

# Classical Literature

A Concise History

Richard Rutherford

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# Introduction

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In this introduction I deal with three topics. First, I give a brief outline of the history of ancient Greece and Rome, to help the reader see the literature of these societies against the background of political developments; second, I discuss the important topic of genre; third, I summarize some of the problems that arise from the way in which these texts have come down to us over the centuries.

## I

The time span of this book extends from the late eighth century BC to the early fifth century AD, a period of some 1,100 years. In the study of ancient literature and history, as in most study of past times, it is conventional to speak of certain subdivisions or 'periods' of both literary history and socio-political history: thus in English literature we refer to the Romantic movement, the Victorian age, and so on. In Greek history a common modern division is into the archaic period (up to the end of the sixth century BC), the classical period (from about 500 BC to the death of Alexander), and the Hellenistic age (from Alexander to the beginning of the Roman Empire); in Roman history, the obvious division is between the Republic and the Empire, and lesser subdivisions also reflect political change, for instance the Augustan age, the Julio-Claudian or Flavian periods, the 'High' and 'Low' Empire. Such divisions are convenient, but can often be misleading. In literary history, one division which, for all its popularity, has hampered criticism in the past is between the so-called golden and silver eras of Latin literature. The metaphor of metals, as in Hesiod's myth of ages, reflects an evaluative judgement, a traditional assumption that Cicero and Virgil belong to a golden age of literature, while Lucan and Tacitus do not. All period-divisions of this kind are suspect, for there are many writers who

bridge the divisions, many kinds of literature that are not affected by political change, and many aspects of the arts which are more fruitfully examined in a long perspective. However, it is obvious that literary forms do not remain static over a period of centuries, and some attempt to define phases in literary history is inevitable; what matters is that we should remain aware of their partial validity and artificial construction.

Greek literature begins for us with Homer and Hesiod, authors of extensive poetic works dealing mainly with myths of man and god. The chronology is murky, but we are probably dealing with compositions from around 720–680 BC. At this date the Greeks had already begun to travel more widely. They inhabited not only the mainland region we still call Greece but Asia Minor, and were also settling permanently all around the Mediterranean: ‘colonies’ soon existed in Sicily, South Italy, North Africa and the Black Sea. What most strikes the modern reader, especially in contrast with Rome, is the separation of Greeks into independent political units: the *polis* (plural *poleis*), the small city-state, was tiny by modern standards, but throughout their history the Greeks resisted unification into larger leagues or kingdoms.

Greek travellers and traders regularly encountered the large monarchies of Egypt, Lydia and later Persia. Contact with the Near East not only fertilized the mythic imagination but gave the Greeks access to more prosperous cultures and (very importantly) an alphabet. The Homeric poems were preserved because someone, probably in the seventh century, thought them important enough to write down. After Homer and Hesiod there is a large gap of time before we reach the next writers to survive in bulk, namely Pindar and Aeschylus in the fifth centuries. In between we have the tantalizing remains of lyric poetry, composed by poets of scattered date and origin – Archilochus from Paros, Alcaeus and Sappho from Lesbos, others from other Greek islands, from Rhegium in Italy, from Ephesus and Smyrna in Asia Minor. Continuous historical narrative has to be reconstructed from later accounts, making detailed study of most *poleis* an impossibility. The exceptions tend to be those which were politically or culturally important, or both, so that in later times readers wanted to know about these places and authors were able to supply the information. Hence the bulk of our evidence concerns Athens and Sparta: in particular, they figure prominently in the *History* of Herodotus.

The authors of *1066 and All That* concluded that in English history only two dates were truly memorable. In describing the classical world I shall allow myself five (emboldened in what follows to distinguish them from other dates mentioned more in passing). The first is **479 BC**, the conclusion of the Persian King Xerxes’ unsuccessful invasion of Greece (following up the earlier attempt by his father Darius). The paradoxical success of the Greeks in repelling the far larger forces of the Persians was a key moment

in their development: not only did it seem to vindicate their own way of life, one of freedom and self-sufficiency as opposed to enslavement to a monarch, but it also stimulated their cultural self-confidence. The rest of the century is the heyday of Athens, which eventually assumed leadership of an anti-Persian alliance, one that gradually developed into an empire run in Athens' own interests. Athenian literature of the fifth century included the great tragedies and comedies; many other writers and thinkers (including Herodotus) were drawn to Athens because of her wealth and power. Socrates talked and taught there, visiting sophists such as Gorgias performed there. This was also the period of the radical democracy, which made Athens famous for its constitutional structures as well as for its literary achievement. In the end Athens fought a long war against Sparta and her allies rather than be deprived of her empire; defeated, she lost it anyway. Thucydides (writing from 431 onwards) chronicled the conflict in a work which became a paradigm of political and military history. In the fourth century our evidence shifts from verse to prose: instead of tragedy and comedy, oratory and philosophy become especially important. Plato and Aristotle taught in Athens, though the former grew steadily more disillusioned with his city, and the latter (not a native Athenian) migrated to Macedonia, where he gave instruction to the young Prince Alexander.

