

ARTES POETICAE: FORMATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS, 1500-1650

SPECIAL ISSUE OF *CLASSICAL RECEPTIONS JOURNAL*

edited by Vladimir Brljak and Micha Lazarus

INTRODUCTION: POETICS AS CLASSICAL RECEPTION

Artes poeticae: Formations and Transformations, 1500–1650 gathers path-breaking new work on the literary criticism of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe and Latin America, a domain of literary and intellectual history which represents one of the richest and most enduring strains of the classical heritage in this period.

Literary thought prior to 1500 was itself deeply influenced by classical tradition. Horace's *Ars poetica* and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* had been known for centuries in the Latin West, readily and sententiously quoted for guidelines governing the poet's art. They inspired new *artes poetriae* by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Matthew of Vendôme, and others, codifying precepts of style, versification, and figurative language for generations of Christian poets on foundations laid by their pagan predecessors. The revered works of Virgil were approached through a commentary tradition going back to Servius and beyond, while dramatic theory built on essays by Donatus and Evanthius. Postclassical literary thought also inherited the vast tradition of allegorical poetics, extending uninterrupted from some of the earliest literary critics on record to Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.

Yet by the turn of 1500, the place of these works in the field of literary theory was about to be transformed by an influx of new texts and new methods of understanding them. Aristotle's *Poetics*, recovered in Greek after the fall of Constantinople and translated into Latin by the turn of the century, supplied striking new material and suggested that still more might be found in the canons of Greek rhetoric, such as Demetrius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Longinus. With it came a rediscovered treasury of Greek examples. The first print editions of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus appeared in the first two decades of the sixteenth century. In some cases, new models and new theories went hand in hand. In the mid-sixteenth century, for example, the Italian humanist Francesco Robortello produced the first major commentary on the *Poetics*, a ground-breaking edition of Aeschylus, and the *editio princeps* of Longinus *On the Sublime*, in the space of just seven years. In others, we find rediscovered classical sources consulted but discarded by poets and critics departing in new directions. Thus despite John Milton's close interest in the *Homeric Problems* of

Heraclitus, he would ultimately turn his back on the venerable tradition of the allegorical epic to write a very different kind of poem.

Across Europe, scholars of this recovered corpus of ancient texts were stimulated to produce their own innovative theories. In Wittenberg, Philip Melanchthon's lectures on the Greek tragedians developed into major theoretical essays in the war-torn 1540s. In Padua, Robortello's commentary on the *Poetics* was accompanied by an essay *De satyra* (1548), and Antonio Riccoboni's came with an original *Ars comica* (1587) claiming to be extrapolated from Aristotle. In Leiden, Daniel Heinsius's editions of Horace's *Ars poetica* and Aristotle's *Poetics* were accompanied with his own theoretical essay *On the Constitution of Tragedy* (1610). In London, Aristotelian influence is detectable behind the radical claim for poetic autonomy in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605, revised 1623), pointing the way to developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, by the seventeenth century we begin to encounter classical literary criticism in previously unexpected contexts: Aristotle's *Poetics* formed part of English schoolboy grammar exercises, and across Europe Longinus was being cited from the pulpit. After centuries of relative stability, Europe's critical landscape was changing at an extraordinary pace under the pressure of the new, the old, and the old made new.

However, in spite of important new specialist work in several of its constituent subfields, the field has largely failed to keep up with these dynamics. The history of Italian poetics still rests on the Chicago-Aristotelian scaffolding of Bernard Weinberg's monumental *History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*; in England, on the model of 'rhetorized' or 'humanist' poetics best exemplified by the work of Brian Vickers; in France, under the long shadow of a later and more rigid neo-classicism; and Iberian and New World poetics is neglected in most Anglophone scholarship. Behind all this hovers the ghost of Joel Elias Spingarn, whose *History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance* (1899) formed the pattern for most subsequent scholarship in the field—and behind Spingarn's ghost, that of Jacob Burckhardt, whose *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) established the model of periodisation which continues to underpin so much work in literary and intellectual history at large. Above all, progress has been hampered by the failure to comprehend the field of premodern poetics as a coherent unit: to acknowledge both the essential continuity and the inventive range of more than two millennia of poetic thought in the West.¹

