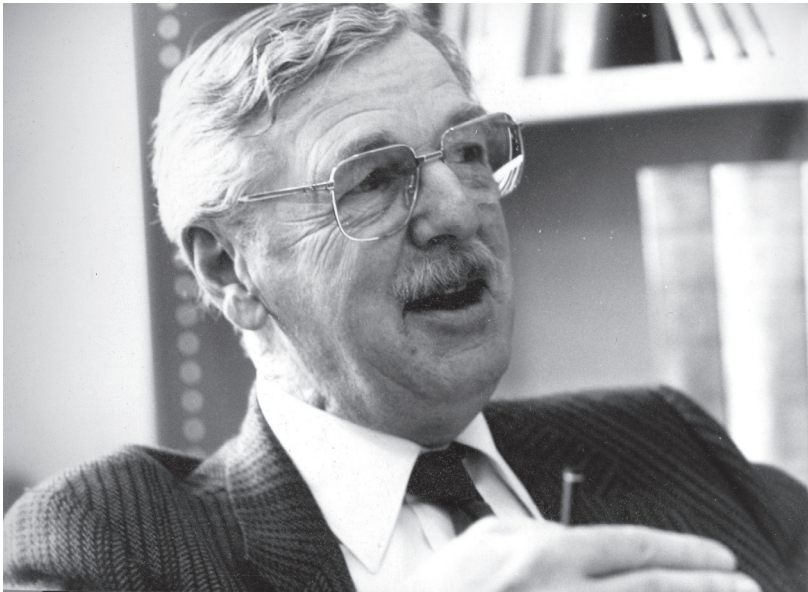


Jakob Wisse\*

Anton D. Leeman  
(9 April 1921–5 August 2010)  
Rhetoric, Latin Literature, *Humanitas* –  
An Appraisal

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2019.051>



**Anton D. Leeman**

Photo by J. J. L. Smolenaars

---

\* Professor of Latin Language & Literature at the School of History, Classics and Archaeology, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU United Kingdom.

E-mail: [Jakob.Wisse@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Jakob.Wisse@ncl.ac.uk) | ORCID: 0000-0001-6849-7621.

It is a commonplace – and a true one – that in the twentieth century the study of classical rhetoric, like that of rhetoric more generally, was no more than a niche subject until the sixties. To be sure, distinguished contributions were made before that by Solmsen, Caplan, Matthes, and others, many of which are still relevant today. But it was with the work of Anton Leeman, George Kennedy, Joachim Classen, and Donald Russell that rhetoric began to re-enter the mainstream of classical scholarship – a role signalled by the fact that in the eighties three of these scholars served as president of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric (ISHR), an organisation of which Leeman had been among the founding fathers in 1977<sup>1</sup>. It is my privilege to attempt a brief sketch and appraisal of Leeman's work – in which there is good reason, as we will see, to discuss not only his contributions to rhetoric but also some of his other scholarship.

He certainly did not start out as a rhetorician, although Cicero was important from the beginning. His doctoral thesis, published in 1949, was entitled *Gloria*, and examined Cicero's views on fame against a copiously discussed background of Hellenistic philosophy and Roman society. Its high quality, as well as four articles on Seneca due to come out in the renowned Dutch scholarly journal *Mnemosyne*<sup>2</sup>, were enough to earn him the appointment to the Amsterdam chair of Latin in 1952, the youngest professor in the Netherlands at the time – an appointment that startled him so much that he initially wanted to withdraw, but which, of course, was proven right by his subsequent career.

It was his fascination with Roman historians that set him on the road to rhetoric. In 1954–1955, he published an article (in two halves) about the prologues of Sallust and his view of historiography, followed in 1957 by a short monograph about the structure and aim of Sallust's *Jugurtha* (Leeman 1954; 1955; 1957). In their choice of topic and texts these publications – which still make highly instructive reading – betrayed two central features of Leeman's approach: an interest in the principles underlying works of Latin literature and their form, and a conviction that an understanding of such principles and their workings (and of much more) necessitated a close analysis of relevant texts, including a meticulous examination of their structure. It was thus, on the basis of his work on Sallust, that he came to the view that ancient rhetoric could offer valuable insights and had been wrongly neglected by scholars – a view natural only by hindsight, but innovative and bold in its time.