Political independence ended for the Greek states when Philip II of Macedon, Alexander's father, conquered their armies at the battle of Chaeronea: the orator Demosthenes' long efforts to nurture resistance to Philip ended in disaster. From that time on Greece was dependent on the will of larger and far more powerful states, first Macedon and ultimately Rome. But Greek horizons were now hugely expanded. The conquests of Alexander, extending as far as the northern regions of India, created with astonishing speed an empire larger than that of Persia, but he seems to have given little thought to the preservation of his conquests, and after his death in 323 (my second memorable date) they became the object of jealous conflict among his heirs and generals. Alexander's death marks the start of the Hellenistic age (so-called because of the theory that he and his successors 'Hellenized' or educated their conquered peoples into civilized Greek ways, a proposition now viewed as neither factually nor politically correct). One of the more notable effects of Greek expansion was the development of a more universal form of the Greek language, the so-called *koine* or 'common speech': the various regional dialects became less important for literature, though sometimes utilized for *recherché* effect. A persistent counter-tendency to ignore the *koine* and mimic the old Attic classics even in vocabulary and syntax reached its height in the second century AD.

Alexander's empire eventually split into three vast kingdoms, Macedonia itself, the Seleucid empire (Asia and the East) and the Ptolemaic kingdom

(Egypt), the last two being named after two of Alexander's marshals. Greece itself became a political backwater, though Athens long retained its intellectual glamour as a university city. In due course Romans such as Cicero and the poet Horace would go there for education, especially in philosophy. But other major centres of culture now emerged, especially Alexandria, the capital of Egypt, where under royal patronage major poets composed in old genres and new (Apollonius in epic, Theocritus in short and exquisite poems on country life, Herodas in deliberately coarse verse on city lowlife). Minor poets above all cultivated the epigram. Prose flourished too, including much scientific and speculative writing: Alexandria with its great library was a centre of learning. The scholar-poet Callimachus, who had a powerful influence on Roman literature, supremely merged poetry and arcane learning.

Inevitably we think that Greece comes first, then Rome. This is true in terms of literature but entirely false if we think of history. One traditional date for the 'beginnings' of Greek history is the supposed date of the first Olympic Games, 776 BC; this is little more than 20 years away from the legendary foundation date for Rome, 753 BC. More substantially, Greeks had been resident in parts of Sicily and Italy since at least 700; Aristotle and others knew about Rome. More militaristic than the Greeks, the Romans determinedly extended their domain throughout Italy, then to Sardinia, Sicily and beyond. Firm discipline and organization, strong, sometimes ruthless leadership, and a refusal to accept defeat, eventually made theirs one of the most formidable empires in history. Their attitude to the Greeks and their culture was always complex: on the one hand Quintilian could claim that 'the Greeks excel in teaching, but the Romans in examples of doing – and that is greater'. On the other hand, Horace memorably commented that 'vanquished Greece captivated her savage conqueror' – that is, Romans succumbed to the spell of Greek culture.<sup>1</sup> The earliest major figure known to us is Livius Andronicus, who may have been part-Greek and who translated the *Odyssey* into Latin, wrote both comedies and tragedies on Greek mythic themes, and transplanted a number of Greek metres. But our first complete works in Latin, the comedies of Plautus, do not much pre-date 200 BC, by which time virtually all the most famous Greek writers were dead. Roman literature is strongly indebted to Greek, yet is never merely imitative.

As for politics, Rome increasingly showed interest in the nations to the East and by the second century BC was expanding her conquests across the Mediterranean. The kingdoms established by Alexander's successors were gradually overthrown. Rome's conquest ('liberation') of Greece, together with her other achievements from 220–146, were chronicled by the Greek historian Polybius, the first of a long line of Greek writers who came to Rome and celebrated or at least sought to record, explain or justify her

successes. The last of the Hellenistic kingdoms, Egypt, fell to Rome with the defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra (a descendant of Ptolemy) in 31 BC. This is our third key date, marking not only the end of the Hellenistic era but the beginning of the Roman empire, with the ascendancy of Octavian, shortly to take the solemn title of Augustus. His establishment of one-man dynastic rule changed the nature of Roman politics, after an eventful half-century dominated by civil wars (the period which witnessed the careers of Caesar and Cicero, the poetry of Lucretius and Catullus, and the early works of Virgil and Horace). The 'Augustan' era (31 BC to AD 14) was distinguished by some of the most gifted writers Rome ever produced, especially Virgil, Horace, Propertius, Tibullus and Livy. Ovid, a younger author, straddled the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius; exile was the punishment for his subversively frivolous poetry. The last years of Augustus saw not only exiled writers but burning of books. Autocracy was on the increase.

The Republic was never restored, despite emperors' proclamations and the efforts of conspirators. Much literature of the first century AD is overshadowed by the expectations of the emperor and the fears of the authors. Writers could be executed for their politics (Lucan, Seneca), and it is hardly fair for us to condemn some of them for playing it safe (Pliny, Martial). Imperial literature of this period often has a dark and sinister flavour (Seneca's tragedies, Lucan's and Statius' epic, Juvenal's satires); philosophy emphasizes personal morality and the need to preserve the inner integrity of the individual (Seneca, Epictetus); the historical works of Tacitus, with their damning presentation of royal family, court and senate, are the high empire's most lasting memorial. Yet in many ways the stability of the empire improved government and even benefited the citizens: our perspective is skewed because so much of the Latin literature of this period comes from the disenchanting aristocratic class.