¹ For further discussion along these lines, see Micha Lazarus, 'Sound Aristotelians and How They Read', and Vladimir Brljak, 'Inventing a Renaissance: Modernity, Allegory and the History of Literary Theory', both in *The Reception of Aristotle's Poetics in the Italian Renaissance and Beyond: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Bryan Brazeau (London, 2020), 38–59 and 60–93, respectively.

This volume, however, along with a number of other recent collections, witnesses new energy circulating in the field, much of it emerging from the study of classical reception.² As it formed European literary culture, classical poetics was itself transformed, adapted, and accommodated to the changing realities of literary production. Featuring exploratory new work from classicists, art historians, and literary scholars across this period's national and linguistic traditions, *Artes poeticae* seeks to take a fresh look at these formations and transformations of classical literary thought in France, England, Italy, and the New World, across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Michael Hetherington opens the volume with a fundamental question: 'what was at stake when an early modern theorist posited a rule?' Most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century critics took it for granted that the discipline of poetics was composed of rules. Yet even as descriptive classical accounts of poetry were crystallised in this period into prescriptive manuals, these critics were also aware, as Hetherington shows, that rules and rule-following were elusive and complex things. Can compositional rules turn a bad poem good? Are they constant companions, or a mere training, to be discarded once the labour of creation begins? Is poetry the test of rules, or are rules the test of poetry? Indeed, to what extent is rule-making really about rule-making, and to what extent simply a conventional outlet for literary-theoretical inquiry? Are we, already at this early date, dealing with description in prescriptive guise—with rules, as Alexander Pope would later put it, 'discovered, not devised'? Stepping back from the content of poetic rules to focus on their form, Hetherington demonstrates that the vocabulary of critical rule-making bore significant metaphorical freight. The lexical and grammatical construction of these texts express in granular form the tensions between talent and training, normative practice and individual style. Conscious of their own inadequacy to regulate creativity, the rules set out in critical texts were at once 'instruments of technical mastery and marks of a kind of helplessness'. Ranging across the critical literatures of the Latin West—from Badius, Erasmus, Giordano Bruno, and Julius Caesar Scaliger, to George Gascoigne, Samuel Daniel, William Scott, and others—Hetherington directs our attention to the most basic assumptions of poetics as a genre in its own right.

Turning to sixteenth-century France, Lucy Rayfield looks at the place of Roman comedy in two mid-century publications by the humanist, diplomat, doctor, and founding member of the *Pléiade*, Jacques Peletier du Mans. Peletier's 1541 translation of the *Ars poetica* into French popularised

² See *Poetics before Modernity: Literary Theory in the West from Antiquity to 1700*, ed. Vladimir Brljak and Micha Lazarus (Oxford, forthcoming); *The Places of Early Modern Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander, Emma Gilby, and Alexander Marr (Oxford, forthcoming); *The Reception of Aristotle's Poetics in the Italian Renaissance and Beyond: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Bryan Brazeau (London, 2020); *Reading Poetry, Writing Genre: English Poetry and Literary Criticism in Dialogue with Classical Scholarship*, ed. Silvio Bär and Emily Hauser (London, 2020).

Horace's treatise for vernacular purposes, and Rayfield traces its influence into the writings of Charles Estienne, Thomas Sébillet, Joachim du Bellay, and Estienne Jodelle. In this earlier work Peletier displays little interest in comedy as a theatrical genre, yet fourteen years later, in his original treatise *Art poétique français* (1555), he would present a concrete and sophisticated account of comedy, and rank among the first to expand the precise technical vocabulary of French criticism with terms such as *bienséance* (decorum). The development of Peletier's thought between these two moments, Rayfield argues, cannot be attributed to just one cause. Instead it was driven by his fascination with Italian vernacular comedies, his involvement in Lyon's vibrant theatrical scene, and parallel readings of ancient authorities such as Terence, Donatus, and Aristotle's *Poetics*, alongside cutting-edge Italian commentary upon them. Presenting a new English translation of the *Art poétique français* on comedy, Rayfield casts Peletier's comic theory as a paradigmatic case of how the recovery of classical models, vernacular literary innovation, and new critical developments, must be considered in this period as operating in concert.

