

# Malcolm Heath (1957–2025)

by Emma Stafford



Photo courtesy of Regine May.

Leeds Classics was deeply saddened to learn of the death of Malcolm Heath on Thursday 13 February 2025. Since his retirement in 2022 he had unfortunately been in ill health, though he was well supported by friends and family, and had received visits by colleagues from the department up until November last year.

Malcolm graduated in Literae Humaniores from Wadham College, Oxford, having been a Major Scholar (1976–80), before completing his DPhil on ‘Literary hermeneutics: theory and practice in the criticism of Greek tragedy’ in 1984. He was also Lecturer in Classics at Wadham (1981–87), while holding a Senior Scholarship at Merton College (1982–84) and a Research Fellowship at Hertford College (1984–

87). He then spent a year as Lecturer in Greek at the University of St Andrews (1987–88), before coming to Leeds, where he would spend the next 34 years – as Lecturer in Classics (1988–91), then Reader in Greek Language and Literature (1991–2000), and latterly as Professor of Greek Language and Literature (2000–2022).

An outstanding scholar, Malcolm was author of 8 monographs and more than 70 articles ranging across numerous areas of research, in all of which his work has been highly influential. Following on from his DPhil, Greek drama was initially the main focus of his research, with publications including *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth/Stanford: Stanford UP 1987) and *Political Comedy in Aristophanes (Hypomnemata 87, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1987)*. A second phase focused on Aristotle's *Poetics* with a view to determining the extent to which this work provides an at least partially reliable guide to ancient Greek theatrical practice. Before this could be achieved, a dozen articles worked out some of the numerous interpretative challenges of other aspects of Aristotle's wide-ranging philosophy, including the vexed question of 'Aristotle on natural slavery', *Phronesis* 53 (2008), 243–70. Malcolm's translation *Aristotle: Poetics* (Harmondsworth 1996) remains a best-seller on the Penguin Classics list.

Malcolm was always a great believer in a symbiotic relationship between teaching and research. This could be seen in undergraduate modules informed by his work on drama, Homer (below) and Aristotle – Greek Tragedy, Making Athens Laugh, Homer's *Iliad*, Understanding Aristotle's *Poetics* – but the influence can work both ways. Malcolm designed The Art of Persuasion module with the specific aim of testing the research premise that Greek rhetorical theories developed in the second century CE could be extremely effective, contrary to the general view that the theories in question were too abstract to be of practical use. Students were taught to apply the system to hypothetical scenarios of the kind used in ancient rhetorical training, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of the theoretical structure. He himself regarded this as one of his most original scholarly achievements, and it is an example of his engagement in making assessment original and interesting long before this became a mainstream concern. Publications in this area include two monographs, *Hermogenes On Issues: Strategies of Argument in Later Greek Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1995)

and *Menander. A Rhetor in Context* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2004), and two dozen articles; amongst these, entries in handbooks of/companions to ancient rhetoric (Brill 1997, Cambridge UP 2009, Oxford UP 2017) demonstrate the centrality of Malcolm's work to the field. Under this heading, the chapter 'Rhetoric in mid-antiquity' (in T.P. Wiseman ed., *Classics in Progress: essays on ancient Greece and Rome*, Oxford: British Academy 2002, 419–39) nicely encapsulates the extraordinary breadth of Malcolm's scholarly interests, as it carries the reader effortlessly from Homer to Manuel II Palaeologus (d.1425 CE), embracing with equal assurance literature and philosophy, and even occasionally history.

A further strand to Malcolm's work encompassed philosophical poetics and aesthetics, exemplified in the monographs *Unity in Greek Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1989) and *Ancient Philosophical Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2013). Half a dozen articles in this area included 'The unity of Plato's *Phaedrus*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1989), 151–73 and 189–91, and 'Divine and human laughter in later Platonism', in P. Destrée and D. Trivigno (ed.), *Laughter and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019), 88–100.

Other topics in Greek literature over which Malcolm ranged include epinician poetry, Thucydides and ancient scholarship on Homer, the latter category featuring the intriguingly entitled papers 'Was Homer a Roman?' (*Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar* 10 (1998), 23–56) and 'Do heroes eat fish? Athenaeus on the Homeric lifestyle' (in D. Braund & J. Wilkins ed., *Athenaeus and his World: Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire*, Exeter: Exeter UP 2000, 342–52 and 576–7). Not only Malcolm's wide interests, but also his belief in the importance of disagreement and debate to our understanding of literature, can be seen in the thought-provoking *Interpreting Classical Texts* (London: Duckworth 2002). This is also an excellent example of his dry sense of humour; a subtle wit was a consistent characteristic of his output.

After his retirement Malcolm had been working on two monographs, one designed to be the culmination of his work on Aristotle, *Poetical Animals: Aristotle, anthropology, and poetry*. The other, *Longinus Reunited: On Sublimity in Context*, was building on



ideas already aired in a number of articles with the aim of settling a long-standing controversy about the authorship of the highly acclaimed treatise *On Sublimity*, arguing in favour of the traditional third-century-CE date, against the view which has prevailed since the nineteenth century, that such a good text could not possibly be a product of late antiquity.

In addition to his own work, Malcolm made an enormous contribution to the discipline in other ways. His editorial work included being co-editor (with P. Destree and D.L. Munteanu) of *The Poetics in its Aristotelian Context* (London: Routledge 2020), and (with Francis Cairns) of four volumes of *Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar* (vols 6–7 and 9–10, 1990–98). Right up to his retirement he sat on the editorial boards of *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* (from 2008), *Revue des études tardo-antiques* (from 2011) and *Classical Philology* (from 2015). Meanwhile, his phenomenal record in reviewing included more than 60 individual book reviews, and his responsibility from 2005 to 2023 for *Greece and Rome*'s biannual subject review in Greek Literature – a daunting undertaking which involved surveying all books received by the journal in this area, and selecting a number for comment: by the time he retired, his reviews had covered 426 books, in consistently pithy style. And finally his care for the discipline's future was demonstrated both by his supervision and examination of postgraduate students and by his promotion of Open Access, of which he was a characteristically early adopter. He was also an enthusiastic supporter of the work of the Classical Association for many years, during which he acted as treasurer for the local branch.

All in all, Malcolm's contribution to the discipline of Classics was exceptional. But more than this, he was both witty and kind, always generous in his support of both students and colleagues. He is sadly missed by all who had the honour of working with him.