Bad emperors could not go on forever. The period from Nerva's accession to the death of Marcus Aurelius was famously singled out by Gibbon as a time of supreme human prosperity. Roman literature becomes less viciously intense and more refined: archaism becomes the fashion, led by the Emperor Hadrian. Greece re-enters the picture with a change in the balance of our evidence in the second century, from which the most attractive figures are the moralist-biographer Plutarch, and Lucian, the immortal writer of satiric dialogues, essays and fantasies. Though politically powerless, the Greeks had not lost their capacity to devise new genres and pour old wine into new bottles.

Modern studies of later antiquity are naturally much concerned with the rise of Christianity. Its gradual encroachment on the literature of the pagan world makes a fascinating study: we see both antagonism and interaction.

Pagan thinkers sometimes dismiss the new faith as trivial, but are in due course obliged to argue in detail against it, only to be countered by more skilful polemicists (Origen against Celsus). Christians sometimes reject all pagan culture, but sometimes present Christian beliefs in attractively classical dress (Minucius Felix). By any standards a key date (the fourth in our series) is the adoption of the Christian faith by the Emperor Constantine, who then gave it his endorsement throughout the empire (AD 312). It would be exaggerating to claim that henceforth paganism was on the defensive, but there was now no doubt that Christianity would survive and prosper. Julian the Apostate's attempt to turn the clock back came too late, even if he had not swiftly died on campaign.

Late antiquity sees the split of the Roman empire into two halves. By the fourth century Rome had lost its prominence in the West, and emperors often ruled from Milan or Trier. In the East power was firmly established in Constantinople (formerly known as Byzantium, but established as a new capital by Constantine). The business of ruling, defending and administering the empire had become too vast. But the potential for a complete division was accelerated when invaders from northern Europe assailed the frontiers of Italy over the period from the late fourth century to the end of the fifth. The sack of Rome by the Visigoths in AD 410 (the last of my five key years) has a claim to be the end of the classical era: this was the first time that foreign invaders had taken Rome in more than 800 years. This sack stimulated the writing of Augustine's late masterpiece, *The City of God*, a meditation on the transience of the worldly city in contrast with the kingdom of heaven. Rome did not fall in a day: there were further emperors of the West after 410, and classical culture lived on in the Eastern empire, but Augustine's enormous epitaph on Rome provides a terminus to the present book.

## II

In the chapters which follow we will be surveying a very wide range of different kinds of literature, in both poetry and prose. The term genre means just that – a kind, a *genus* or type. It is indeed obvious that literature falls into different types or categories: even today, we distinguish between poetry and prose, sometimes separating drama as a third category, and further subdivisions are possible, for instance between tragedy and comedy, or novel and short-story. Other categorizations depend on strictly formal features: most of us can identify a sonnet or a limerick by the arrangement of rhymes and lines. In the ancient world genre-distinctions were numerous. They were made on various principles: a genre might be characterized by

its metre, its typical subject matter, the occasion with which it was associated, and its stylistic level. In practice these were usually correlated: thus the typical epic would be composed in hexameter verse, would describe the deeds of a hero or heroes, often belonging to the mythical age, might be recited at a festival or some other formal event, and would be phrased in an elevated poetic style, remote from everyday speech, as suited the dignified subject.

Some but not all of the genres identified by modern critics were also recognized by the ancient writers themselves. The terms tragedy and comedy, for example, are already in use in the age of Sophocles and Aristophanes. Lyric, elegy, epigram and other terms are all derived from Greek words, though their nuances have altered. Similarly Herodotus used the term *historia* in his opening paragraph, though referring to the process of inquiry: we may doubt whether he had a fully developed concept of his genre. Other generic terms are of later origin: there is for instance no ancient word for 'novel'. Also, some of the forms which we would regard as distinct were not regularly segregated by ancient critics: epic could embrace the didactic poetry of Hesiod and others, and perhaps even the hexameter poetry of Theocritus, as a result of a classification based on metre, when we might see differences of subject matter as more significant. However, the fact that the ancient critics lacked a fixed term for pastoral poetry does not mean that they were unable to see that some of Theocritus' poems about shepherds had a clear family resemblance. Propertius and Tibullus could write amatory poems in imitation of Gallus without distinguishing the subclass of love elegy from the larger category of elegy as a whole. In the same way, we learn to swim, wrestle, or make love without necessarily knowing all the technical terms. Writers could compose grammatical sentences long before the terminology of tenses and participles had been codified.