Ted Tregear's contribution picks up where Rayfield's leaves off, in France, with an early invocation of the sublime in Montaigne's *Essais*. Weighing fragments of classical poetry against one another, Montaigne's comparative method is reflected in two poetic anthologies produced in England in 1600: *Englands Parnassus* and *Bel-vedère*, hybrid creations 'somewhere between a commonplace-book and a poetic miscellany'. By virtue of this hybridity, Tregear shows, these anthologies become arenas of vibrant literary-critical activity. At once unifying vernacular extracts under commonplace headings and inviting readers to compare and contrast between them, the anthologies are to be seen against the fiery critical backdrop of the Poets' War, as it unfolded on English professional and university stages at the turn of the sixteenth century. Closely analysing both their stage reception and their internal dynamics, Tregear places these works at the heart of a new kind of comparative criticism in England: a criticism based on performative acts of close-reading, censure, and discrimination by both poets and their readers, which would find full expression more than a century later, in the doctrine of taste and the battles of the ancients and moderns. As he attributes the theoretical underpinnings of this new search for distinction to Longinus's *On the Sublime*, Tregear argues that the sublime itself has anthological roots in confrontations with a fragmentary classical archive.

Drawing on English literature and painting in the early decades of the seventeenth century, James Hall focuses on the Europe-wide vogue for sympathetic mimicry: the principle, often attributed to Horace, that an authors, orators, actors, and artists must identify emotionally with their subjects in order to render them most vividly. In doing so he refines Rensselaer W. Lee's influential thesis of 1940, which claimed that sympathetic mimicry was an all but ubiquitous classical inheritance in the

poetics and art theory of Renaissance Italy and France. On the contrary, Hall argues, while elements of the theory can be found in Cicero, Quintilian, and Horace, it was above all the rediscovery of Aristotle's discussion of the manic poet in the *Poetics*—and the frenzy of Italian commentary that followed on its heels, in particular that of Castelvetro—that popularised this notion across Europe. Hall proceeds to examine how this foreign body of thought, 'both intoxicating and toxic', was represented on stage by a fascinated and sceptical Shakespeare. In Hamlet's famous reflection on acting Hecuba, sympathetic mimicry and its manipulation of aesthetic distance is mediated through a subtle reading of Roscius, the Roman actor commonly cited in this period as a tragedian but in fact, and in Hamlet's speech, renowned for his sympathetic range. Ophelia's description of portrait painters in *Hamlet*, and Bassanio's in *The Merchant of Venice*, are illuminated with material from English treatises on limning by Nicholas Hilliard and Edward Norgate, and ultimately traced to Castiglione's *Courtier*. And the dangerous excesses of this theory emerge in Hall's analysis of the 'Painter scene' in Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*—long suspected and now broadly accepted as a Shakespearean addition—in which sympathetic mimicry at last tips into madness.

