

J. L. MARR – P. J. RHODES (trans., comm.). *The ‘Old Oligarch’: the Constitution of the Athenians attributed to Xenophon*. Aris & Phillips classical texts, Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 2008, 178 pp., ISBN 9780856687815.

Five years ago the only significant English commentary on the *Constitution of the Athenians* ascribed to Xenophon was in J.M. Moore’s *Aristotle and Xenophon on Democracy and Oligarchy*, London 1975. Now English speaking readers have the luxury of three to choose from: a small-scale commentary that I produced to accompany a new revised edition of the LACTOR *Old Oligarch* translation (LACTOR 2, 2004); a philological commentary aimed at students reading the work in Greek (in V. Gray, *Xenophon On Government*, Cambridge 2007) and now Marr and Rhodes.

Whatever the Aris and Phillips Classical Texts series started out as, Marr and Rhodes’ volume proves it to have come of age. Theirs is the best text available, the most reliable, if not the most idiomatic, English translation, the fullest analysis of the style and content (especially in the 7 extremely enlightening appendices), and the commentary that deals best not only with issues of historical reference but with issues of how the text should be construed. Although M and R, unlike Gray, do not go in for the grammatical description of Greek constructions, they discuss in full how problematic passages should be construed, picking up quite a large number of issues simply passed over by Gray. Their’s is, indeed, a fine demonstration that seeing what needs to be explained about a text depends on thinking deeply about what the author of that text might be trying to say.

The definitive discussions here are achieved at a cost. Although the introduction is accessible to the Greekless, knowledge of Greek is presupposed in the commentary, not just, inevitably, when points of grammar and syntax are being explained, but more generally. It is not infrequent that, when the point could

be made using transliteration, the commentary nevertheless turns to Greek. And the translation, too, almost always (but see 2.19) resorts to transliteration for the key term *demos*, rather than attempt either to impose a single English equivalent or lose the slipperiness of the original by employing various terms. Oddly, however, when the term gets really slippery, in 2.17 the transliteration disappears and the 'full *demos*' becomes the 'full assembly-meeting' (explained in the commentary, but cf. 1.17 where the use of *demotikoi* in the Greek leads to 'the common people' in the translation but goes without note in the commentary). These features, and the very scale of the commentary, mean that for the truly Greekless student this edition is probably not the best first point of call.

For all scholarly future work, however, this edition simply has to be the starting point. And a very firm foundation it is. M and R insert this work into the wider framework of ancient discussions of the Athenian constitution with full references to the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians*, Aristotle's *Politics*, and Thucydides, in particular. They keep their eyes firmly on the point in hand, and the reader is spared parallels that are not close enough to offer historical enlightenment. Readers are regularly referred in the commentary to modern scholarly discussions of the topics in hand, without M and R seeking to make this simply a bibliographical guide to Athenian democracy. (In the Introduction, by contrast, M. and R. footnote modern scholarship very lightly. This is unhelpful, sometimes even misleading, in my view: readers of the discussion of hoplites on p. 21 (e.g.) really do need to be told about van Wees' recent work.) On the whole they write for the reader who is seeking to understand the text as a whole, whether as a historical source or as a piece of Attic prose, rather than the reader interested in pursuing an isolated claim that the work makes. This results in some shortage of cross-referencing. Thus we are three times (on 1.16, 1.18 and 3.7) told about the panel of 6000 jurors and twice (1.16, 3.6) about how many days they are likely to have served each year. But although the discussion at 1.16 refers forward to that at 1.18, and the discussion at 3.7 refers back to both those at 1.16 and 1.18, neither 1.16 nor 1.18 refer forward to 3.6 and 7, and 3.6 makes no reference to any other discussion. Nor will consulting the index

help, for the index is very brief (54 main entries over a side and a half; compare the 70 entries in the index to the LACTOR) and is the least adequate feature of the whole book.