Terminology matters less than mind-set. In ancient times authors were much more aware of literary forms and conventions than they are today. Whereas nowadays a writer may sit down intending to write a poem on a specific topic, in antiquity writers thought more in terms of composing in a particular genre. In earlier times they might also be composing for a specific occasion, religious or celebratory or convivial. Already in Homer we find references to other literary forms: the wedding song, or the paean, a type of hymn in praise of Apollo. Precedent and tradition provided inspiration and promptings, a framework within which the poet found his individual voice. Often a poet might be the pupil of his predecessor; in any case, he would learn by heart and study closely older poets' work. The interest in tradition is demonstrated by the special importance attached to the founder or originator of each genre – Homer for epic, Archilochus for iambic, and so on; but as time went on similar prestige would be attached to later writers

who acquired classic status. It was common practice to imitate, quote from or echo the words of one's predecessors: often the author would choose a particularly famous passage for emulation. Thus conventions develop in each genre: besides the regular correlation of subject and metre, there are certain subsidiary features which become typical – the epic simile, for example, or the messenger's speech in tragedy. These recurring typical features are sometimes referred to as *topoi*, a Greek term meaning commonplaces. They form part of the poetic stock in-trade. In a tradition founded on respect for and imitation of older models, originality is demonstrated not by a rejection of older works, but by reshaping or giving a new freshness to an older poet's plot, imagery or language. This respect for tradition should not be seen as a straitjacket: admiration for the great models of the past could be combined with a spirit of rivalry and competitiveness.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly clear when we turn to Roman writers. Their imitation of the Greek masters, already established as classics, involves a clear and sometimes aggressive determination to colonize a particular literary territory, to import a new genre to Roman literature. The same motive is discernible in the eagerness of Roman writers to identify a Latin equivalent to a Greek author: Varro probably named Ennius the Latin Homer, and Propertius styles himself the Roman Callimachus.<sup>3</sup>

The very notion of a founder implies that there was a time when each genre was invented, and this was indeed the normal ancient assumption. Clearly this is often an over-simplification: there was epic poetry long before Homer, and even the ancients were vague on the origins of some types of poetry which they knew to be older than the practitioners familiar to them. Commenting on the question 'who first composed elegy?', Horace quips: 'the schoolmasters are in dispute, and the case is still under scrutiny' (*Art of Poetry* 78). In some cases, particularly later ones, it does seem justifiable to identify the prime mover. The philosophic prose dialogue is an example: whether or not it was first invented by Plato, it surely originates in the Socratic circle. Similarly Theocritus is either the inventor of pastoral or close in time to that invention. Both these cases, however, also show the advantages of a more evolutionary approach. These genres did not spring from nowhere: we can identify some of the ingredients of each in earlier, related forms, though in each case the authors named contributed something crucial and transformed the compound. So too with a genre like elegy, vaguely defined and accommodating poetry of very different subject, length and tone. In such cases it is better to explore the ways in which the form develops, and the prominence of different themes at different times, than to regard it as a rigidly consistent type of verse.

As more genres emerged, both poets and critics began to view them in relation to one another. We can detect a kind of hierarchy emerging, in

which some literary forms have greater prestige and their authors are more highly regarded than others. This hierarchy is neither defined in detail nor set in stone, but certain assumptions can be deduced from a variety of ancient texts and still more from practice. An epigram of Martial lists a series of genres in descending order of merit and difficulty: epic, tragedy, lyric, satire, elegy, epigram (12.94). Broadly speaking, ‘high’ forms are those which deal in elevated language with serious subject matter presented in a consistently dignified way (epic, tragedy, some history); ‘low’ genres tend in the opposite direction (comedy, epigram, mime). Related oppositions are those between the mythical and the contemporary, and between public or sacred subject matter and private, personal, more trivial material. There is also some tendency to look down on shorter works – satire, epigram, short lyrics like those of Catullus, epistles, pastorals, some elegy. Longer works, it could be felt, demand greater ambition and more sustained effort. Language is also important: writers were expected to select a vocabulary and style suited to the type of work they were writing, and the artificial but magnificent language of epic could be seen as superior to the conversational and colloquial manner of satire. Horace makes this point while protesting that his satires cannot be taken seriously as poetry (needless to say, he has his tongue in his cheek here): as he puts it, if you rearranged the words of his own poem and disrupted the metre, there would be no sign that it had been poetry before, whereas the lofty diction of Ennius is such that, ‘even when he is dismembered, you would still discover the limbs of a poet’ (*Satires* 1.4.56–62).

Something more should be said about the relationship of poetry and prose. Poetry was older and in some ways more prestigious: the poet had the advantage of elevated and sensuous language, variety of metrical forms, greater freedom in vocabulary and syntax. But it is a mistake to group all prose authors together, still more to brand them prosaic. Prose-writing too called for a highly developed sense of style and decorum: an historian, an orator, even a philosopher, would write not only to persuade but to move, arouse, excite and inspire. Formal prose deployed many stylistic devices to heighten and enrich the information conveyed: figures of speech, many of them shared with poetry, are the most obvious. Although prose was not metrical, most writers paid attention to the rhythms and cadences of their work (oratory was meant to be declaimed, and although silent reading, contrary to a common assumption, was recognized as usual in antiquity, it remains true that readers were keenly alert to the auditory effect of a work).<sup>4</sup> Not all prose genres would be considered inferior to verse: Dionysius declares that the power and pathos of Thucydides’ history are such as to outclass any historians and any poets (*On Thucydides* 15). Horace the lyricist pays respectful tribute to Pollio the great historian (*Odes* ii.1). The philosophic

myths of Plato or Plutarch, the inspirational opening of the fifth book of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, reach a level of eloquence that rivals the most sublime passages of Lucretius. Polemic by prose against poetry was also possible: Seneca the moralist can pour scorn upon the fabulous tales of the *Odyssey*: 'do you ask where Ulysses' wanderings took him rather than ensuring that we are not ourselves forever astray?' (*Letters* 88.7)