The product of this view, published in 1963, was the book that made his name, and which still counts among the classics in the rhetorical field: *Orationis Ratio*. Its subtitle in fact shows that the book had its roots in his earlier preoccupations: 'the stylistic theories and practice of the Roman orators, historians and philosophers'. While, inevitably in a daring and wide-ranging work, especially after some fifty-five years, it cannot be taken as an authoritative guide in a number of respects, it remains remarkably fresh and instructive.

<sup>1</sup> For the ISHR see <http://ishr-web.org/aws/ISHR/pt/sp/about> (with, under 'History', a list of past presidents). The present piece expands on my obituary of Leeman on this site. I have used the following sources in Dutch: an interview at his retirement in 1986, in the Amsterdam student journal *WAU* (Lenssen and Tromp 1986); and obituaries by Rabbie (2010), Smolenaars (2010), den Hengst (2011), and Schrijvers (2011). See now also de Jonge (2017). I am again grateful to Nancy Laan – who was also taught by Leeman – for improving clarity and focus.

<sup>2</sup> I give full bibliographical information only for those of his publications that I discuss. The others will easily be found in *L'Année philologique* on line.

Lucid and accessible (all ancient texts are provided with translations), it is probably, even now, unrivalled for giving the reader an intimate understanding of, and a feeling for, the lively and important interplay of Latin prose with rhetorical, especially stylistic, theory.

While the importance of the book was immediately recognised<sup>3</sup>, an appraisal of its actual contribution and, perhaps more interestingly, of its critical stance – beyond a general statement of its importance – was and is more complicated than it might seem. For, because of his avowedly didactic aim and concentration on analysing the texts, Leeman chose almost completely to dispense with explicit scholarly debate (1963: 15) – a feature of the book understandably regretted by some of its reviewers. However, two of Leeman's early pieces can assist us here: a short, critical discussion of the method of a book he considered a masterpiece, Eduard Fraenkel's *Horace* from 1957; and a brilliant article in Dutch on formative elements of Latin literature, which set out the principles of examining Latin literature as he saw them, and included an appeal for a serious engagement with ancient rhetoric (Leeman 1958 and 1962). Moreover, a good starting point is a brief comparison with the work that Leeman himself (1963: 15) singles out as a predecessor, Eduard Norden's *Die antike Kunstprosa* (1898). In the first place, Leeman criticised Norden's simplifications – almost certainly a reference to Norden's tendency to see the whole history of style as a battle between Asianism and Atticism, and to interpret all ancient views in that light<sup>4</sup>. We can indeed observe that Leeman does not allow such general views to override the evidence that he presents and discusses in such abundance; and this evidence reveals that the variety of styles (and of views on style) was much greater than Norden allowed. In the process, Atticism becomes more complicated, its outlines less clear. But this blurred picture is no disadvantage – on the contrary: the actual form of such a 'movement' (real as it was) is bound to have been much more messy than the neat categories of Atticism vs Asianism might suggest<sup>5</sup>. In this respect Leeman's views, characteristically, re-opened a discussion that seemed to have reached a dead end. In the second place, remarkably, Leeman thought Norden over-estimated the role of rhetoric. This was equally characteristic: lesser scholars, after 'discovering' the potential importance of ancient rhetorical theory, might have been tempted to see its influence in every corner of Latin literature; Leeman remained focused on the evidence and on the question what rhetoric can actually do to illuminate it<sup>6</sup>.

If we turn to Leeman's approach in more general terms, we can see that he was much influenced by New Criticism. He welcomed the 'ergocentric' (i.e., work-centred) approach then much in vogue (and implicitly reflected in Fraenkel's book), to the extent that it helped to set aside the excessive authority of received ideas, and thus to allow a less biased and

---

<sup>3</sup> The reviews did not, of course, refrain from criticisms, some of them justified. The most notable are Smethurst (1965), Douglas (1965) (see below), Fuhrmann (1966) (especially detailed and helpful, and very fair also in its criticisms), and Kennedy (1966) (would have liked to see a more balanced selection especially of Ciceronian texts, probably rightly). An Italian translation appeared in 1974.

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Norden (1898: 149–151).

