Progymnasmata*’) and 7 (‘From Dio Chrysostom to Late Antiquity: A Diachronic Analysis of the Canons of Greek Historiography’) return to the fortunes of the Greek historiographical canon in authors of the Imperial period (especially pseudo-Longinus, Demetrius, Aelius Theon, and Hermogenes) and Late Antiquity (especially Themistius, Ausonius, and Jerome). In these chapters M. navigates diverse texts that will be unfamiliar to many. There are one or two cases where passages that do not necessarily have the canonising force that M. would ideally like for his arguments are pressed into service: note, for example, the somewhat self-contradictory tone of a sentence like ‘There is a passage in the opening chapters of this *logos basilikos* ascribed to Menander Rhetor where, *roughly speaking*, a canon of historiography is *clearly* expressed’ (184–5, my emphasis). In general, however, M. negotiates this collection in satisfactory fashion, with due attention to the occasions where the narrowing canon throws up surprises.

Some more general points in conclusion. M. is rightly insistent on Xenophon’s high profile as a philosopher in antiquity. However, this leads to

a slightly excessive tendency on his part to downplay the ancient world's interest in Xenophon the historian: 'The ancients were not very interested in Xenophon's historical works' (224). One should not, in fact, go too far in this direction. Diogenes Laertius 2.57–8, for example, even though it is part of a potted biography which is devoted to Xenophon the philosopher, puts the *Anabasis*, the *Cyropaedia*, and the *Hellenica* before any philosophical output in its list of Xenophon's works, is exercised by claims about the relationship between Xenophon and Thucydides, and includes an epigram of Diogenes' own creation which devotes as much space to Xenophon's historiographical endeavours as to the *Memorabilia*. Plut. *De glor. Ath.* 345E (in a passage which M. cites several times, but only for the relationship between Thucydides and Cratippus) also shows that Plutarch, at least, sees Xenophon as a go-to example of a general who wrote about his own deeds, whatever one makes of Plutarch's suggestion there that responsibility for the *Anabasis* was hived off on to Themistogenes of Syracuse.

This issue of sources leads to another observation. As should already be clear from the summary above, one of the most striking characteristics of *Shaping the Canons* is the sheer range of material which it analyses, from the voluminous outpourings of Dionysius to Imperial rhetorical treatises, and beyond. One should also observe the impressive command of papyrological sources (see, for example, 11–13 and 150–1).

A notable absence, however, is any systematic use of the Imperial Greek historians. M. announces this as a matter of policy in his Introduction: 'It must be stressed that later historical texts cannot be exploited for the analysis of the canons of historiography because most of the works of history written after Alexander's death were *not* considered canonical in any ancient selection. Moreover, Imperial Greek historians do not provide any firm clue for the existence of canonical selection within the historiographical genre' (2). This seems to me rather to miss the point. The mere fact that the later historians were not themselves regarded as canonical does not rule out their use as evidence to determine the canonicity of earlier texts, any more than it would do so for M.'s principal source Dionysius of Halicarnassus. The observation about the lack of firm clues as to the existence of canonical selection in the Imperial Greek historians is stronger, but, again, not all the later Imperial sources which M. happily uses are explicit in their regard for canon selection, either. In fact, M. himself, in a sensitive reading of Herodian's preface (192–3), does actually show what the Imperial historians can potentially imply about the canon, even where they are less explicit about it than works of literary criticism are.

The elephant in the room that M.'s policy of exclusion nurtures is Arrian, who is not cited (or even, I think, named) at any point in *Shaping the Canons*. The omission is unfortunate. Arrian, after all, seems, in his *Periplus* at any rate, to have modelled himself on Xenophon the historiographer as much as upon

Xenophon the philosopher (Arr. *Peripl. M. Eux.* 12.5). This has rather destructive consequences, perhaps, for the blanket assertion that the ancients were not very interested in Xenophontic historiography. We may also note that Arrian is pertinent to M.'s other theme: the extent to which canonical and non-canonical Greek historiography survived into later ages. It is, at least, worth noting that Arrian, in the second century, makes thorough use of the Alexander-historians Ptolemy and Aristobulus (Arr. *Anab.* 1.1.1).

Proof-reading is not one of this volume's stronger characteristics. One cannot go for many pages in it without encountering a 'Quintilian's' (19 n. 55), *vel sim.*; the possessive apostrophe is also a somewhat erratic visitor (48, 81, 82, 85). Hardly any of the typographical blemishes seriously impair the sense. The only real exception is the suggestion on p. 199 that Menander was a writer of the Old Comedy, which M. certainly knows (contrast p. 20) not to be the case.

These, however, are only incidental observations. *Shaping the Canons* is a genuinely stimulating and thoughtful book. I intend to make significant use of it in my own thinking about ancient historiographical canons, and would encourage any similarly interested scholar to do likewise.

Somerville College, Oxford

LUKE PITCHER
luke.pitcher@classics.ox.ac.uk