line 617 'cases': a brief comment would have been helpful rather than the bare reference to Sparkes.

Fourth Choral Ode (766-801): especially good commentary here, though the comment on all the choral parts is exemplary (with the possible exception of 464-493 where, however, the subject matter does not exactly lend itself to stimulating comment!), and there is a particularly useful discussion of the problems associated with the second antistrophe of 1009-46.

lines 885-6: a brief note establishing the locality of Dodona would have been useful.

Sixth Act (1047-1288): a little more comment on Delphi in the fifth century and especially the treasuries (see 1093) would have been useful.

lines 1186-7 'O marriage, marriage...': comparison with 'cursed marriage' cries in Sophoclean contexts such as *Antigone* and *OT* would have enhanced this note.

lines 1266-88: a little more could usefully have been said about the mechane, even though reference is made to further more detailed discussions.

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St Ambrose is one of the most remarkable figures of the early Church. Hailed bishop before he had even been baptised, the
coincidence of his holding the see of Milan precisely during the main period when the city functioned as an imperial capital led to a long and stormy relationship with the courts of three emperors, Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius I. Almost as soon as he was dead, he became a legend, reportedly appearing in dreams to foretell victory in war or announce the possibility of curing blindness; his writings, moreover, achieved the status of classics for the generations that immediately followed and played a crucial role as texts of reference for both sides in the Pelagian controversy of the fifth century. Most lasting for posterity were the splendid churches which he constructed in the suburbs of Milan and, of course, his conversion to Christianity of Augustine while the latter was pursuing a career as a rhetorician at the court of Valentinian II.

Neil McLynn’s book is the first major study of Ambrose in English for nearly sixty years. Contrary to the tendency of many scholars of Ambrose over the years, he disclaims the biographical approach as being doomed to failure. The bishop, he argues, more than any other of his Christian contemporaries, exercised painstaking control over the manner of his self-presentation in his writings. None of them provides the means with which to explore his inner life as is possible for fellow churchmen like Jerome and Augustine, and the often alleged aloofness and inaccessibility of his character is better viewed as a rhetorical and presentational device. McLynn analyses Ambrose’s writings as rhetorical set-pieces, concerned not with a search for the ‘inner man’ behind them but rather with exploring the circumstances and forces which moulded the presentation at each point. He is interested in discovering Ambrose the public figure and not Ambrose the private individual. So the focus is on his career as a bishop, his relations with his congregation, his style of leadership, and his connections with leading figures in other churches, particularly in northern Italy and the Balkans. Of equal importance are his relationships with leading figures in secular public life, most notably the various emperors with whom he came into contact. Our understanding of the history of the later Roman Empire has been transformed in recent years and one of McLynn’s most important contributions is to analyse Ambrose and the presentation of the events of his career against
this new background, thereby suggesting numerous new interpretations of familiar texts and episodes.

Two examples must suffice to illustrate. The circumstances of Ambrose’s election as bishop in 374 are very striking. Rufinus of Aquileia’s account depicts him entering the cathedral of Milan while consularis of Aemilia and Liguria in order to calm the rivalry of the two parties competing to place their candidates on the bishop’s throne. However, after making his speech, he himself was unanimously acclaimed as bishop by the people, an honour which he eventually accepted with great reluctance after an order had been obtained from the emperor. McLynn rejects the literal interpretation of the events in the cathedral which views Ambrose as a neutral intervening in the dispute of two equal factions and hailed as a peacemaker by the whole people. Instead, he argues that at the death of Auxentius, the former bishop, the ‘Arians’ overwhelmingly controlled Christian life in Milan and thus, by intervening in their election, Ambrose was using the authority of the secular government to promote the cause of the minority Nicene sect. Other evidence is marshalled to show how easily Roman magistrates fell under the domination of various local factions, whether Christian or pagan, and Ambrose’s sympathy with the Nicene cause is attributed to his upbringing within the church in Rome, which had long been leading a vigorous campaign against Auxentius and his championship of the homoean creed approved by the Council of Rimini in 359. The ‘unanimous acclamation’ of the people is shown to be standard reported feature of all elections, whether episcopal or secular, implying nothing more than an acclamation in a public place by a group of a candidate’s supporters, while the force attributed to Valentinian’s order in response to this acclamation is reduced when it is realised how easily distant emperors could be influenced by inaccurate or one-sided information from biased petitioners. Nevertheless, Ambrose probably was wrong-footed by the Nicenes whose cause he was championing when they began to acclaim him as bishop, and McLynn substantially accepts the truth of Paulinus of Nola’s account of the measures which he took to avoid such an office, including setting up his judge’s tribunal, announcing his intention of becoming a philosopher, inviting prostitutes to his house, and
attempting to flee Milan altogether. These have long been dismissed as mere examples of the stock 'preliminary refusal' motif employed by many contemporary churchmen in relation to their entering upon ordination.