The conception of a hierarchy is important and widespread, but it must be emphasized that we are not dealing with a fixed rule book, that genre relationships vary as the different forms develop, and that different oppositions are handled in different ways for polemical purposes. Comedy can make fun of grandiose tragedy. Satire can represent itself as closer to real life than bombastic epic (Juvenal 1.1ff.). Plato in his dialogues includes parody of rhetoric and satirical portraits of its practitioners. Plutarch declares that biography, with its attention to small-scale detail and personal idiosyncrasy, can often provide illumination in a way that history cannot (*Alexander* 1). Writers in the higher genres generally abstain from comment on lesser forms (and impersonal genres like epic and tragedy have little room for such comment in any case); as a result we tend to see more examples of low authors parodying or sniping at high than the reverse. But the principle works both ways, and in each case partly serves as a form of self-assertion, or, better, an indication of what the author and his own style of writing is capable of. Tacitus in his account of Nero's reign remarks that a particular year was of little note, 'unless one were to take pleasure in filling volumes with praise of the foundations and timber work on which the emperor piled the immense amphitheatre on the field of Mars. But we have learnt that it suits the dignity of the Roman people to reserve history for great achievements, and to leave such details to the city's daily register' (*Annals* 13.31). Ranking, like evaluation generally, depends on your point of view. Cicero disparagingly declared that if he had his lifetime over again, he still would not consider he had time to waste reading Greek lyric poets (Seneca, *Letters* 49.5); Julian dismisses the immoral trivialities of the erotic novel (p. 145). In both cases this is not mere philistinism but says something about the writers' own literary and educational priorities. Comments on literature, ancient and modern, spring from an individual reader and reflect that person's priorities. For example, a famous reading list in Quintilian (x.1) is not intended to be a total picture of ancient literature, but a selection angled towards the needs of the aspiring orator, and his judgements need to be weighed with that principle in mind: thus Sappho passes unmentioned, while apart from the orators Homer, Euripides and Menander get extended treatment.

Neither the hierarchy nor generic boundaries are absolute. In the first place, new genres emerge out of and are derived from old, or from

particular elements of the old (pastoral poetry, for example, had some precedent in the descriptions of landscape in epic and early lyric). Second, they complement, influence, interact with each other (e.g. Greek tragedy in relation to comedy, or history to biography); they take up positions in relation to one another which shift and develop in response to changing literary trends and sometimes in reaction to historical constraints (thus political oratory and poetic invective become tamer under the Roman Empire). Genres could change and adapt. Callimachus did something entirely new with elegy in his poem the *Actia*; still further potentials in the same genre were tapped by Gallus. Genres not only influenced one another but blended, producing a hybrid. Ovid in his *Art of Love* composed a didactic poem in the 'wrong' metre, elegiac couplets, so parodying and deflating the lofty didactic aspirations of Lucretius and Virgil. Older critics spoke of 'mixing' genres (aetiological elegy; tragic history; epistolary novel); moderns prefer to use terms like 'inclusion', 'incorporation', 'appropriation'; perhaps even 'invasion' may sometimes be suitable. Thus Virgil introduces his friend and predecessor, the love-elegist Gallus, as the leading character in one of Virgil's own pastoral poems: pastoral mounts a kind of takeover bid on elegiac territory, though the tone is humorous and parodic. Much more ambitious is the way in which the mature Virgil includes a great range of non-epic material, themes, characters and ideas from other genres within the *Aeneid*. The epic of Roman imperialism is itself a document of generic colonization.

This kind of generic fluidity, and the frequency with which generic rules seem to be bent or broken, has persuaded some scholars that the concept of genre is irrelevant or of limited value. Nothing could be further from the truth. Classical authors, in both poetry and prose, are always conscious of what they are writing, and what kind of work it is. It is true that some forms are more precisely defined than others: sometimes, indeed, a poet may deliberately choose to write in a stricter mode than the genre requires (Pindar in his victory odes is perhaps an example). Some genres affected a loose and anarchic manner: Latin satire comes to mind, but it would be a mistake to take this affectation of informality too literally. Conventions varied in importance and evolved over time; if a rule had been breached once, that too established itself as a precedent (Virgil followed Apollonius in including a love affair in epic). Both the artists and the critics regularly refer to generic rules and expectations: the fact that the system was flexible, that the boundaries could be breached, does not prove that the system did not exist but rather that the creative writers were constantly engaging with and stimulated by it. Any reader who wishes to appreciate classical literature needs to recognize that a system of this kind can offer positive advantages which total freedom could not.

## III

It is all too easy for a modern reader to forget that every copy of every work of classical literature had to be produced by hand, whether by the author or by scribes. Only the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century changed this situation. These facts are of central importance for our understanding of the place of literature in ancient society, its distribution, and its transmission to modern times. To produce even one copy of a work involved time and skilled labour. To distribute multiple copies of any work was a major undertaking. The concept of publication itself is difficult, as the procedure was a less formal one than it is today. An author would often begin by reciting extracts, or circulating drafts among close friends for criticism. Detailed revision might follow, but occasionally works were passed on and copied, even distributed without the author's knowledge before he was ready to pronounce the work 'finished'.<sup>5</sup> Special considerations arise with particular genres: dramas were composed for performance in the theatre, speeches for oral delivery. The decision to circulate a written text might depend on the success or failure of the performed version.

