



2000

**Review of Deborah H. Roberts, Francis M. Dunn, and Don Fowler
(Eds.), *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin
Literature***

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Recommended Citation

Farrell, J. (2000). Review of Deborah H. Roberts, Francis M. Dunn, and Don Fowler (Eds.), *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*. *Classical Philology*, 95 (1), 88-93. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/449475>

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Review of Deborah H. Roberts, Francis M. Dunn, and Don Fowler (Eds.), *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*

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BOOK REVIEWS

Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature. Edited by DEBORAH H. ROBERTS, FRANCIS M. DUNN, and DON FOWLER. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. Pp. 328. \$45.00.

This excellent collection of essays considers the problem of closure, variously defined, in several genres of Greek and Latin prose and poetry. It covers a span of time extending from Homer to the Second Sophistic (with an afterword that looks ahead to the modern period) and a range of approaches that combines theoretical and practical perspectives in judicious proportions.

In organizing the volume and working with the individual contributors to make this a collection instead of a mere assemblage, the editors have done an outstanding job. The reader will find here, both in plan and in execution, an attractive selection of topics addressed in a stimulating fashion by scholars and critics who write with authority and imagination. Many of course will consult the essays individually, but will find themselves regularly directed to apposite discussions elsewhere in the volume. Moreover, both the arrangement of the collection and the effort that the various contributors have made to engage with similar questions from their individual perspectives encourage the reader to go straight through the book from beginning to end.

The contributors' general tendency is to question closural strategies and the ideological structures that closure represents, whether in the discursive, the aesthetic, or the political realm. Curiously, then, but perhaps inevitably, the ethos of the collection invites the reader to question those elements that give the volume its reassuring sense of wholeness. Indeed, with reflection one discerns, first, the outlines of a very familiar conception of literary history and, second, a persistent habit of dividing the modern intellectual landscape into what is and what is not classical. The title of the collection advertises its subject not merely as closure, but as the classical variety of that phenomenon. The classical world itself, moreover—and I would say in marked contrast to individual works of classical literature as they are explicated in this volume—is constructed as a relatively closed and stable entity with a very definite form. The chapters march chronologically from the Archaic period to the High Empire, outlining a largely standard history of classical literature with its usual beginning, middle, and end. Part of the editors' work is to relate this closed world to the larger, external world of modern literature and modern theory; and one effect of this distinction is to reinforce the idea that the classical differs in some decisive way from the nonclassical.

Don Fowler's elegant and aptly titled chapter 1, "Second Thoughts on Closure," which revisits and extends the discussion of issues that he first raised in 1989, and a thorough bibliographical survey, which (accurately) represents closure as a topic of inquiry imported into the classical world from without, provide a theoretical

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frame for the volume. The implication is that classicists must gain theoretical insight from external sources and only then apply it to their own material. "The works that inaugurated the modern study of closure," as the bibliography informs us, date from the late sixties. This volume, then, in some sense registers the impact that these studies are having on classicists only after the passing of a full thirty years.

That said, it is clear that individual papers make important contributions of an implicitly theoretical nature towards rewriting traditional literary history and reversing the usual vectors of critical influence between classicists and modernists. Sheila Murnaghan's essay on Homer, "Equal Honor and Future Glory: The Plan of Zeus in the *Iliad*," is an excellent example of what I mean. Murnaghan shows that even so simple a matter as the epic poet's announcement of his theme involves the reader in depths of ever expanding, continuous plotlines that reach far beyond the dimensions of any specific poem. The narrator's invocation, Murnaghan argues, appears to equate "the wrath of Achilles" with "the plan of Zeus," and thus to coordinate actions and motivation in the human and divine spheres. But Achilles' anger over the loss of Briseis modulates after the death of Patroclus into a force larger even than Achilles himself; similarly, the plan of Zeus is to be understood not merely as an intention to honor Achilles as greatest of the Achaeans, but as coextensive with the mythic paradigm by which Zeus, on behalf of his fellow immortals, "constantly reasserts his nature and power by assuring the existence for others of what he definitively lacks, repeatedly securing the mortality of mortals" (p. 24). In specific terms, "the plan of Zeus" demands not merely the exaltation, but the death of Achilles, the mortality of the hero who would, had he been born the son of Zeus instead of Peleus, have surpassed the father of gods and men. The *Iliad* thus envisions a kind of closure at the level of myth—Zeus remains in power—even as it inscribes itself within a narrative that cannot end, either with the burial of Hector or in later, post-Iliadic events, including the daily drama of mortality that is life after Homer's heroic age. Closural and anticlosural forces are present and, indeed, complicit here to an impressive degree, and this essay should be required reading for anyone proposing to theorize about the closed nature of the epic genre in antiquity, a common topos of modernist self-fashioning.