<sup>5</sup> He could have been more consistent in his use of labels like 'Atticism' and 'pseudo-Atticism', as Douglas pointed out (1965: 325–326). In my view, however, this was clearly a consequence of his constructive grappling with the real-life complications of the Atticist phenomenon: the resulting picture is clear enough and basically convincing (cf. Fuhrmann 1966: 360). The severity of Douglas's criticism is therefore essentially unfair; Douglas himself was too eager to deny Atticism any real importance. For my own view of (the fluid nature of) the Atticist 'movement' see Wisse (1995: esp. 70–71).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Douglas (1965: 325): 'He has interesting and necessary things to say on ... the *limits* to the importance of the formal elements which are his main concern (p. 134)' (emphasis original).

mediated view of the actual Latin literary texts<sup>7</sup>. However, he emphatically rejected the notion of a literary work as ‘self-contained’, and insisted that interpretations of the texts should be grounded in their literary-historical context and the formative principles provided by it: the conventions and literary traditions of the period in question, known to authors and readers alike. This is where he argued that rhetoric was relevant: it furnished important elements of such conventions. But in many respects it was also inadequate, having very little or nothing to say, e.g., on the adaptation of form to function, on literary composition, or on the employment of allusions to the literary tradition so typical of Latin literature (Leeman 1962: 82–83).

If much of this sounds overly familiar nowadays, it was not so around 1960; and Leeman’s combination of good sense, eye for relevant literary detail, historical awareness, and openness to (then) modern critical approaches is, in many respects, still exemplary. He helpfully formulated three key questions that, in his view, any interpretation of a text should try to answer: ‘what, how, why thus?’<sup>8</sup> – that is, what is it saying, in what form is it saying it, and why is it saying it in this way. The last of these questions of course implies an interest in authorial intention – something that had already come under attack at the time (but then as now more often maligned than actually avoided). My impression was that he was not too bothered about such attacks, although he did always emphasise that one needed to steer clear of excessively psychologising interpretations unsupported by the texts themselves. In fact, Leeman’s acceptance of the importance of at least investigating possible intentions was not unreflected or naive: it must be seen as a consequence of his insistence on the importance of the historical context in which each particular literary work had taken shape.

His first ten years had thus been very active, and his publications suggest a strong feeling of intellectual excitement – something he managed to retain also in his later periods, due to his love of the texts that he chose as his objects of study. In the sixties he also very much enjoyed the interaction with students; e.g., he regularly joined the trips abroad organised by the very active Amsterdam student societies. On one of these, they more or less forced him to use their first names, but insisted they continue to call him ‘Professor’ – a lack of symmetry that of course quickly became the norm, but that he, always the gentleman, initially thought was not quite right. The atmosphere of the seventies, overshadowed by student revolts and their consequences, was less enjoyable: he was disconcerted suddenly to be regarded, and criticised, as part of the establishment. The expansion of universities that followed, however, suited him well, and he and his Greek colleagues built a congenial staff team of considerable size. When I started studying Classics in Amsterdam in 1980, initially as a side-activity to taking Mathematics, I was immediately struck by the feeling of intellectual breadth, curiosity, and excitement pervading the department; but it was especially Leeman’s weekly lectures that quickly persuaded me that Classics was where I belonged.

He was also heavily involved in the formation of the Latin school curriculum when the Dutch educational system was fundamentally reformed in the late 1960’s. A few years later, exasperated by the lack of interesting and inspiring teaching material for schools, he produced – as the story has it, in one energetic summer – an eye-opening anthology of Latin

<sup>7</sup> For this and what follows see Leeman (1958: 245–246); and *ib.* 244 for his quotation of Fraenkel’s well-known statement (1957, VII) that he wished ‘to remove from the poems of Horace some of the crusts with which the industry of many centuries has overlaid them’.

<sup>8</sup> In Dutch: ‘Wat, hoe, waarom zo?’.

literature, *Romanitas*, organised around Roman themes such as the state and the contrast between farmer and townsman (1973). In 1968 he also, with C. M. J. Sicking (Greek, Leiden) and H. T. Wallinga (Ancient History, Utrecht), founded the journal *Lampas* to help bridge the gap between universities and schools.