The principal medium in the Greek world, and under Rome until about the third century AD, was the papyrus roll, on one side of which the text was written out in a series of columns. The reader had to unwind the roll as he read, using one hand to hold and roll up again the part he had already seen. The awkwardness of the unrolling process was considerable; to judge by surviving examples, some of the papyrus rolls were as much as 10 metres long. The material was by no means strong, and could easily be damaged. As a rule writers would use only one side of the roll, as the outside would be handled and easily smudged or worse. As for the text itself, punctuation was often absent or minimal. Texts were frequently written without spaces between words; it was not until the Middle Ages that an effort was made to systematize word-division, though in some Latin texts around the time of Augustus there is a step towards it in putting small dots between words. In texts of plays, not much was done to identify the names of speakers, and this has led to many problems and doubtful attributions. On papyri of drama, we can see that a change of speaker was often indicated only by a dash. Considering how appallingly difficult this must have made the reading and interpretation of texts, it is surprising that more was not done to improve practice; but often, we may suspect, a quick cheap job was preferred to an expensive *de luxe* copy.

There are many unanswerable questions related to the production and use of books in the ancient world. We know much less than we would like about levels of literacy, the degree to which different types of text were used

in education, the relative importance of public performance and private reading, the development of the book trade, the growth of libraries, and other equally important topics. The nature of our evidence varies according to time and place, and often we do not know whether an anecdote or a particular datum is typical or extraordinary. It is clear that in both Greece and Rome the poets were used as study texts in schools, and at any rate by the late fifth century in Athens there was an active book trade. Books certainly existed in private hands: a character in Xenophon owns a complete text of Homer.<sup>6</sup> Much poetry was learned by heart; prose authors may have depended more on the written word and on readers. Heraclitus is said to have dedicated his philosophical work in the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, perhaps to ensure its preservation. Herodotus allegedly gave recitations, but it is less easy to imagine audiences listening avidly to Thucydides' complex speeches and analyses. By the latter part of the fifth century books were becoming more common, although associated with intellectuals and other eccentrics. ('Either a book or Prodicus has corrupted the man', remarks a character in Aristophanes.) In earlier periods, it is often maintained, performance was primary and readers rare or non-existent. This may be true, although it is usually taken far too much for granted. We can accept that oral performance, whether to small or large audiences, may have been the norm without denying that writers would also have been concerned that their work should be preserved in writing and continued to be read. The lyric poets hope that their works and their subjects will outlive them: Theognis includes his own name as a 'seal' to guarantee to later readers that this is his authentic work. We can also argue from the knowledge of these writers in later times. The scholars of Alexandria were able to assemble most of the oeuvre of Sappho and Alcaeus, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Sappho's work alone occupied nine books, the first of which included 330 stanzas. These texts could not have survived so long had they not been treated as important in themselves, independent of performance.

Evidence is more abundant in Hellenistic and Roman times: in particular, the letters of Cicero give us many insights into the writer's life and the process of publication (his friend Atticus regularly organized the copying and distribution of Cicero's numerous works). Cicero had a considerable library of his own, and also borrowed extensively from those of others. The first public library in Rome was established by Asinius Pollio (39 BC), and others, including one founded by Augustus, soon followed.<sup>7</sup> Writers became more self-conscious about their books as artefacts: Catullus and others dwell on the physical appearance of the finished product. A fine book could be a luxury object, a book of love poetry should itself be sleek and seductive; by contrast, the despised output of the poet's enemy is suited only to be wrapping for cheap mackerel.<sup>8</sup>

Turning to the problems of transmission, we must again remember the crucial fact that each copy is hand-produced, not a replica but a new version. The major writers of antiquity do not survive in versions from their own hands. In all cases we are dealing with a tradition that transmits the ancient text through many stages of recopying, and often by several different routes. We may draw the analogy of a family tree that begins from a single ancestor, the original authorial text. First let us assume that there are three copies made, but these are then split up, sent off to different places, and subsequently more copies are made from each. Fresh mistakes will be introduced at each stage, and if these manuscripts are never brought together again they cannot be rechecked against one another. The family analogy works, in that each separate branch of the tradition will tend to multiply, though of course one of the manuscripts might get destroyed and a branch of the family might die out. Or it might be partially destroyed, and only the surviving part could be copied in that particular line of descent (here the family-tree analogy breaks down). If this happens at an early enough stage then all subsequent copies may be deficient. Thus we have lost substantial parts of Tacitus' *Annals* and *Histories*.

