

JASPER GRIFFIN

Jasper Griffin

29 May 1937 – 22 November 2019

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1987

by

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Fellow of the Academy

Summary. Professor Jasper Griffin was a figure of great importance in the study of both Greek and Latin literature. Especially significant were his books *Homer on Life and Death* and *Latin Poetry and Roman Life*. A big book on tragedy was worked on, but not completed. Griffin also had a large influence on the subject as a tutor and lecturer. In his writing, as in person, he was utterly individual.



James Griffin

Jasper Griffin was a monumental figure, in appearance and manner no less than in scholarship. So imposing a person could easily overshadow his own work; here an account of the life and person is followed by a discussion of three books. This form will help to throw emphasis on to his scholarly contribution – a contribution which no one else could have made. The biography and the books will throw light on each other.

I

Jasper was born on 29 May 1937 in Lewisham, South London. His father worked with the GPO. Jasper had a younger brother, Geoffrey, born in 1940. Their childhood involved much movement, with evacuations during the war. Their father served in the Navy. Jasper won a scholarship to Christ's Hospital in Horsham, Sussex; there he boarded, not altogether happily. Perhaps it was there that he acquired his stately way of holding books, with his lower arm bent up.

He won an Exhibition to Balliol College, Oxford, where he started in 1956. He obtained a First both in Honour Moderations and in Literae Humaniores (then just philosophy and ancient history). He gained numerous university prizes. As a graduate student he went to Harvard for a year. He had already met Miriam Dressler, the centre of his life; they married in New York, in 1960. She had made him shave off his enormous red beard; he had made her stop smoking. They returned to Oxford, where in 1961 Jasper became a Junior Research Fellow at Balliol; he became a Tutorial Fellow at the same college in 1963, and Miriam became a Tutorial Fellow at Somerville in 1967.

In 1962, Jasper's brother Geoffrey died from bone marrow cancer, at the age of 22. This loss had the deepest effect on Jasper. His first book, *Homer on Life and Death*, is dedicated to his brother's memory; a poignant quotation from the *Odyssey* draws his own experience into Homeric conceptions. Jasper's second book *Latin Poets and Roman Life* is dedicated to Miriam, with words that evoke Latin inscriptions. Their first daughter Julia was born in 1963; Miranda and Tamara followed. Family life was very happy. Jasper delighted his daughters by improvising comic poems. In later years he would annually read *A Christmas Carol* aloud to the family, over four evenings; everyone cried.

Griffin (as we should perhaps call him from this point) was a lecturer and tutor of unmatched power and skill. His lectures were the highlight of the week when I started as an undergraduate myself. The mighty figure, robed in his gown, held forth in Balliol Hall with unforgettable eloquence and humour. The impression was especially great in the days before handouts (the copious numerical references were each thoughtfully read out twice). Gales of youthful mirth accompanied his august rendering of a Brazilian myth including a bottom made from mashed potato (just words on a page in *Homer on Life and Death*, 174). As a tutor, he seemed to know the facts and scholarship around whatever

topic we chanced on. He read prosed and translations with the most subtle attention. He was weighty and witty in his comments on essays, but also kind and, above all, encouraging. With his colleagues, especially Oliver Lyne and Oswyn Murray, he led to an extraordinary number of his pupils becoming classical scholars.

He began to publish articles only in his late thirties. The remarkable decade 1976–86 saw the publication of his two most important books, on Homer and on Latin poetry, and of valuable articles not taken up into those books. This is not to mention other books, and the editing, with John Boardman and Oswyn Murray, of the hugely popular *Oxford History of the Classical World* (Oxford, 1986). The two major books and the articles combatted scholarly tendencies of the time with dauntless independence. The impact of the book on Homer was enormous; that of the book on Latin poetry somewhat less so, though more recently eminent scholars have stressed its significance. In the '90s, Griffin turned to a new area: Greek tragedy. He robustly took on current approaches in the article 'The Social Function of Attic Tragedy', *Classical Quarterly*, ns 48 (1998), 39–61, and the book chapter 'Sophocles and the Democratic City', in J. Griffin (ed.), *Sophocles Revisited: Essays Presented to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones* (Oxford, 1999), 73–94. Lively controversy ensued; Griffin's pieces indisputably made a vital contribution to the debate. He did much work for a book on tragedy, which his health prevented him from accomplishing.

