

Introduction
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The study of the “popular” came late to classicists and ancient historians. By way of introduction, both to the study of popular culture in the classical world, and to the papers in this special edition of *New Classicists*, I offer here a brief account of approaches past and present for engaging with the lives, cultures, and artistic outputs of ordinary and understudied people in Greco-Roman antiquity.

There are six main approaches to the subject developed by non-classical scholars. According to these theories, popular culture can be:¹

- 1) quantitatively superior: the things most people like.²
- 2) qualitatively inferior: in the words of Storey, “a residual category, there to accommodate texts and practices that fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture. In other words, it is a definition of popular culture as inferior culture.”³
- 3) mass culture: enabled by the increasing mechanization of culture, industrialization, and urbanization, this is culture imposed on the people from above.⁴ It is often contrasted with:
- 4) a product of the ‘people’: arguably where study of popular culture began in the 18th century. Key scholars include Johann Herder and the Grimm brothers.⁵ The popular culture they envisaged was largely rural, autochthonous, and ahistorical, what is sometimes referred to as “folk” culture.⁶
- 5) a battlefield for hegemony: derived from Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, popular culture on this theory is seen as a site of exchange and negotiation between the resistance of subordinate groups and the incorporation of imposed culture in the interest of dominant groups.⁷
- 6) a chimera to be deconstructed by postmodernism.⁸

None of these definitions is right or wrong *per se*. Each can be useful depending on the time, place, or phenomenon being studied. In the ancient world, for example, popular culture could be critically analyzed as mass culture in a study of Athenian drama or mass-produced Egyptian ushabti figurines⁹, but popular culture as a site of exchange and negotiation between elite and

¹ The rubrics are taken from Grig 2016, 3 and Canevaro 2016, 39; they summarize the definitions put forward by Parker 2011 (“Toward a definition of popular culture”), who in turn derived them from Storey’s *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, and Bennett’s “Popular culture: a teaching object” (1980).

² See Storey 2015, 5-6; Parker 2011, 150-1 for critiques of this definition.

³ Storey 2015, 6.

⁴ On mass culture see further Strinati 2004, especially 1-45.

⁵ Herder made collections of *Volkslieder* and the Grimm brothers collected folk tales. See further Grig 2016, 4.

⁶ Storey 2015, 9. Schroeder 1980, 7 denies that folk culture is popular culture because it is “mainly governed by personal one-to-one relationships” and “contact with other cultures is restricted or almost non-existent.” This stems from his own definition of popular culture before the printing press, the key features of which, for him, are “mass production, mass distribution, and mass communication.”

⁷ Strinati 2004, 148-63; See further Bennett 2009, 79-87; Storey 2015, 79-82; Parker 2011, 155-7.

⁸ Storey 2015, 12-13 and 181-212. In the light of the problems with these six definitions, Parker offers his own redefinition of popular culture as unauthorized culture that requires little cultural capital (Parker 2011, 169-70). Canevaro’s essay in *Popular Culture in the Ancient World* offers a substantial critique of Parker’s definition for Classical Athens (Canevaro 2016, 39-65). See also Richlin 2017, 54-8 on the utility of Parker’s definitions.

⁹ On Athenian drama and mass culture see Nehamas 1988 and Parker 2011, 153; on ushabti figurines see Schroeder 1980, 4.

subordinate groups may be a more useful way of thinking about, for example, the story of the bandit-slave Drimakos, and the hero-cult named after him: Forsdyke argues that the story contains both popular and elite elements and that this “mixing” took place in the social context of mediating tensions between groups.¹⁰

There are, as many scholars have shown, problems with transposing these theories of popular culture developed outside the field to the study of the ancient world; not least of these is that most of the theories cited above take popular culture to be a post-industrial revolution phenomenon.¹¹ The result is that not only were the theories and methodologies for studying popular culture developed with a certain amount of technological advancement (e.g. printing) in mind, but they also tend to have a presentist bent¹² which alleviates the biggest issue facing scholars of the ancient world: the evidence.¹³

In any study of popular culture in the ancient world, two key questions must be addressed: what methodologies can we use to investigate this culture given the problematically elite biases of the evidence? And who are the *populus* whose culture we intend to study?¹⁴ In what follows, I offer a consideration of three recent works on very different aspects of Classical popular culture, and how they deal with these questions: Mikalson’s *Athenian Popular Religion* (1983), Clarke’s *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans* (2003), and Forsdyke’s *Slaves Tell Tales and Other Episodes in the Politics of Popular Culture in Ancient Greece* (2012).¹⁵

The “Popular” in Popular Culture

¹⁰ Forsdyke 2012, 38-89 especially 47, though she does not explicitly invoke theories inspired by Gramscian hegemony, but the story of Drimakos is certainly treated as “an area of negotiation... within which... dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are ‘mixed’ in different permutations” (Bennett 2009, 85).