The final essay, Deborah Roberts' "Afterword: Ending and Aftermath, Ancient and Modern," deals with mythic closure in a related way. This is the only essay that explicitly deals with both classical and modern literature, considering anticlosural elements in Bacchylides' fifth ode and in Shirley Hazzard's novel *The Transit of Venus*, with additional consideration of such works as the *Odyssey*, Sappho's "Wedding of Hector and Andromache" (frag. 44), and Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. What unites these works, as Roberts well demonstrates, is a duality that appears in the form of alternate closural devices: marriage or the promise of marriage at the formal conclusion of each work, but death, generally in some disastrous form, projected beyond the formal conclusion in an unnarrated aftermath. The essay is appealing in the way that it explores the depth of this relationship without allowing the tragic aftermath, which is a kind of subtext, entirely to trump the more hopeful stories narrated in the text itself. This is a particularly effective application of the common critical trope whereby narrative closure is taken as either a figure for or a denial of death. In Bacchylides' ode, Heracles journeys alive to the land of the dead

where he learns for the first time the identity of his future wife Deianira. The poem is about as explicit as it can be in making marriage a closural device that ousts death from its "proper" place. The ancient reader or listener, however, surely knew the outcome of this marriage from tellings like that of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, and could thus supply the ode with an aftermath familiar from other sources. Hazzard's novel, too, forecasts marriage for its main characters, but resembles the story of Heracles and Deianira by using a form of "embedded external prolepsis" (Genette) to provide the reader with enough information to construct a detailed aftermath in which both protagonists come to grief. Roberts introduces *The Transit of Venus* as "the text whose closural strategy I think comes closest to what we find in Bacchylides and Sophocles" (p. 266). This is a provocative remark, but what larger argument does it serve? It seems possible to read the essay as arguing that the literary culture of antiquity, in which almost all poems, even new ones, were retellings of familiar myths, offered particular advantages to a poet interested in exploiting the possibilities inherent in ambivalent closural strategies. Indeed, the ancient poet could hardly avoid these possibilities, while the postmodern writer must work hard to conjure up similar effects.

Of the other essays, several, including Ian Rutherford's "Odes and Ends: Closure in Greek Lyric" and Massimo Fusillo's "How Novels End: Some Patterns of Closure in Ancient Narrative," are essentially descriptive in that they survey the various closural techniques associated with a particular genre or form. Christopher Pelling goes farther in "Is Death the End? Closure in Plutarch's *Lives*." Here the equation of closure with death takes on a specific generic form, the narration of a single character's *bios*. But, as Pelling shows, "[Plutarch's] artistic unit is not the individual *Life*, it is the pair: the end of a single *Life* is a temporary resting place, no more" (p. 228). And, he continues, even the second *Life* of a pair is followed by a *synkrisis* that itself does not so much conclude as begin the process by which the reader revisits the details of the two *Lives* being compared and rethinks their meaning, both individually and as a pair. Pelling does in fact proceed by taking note of the various closural devices that appear in the *Lives* and of the various ways in which Plutarch handles the issue of death. The survey begins with a fascinating discussion of how often Plutarch concludes a *Life* by narrating the death of someone other than the subject, and moves on to consider other complexities in Plutarch's approach. The resulting essay is not merely a survey of formal devices but a rewarding exploration of Plutarch's sophistication as a narrator.

Only a few chapters raise an issue even more basic than that of closural technique, namely, the editorial question of whether the transmitted ending of a particular work is in fact the ending that was designed for it. Peta Fowler's essay on "Lucretian Conclusions" begins with a long-standing debate about the end of the *De Rerum Natura*, then moves on to consider this ending in light of previous and subsequent intertexts. First, she adopts Bockemüller's transposition of *De Rerum Natura* 6.1247–51 to the end of the poem, a transposition suggested by the closure of Lucretius' model, Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague; then she demonstrates how well this ending is supported by the closural strategies found in a variety of genres, in other books of Lucretius' poem, and in two later works, Sallust's *Catiline* and Virgil's *Georgics*, works that in different ways (she argues) follow or

