

IN MEMORIAM
MALCOLM HEATH
(1957–13.II.2025)

DANA L. MUNTEANU
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY



It seems unfathomable that I was asked to write this piece in memory of Malcolm Heath. At the end of a semester, not too long ago, I used to write a long email to Malcolm, sharing scholarly ideas, political concerns and life anecdotes. His reply would usually start with a witty, self-deprecatory paragraph about the pleasure of getting lost digging into a forgotten commentary, then it would continue with stories about the many delights and occasional sorrows of teaching and with some research and travel plans. Since this sad task I have undertaken resembles one last message, with no expected reply, I shall try to say few things about the man besides highlighting the scholar's many accomplishments.

Whoever met Malcolm Heath in person may have had the impression that he was shy and reserved. Yet Malcolm was daring in his scholarly investigations, excited about ideas and unapologetic in his approach to literature and rhetoric. He enthusiastically explored untrodden paths of research, while remaining precise in his method. Among his last lectures available online, for example, is one entitled « Not all animals are dumb: language, communication and Aristotle's animals », at the *Hellenic Society and the Roman Society* on 10th March 2020 in London. For sure, this is not every classicist's cup of tea. As a study in contrasts, he may have seemed aloof, a formidable figure in the field, but he remained kind, patient and generous toward upcoming scholars, peers and friends. Many of his colleagues at the University of Leeds and elsewhere, former students, and myself can testify that he would read our manuscripts carefully and comment on them despite his busy

schedule, and he would do so for no other reason than the intrinsic pleasure of exchanging scholarly ideas.

A simple list of Malcolm Heath's academic positions and accomplishments can give the reader a good idea about his illustrious career as a classicist. Malcolm Heath obtained his PhD from Oxford in 1984. After holding Lecturer positions at Wadham (1981–1987) and St. Andrews (1987–1988), as well as a Research Fellowship at Hertford College (1984–1987), he taught at the University of Leeds for over three decades, reaching the highest academic rank as Professor of Greek Language and Literature which he held until his retirement (2000–2022). The sheer amount of Malcolm's scholarly works, editorial contributions and review record speaks for itself: eight monographs (*The Poetics of Greek Tragedy*, London 1987; *Political Comedy in Aristophanes*, Göttingen 1987; *Unity in Greek Poetics*, Oxford 1989; *Hermogenes on Issues: Strategies of Argument in Later Greek Rhetoric*, Oxford 1995; *Aristotle: Poetics* (Translation), Harmondsworth 1996, *Menander. A Rhetor in Context*, Oxford 2004; *Interpreting Classical Texts*, London 2002; *Ancient Philosophical Poetics*, Cambridge 2013); several co-edited volumes, such as *Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar* (vols 6–7 and 9–10, 1990–1998), edited with Francis Cairns, and *The Poetics in its Aristotelian Context*, London 2020, edited with Pierre Destrée and myself. In addition, he published over seventy scholarly articles and essays and reviewed over four hundred books (!) for the prestigious « Review in Greek Literature » section in *Greece and Rome* (2005–2023) alone, besides serving on editorial boards of renowned classical journals.

More difficult it is to capture the uniqueness of Malcolm Heath's originality, wit and intellectual curiosity. Several features of Malcolm's scholarly contributions deserve highlighting. One of these remains his unabashed emphasis on the philosophical background of the ancient literary criticism and his interest in the practical uses of rhetoric in antiquity. Thus, he has illuminated less discussed topics (e.g., his discussion of Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*, or the « marriage between Homer and Plato » in the textual criticism of Maximus of Tyre, Plotinus and Longinus, *Ancient Philosophical Poetics*, 2013, p. 125–180), and brought attention to less-known authors (e.g., his translation and commentary of the fragments and testimonia of Menander of Laodicea in the book-length 2004 study). Another is the ability to express clearly complicated ideas and concepts, and to calibrate those appropriately for targeted audiences. Malcolm's translation of the *Poetics*, for example, accompanied by minimal notes makes accessible a difficult text to broad audiences – by no means a simple feat. A third, rare quality of Malcolm's writing consists of deliberate reflection on our ways of examining classical texts, a kind of meditative meta-interpretation of methods and ideas. As he puts it in *Interpreting Classical Texts* (2002, p. 9–38), we should accept interpretative disagreement as a catalyst of fruitful enquiries and reflect on our own critical claims to clarify various angles of interpretative approaches. This may appear baffling to some,

when Malcolm could defend an interpretative position adamantly. Heath's first book, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London 1987), for instance, discusses how Greek thinkers have emphasized pleasure and emotions as responses to tragedies in the fifth- and fourth-century BCE. While nothing appeared controversial in the topic per se, the study took a solitary path vis-à-vis a wave of scholarship focusing the political aspects of classical Greek drama. Now some scholars (myself included) do not see an absolute divide between the historic and philosophical approaches to literature and rhetoric. Tragedy surely played a crucial role in ancient Athens, reflected social realities and stirred emotions that were not disconnected from the polis. While Heath did not deny the overlap, he advocated for the right of the ancient authors to express themselves as literary critics without being deemed unworthy by us because they would not discuss certain topics of contemporary interest. Any adherence to a theory may be fine, he has insisted, as long as it does not dogmatically cloud every other possibility of analysis. In case of a scholarly disagreement, he once said: « I am not sure I am convinced, but I'll think about it and, regardless of the outcome, I know I would have learned a lot from this. » This kind of scrutiny of one's own position and willingness to change it if the evidence presents itself remains rare even among the best of us.

Let me conclude with ring composition, on a personal note. When my first book underwent the peer review process, one anonymous reader made strangely idiosyncratic comments from which I guessed it might have been Malcolm Heath. After the book was published, I reached out to Malcolm and asked him if he had been one of the readers, and if so, if he would be interested in another Aristotelian project. He responded with surprise: yes and yes. Therefore, I like to believe that we met through a kind of scholarly « recognition » (*anagnôrisis*), through books. As a co-editor Malcolm never assumed any air of superiority, despite his seniority, and worked diligently, without complaint, on the most unmerciful tasks, such as creating an index after realizing that our work had not yet been finished. I do have regrets: I could never convince Malcolm to like opera, even though he was an admirer of symphonic music and a lover of Edward Grieg. More seriously, it would be a pity if Malcolm's book manuscript, *Poetical Animals*, an account of Aristotle's anthropological approach to poetry and to other arts which he finished before death, as well as his work on Longinus, would remain unpublished.

Finally, I believe I know what Malcolm would have liked us all to keep in mind both in remembrance of him and for our own benefit: the joy of intellectual discovery. One of his favorite passages from Aristotle's *Protrepticus* (fr. B.44) reminds us that we pay good money to see all sorts of athletic and dramatic competitions for their own sake and not for any material gain, and thus it would be foolish « not to think it right to contemplate the nature and reality of things without payment (*amisthi*) ». Malcolm particularly liked the word thrown at the end as an unexpected punchline « for free » (*amisthi*). He thought of it as a

memorable reminder of how fortunate we have been to enjoy a life of contemplation. Indeed, some of us were lucky to have collaborated with Malcolm, or intrigued to have read his works, and, if neither, at least, fortunate that, even in dark times, we may observe small things and contemplate bigger ones in the universe – without payment.