¹¹ Parker 2011, 148

¹² For example, the Grimm brothers wrote down tales that they heard being orally told, something impossible for classicists and ancient historians (Zipes 2002, 28). A look at several recently published books on popular culture shows the presentist inflection of popular culture studies: Hermes’ *Re-reading Popular Culture* (2005) offers chapters on football and the detective novel; and Danesi’s *Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives* (2008) focuses on modern media, including print, radio, television, cinema, and advertising.

¹³ Scholars from non-classical studies disciplines again led the way in developing techniques for studying popular culture in pre-modern societies, especially Bakhtin. On the influence of Bakhtin in the study of popular culture see Grig 2016, 11-13. On popular culture in pre-modern societies in general see Grig 2016, 9-14.

¹⁴ One might also ask what is meant by the “culture” element of “popular culture”. While the definition of “culture” is contested, it is not a problem unique to studies of the popular. As Grig 2016, 3 argues in the introduction to her edited volume *Popular Culture in the Ancient World*, “in the definition of *popular* culture the definition of culture itself is at stake” and she notes further that culture can be anything from “a pluralistic ‘way of life’ to an elitist ‘high’ culture.” Indeed, in studies of ancient popular culture we often see re-definitions of the “culture” element. For example, in his essay in the volume, “The intellectual life of the Roman non-elite”, Jerry Toner must broaden the definition of “intellectual life.” Instead of considering it the books, libraries, scholars, and high-literary pursuits that characterize Rawson’s 1985 book *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic*, Toner defines intellectual life as comprising “those activities that involve creative or considered thought at all levels of society” and revolving around “finding solutions to more everyday problems and providing intellectual stimulation in an environment of limited resources” (Toner 2016, 167).

¹⁵ There are many other books on ancient popular culture that I could have chosen. They include Dover’s *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (1994); Horsfall’s *The Culture of the Roman Plebs* (2003); Toner’s *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome* (2009); Kurke’s *Aesopic Conversations* (2011); and Richlin’s *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic: Plautus and Popular Comedy* (2017), among many others. I have selected the three above partly to reflect the topics of the papers in this volume: religion, art, and politics, and partly because each offers a diverse definition of the *populus* and an accordingly different methodology.

It matters who the *populus* are. The problem, in sources from the ancient world, is that we frequently only have the perspective of the elite, who often tend to treat those not in their own social circle as an undifferentiated mass. For some scholars of popular culture, the *populus* is simply, as the ancient elite would have it, not the elite.¹⁶ Both Clarke and Forsdyke utilize a version of this definition in their studies. For Clarke, the “everyday Romans” of his title comprise “the other 98% of Roman society: the freeborn working poor, slaves, former slaves, and foreigners.”¹⁷ Their art is opposed to the art of the elite (those with money, important public appointments, social prestige, and membership of an *ordo*¹⁸), and is art that “exalted imperial ideals.”¹⁹ Clarke emphasizes, however, that the boundaries between elite and non-elite can be fluid, and include “would-be elite on the borders between elite and non-elite society.”²⁰ Clarke does not consider the culture (“attitudes, belief systems, and cultural practice”²¹) of all “ordinary” Romans to be identical either, noting particularly chronological differences that came about with the rise of “freedman art.”²² Clarke’s methodology, which begins from the art and looks for elements that might appeal to particular non-elite people, also highlights his attempt to emphasize the diversity of the non-elite. In his chapter on the *ara pacis*, for example, he considers the monument’s appeal to agricultural viewers driven from the countryside into the city by civil war²³, but in his chapter on Trajan’s Column, he analyzes how foreign communities in Rome may react to the monument.²⁴

Forsdyke similarly highlights the different “popular cultures” that “popular culture” implies, describing it as “a dynamic and ever-changing field of speech and action in which various groups participated to varying degrees over time.”²⁵ The “people” of her study are farmers, slaves, craftsmen, and traders, and like Clarke she notes the fluidity of these categories and the distinct interests that could be generated by distinctions between e.g. slave and free, citizen and non-citizen, or man and woman.²⁶ Unlike Clarke, however, Forsdyke argues that the “hybrid nature” of the people “does not weaken the argument for (at least in some contexts) a

