

Tips for doing a critical commentary



Critical commentary on a literary text



Focus on passage (not making a general argument)- arrange points thematically or line by line

- read scholarship and cite where appropriate (own view too)

Cite detail ; cross-reference out

- Always (briefly) give the context

(e.g. author, date, genre, what is going on)

(can lead onto other points)



commentary

- Context: noting what happens after as well as before in a long work
(e.g. Alexander in passage near start of Luc. 10: what about Caesar at end of Book 9?)
for a collection, any interest in surrounding/close poems?
(nb *Heroides* a collection; passage from 3rd epistle. Does it pick up other epistles?)

Literary commentary



Context: If the passage is part of direct speech, name the speaker. Context can often lead on to bigger points: e.g. if first person speech, consider reliability and character of narrator. *Heroides*: remember female (voiced by narrator) writing. Aims?

- Briefly explain significant names and references (preferably in integrated way), esp. if making a point. You may need to be selective.

NB Do not simply describe what is going on.



commentary



- Comment on the passage as a whole e.g.:
 - how does it fit into overall structure and themes of the work? Cross-reference to show off your knowledge (**but do not digress**). In narrative texts, consider the passage's place and function in plot and narrative development. (Lucan 10: other evocations of Alexander? Walter: early on; chance to explore character)
 - structure of passage (coherence; development of argument)



commentary

- literary background
- intertextuality (engaging with earlier works? Why?)

e.g. Walter's *Alexandreis* and Claudian's panegyrics on the consulships of Honorius

Walter *Alex.* 1.58-60 Townsend "But shall I always /be thought the offspring of Nectanabus?/ Let no man call me bastard to my face!"/ 1.46-7 "semperne putabor, / Nectanebi proles? aut degener arguar? absit!"

Aristotle to Alexander at Walter, *Alex.* 1.96-7 Townsend "Put on a grown man's mind, boy, take up arms."/ 1.82 (Latin) "**Indue mente** uirum, Macedo puer, arma capesce"

Cf. "take on thee a father's spirit" (Claud. *Hons. Cons.* 3.157, dying Theodosius to Stilicho: "**indue mente** patrem")

commentary

Claud. *Cons. Hon.* 4.362-5 (Honorius asks Theodosius if he can fight with him) “Am I still such a child that neither power profaned nor just revenge for an uncle’s blood shall move me? Fain would I ride through blood. Quick, give me arms. Why castest thou my youth in my teeth? Why thinkest me unequal to the combat?” (“usque adeone puer? nec me polluta potestas / nec pia cognati tanget vindicta cruoris? / da protinus arma. / cur annos obicis? pugnae cur **arguor** impar?”)

e.g. Ov. *Her.* 3/*Iliad*

e.g. *Deidamia Achilli*/Ovid and Statius

- is there background cultural/historical knowledge which is relevant?

commentary: style



Consider the style of the passage as well as its content and context.

Use commentaries to help where available. Don't be afraid to look at the Latin structure (e.g. verbs framing line; repetition). Sound effects ("s" sounds). Can be useful to go back to Latin using criticism to track down diction (significant elsewhere? Vivid?)

Consider why a stylistic feature is being used



style

e.g. Effect of an apostrophe (i.e. an appeal to a person or thing): can evoke pathos and raise emotional intensity.

e.g. interruption of authorial voice in epic (unusual)

e.g. Are there sudden or surprising changes in linguistic register (low, colloquial tone in high style or *vice versa*)? What is effect? Is the diction of a particular register? (e.g. *gladius*, prosaic word for sword, used by Lucan)

e.g. Imagery (including metaphor, similes and personification): what does it contribute?