In the meantime, Leeman wrote a number of noteworthy articles, in several languages (including Dutch), that again showed his literary acumen at work. They covered poetry as well as prose and a wide range of authors: Lucretius, Catullus, Horace, and Vergil, as well as Sallust, Seneca, Petronius, and Tacitus. One of these explored the prologues of the last-mentioned, so very ‘Sallustian’ historian (Leeman 1973), a natural sequel to his work on Sallust’s own prologues in the fifties and to an article on Livy’s prologue from 1961 (Leeman 1961). He also published, in 1972, a lively Dutch translation of Petronius’ picaresque novel *Satyricon*<sup>9</sup>.

His second major project, however, was also his second great contribution to the study of classical rhetoric. The whole fifth chapter of *Orationis Ratio* had been devoted to *De Oratore* (‘On the [Ideal] Orator’), Cicero’s masterpiece on rhetoric, oratory, and philosophy, and after the publication of the book he was approached by the prestigious German publisher Winter of Heidelberg to write a commentary on this work. It was meant to offer not only the detailed textual and linguistic analysis expected of a full-scale commentary, but also an interpretation of *De Oratore*, in the widest sense of the term. To an important extent, the task thus corresponded with his long-held convictions about the interdependence of detailed analysis of texts on the one hand, and their broad contextual, cultural, and literary interpretation on the other. At the same time, he seems not to have regarded himself as sufficiently capable of, and interested in, pursuing questions of detail that were not clearly relevant to larger issues of interpretation; and he must also quickly have realised the enormity of the task, however conceived. His solution was generous and felicitous: he formed a team with his former student Harm Pinkster, who was later to develop into one of the most eminent Latin linguists and a successful promoter of the application of general linguistics to Latin. They were, in the words of one of the reviewers of the first volume (1981), ‘a strikingly well-qualified pair’ (Winterbottom 1983: 36). In a characteristically open-minded way, others were also enlisted as co-authors: the legal scholar Hein L. W. Nelson for vol. 2 (1985); Edwin Rabbie, who supplied a thorough analysis of the section on humour (vol. 3, 1989); I was privileged to contribute to vol. 4 (1996). His advancing age then unfortunately meant diminished energy, and he had to pass on the baton to a team of friends and colleagues (consisting of Michael Winterbottom, Elaine Fantham, and me); fortunately, we were able to finish in 2008, so that he did see the completion of what he had so boldly begun.

In a sense, the chapter about *De Oratore* in *Orationis Ratio* met a fate common to much pioneering work: to inspire further scholarship that will in turn overtake it (Kennedy’s handbooks are likewise testimony to this mechanism). Perhaps paradoxically, in this case it was Leeman’s own subsequent work and work directly inspired and directed by him that led to at times radical revisions of earlier scholarly views of Cicero’s mature masterpiece – including his own. Cicero’s massive treatise turned out to be more unorthodox than had hitherto been realised. This also meant that the challenges it posed were even greater than

---

<sup>9</sup> Petronius, *Satyricon* (first ed. as *Schelmen en tafelschuimers*, Amsterdam 1966; revised 1972; many reprints).

expected. These were due to some essential characteristics that make it radically different from the common handbooks of classical rhetoric. First, Cicero chooses the literary form of the dialogue. Second, he rejects the approach of the rhetoricians found in the handbooks – by arguing that their rigid theories are not fit for the purpose of producing persuasive speeches and by offering an alternative, and also by insisting that the (ideal) orator must go beyond rhetorical theory and master philosophy. And third, he also polemicalises against the philosophers of his time who reject rhetorical theory as well as practical oratory. These features posed problems of presentation as well as analysis. For solving these, Leeman's earlier approach to literary texts proved highly fruitful. *De Oratore* falls into a number of internally coherent passages (e.g., 1.134–146 and 2.77–84, both about the common rhetorical rules; or 2.51–64, about historiography); and for each, the commentary first presents a summary (the 'what'), an analysis of structure and, if relevant, other formal characteristics (the 'how'), and an analysis of the background and Cicero's (often polemical) views that explain (or may explain) Cicero's presentation (the 'why thus'); only then follows the normal word-for-word commentary. The 'what-how-why thus' format (always flexibly applied) channelled the analyses, but (as I can testify) also helpfully forced contributors to interrogate the text in productive ways: in keeping with the versatile and idiosyncratic character of the work, it made sure that we could never take for granted what Cicero was going to discuss next, and how. Thus Leeman's approach, developed for the understanding of (Latin) literature in general, and nourished by an interaction with literary theory, decisively influenced the elucidation of Cicero's major work on rhetoric and oratory.