A huge amount of ancient literature has been lost. It is quite rare for us to possess the complete works of an author: Plato, Virgil, Horace, are among the few major examples. More often we have only a small portion of a writer's work: seven complete plays by Sophocles from a total of over a hundred. The reasons for loss over the centuries are various: not only fire, flood and other accidents, but deliberate selection, changes of fashion which caused certain authors to fall out of favour, inertia, limited resources (papyrus and parchment were expensive) and occasionally bowdlerization. Canonization of the great authors has its negative aspect: those excluded from the central core of classics will tend to disappear. Some authors were found too difficult: the more straightforward Euripides was read more often in schools than Aeschylus. Others were too long for comfort. The critic Dionysius lists a number of Greek historians whom (he says) no one has ever read through to the end: Polybius is among them, and it is true that only the first six books, out of 40, survive complete. Livy was already available in an abridged version by the time of Martial, less than a century after the historian's death. Abridgements of the *Reader's Digest* variety became common; popular also were anthologies, often concentrating on morally uplifting passages. Another contributing factor was technological, in the change (itself highly beneficial) from roll to codex: that is, from the use of a lengthy papyrus roll as described above to a bound volume of sheets, glued together within a protective binding, something much more like our 'book'. This format is first attested in the first century AD and the shift from one format to the other seems to have substantially taken place

during the third and fourth centuries. It is likely that not all works found in papyrus would have been thought worth transcribing laboriously into this new format.<sup>9</sup> The rise of Christianity, with its ambiguous attitude to 'pagan' writings, must have played an important part: scribes concentrated on transcribing Scripture and sermons rather than texts containing false mythology or misguided philosophy. But more important than any of these causes were the political unrest and destructive wars which marked the end of the Roman Empire in the West and the beginning of medieval Europe. Literature and scholarship fell into abeyance, learned readers were fewer, new books were not being produced, and, more damagingly, old books were not being re-copied. Even if wanton destruction was not as widespread as has sometimes been supposed, neglect could be just as damaging.

Political changes have cultural consequences. A cultural gulf widened between East and West. The Empire had been divided administratively since Diocletian (AD 293), and linguistic separation followed. By the fourth century few Latin writers knew Greek. Although Neoplatonic teachings were so important to Augustine, in his formative years he could hardly read Plato or Plotinus in the original. By 700 Greek was virtually unknown in the West. It was hundreds of years before detailed knowledge of Greek language and literature returned to Europe, and in the meantime much was lost, for instance in the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders (1204). Callimachus' *Hecale* was probably one of the many casualties of Christian zeal (lost when the Crusaders took Athens).<sup>10</sup> Some authors were sufficiently well known and continuously used for their future never to be in doubt. The tradition of Virgil is one of the strongest, and he is fully preserved in several fine manuscripts which go back as far as the fifth and sixth centuries. Few were so fortunate.

The gradual disappearance of so much classical literature is partly compensated for by the excitement of gradual rediscovery, first in the period of Charlemagne (c.800) and later in the Renaissance. Many texts survived in monasteries or other refuges, and were eventually identified. Others are known to have existed surprisingly late, but eventually perished. A complete text of Ennius' *Annals*, the first great epic of Latin literature, may have been extant as late as the fifth century AD.<sup>11</sup> There were narrow escapes and miraculous strokes of good fortune: the process by which the Renaissance recovered the classics is a memorable story, a tale of survival against great odds. In each phase of revival fresh texts were found and copied, but some came through by the skin of their teeth. Parts of Aeschylus, almost all of Catullus, the Tiberian books of Tacitus (*Annals* 1–6), are among the treasures preserved only through the survival of a single manuscript. The delight and excitement of recovery can still be felt in the writings of the scholars chiefly involved, as in the triumphant epigram added to the text of Catullus

by an Italian notary, celebrating the survival of the unique manuscript of the poet, unknown for over three centuries (*c.*1320).<sup>12</sup> Pleasure is mingled with touching disillusionment in Petrarch's famous 'letter' to Cicero, in which he expresses his amazement at what he has found in the orator's *Letters to Atticus*: we see him coming to terms with the realization that his idol has, if not feet of clay, at any rate human weaknesses.<sup>13</sup>

Once found, a text had to be deciphered, copied, explained. Interpretation of classical texts has traditionally been done in the form of an edition with commentary (often longer than the text and full of tangentially interesting information). Older editions tended to concentrate almost exclusively on linguistic phenomena, identification of historical or mythological references, and above all exegesis and correction ('emendation') of the text. Over the last few centuries editorial technique has become more systematic: our texts of the central authors have been greatly improved, by comparison of different manuscripts, through a better understanding of language, dialect and metre, and by the insight of particularly gifted critics. The importance of textual criticism is unquestionable, though sometimes exaggerated: the followers of A. E. Housman, admittedly a master of his craft whom few could equal, have sometimes almost deified their hero. A more ambitious conception of classical scholarship was propounded and practised by the great German classicist Wilamowitz, a towering figure of immense influence, who urged that all departments of knowledge (linguistic, historical, religious, philosophical, archaeological . . .) should combine in order to illuminate an author or a text or a period – a kind of total ancient history. Modern studies have gone still further in an effort to bridge disciplines: anthropology, ethnography, psychology, discourse analysis, even determinist biology are among the approaches which have been applied, not to mention the endless varieties of structuralism. Commentaries on texts are still written, but more numerous now are monographs on authors or on broader synthesizing topics. In 1902 Gilbert Murray declared that Euripides was more in need of interpretation than of emendation, and this has been the keynote of the century since then; but scholars with exact linguistic knowledge are still needed, to edit new texts and improve old.