allude to Lucretius' method of closing his final book. This essay stands first in an exceptionally coherent series of mutually illuminating chapters dealing with Latin poetry. The series includes Philip Hardie, "Closure in Latin Epic"; W. R. Johnson, "Final Exit: Propertius 4.11"; and Alessandro Barchiesi, "Endgames: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 15 and *Fasti* 6." The span of time that they cover—the late Republic to the Flavian Principate—is fairly long, but the most salient issues with which they are concerned are those that arise, directly or indirectly, from the decisive transformation of Roman history and society that was associated with the political transition from republic to empire. This transition was fraught with concern about closural gestures (Virgil's *imperium sine fine*, Augustus' shutting the doors of the Temple of Bellona, Agrippa's map of the imperial *oikoumene*, the new literary genre of universal history), and these essays on literary productions that share this concern gain from being in dialogue with one another and about the times that produced them. The unifying factor is the linkage between closure and political power. Peta Fowler announces this theme in comparing the ending of the *Catiline* to that of the *De Rerum Natura*: both works are open-ended, envisioning in their different ways the dissolution of the social order—the great issue of their day, which could view closure only as the end of an era and the introduction of a debased aftermath. In the era that followed, closure represented the end of civil war and the establishment of a new social order. But how "closed," how permanent would the new order be? This is the subject of Hardie's paper, which adds to the discussion that he inaugurated in *The Epic Successors of Virgil* (1995) about the anticlosural intertextual strategies of post-Augustan poetry. Hardie's essay is much concerned with Imperial responses to the closural gestures of Virgilian epic and the Augustan Principate; Johnson and Barchiesi consider, variously, contemporary resistance to Augustan closure. For Johnson, this takes the form of a vigorously witty reading of Propertius' Cornelia elegy; for Barchiesi, of investigating the open nature of Ovid's two most ambitious poems. This openness consists both in the form of the *Fasti* itself and in its mutually dependent relationship with the *Metamorphoses*. Barchiesi gets at this openness by considering such topics as what the *Fasti* does not include, both in the six books that we have (e.g., the anniversary of Tiberius' birthday) and in those that we do not (e.g., the Caesarian months named *Iulius* and *Augustus*) as much as what it does. He also considers the way in which the *Fasti* and the *Metamorphoses* seem both to complete one another and to reveal their mutual incompleteness. The material presented in this chapter is available elsewhere, but it is so well integrated into this collection that rereading it here is almost a new experience.

This series of essays gains from the fact that the essays share a particular cultural matrix and, to some extent, the same generic focus. Don Fowler, in his introduction, pairs Latin epic with fifth-century tragedy and comedy as "the ancient literary genres where the politics of closure have been particularly important," and goes on to observe that while Latinists have been quick to borrow from students of tragedy in particular, "it is unfortunate that this development has not been more reciprocal" (p. 7). Comedy does not figure in this volume, but tragedy is ably represented by Francis Dunn's essay on "Ends and Means in Euripides' *Heracles*." What Dunn may have learned specifically from students of Latin epic, I could not

say, but he approaches his material in ways that at least the Latinist contributors to this collection would find agreeable. Dunn's essay moves from formalist to historicist concerns, beginning with "Narrative Ends" and proceeding to consider (among other topics) "Divine Ends," "Heroic Ends," and "Civic Ends." Having argued in earlier sections of the essay that "the false ends of narrative are reprised by the deus who is no deus," Dunn goes on to suggest "that the empty or unrealized promise of civic closure likewise reprises an uncertain relation to public values and ideology" (p. 104). His interpretation hinges on Euripides' treatment of Lycus and Theseus as representatives of tyrannical and democratic government, respectively. Carolyn Dewald's "Wanton Kings, Pickled Heroes, and Gnostic Founding Fathers: Strategies of Meaning at the End of Herodotus' *Histories*" moves in a similar direction. Viewed in strictly literary terms, the end of the *Histories*, in which Herodotus recalls an anecdote about Cyrus the Great that supposedly took place many years before the Greco-Persian Wars, makes no sense (as Wilamowitz, Jacoby, and others complained). The upshot of the anecdote—the Persians "chose to rule living in a barren land rather than, sowing plains, to serve others in luxury" (9.122.4)—invites the reader to take it as a cautionary parable directed at Athenian imperial designs. But Dewald insists, convincingly I think, that we resist any urge to find in the parable Herodotus' judgment about those designs. "Was the contemporary Athenian empire a good thing or a bad thing?" she asks. Her answer is that "The *Histories* is silent on this score not because Herodotus thought there was no answer, or because he didn't want to offend someone, or because the answer didn't matter, but because at the time of his writing this part of the pattern had not yet emerged" (p. 81). Thus the historian, having taught his reader what he can about the past, poses a question about the future.

Dewald prefers the postmodern openness of Herodotus' final episode to any effort to impose closure by deciding among its possible meanings, and thus, like Dunn, manages to walk a fine line between formalist and historicist reading. Both Herodotus and Euripides, on these readings, view the closed, triumphalist narratives of Athenian ascendancy with an ironic detachment not unlike the attitude ascribed elsewhere in this volume to Propertius or to Ovid. But there is much more to say here. Both Dewald and Dunn show, in different ways, how hard it is to read fifth-century literature without the historical closure of Athenian defeat very much in mind. By contrast, a strong current within Augustan studies has involved the critic in siding with those writers who show signs of resisting the historical closure that Augustus imposed. The similarities that modern scholars are tempted to see in fifth-century Athenian and first-century Roman intellectuals must be considered against the background of the contrasting fortunes of the states within which they lived and worked. Don Fowler's point bears repeating and amplification: the conversation among scholars in these two fields should intensify, and should take a more reciprocal form than it has in the past, as in fact it does in the middle chapters of this volume.

In closing (as it were), *Classical Closure* is a superb contribution. The individual essays are of a very high quality. Their range ensures that there will be something to interest almost any reader, while every essay gains from being read in light of others in the volume. The collection is thus not only a valuable source of infor-

mation and inspiration for those interested in this abidingly important topic, but also a model of how a volume of thematically related essays should be organized. The individual contributors and the editors are to be warmly congratulated on a fine achievement.

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