¹⁶ Toner 2009, 9 begins his study of Roman popular culture with such a statement. Though he goes on to acknowledge the different social groups that comprise the non-elite (“peasants, craftsmen and artisans, labourers, healers, fortune-tellers, storytellers and entertainers, shopkeepers and traders – but also consisted of their women, their children, and the have-nots of Roman society: slaves and those who had fallen into destitution and beggary”) he maintains that the culture of this group can be understood as a whole, as unofficial culture because of “the broadly similar social, economic and environmental conditions that the majority of the population of the Roman Empire faced throughout its history” (10) He calls popular culture “A mosaic of popular subcultures united by broadly similar interests, facing the same day-to-day problems of making a living, and equipped with the same tried-and-tested ways of trying to get things done in a tough, hierarchical world run by the elite for the elite” (11).

¹⁷ Clarke 2003, 4 further defines the non-elite as someone who lacks one or more of the following: money, important public appointments, social prestige, or membership of an *ordo*. He highlights the difference between different members of the non-elite, acknowledging, for example, that “even among slaves there was a clear hierarchy of social value” (5).

¹⁸ Clarke 2003, 4.

¹⁹ Clarke 2003, 1.

²⁰ Clarke 2003, 8.

²¹ Clarke 2003, 4.

²² Clarke 2003, 7. The notion of “freedman art” has been critiqued, but Clarke’s point is that in the Republic the political and cultural elite were the same, but the rise of the freedman complicated this in the Imperial period.

²³ Clarke 2003, 28.

²⁴ Clarke 2003, 37.

²⁵ Forsdyke 2012, 18.

²⁶ Forsdyke 2012, 18-22.

unified popular culture in which all groups could partake.”²⁷ Her study is also concerned to expand the purview beyond Athens, and so necessitates a view of popular culture as in some sense a coherent phenomenon that can cross geographical, political, and temporal boundaries. Such a notion of popular culture is also implicit in her use of comparative methodologies which uses evidence from early modern Europe, contemporary Malaysian peasant communities and the antebellum American south.²⁸

In contrast to Clarke and Forsdyke’s notion of “popular” as “non-elite”, Mikalson’s *Athenian Popular Religion* offers a rather different definition. For his study, “popular” means the “religious views and attitudes that were acceptable to the *majority* of Athenians.”²⁹ He speaks of a hypothetical “average” Athenian³⁰ and takes care to specify that his “popular” does not indicate a particular social class of person, nor is it being used as a pejorative term.³¹ Popular, for Mikalson, is consensus.³² But, like Forsdyke, Clarke, and many other studies of popular culture, “popular” is still contrasted with something “elite” – in this case poetic and philosophical treatments of religion. Unlike these intellectual religious discourses, Mikalson argues, popular beliefs lack “metaphysical dynamism.”³³ To this we can compare Dover’s assertion, in his *Greek Popular Morality*, that popular morality is “essentially unsystematic.”³⁴ Since Mikalson’s aim is to recover an average daily experience of religion, he limits his study to a narrow temporal and spatial window – Athens of the late 5th and 4th centuries – “to avoid inaccurate generalizations.”³⁵ He chooses this time and place because there is more evidence than for other times and places, in the speeches of the Greek orators.³⁶ The implication of his choice is that the “popular” (as average or majority) looks different in different times and places.

There is no right or wrong way to define the “popular” in popular culture, and to a certain extent the nature of any study and the evidence available will determine whose experiences count under this rubric. But in each of the (very selective) examples given here, there is one constant: the heuristic “popular” provides an alternative mode of examining the ancient world.

Next, we consider the evidence and methodologies used by Clarke, Forsdyke, and Mikalson in their studies of ancient popular culture.

Methodologies

Each of the three representative studies on popular culture approaches the topic in a different way, and with a different set of evidence. For Clarke’s art historical study, the evidence is material: imperial monuments in Rome, wall paintings in Pompeii, and funerary monuments. Forsdyke and Mikalson both focus on literary evidence. Mikalson looks for popular religion in Greek oratory and Xenophon, as well as inscriptions,³⁷ rather than in the “elite” sources of

²⁷ Forsdyke 2012, 30.

