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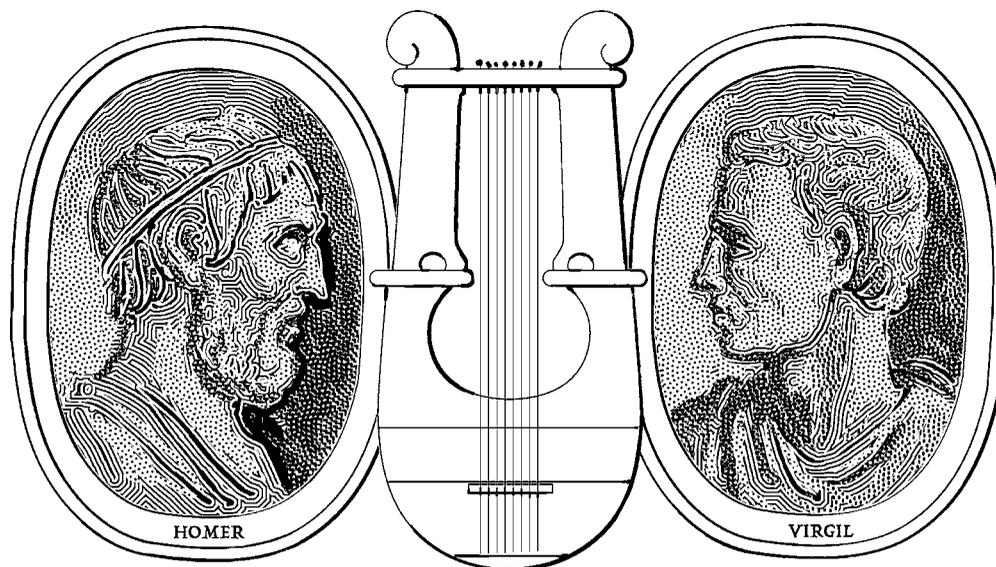
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ANCIENT AUTHORS

Classical Literature: An Epic Journey from Homer to Virgil and Beyond, by Richard Jenkyns.
Basic Books, 288 pages, \$27.99



IT'S BECOME INCREASINGLY HARD TO FIND a book about literature as literature, and not literature as sociology or political ax-grinding. Fortunately, there is no psychologizing in Richard Jenkyns's new book, *Classical Literature: An Epic Journey from Homer to Virgil and Beyond*, because its author understands that we know too little about ancient authors to try to explain how their lives might have influenced their works. Nor is the book concerned with "reception," that is, the study of the ways in which subsequent authors have understood ancient Greek and Latin writings. Instead *Classical Literature* concentrates on what ancient Greek and Roman authors wrote and the characteristics that made their writing distinctive. It is short and readable, in contrast to most histories of ancient literature, which tend to be long, and bristling with scholarly references. Jenkyns does not pretend to be anonymous, omniscient, or impartial. Professor Emeritus of the Classical Tradition at Oxford, he has a distinct authorial voice that engages his audience, making the reading of his book more like taking part in a conversation than listening to a lecture.

Although works written in Greek and in Latin are often discussed separately, Jenkyns deals with both languages and the ways in which authors in one influenced authors in the other. The two civilizations were closely related by culture as well as by geography.

Greeks had settled in the south of Italy as early as the 8th century B.C. The Romans adopted their alphabet and, along with it, their literature, even to the point of making their own language conform to the established metrical patterns used by the Greek poets. The Greeks, in turn, were eventually compelled to learn about Roman history and law, after the Romans conquered the eastern half of the Mediterranean.

ANYONE WHO HAS AN INTEREST IN ancient literature will find this book stimulating, if only because Jenkyns doesn't try to suggest that every extant piece of Greek or Latin writing is equally appealing or worth the time and trouble it might take his readers to appreciate it. He tells you what he judges to be worth reading, and what he thinks you need not bother with, like the dramas written by the Roman philosopher and poet Seneca (4 B.C.–65 A.D.), who had more influence on William Shakespeare than any other ancient dramatist. Nonetheless Jenkyns dislikes the Roman's overblown rhetoric and fondness for ghoulish detail; "in the end," he insists, "it is hard to avoid the conclusion: a man must have real talent to write works as bad as these." Quite a few professional classicists would disagree, but Jenkyns always explains why he thinks an author has been overrated. He finds the 3rd-

century B.C. Greek poet Callimachus technically sophisticated, and illustrates his point by providing a literal English translation to show how effectively Callimachus arranges his words. But Jenkyns considers the poet's writings dry, and suggests that his influence on Roman poets wasn't as great as has recently been imagined.

But other classics still deserve our attention. Among them, indisputably, stand Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, epics that are in their different ways the most influential works of ancient Greek and Roman literature. In ancient Greece schoolchildren learned to read and write by copying out and reciting passages from the *Iliad*. The *Aeneid* became an instant classic, even though its author had asked that it be destroyed if he hadn't finished it when he died. For much of the 20th century the *Iliad* was regarded as a product of an oral tradition, composed in effect by many different bards—as if such a significant and coherent work of literature could have been produced by a committee! Jenkyns explains why the *Iliad*, although developed through traditional methods, almost certainly is "the creation of a single mind," composed at a time when it could be preserved in writing.