New texts do in fact come to light, though this may surprise those who assume that classicists continue to chew the same old cud forever. The sands of Egypt, where the absence of rain makes it possible for written documents to survive for centuries, have yielded up many treasures in fragmentary form, most of them far older than the manuscripts we now have for the main authors. For over a century scholars have been publishing the massive hoard of papyri dug up by the pioneers at Oxyrhynchus and elsewhere. There have been many cases where these papyri have provided earlier versions of texts we have, and enabled scholars to improve on the versions

which the manuscript tradition gave us. More excitingly, there have been many discoveries of new texts: lyrics by Sappho and Alcaeus, invectives by Archilochus, poems by Pindar and his contemporary Bacchylides, Aristotle's analysis of the Constitution of Athens, significant parts of lost plays by Sophocles and Euripides and still more substantial portions of Menander's comedies, have been among the new finds. Study of the Hellenistic age has been transformed: we now know much more about both Callimachus and his context. Roman literature has benefited less from these discoveries, but the poet Cornelius Gallus, founder of Latin erotic elegy and friend of Virgil, has become more than a great name, with the publication of the papyrus of a few lines of his elegies in 1979:<sup>14</sup> this is the earliest known Latin papyrus, not later than AD 25, perhaps from the reign of Augustus himself. Since Gallus died in 27 BC, this brings us excitingly close to the poet's own copy. Sometimes these discoveries confirm old guesses; as often they refute them. Above all they open new perspectives, raise new questions. I shall often have reason to quote some of these new finds in the pages which follow.

Finally, something should be said about the terminology of 'book' and 'fragment'. Readers are often puzzled to find references to 'the sixth book of the *Aeneid*' and the like. A book in ancient times is normally much shorter than an average modern book. Essentially this is because of the original format, the papyrus roll. The longer the roll, the more unwieldy it becomes. Lengths vary in different periods, but a 'book' of verse is often not longer than 1,000 lines and almost never as high as 2,000. (All of Virgil's books are less than 1,000 lines). Similar considerations apply in prose: Plato's *Republic* is divided into 10 books (i.e. rolls), Herodotus' History into nine, but we might think of these as more like long chapters. Once the codex was introduced, several books might be combined into one volume, and we are a step or two closer to the modern format. Practical considerations of length, however, are not the whole story: the variation in length is quite considerable, and aesthetic concerns evidently enter into play. Each book of Lucretius' poem begins with an impressive prologue, making a fresh start and heralding the themes of a new phase in the argument: he is not simply continuing from where he left off. The Augustan poets in particular clearly plan the arrangement of their books very carefully, cultivating effects of variety and significant juxtaposition (as in Virgil's *Eclogues* and Horace's *Odes*). On the larger scale, groupings of books could provide a structuring principle in a very lengthy work. Livy seems to have planned his *History* in terms of 'pentads' (5-book sections) and 'decades' (10 books); Augustine took pains to ensure that the *City of God* was bound up in codices in such a way as to make the structure of the argument as clear as possible.<sup>15</sup>

As for 'fragment', this term arises from the losses of much ancient literature already described. Providence has not been kind enough to ensure that

everything of high quality has survived: chance and prejudice have played too great a part. In any case, we want to know about the background as well as the masterpieces. Hence the interest in what we can discover about lost works by a major author, and about authors by whom no complete works survive. Surviving texts often quote from older writers, sometimes by name. A quotation, for instance, from a lost play of Aeschylus by Plato counts as a 'fragment' of Aeschylus and is included in standard collections of that poet's remains. The other common use of the term is to refer to a papyrus find, since we are seldom lucky enough to discover complete works in this form. Sometimes quotations already known from a surviving source ('book-fragments', as they are often called) may be supplemented by a papyrus find. An example is a short citation from Aeschylus' lost play *Niobe*, quoted by Plato as an example of the immoral ideas about the gods which are to be found in the tragic poets, and which require them to be expelled from the ideal society. Plato quotes only two lines: 'God plants a fault in mortals, when he wishes utterly to ravage a household.' A papyrus fragment, some 20 lines long, has put the extract in a context (and incidentally shown that Plato's treatment of the Aeschylean religious conception is unduly harsh). A find like this has important consequences for students of both Aeschylus and Plato.<sup>16</sup>

Besides fragments, ancient comments or 'testimonies' about a lost work can be just as important. A summary of a lost play or poem may be as valuable as brief quotations devoid of context. Sometimes we are lucky enough to have both: the fragments of Callimachus' poem the *Actia* would be largely unintelligible without the concise résumé of its contents which survives for much of the work. Even briefer, more impressionistic comment or evaluation may give us a clearer notion of the characteristics of an author, as with Demetrius' enthusiastic praise of Sappho: 'This is why when Sappho sings of beauty her words are beautiful and sweet; so too when she sings of loves and spring and the halcyon; every type of beautiful word is woven into her poetry, and some of them are her own creation.' (Demetrius, *On Style* 166 = Sappho F 195) Such comments also form a part of the history of taste.

The obstacles which make a full understanding of ancient literature difficult for the modern reader, some of which have been outlined above, are considerable: the remoteness in time, the differences in their ways of life and ways of thought, the different assumptions they brought to literature and the conventions by which they composed it, the linguistic barriers, and the damage to the textual tradition. I hope that the following chapters will demonstrate that despite these obstacles, the encounter with Greek and Latin literature also offers rich rewards.