In 1986 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. He was disappointed not to have been made Regius Professor of Greek after Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones; but he took this disappointment magnanimously. He was given a personal chair in 1992. A conference was held at his retirement in 2004; a *Festschrift* emerged from it (M.J. Clarke, B.G.F. Currie, R.O.A.M. Lyne (eds), *Epic Interactions: Perspectives on Homer, Virgil, and the Epic Tradition Presented to Jasper Griffin* (Oxford, 2006)). One job he had much enjoyed was being Public Orator, and so delivering Latin speeches (in rhythmic prose) on famous people awarded honorary degrees; his speeches, with cheeky touches, were greatly appreciated by their audiences. For all his majesty of bearing, he loved to make fun of himself.

Miriam died in 2018; he died on 22 November of the following year.

II

***Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980)**

The book shows a massive confidence in the poetry of Homer, and in its own ability to make that poetry speak to its readers. The essence of the *Iliad* is seen to lie in its total vision of mortals and gods; that vision is communicated, in imitation of the poem itself, by a huge accumulation of specific moments. Quotation from the Homeric poems, in

English or English and Greek, is far denser than in G.S. Kirk's *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, 1962), or even K. Reinhardt's *Die Ilias und ihr Dichter* (Göttingen, 1961). Comment is commonly brief, and expressed with telling simplicity. To be sure, the examples are arranged as part of a scholarly argument; often the discussion starts from clear instances, which enable us to interpret less clear ones. Variation and nuance are seen as important. But in the poem, it is held, basic principles pervade all the specifics; a world is built up, which the book offers to us. The book does not at all follow the structure of the poem, as Reinhardt's book does. It has its own structure, and proceeds from objects (ch. 1) to humans (chs 2–4) to gods (chs 5–6). The gods are not a mere literary fiction: they present the vision in its most powerful form, through the contrast and entanglement of divine and human. 'Only in the light of the nature and perspective of the gods is human life intelligible' (184). The book both imitates the *Iliad* and conveys the essence of that poem through its own potent artistry.

A certain pride and grandeur gives a heroic quality to the author's own stance. On the first page of the Introduction, he dismisses Analysts (strictly some Analysts) with elegantly sustained metaphor (some analysis 'by pressing on verbal repetitions and minor inconcinnities dissolved the poems into fragments'); the first footnote pointedly mocks mixed metaphors in a proponent of oral poetics. The book is aware of its own fine writing, and follows its own aesthetic path with magnificent assurance. But the supremacy of the *Iliad* is its great concern. Even the *Odyssey* brings out through contrast the nobility of the *Iliad*; to the advantage of the *Iliad* Near Eastern and mediaeval literature are deployed. The death of George Osborne in *Vanity Fair* ('rather crude') shows 'the quality of Homer's treatment' (110). Only Mozart, in a different medium, is implied to be on a level with Homer (103).

The character of the book may be illustrated by its handling of three passages on Hector's death (128–30). This chapter adapts the article in *Classical Quarterly* (1976); in 128–30 (cf. *CQ* 177–8) translations are added, references to the scholia are removed. The quotations themselves, with their translations, now dominate the space. The discussion incidentally doubts a deletion by 'most editors' (now including West), on emotional grounds ('*emotional*' in italics); it praises Schadewaldt and Deichgräber, and dispraises Von der Mühl (following Reinhardt, 337 n. 12). On Zeus's monologue at *Il.* 17.201–8 Griffin says, 'It represents in fact what might be called the austere pathos of heaven; in contrast, the passionate pathos of earth is exemplified by Andromache's lament over Hector's body, 24.723:'. 'The austere pathos of heaven' is a memorable phrase and conception, and forcefully opposed to 'the passionate pathos of earth'. Much of the book is encapsulated here. Griffin summarises with an 'ascending scale of pathos': the poet's 'objective manner', Zeus's perspective, 'in which human suffering is touching but not shattering', and 'the view of the human victim whose life is destroyed'. The words 'touching but not shattering' are carefully chosen to convey distance; their rhythm

contrasts with the strong ending to sentence and paragraph in ‘destroyed’. The reader is impelled to linger on the finality of the bereavement and on the suffering mortal’s viewpoint, which overwhelms all others.

***Latin Poets and Roman Life* (London, 1985)**

This book includes versions of some articles which were published before the book on Homer. Griffin had been working on these two completely different areas simultaneously. This second book brings out sides of himself for which the first offered little scope: his humour, his enjoyment of others’ writing on pleasure and love, and his own amused enjoyment in writing on theirs. The first book concentrated on two enormous poems, and mainly on one; the second engages with many poems, by Catullus, Horace, Propertius, Tibullus, Virgil, Ovid, and others. The first had been relatively little concerned by Homer’s historical context; the second is preoccupied with the relation between the cultural context and the poetry. Griffin said later that he would have welcomed collaboration with an archaeologist in writing the book; its only image is the one on the cover – with important comments. But through his words he conjures up a diverse world for the reader to enter.