In 1986, Leeman reached retirement age and, after thirty-four years, stepped down from the Amsterdam chair. He was still very active in this period, even apart from the publication, in 1985, of a careful selection of his work on prose and poetry in the aptly titled, impressive collection *Form und Sinn* (which includes some originally Dutch articles in German translation)<sup>10</sup>. In matters rhetorical, he collaborated with Antoine C. Braet on a concise and very useful handbook of classical rhetoric in Dutch (Leeman-Braet 1987), and helped produce a lively and accurate Dutch translation of *De Oratore* (with H. W. A. van Rooijen-Dijkman, 1989). But most notable are a masterful interpretation of Cicero's continually shifting perspective in the speech *For Murena* (Leeman 1982), and an important analysis of the passage about historiography in *De Oratore*, 2.51–64 (1985). In the latter he offered a precise reading of the passage in its context, showing that Cicero did not, as is often supposed, 'rhetoricise' the writing of history (or wanted to do so) but, on the contrary, presupposed the importance of historical truth (Leeman 1985)<sup>11</sup>.

His personal qualities matched his scholarly ones. Aware of his own strengths, he was at the same time extremely generous; the many collaborations mentioned, and the fostering of new generations at every level, are an integral part of his legacy. I am personally indebted to him for many reasons, not least for his being an important factor in my decision

<sup>10</sup> Leeman (1985); throughout, there are some adaptations and additions to the originals, but these changes are generally slight.

<sup>11</sup> The essentials can also be found in the second volume of the commentary, published in the same year. He specifically rejected T. P. Wiseman's view of the passage (see esp. Wiseman 1979). Leeman also wrote a closely related piece (1989), responding to A. J. Woodman's similarly rhetoricising interpretation of the same passage (Woodman 1988, chapter 2); it was published only in Dutch, and is unfortunately still awaiting an expanded, English version (announced several times as Wisse-Leeman).

to become a classicist and for inspiring and helping my career after that; many others have similar memories. His stylish appearance and wit made him a much-loved companion inside and outside scholarly circles. He was a gifted speaker himself, with a range from the deeply serious to the comical. Many of his colleagues and students will remember the hilarious lecture on Cato's 'Encomium of the cabbage'. And who would have thought that it was possible, as he did in 'Julius Caesar, the Orator of Paradox' delivered at the colloquium for George Kennedy in 1998, to analyse Caesar's one-word address to his troops, *Quirites*, as a full-blown speech with a prologue, a narration, arguments, and an epilogue? (Leeman 2001).

Anton Leeman will be remembered for his contributions to rhetoric and literature, for his erudition and style, for his humour and penchant for paradoxes. But, to end on a personal note, his many friends and pupils will most fondly recall his true *humanitas*.

## Bibliography

### Titles by Anton D. Leeman

- Leeman, Anton D. 1954–1955. 'Sallusts Prologe und seine Auffassung von der Historiographie: I. Das Catilina-proömium', *Mnemosyne* 7: 323–339; 'Sallusts Prologe und seine Auffassung von der Historiographie: II. Das Jugurtha-proömium'. *Mnemosyne* 8: 38–48 (= Leeman 1985: 77–97).
- 1957. *Aufbau und Absicht von Sallusts Bellum Iugurthinum* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandse Uitgevers Maatschappij).
- 1958. 'Some Comments on Fraenkel's Horace'. *Mnemosyne* 11: 244–250.
- 1961. 'Are we Fair to Livy? Some Thoughts on Livy's Prologue'. *Helikon* 1: 28–39 (= 'Gedanken zu der Praefatio des Livius'. In: Leeman 1985: 99–109).
- 1962. 'Formatieve elementen in de latijnse litteratuur'. *Forum der Letteren* 3: 65–85. On-line publication available at: <http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/> (= 'Form und Sinn in der römischen Literatur'. In: Leeman 1985: 9–26).
- 1963. *Orationis Ratio. The Stylistic Theories and Practice of the Roman Orators, Historians and Philosophers* (2 volumes, Amsterdam: Hakkert; repr. 1 vol., 1986).
- 1966 (transl.). Petronius. *Satyricon* (first ed. as *Schelmen en tafelschuimers*, Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep; revised 1972; many reprints).
- 1973 (ed.). *Romanitas: synthematische bloemlezing uit de Latijnse litteratuur* Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep.
- 1973. 'Structure and Meaning in the Prologues of Tacitus'. *Yale Classical Studies* 23: 169–208 (= Leeman 1985, 317–348).
- 1982. 'The Technique of Persuasion in Cicero's Pro Murena'. In: *Éloquence et rhétorique chez Cicéron. Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique XXVIII* (Vandœuvres-Genève): 193–236 (= Leeman 1985: 49–68).
- 1985. 'L'historiographie dans le *De oratore* de Cicéron'. *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé*: 280–288.
- 1985. *Form und Sinn. Studien zur römischen Literatur (1954–1984)*. Frankfurt am Main, New York: Peter Lang.