No one will be surprised that M & R are on the whole conservative in their judgements. They think the apparent reference to Pylos and the comments about land powers making expeditions to distant parts indicate a date of 425–4 for the work, for all that they acknowledge the weakness in form of the arguments leading to that conclusion. They regard the work as sufficiently ill-written, and in particular ill-structured, as to point to a youthful author. Though entertaining for a remarkable length of discussion the possibility that the author might indeed be a teenage Xenophon, they finally conclude that this is unlikely (but wittily call the author ‘X’).

One aspect of their conservatism deserves emphasis. They rightly insist that amending the text just because it says something we find surprising is inappropriate (on 3.4, a propos of Bowersock’s proposal to replace four hundred by three hundred trierarchs), but they happily insist that ‘X is simply wrong in his assumption that all, or nearly all (*cf.* 2.19–20), such men were inherently oligarchs, fiercely opposed to the democratic system’ (p. 20). Their grounds for insisting that the vast majority of the social élite were ‘loyal to the democratic constitution’ is that they can list members of the social elite who were loyal – ‘Cimon, Pericles, Nicias, and even the historian Thucydides’. But how plausible is their picture? What 2.19–20 is arguing is that the democracy is in the interests of the *demos* and the members of the *demos* should be expected to support it because by doing so they look after themselves, but that it is not in the interests of the *khrestoi* and so those who support it are not acting justly. For anyone who adopts this position, it follows that the *demos* can never trust the *khrestoi* because they will always be acting other than in their own interest. The *khrestoi* ought to want to change the constitution. Such men may not be, in the terms which are M and R’s own, ‘fiercely opposed to the democratic system’ (and indeed 2.20 suggests they were not), but they are bound to be less than fully committed to it. And the people who must be aware that they are less than fully committed are bound if not to hate (2.19) at least to suspect them.

Is X so wrong to think that the *demos* suspected all the social elite? That Kimon while ostracised was thought capable of launching an attack on the constitution is clear from the stories surrounding the battle of Tanagra. That Alcibiades was suspected as well as admired is clear from Thucydides 6. The critiques of the Assembly, Council and Courts in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, *Knights*, and *Wasps* are not trivial, and must gain their humour in part from their familiarity: one could surely hear plenty of people pointing out how much better run Athens would be were the system to be different. Combine this with an awareness that the social elite were not obviously serving their own interests in supporting democracy and suspicion of disloyalty must have been easy to generate. The social elite are both unlikely to have been 'fiercely loyal' to the details of the democratic system, and are very likely to have been suspected of potential disloyalty. In fact the belief that there ought to be some reform may have extended rather more widely than simply the social elite: the willingness of Athenians in 411 to believe that there were a very large number of people who supported constitutional change surely points in this direction.

I labour this minor point because it affects what we take the *Constitution of the Athenians* to be. Convinced that X is writing in 425/4 and that at this period critics of democracy were negligible, M. and R. take X's analysis to be mistaken ('X's basic assumptions in his treatise are flawed' p. 22). The closer one gets to 411 the more X's analysis comes to seem, if not more accurate then certainly one which a significant proportion of Athenians were prepared to believe. X may be slippery in his use of the term *demos*, but Athenian use of that term *was* slippery. That slipperiness in some circumstances reinforced the sense of democratic solidarity, but what X shows rather well is that it could equally easily be exploited to undermine that solidarity.

It is no accident that the passage with which I have chosen to take issue comes from the Introduction. M and R's conservatism contributes positively to the value of their commentary, it is its effect on what they are and are not prepared to contemplate in assessing the importance and place of the work as a whole that its influence is more questionable. This commentary will endure for a very long time; it will also, I hope, stimulate more

scholars to pay closer attention to this fascinating text. I would be very surprised if that close attention did not lead to issue being taken with the claims made in the Introduction. The Old Oligarch has too often been treated as a marginal witness to fifth-century Athenian democracy – as if disqualified from serious consideration because of his senility. M and R rejuvenate him in their Introduction to such an extent as to marginalise him as a juvenile. Fortunately their commentary takes X seriously. The consequences of that for our picture of late fifth-century Athenian democracy still need fully to be teased out.

ROBIN OSBORNE
University of Cambridge
ro225@cam.ac.uk