The first three chapters sweep through Augustan poetry, especially love-poetry, with a specific chapter on Propertius and Antony; two then deal with the colourful delights of wine, water, and nakedness; two pursue more emotional and social aspects of love; with a greater ascent, the next chapter addresses the finale of Virgil’s *Georgics*, the next, ascending further still, the *Aeneid*. At the end Virgil is called ‘the truest interpreter’ of his own world. A shortish final chapter is something of a coda, on Republican drama and Augustan elegy; its relation to the rest is not wholly straightforward, but it contributes to the fusion of ‘literature and life’. The structure does not have the point, as in the book on Homer, of gradually opening out a poem’s world-view; but it unfolds a culture with a growing sense of seriousness.

The book is inexhaustibly copious; the reader is endlessly entertained by captivating lines and scenes from the poets and witty phrases from the author. The material is lucidly set out, and the arguments are clear. It is not explained at length what the ultimate goal is: perhaps the historical understanding of the poetry, through realising how the poets formed it from the world they lived in. How its relationship to that world affected contemporary readers is not so much the focus of concern. The distinction of different modes and degrees of stylisation enhances the appreciation of individual poets through comparison; but the main point is to show that this is stylised reality, not self-enclosed literature. The work aims to have the encounter of reality and poetry encountered directly by the reader: the reader is to escape the merely bookish erudition attributed to modern scholars, and their bookish notion of the poems.

A sample may be taken from the beginning of ch. 5 ('The Pleasures of Water and Nakedness'). It starts with bathing at Rome. Archaeology is brought in, if briskly; written sources are more fully evoked (it is interesting to compare the treatment of the Baths of Agrippa in F. Yegül, *Bathing in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2010), 105–7). The translations alertly capture Livy's outraged polysyndeton on Capua and Seneca's diminishing lengths of word, ending with *uirum* 'man', for the smell of the Scipios. That paragraph closes with Quintilian on 'boozing in the baths'. A striking sequence then presents a string of attractive young men swimming in the Tiber (with a respectful reference to Nisbet and Hubbard). Finally, Cyrene's cave in Virg. *G.* 4.333–75 is made an elevated version of the Roman baths. We are said to find there 'without surprise' beautiful nymphs interested in love-stories; but the knowing phrase plays down the bold connection of baths and cave. The pages are entrancing; but they provoke much thought.

***Virgil* (Oxford, 1986)**

The smaller books display remarkable range, in the type of writing as in the subject. The commentary on *Iliad* 9 (Oxford, 1995) turns to the special manner of the commentator – a notable generic move in a subject largely divided between commentators and authors of critical books. *The Mirror of Myth* (London, 1986) strides into the field of reception. One to touch on here is the little *Past Masters* book on Virgil. It could be feared that any such book would be slightly dull reading for someone with a knowledge of the subject – not least because Griffin's views on imperialism in the *Aeneid* are appropriated and presented by so many students at school and university. But everything he writes is engaging and individual. So many aspects of the poetry are displayed to the reader in the street. And there is incidental entertainment all the time; even if Varro is made a foil to Virgil, one has to like 'Varro's rather simple sense of humour', especially when followed by 'charming informality'. The reading and expression are often notable. In discussing the end of *Aeneid* 8, Griffin responds imaginatively to the combination of metal and glory in the description of Aeneas' shield, and, in the description of Aeneas' lifting it, to the combination of cognitive unclarity, physical heaviness, and historical heaviness. The paragraph ends: 'He finds some pleasure in contemplating its [the history's] half-comprehended image, but he must feel its full weight when he carries on his shoulder the brilliant burden of destiny.' The writing here is so alive, with the long mental 'contemplating' and 'half-comprehended' succeeded by the short physical 'feel' and 'full weight', and all subsumed in the arresting junction of 'brilliant burden'. There is nothing pre-packaged in the author's reading and thinking.

Such is the writing, such are the creations, of a scholar completely himself.

Acknowledgements, etc.

I was asked to write this memoir in August 2025; Jasper Griffin had died at the time of the pandemic, and arranging a memoir had slipped through the net. In view of the excellent account by Professor Richard Jenkyns in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, this account has been kept relatively brief. Professor Eleanor Dickey's obituary in *Council of University Classical Departments*, 49 (2020), has been very helpful too. I am greatly obliged to Professor Julia Griffin for invaluable conversation.

Note on the author: G.O. Hutchinson is Regius Professor of Greek Emeritus at the University of Oxford. He was elected a Fellow of the Academy in 2021.

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