In his discussion of the poem's narrative, he concentrates almost exclusively on human action, and particularly on Achilles, whose

wrath causes most of the deaths so vividly described in the tale. Heroism, Jenkyns observes, is essentially selfish; even if at end of the poem Achilles sees himself clearly, he is not prepared to change. But Jenkyns might also have pointed out that the damage caused by Achilles' wrath was also a part of Zeus' plan for the destruction of Troy; without the gods, his anger would have been far less effective. The gods' interventions, however brief, are consequential. The same might be said about divine action in Homer's *Odyssey*. The goddess Athena is more than a fairy godmother, patroness, or protector. She orchestrates the action of the epic, making sure that both Odysseus and his son Telemachus return safely to their homeland, and assists them in defeating, with the help of two slaves, Penelope's more than one hundred suitors.

IN OTHER PLACES, JENKYNs COMMENTS on the remarkable simplicity that makes Sappho's verse unique, and the lyric poet Pindar's sudden metaphors and attention to detail so striking and memorable. But in his view the greatest Greek lyrics were written by the tragic poet Aeschylus. The comic poet Aristophanes made fun of Aeschylus' clunky, pompous language and dramaturgy, but Jenkyns defends the deep psychological insight of the poet's words, and shows that his plots are carefully and effectively structured. By contrast, Jenkyns regards Sophocles as "strange, savage, and extreme," rather than being the model against whom other dramatists should be judged, as Aristotle seems to suggest in the *Poetics*. Sophocles' vision of humanity, Jenkyns observes, is not so far from that of the historian Thucydides, who makes his audience confront the human brutality and fallibility that ultimately led to Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War. Yet it was Euripides who had the greatest influence on subsequent European literature. His exciting plots inspired both adventure novels and light comedy. His *Medea* and *Phaedra* provided the archetypes for later dramatic

characterizations of the uncontrolled, divided mind.

THE BOOK'S SECOND HALF IS DEVOTED TO authors who were inspired by Greek literature but who wrote in Latin. Roman writers enriched their own work by careful references to Greek models that educated audiences might easily recognize: Catullus might seem to be translating a famous poem of Sappho, until we come to the last line, and realize he is talking about a crisis of conscience that Sappho doesn't mention. Most remarkably, Roman poets employed Greek metrical patterns, which are not easily replicated in Latin, a language with relatively few short syllables. Lucretius chose to write a long poem about Epicurean philosophy in dactylic hexameter, the same verse pattern employed by Homer for his epic narratives. Lucretius took advantage of Latin's ponderous sonorities to say of the philosopher Epicurus' theories about the nature of the universe: "where he is craggy and awkward, it is to express the recalcitrance of his material." But Lucretius' eye for illustrative detail is distinctive and original, and his ability to see the poetic in the mundane helped make it possible for Virgil to write the *Georgics*.

Virgil gets a chapter of his own in Jenkyns's survey. Original, complex and, allusive in his earlier works, Virgil in his epic poem the *Georgics* used farming the Italian countryside as a commentary on man and the forces of nature, as well as on the destruction and brutality of the civil wars of his own time. His *Aeneid*, despite its title, is not a poem about the journey of Aeneas, in the way that the *Odyssey* is about the wanderings of Odysseus; it is clear from its opening lines that the *Aeneid* is also the story of Rome, its founding and its future; a story of a journey that also explores the nature of empire. Aeneas must leave Dido and Carthage and go to Italy; the cause must take precedence over the needs of the individual. Unlike Odysseus, Aeneas does not get to return home or find happiness. The poem ends with an act of violence—Aeneas' slaying

of Turnus—without the reconciliation and reflection of the last book of the *Iliad*. But along with the violence there is hope, since we have already learned of the promise of Rome's future, even though (as Jenkyns might have added) that future was accompanied by continued violence and cruelty.

JENKYNs DEVOTES LESS SPACE TO POST-Virgilian literature, but he does include (as most surveys fail to do) some of the great writing by non-native speakers of Greek—the gospels of Luke and John, the letters of Paul of Tarsus, and the stunning last few chapters of the New Testament's Book of Revelation. Among Roman writers, he pays special attention to "the saturnine grandeur and dark brilliance" of Tacitus and Juvenal. Tacitus writes about ambition and power in a taut, acidic style that is not as dispassionate as he claims it to be. Juvenal wrote satires, short verse essays about society that have no analogue in Greek literature. His voice (like that of Lucretius) is impersonal, and his particular targets are vulgarity and tastelessness. He was also technically proficient, able to shape a hexameter as effectively as Virgil. The modern notion of satire derives primarily from him, rather than from his less acerbic predecessor Horace.

The book ends with a brief reminder of how many genres of European literature derive from antiquity, and how later writers found the work of Greek and Roman authors not restrictive, but inspirational. By portraying ancient literature as transformative, Richard Jenkyns presents a powerful argument against those who would dismiss the Classics as dead white European male propaganda. Better for us to do as the Romans did, to read and learn from them, and communicate all the more effectively because of our connection with an instructive and enduring past.

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