- 1989. 'Antieke en moderne geschiedschrijving. Een misleidende Cicero-interpretatie.' *Hermeneus* 61: 235–241.
- 2001. 'Julius Caesar, the Orator of Paradox'. In: Cecil W. Wooten (ed.). *The Orator in Action and Theory in Greece and Rome. Essays in Honor of George A. Kennedy*. Leiden: Brill. 97–110.
- Leeman, Anton D. et al. 1981–2008. *M. Tullius Cicero De oratore libri III. Kommentar/A Commentary*. 5 Volumes. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Leeman, Anton D. [&] Antoine C. Braet 1987. *Klassieke retorica: haar inhoud, functie en betekenis*. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff/Forsten.
- Rooijen-Dijkman, H[edwig] W. A. van & A[nton] D. Leeman 1989 (transl.). *Cicero. De ideale redenaar*. First ed. as *Drie gesprekken over redenaarskunst*. Amsterdam: Athenaeum/Polak & Van Genneep; many reprints.

## Obituaries etc.

- Hengst, Daan den 2011. 'In memoriam Anton Daniël Leeman'. *Lampas* 44: 3–6.
- Jonge, Casper C. de 2017. 'Leeman, *Lampas* en *Logos*: Een pleidooi voor een redelijke retorica'. *Lampas* 50: 369–382.
- Lenssen, Sé and Ton Tromp 1986. 'Te gast op de Turfmarkt. Interview'. *WAVU* 9, 2: 4–8.
- Rabbie, Edwin 2010. 'Bij herdenking Leeman, AUV-dag, 6 nov 2010'. [Amsterdam] (unpublished).
- Schrijvers, P[etrus] H. 2011. 'Anton Daniël Leeman, 9 april 1921 – 5 augustus 2010'. In: *Levensberichten en Herdenkingen 2011* (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (KNAW) = Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Amsterdam) (<https://www.knaw.nl/nl/actueel/publicaties/levensberichten-en-herdenkingen-2011>). 76–83.
- Smolenaars, J[ohannes] J. L. 2010. 'In memoriam Anton (Ton) Daniël Leeman'. *Hermeneus* 82: 228–229.

## Other titles

- Douglas, A[lan] E[dward] 1965. A Review of Leeman 1963. *Classical Review* 15: 325–327.
- Fraenkel, Eduard 1957. *Horace*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fuhrmann, Manfred 1966. Review of Leeman 1963. *Gnomon* 38: 356–364.
- Kennedy, George 1966. Review of Leeman 1963. *American Journal of Philology* 87: 237–241.
- Norden, Eduard 1898. *Die antike Kunstprosa vom VI. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis in die Zeit der Renaissance*. 2 volumes. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Smethurst, S[tanley] E[ric] 1965. Review of Leeman 1963. *Phoenix* 19: 167–169.
- Winterbottom, Michael 1983. Review of Leeman-Pinkster 1981. *Classical Review* 33: 36–37.
- Wiseman, T[imothy] P[eter] 1979. *Clio's Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, Rowman and Littlefield.
- Wisse, Jakob 1995. 'Greeks, Romans, and the Rise of Atticism'. In: J[elle] G. J. Abbenes et al. (eds.). *Greek Literary Theory after Aristotle: A Collection of Papers in Honour of D. M. Schenkeveld*. Amsterdam: VU University Press. 65–82.
- Woodman, A[nthony] J[ohn] 1988. *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*. London: Routledge.