Madness is never far away in Aaron Kachuck's analysis of the bear that closes Horace's *Ars poetica* as the 'classical emblem of classical rule-breaking' from Augustan poetics to the Shakespearean stage. Magisterially tracing the bear's many aspects through ancient natural history, mythography, folklore, historiography, etymology, epic, satire, and beyond, Kachuck recasts Augustan literature, and its standard-bearers Horace and Virgil, as less 'classical' and more monstrously ursine than is usually allowed. Horace (and Augustan poetics more generally) is typically seen as a 'guarantor of a neo-classical generic order', champion of formal unity and enemy of indecorous mixture. Yet at the heart of Horace's self-mythologizing and his portrait of the poet Kachuck locates the bear, at once a form-giving figure, licking its poetic young into shape, and the agent of generic havoc. Both aspects persisted into English poetic debates. Returning to the Poets' War in the years around 1600, Kachuck charts the *fortuna* of Horace's abrupt conclusion to the *Ars poetica* as it was taken up by his translators and critical followers. Ben Jonson, in particular, took on the persona of Horace in *Poetaster*, and it is by way of late rebuke to Jonson, Kachuck argues, that Shakespeare inserted *The Winter's Tale*'s famous stage direction: 'Exit, pursued by a bear.' Shakespeare's bear, like the bear of Augustan poetics, crashes through the unities of the play and transforms it into mongrel tragicomedy—a manoeuvre to which Kachuck finds a parallel in the Renaissance text of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. Horace's bear at last survives as a kind of critical metaphor, a cluster of formal principles that play out within the poetic frame itself.

Where French and English critics could sample Italian criticism as a foreign novelty, Bryan Brazeau shifts our attention to turn-of-the-century Italy, where a generation of poets was labouring in its

imposing shadow. Lucrezia Marinella's 1602 *Vita di Maria Vergine*, which presents parallel verse and prose epics of the life of the Virgin, has been seen as an elaboration of Tasso's theories of Christian epic. Without displacing Tasso's influence, however, Brazeau focuses instead on the original critical contribution set out in Marinella's prefatory essay to the prose *Vita*. Prose was not widely considered appropriate to elevated subject matter. To justify her use of prose, therefore, Marinella pioneered arguments for the dignity of prose narrative even beyond that of verse. Brazeau explores the voluminous critical background to Marinella's ideas in Italian sources, all of it prompted in some respect by Aristotelian debates over the distinction between prose and poetry. Critics such as Maggi, Michele, Beni, Bonciani, and Buonamici argued back and forth over the virtues of prose fiction for the lower genres, but none of them would countenance a prose epic. Yet Marinella stepped over this body of criticism, Brazeau shows, and instead derived her authority directly from Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, and Italian vernacular commentaries on the *Poetics* by Segni and Piccolomini. Supplying an English version of this previously untranslated text, Brazeau sheds light on Marinella's development of a new sublime prose style, better suited even than verse to the grandeur of divine subject-matter.

In the final essay, Maya Feile Tames expands the borders of this volume to take in a vast and overlooked locus of poetic activity in this period: the Americas. From 1492 onwards, America became an unavoidable presence as both poetic subject matter and itself a productive site of poetry and poetics. Works composed in America were printed in Europe, and works composed in Europe—from the classical critical canon of Aristotle, Horace, and Cicero, to the writings of influential humanists such as Poliziano, Vives, and Scaliger—issued in droves from presses across the Americas, making them the first non-European arena of the European poetic tradition. Criticism was no exception. In addition to much-studied works such as Bernardo Balbuena's *Compendio apologetico* (Mexico, 1604) and the anonymous *Discurso en loor de la poesia* (Lima, 1608), Feile Tames sketches an extensive hinterland of critical works stretching well into the seventeenth century and beyond. Such works have been criticised as derivative, indistinguishable from their European models, yet Feile Tames powerfully argues that this misses the point: to produce criticism that could be taken for European was, for a young American literary culture, a competitive act, licensing the New World as 'a space of poetic activity'. Truly innovative criticism, meanwhile, was taking place in the poetics of place woven into New World poetry itself. Surveying two hundred years of metapoetic gestures, Feile Tames shows how Ibero-American poets summoned America into poetry by manipulating classical tropes, repatriating the Muses on American soil and projecting the topography of European poetics, such as Mount Parnassus, onto an American map.