²⁸ Forsdyke 2012, 4-6.

²⁹ Mikalson 1983, 5. Emphasis my own.

³⁰ Mikalson 1983, 6.

³¹ Mikalson 1983, 5.

³² Mikalson 1983, 12. Cf. Dover 1994, 40.

³³ Mikalson 1983, ix.

³⁴ Dover 1994, xii.

³⁵ Mikalson 1983, 5.

³⁶ Mikalson 1983, 5.

³⁷ Mikalson 1983, 7-11. For Mikalson, since Greek orators were pleading their cases before a jury of “ordinary” Athenians, they would surely express moral and religious views generally deemed acceptable. He considers forensic oratory the best source (8-9). Though generally attempting to avoid “elite” sources, he justifies the use of Xenophon

philosophers and dramatists. He acknowledges that such sources can probably tell us something about popular religion, but says that it is methodologically necessary to first establish what counts as “popular” independently of such sources.³⁸ Forsdyke does not necessarily look for non-elite sources, but argues that elements of popular culture survive “as refracted through the writings of elites” and that we may access them by stripping away their ideological biases.³⁹ She also looks to literary genres that bear a generic relationship to popular non-literary forms such as iambic, comedy, satire, and the novel, and genres not derived from non-literary forms but that use material derived from them, such as Herodotus.⁴⁰ While Mikalson’s approach to the evidence is relatively straightforward, Forsdyke uses a variety of methodologies to get at the popular elements in her elite sources. First, she acknowledges that popular/elite is not a hard and fast dichotomy and that popular culture and elite culture must be studied in relation to one another.⁴¹ Popular culture, she argues, is a composite of popular and elite and we only have access to that composite in elite texts: “the trick is to recognize these appropriations [of the popular by elite texts] and decode what these images and themes would have signified to non-elite audiences.”⁴² One way in which Forsdyke does this is to identify incongruous elements in elite texts, which reflect the imperfect adaptation of the popular to its new context.⁴³ She proposes a different methodology for texts that were written by elites but for a mixed audience (e.g. drama, oratory). In this case, she suggests, one should consider the differences between how an elite audience member may react differently from a non-elite audience member. Clarke uses a similar methodology in the first part of his book, which deals with how the non-elite may have viewed elite, imperial monuments. This is, he admits “an exercise in historical imagination, but one that emphasizes in a new way the non-elites living in Rome.” As well as imagining how non-elites may react to the available evidence, Forsdyke has also employed comparative evidence from medieval popular culture (such as images of the grotesque body); slave tales of trickster animals from the antebellum South; and landlord/peasant interactions in Malaysia. She highlights the potential problems of using such evidence: one must take care not to claim that such societies were socially or politically equal to ancient societies in any way, but it should rather be used to construct models to understand ancient evidence and to provide texture for cultural practices only hinted at in the sources. As an example of the first usage of comparative evidence, Forsdyke compares revelry involving role reversal and transgression in ancient Megara and early modern Europe, arguing that such occasions were “an important medium for the negotiation of relations between elites and masses”⁴⁴ and that using the comparison we can see a broad pattern indicating that changes in economic relations between rich and poor are the material causes of peasant resistance.⁴⁵ As an example of using more recent evidence to fill out the texture of ancient

because “his writings are sprinkled with casual and unselfconscious references to religious beliefs and preferences...which lack any hint of an innovative or polemical outlook.” (11).

³⁸ Mikalson 1983, 10-11. Mikalson dedicated two further studies to the subject of popular religion in tragedy (1991) and popular religion in philosophy (2010).

³⁹ Forsdyke 2012, 7.

⁴⁰ Forsdyke 2012, 7.

⁴¹ Forsdyke 2012, 8.

⁴² Forsdyke 2012, 9. See also 11.

⁴³ See for example, Forsdyke’s chapter “Pigs, asses, and swine: obscenity and the popular imagination in ancient Sicyon” (90-116) where she argues that Herodotus’ account of the Sicyonian tyrant Cleisthenes’ reforms derives from a fifth-century popular tradition of folk humor.

⁴⁴ Forsdyke 2012, 118.