The famous episode in which the Emperor Theodosius was compelled by Ambrose to do penance to atone for the massacre of Thessalonica in 390 also receives a radically new interpretation at McLynn's hands. The traditional account of this episode presents Theodosius ordering the massacre in a fit of rage at the murder of Butheric, the commander of the forces in Illyricum, and then being forced by the mighty bishop to do public penance in his cathedral. McLynn prefers to analyse the massacre in the light of what is known about the procedures of imperial decision-making, using for comparison the handling of a similarly dangerous episode in Antioch in 387, when reprisals were averted after a riot led to the destruction of images of the imperial family and the emperor's statues. His conclusion is that the key role played by an emperor's council in making decisions entails that Theodosius cannot in a fit of rage have ordered an indiscriminate massacre of the inhabitants of Thessalonica; what happened was the result possibly of misinterpretation and distortion of the punishment-orders that were despatched, and very probably of a lack of discipline and control among Butheri's subordinates and soldiers who took the opportunity to settle scores and enrich themselves with booty. Furthermore, his demonstration of Ambrose's earlier failure to influence the decisions of Theodosius leads McLynn to doubt that the emperor now submitted unwillingly to the bishop's orders to do penance in order to continue in communion with the church. Rather, he suggests that Ambrose, by promising in effect to stage-manage a ceremony of public penance in order to restore the emperor's tarnished public image, thereby used the event as an opportunity to gain a position in his favour.

The traditional image of Ambrose has been of a man calmly towering above the confusion and uncertainty of his times, able to use his intimacy with successive emperors to bend them to his will. McLynn, however, prefers to view Ambrose as a man thoroughly immersed in the fray. Steadfast he may have been in his opposition
to what he regarded as heresy, but it was only through constant improvisation in his reactions to and attempts to shape events that he was able to confound his enemies and survive. Nor should we exaggerate the degree of personal intimacy which he enjoyed with the various emperors with whom he dealt; that is to misunderstand the nature of the remarks uttered by him in texts such as the sermons delivered at the funerals of Valentinian II and Theodosius. Nevertheless, Ambrose succeeded in acquiring considerable power and influence and McLynn well analyses the various ways in which these were manifested and secured. The bishop bound his congregation together around him not simply through his abilities as a public speaker honed during his years of training as a lawyer, but also through introducing antiphonal hymn-singing and the (often all too convenient) discovery of the relics of local martyrs. He established himself as the dominant figure in the church of the whole of north Italy by intervening in disputes and elections within other sees and providing exegesis of such problems as the date of Easter in 387. Finally, his long-standing connections with Rome enabled him to function as a channel through which the important members of the church and Senate of that city could seek access to the court based in Milan.

This is truly a superb book. Wonderfully readable, it is also impressively thorough in the way in which it attempts to expose and penetrate the rhetoric and tendentiousness of the sources. The picture drawn of Ambrose is the more convincing in view of the way in which he is constantly presented against the background of contemporary public life. Elusive as the man may be, this book must surely long remain a key study of Ambrose the bishop.

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