Artes poeticae thus ranges across developments in France, England, Italy, and the New World, from Badius Ascensius's edition of Horace's *Ars poetica* in 1500 to a period of such critical *copia* that chronology and geography cease to be useful heuristics. Yet cutting across the volume are several guiding, disciplinary questions, revisited and expanded by Chris Stamatakis in his probing afterword. The first asks how poetics works as, in Kachuck's words, a 'literary genre *sui generis*'. Hetherington and Kachuck unpack critical texts by careful close reading of their lexical and metaphorical economies; Hall, Tregear, and Feile Tomes explore how critical notions are encoded and performed in poetic compositions themselves. Second is the question of how systematic poetics can accommodate elements that elude systematicity, such as the irrational, manic, and sublime. Hetherington discovers critics confronting the incapacity of rule-based systems to govern or even describe creative acts; Tregear shows how sublimity steps in at the limits of analysis; Kachuck and Hall pursue the classical *furor poeticus* onto (and off) the English stage. Thirdly, the volume makes a forceful claim for the vitality of the commentary form, still sometimes considered derivative, as a critical tradition in its own right. The critical innovations showcased by Rayfield and Brazeau came about through direct, close engagements with the Italian commentary tradition, not in place of but alongside, and in excess of, their classical authorities. Fourthly, the volume considers the consequences of mapping the boundaries of the field of poetics along specifically *classical* lines. Brazeau and Feile Tomes highlight transformations of the classical at the edges of the Graeco-Latin linguistic and cultural world, Rayfield examines comic theory as it enters the vernacular, and Tregear and Kachuck expand our notion of the kinds of texts we include in and exclude from inquiry.

Combined, the essays collected in this volume throw fresh light on literary criticism in this period. Among other things, they show that it was neither a solitary nor a segregated endeavour; every essay in this volume attests the free movement of critical curiosity across Europe and its languages, and even over the Atlantic. Polyglot learned communities stretched across national and period boundaries, developing theoretical, critical, and interpretative traditions that have been occluded by modern disciplinary categories. We hope that this special issue of *Classical Reception Journal* begins to bring them back into view.

The essays collected in this special issue represent a selection of the contributions to a conference held in December 2017 under the umbrella of *Poetics before Modernity*, a project launched by the editors in 2016 with two main goals: to cultivate new exploratory work on Western literary criticism from its beginnings the eighteenth century, and to provide a dedicated interdisciplinary platform for future work on the subject. It is an immensely satisfying moment for us to send to press the first substantial publication emerging from the project. As we write, a second collection (see n. 2) is nearing completion, and other publications are in various stages of development. Much of the

superb research currently being done around the world in the history of premodern literary criticism remains scattered across a range of disciplines and nation-, period-, and author-focused specializations. We very much hope that *Poetics before Modernity* proves an encouragement to scholars already working on the subject, sparks fresh interest in others, and above all fosters a sense of community among scholars working in this shared interdisciplinary field. Colleagues interested in possibilities of collaboration are warmly encouraged to get in touch; contact information, along with further particulars about the project, is available at www.poeticsbeforemodernity.net.

It is a pleasure to record here some of the debts we have incurred in the past four years. First of all, we remain grateful to the other contributors to the *Poetics before Modernity Conference 2017*: Anna Goetz Boemler, Patrick Gray, Nicolas Lema Habash, Lydia Yaitsky Kertz, Raphael Lyne, Joe Moshenska, Kathryn Murphy, Marco Nievergelt, Irene Rodríguez Cachón, and Rasmus Sevelsted. The conference took place on 14–15 December 2018 at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities, University of Cambridge, for which we are grateful to Simon Goldhill, Oliver Wright, and all the staff at CRASH. We also thank Constanze Güthenke and Pantelis Michelakis for their editorial support on this publication, and the journal's anonymous readers for their helpful and encouraging comments.

Finally, we note with regret and concern that this special issue goes to press in the midst of a global health crisis, and that many of our colleagues are returning to their universities and classrooms in unprecedented and hazardous circumstances. Wherever this finds you, we hope it finds you well, and that we may soon resume these conversations in a world more like to that in which they were begun.