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Emetics Illustrated: A Review of C. R. BEYE, Ancient Greek Literature and Society

Thomas Nelson Winter

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, c150gpilot@yahoo.com

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Emetics Illustrated

C. R. BEYE, *Ancient Greek Literature and Society*, Anchor.

"It's such a hardship reviewing a handbook," writes Virgil somewhere in book one of the *Aeneid*. But this one is a somewhat different manual species. You see, for starters, there's this elegant ancient painting in the classical style on the cover. Elegant, yes, but also incongruous. The Elegant Greek on it is puking. The Classical Greek Maiden on it is holding his head together for him, obviously lest it explode. The modern title noted on the back cover is "The Morning After." One could as well, of course, title it "Intermission."

And how does this pertain to Ancient Greek Lit and Society? If you can keep reading that far (this book is airy and puffy and interminable), one is rewarded finally on page 353, where C. R. Beye concludes a case with the emesis on the front cover. The case he is making is that, in contrast with the "Anglo-Saxon proprieties" (deliberately so mislabeled, no doubt the better to leave one's Christian readership unruffled), there was nothing offensive, he argues, about the human body to the Greeks. The cover painting is the final supporting instance. I use it to illustrate an advantage of this handbook: attempts are made to fulfill the promise in the title and to show the society in the audience as well as the literature on the stage. In doing it, Beye makes good his thesis that the Greek literature was, in the main, a public literature. It is definitely worthwhile to be reminded from time to time that Aeschylus wrote for people, not for Aristotle, not for graduate seminars.

The book attempts a synthesis of several areas: the Homeric (a recap of Beye's earlier *Iliad, Odyssey and Epic Tradition*, with some other material), forty pages of good background material on fifth-century Athens, Herodotus and Thucydides, Tragedy (including Euripides), Comedy (also including Euripides. Justly, I think), and, for the sake of the contrast, Professor Beye includes the Alexandrian literature, a good choice. Plato, though aptly fitted into the warp and woof of fifth-century Athens, is otherwise deliberately omitted, another good choice. The Attic Orators are also consciously omitted, dismissed as fodder for a very few aficionados of good prose—a bad choice for a book dealing with the society. Quite apart from their value as literature, the orators are a gold mine for societal information, as one might well imagine: how better to reveal a culture than by observing what it swallowed?

Professor Beye brackets his book: in front with a chronological table from the Bronze to the Alexandrian Age, at the close with a descriptive bibliography of matter for further reading. Useful stuff.

THOMAS N. WINTER