⁴⁵ Forsdyke 2012, 142.

evidence, Forsdyke compares ancient festivals like the Kronia to early modern English rituals such as molly-dancing or plough Monday.⁴⁶

In addition to looking at old evidence in new ways, Clarke and other scholars of popular culture turn to evidence that scholarship – particularly literary scholarship – has tended to underappreciate or dismiss: material culture evidence, and especially the decoration of ordinary houses. Other studies in popular culture likewise turn to non-literary evidence as a way to get beyond the elite. Grey, in his *Constructing Communities in the Late Roman Countryside* uses the evidence of Egyptian papyri⁴⁷ and letters.⁴⁸ Toner also uses papyri, alongside oracles, joke books, curses, graffiti, inscriptions, law-codes, and archaeological artifacts.⁴⁹

This is by no means been an exhaustive examination of the evidence and methodologies that scholars of the ancient world have used to “excavate” popular culture. But it has, hopefully, provided a representative sample of approaches useful for future scholars who hope to take the study of ancient popular culture further.

New Studies in Popular Culture

Each of the papers in this volume has its own approach to the concept of the popular. In her paper “Boundaries, Magic, and Popular Religion in Two Mosaics from Ancient Thysdrus,” Porstner uses an analysis of two mosaics – the *Owl Mosaic* from the Baths of the Owl, and the *January* panel from the *Mosaic of the Months* – as a snapshot to problematize a strong conceptual distinction between “popular” and “elite.” In studies of ancient religion, the popular-elite divide is often construed as unauthorized magic vs. official religion. Porstner argues, however, that in the *Owl Mosaic* we can detect evidence of an elite African *sodalitas* (the Telegenii) using a magically inflected mosaic to avert the evil eye, and perhaps inflict it upon rival *sodalitates*. She proposes that the Telegenii themselves were probably members of the provincial elite, and suggests that the toga the anthropomorphized owl is wearing is a senatorial or priestly *toga praetexta* rather than the *angusticlavia* worn by equestrians.

In “Cityscapes in Roman Painting: The Amphitheater Riot Fresco as a Piece of ‘Popular Art,’” Lee undertakes a thorough examination of the Pompeii riot fresco, an ancient artwork usually designated “popular” due to the nature of the house in which it was discovered, its style, and its content. Lee contrasts the cityscape of the riot fresco with other contemporary “elite” cityscapes, including the *Città Dipinta* discovered beneath the Baths of Trajan in Rome, a harborscape from Stabiae, and a mythical cityscape that forms the backdrop in the *Trojan Horse* fresco from the House of the Menander. He also considers several other mythical cityscapes from the houses of the well-to-do non-elite of Pompeii who imitate elite artistic preferences. By contrasting these cityscapes, Lee identifies an elite preference for well-ordered, harmonious, and idealistic cityscapes. The *Trojan Horse* from the House of the Menander, which focuses on the human rather than the architectural, is an exception, but its mythic distance renders the violence depicted in it different from the local scenes of violence in the riot fresco. Ultimately Lee concludes that the riot fresco splits the difference between these elite tendencies, “fully integrating figures, architecture, and natural elements into the city.” The riot fresco represents and celebrates both the exuberant violence of urban life as well as the city’s more peaceful, contemplative potential.

⁴⁶ Forsdyke 2012, 124-9.

⁴⁷ Grey 2011, 4-5; 114; 222.

⁴⁸ Grey 2011, 9-10; 30-31.

⁴⁹ Toner 2009, 19.

While each of these papers offer analyses of material culture through the lens of the popular, Huang analyzes literary representations of the Athenian people as democratic agents. In her paper, “‘Solon’ and his People: The Afterlife of an Archaic Political Personage in Late Democratic Athens,” Huang discusses the discrepancy between Solon’s hostility towards the people, whom he views as a source of civil strife, and his reputation in the popular oratory of the 4th century BCE as the founding-father of democracy. She argues that Aeschines and Demosthenes reformulate Solon’s negative view of the people as a locus of power, into a positive, democratic assertion of the people’s sovereign capabilities. In Solon’s poetry, according to Huang, there is a consistent dichotomizing of aristocracy and δῆμος (in Solon explicitly referring to the lower classes). In Solon 4 the dichotomy is collapsed, as Solon blames not just the poor masses, but the entire population for civil corruption, outlining parallel sufferings for each social class. Aeschines and Demosthenes, however, in their reception of Solon, shift the focus to a different binary also present in Solonian fragments: the public and the private. By re-orienting the emphasis, Huang argues, the orators highlight Solon’s concern for private morals and their parallel effect on public life to re-present to the people of Athens a Solon who sees individuals as capable of private morality, and these individuals as the lynchpin of good, democratic, popular politics.

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