The series ‘Christian Theology in Context’, of which David Gwynn’s study of Athanasius of Alexandria forms a part, is framed by its editors in explicitly Marxist terms: ‘Too texts have to be understood in their life situation, related to questions of power, class, and modes of production. … [T]exts are also forms of cultural power, expressing and modifying the dominant ideologies through which we understand the world.’ Despite this prospectus, this volume (like previous ones on Martin Luther and Origen) takes as its focus a single author, and Athanasius is provided with nothing more radical than an intellectual biography. Not that this is unwelcome. It is rare for a study of Athanasius to emphasize so prominently the necessary integration of his historical actions with his theological ideas, but G. must be right in his insistence that only by taking seriously both aspects can we grasp how Athanasius himself must have understood his career.

Following a brief introduction to his life and works, this integration is explored across the four roles set out in the subtitle. There is no strict chronological progression and the roles are not quite given equal weight — the chapter on asceticism is appropriately thin — but the point is to show that Athanasius need not be seen only as the fanatical campaigner against heresy he appears to be in the Greek and Latin historians of the Church and Empire. To make this abundantly clear, G. devotes a final chapter to the reputation of Athanasius not only in these traditions but also in Syriac, Armenian and Coptic texts, noting that in the last of these in particular he is remembered chiefly for his role in creating a semi-independent Egyptian church. This should hardly be surprising, but it is nevertheless an important reminder that when we encounter Athanasius the champion of orthodoxy engaged in battle with emperors and heretics, we are seeing him in only the most visible of his roles — and that, like any other bishop, he was also frequently preoccupied with less glamorous local concerns. The effect is to bring Athanasius down to earth: to insist, rightly, that his career as a bishop be understood in terms of his rôle among his local followers as well as on the imperial stage.

For G., the ‘true greatness’ of Athanasius therefore lies in the way that ‘through his pastoral dedication [he] won and retained the love and support of his church, of the monks, and of the people of Alexandria and Egypt’ (151). The Festal Letters are the primary evidence for this pastoral dedication, although as letters from Alexandria, or from exile, they inevitably show a bishop exhorting his congregation more than engaging with them. G. insists on the sincerity of Athanasius’ appeals to the people, however, and even makes the remarkable claim that he ‘was not a theoretical or intellectual theologian’ because ‘[t]he questions that inspired his teachings were those that concerned his congregations and the wider Christian people’ (68). This emphasis on his demotic credentials, and on an unprovable sincerity, is a result of G.’s determination to prevent his Athanasius from being seen as a Machiavellian schemer, working purely in the interests of himself and of his theological faction. Certainly there have been accounts of Athanasius which present him broadly in such terms — and G. is right to seek to redress the balance, and to remind us of the varied commitments and responsibilities of even a controversial bishop of Alexandria.

The same motive seems to lie behind the repeated reference to the ‘fundamental theological principles’ (11) which Athanasius is said to have consistently applied — but here G. seems to be working against the approach envisaged by the series editors. The decision to present him as steadfast and sincere in his theological beliefs makes sense in a biography, in which the bias is always towards the creation of a consistent character. But it means that we are denied the chance of seeing those beliefs develop dialectically, in response to the political and intellectual as well as pastoral challenges he faced, and so to see them not only as interacting with their contexts but as shaped and conditioned by them. Thus in place of the dynamic interplay of text and context, we are given a rather static figure who arrives all but fully formed as a theologian — almost as in the story of the young Athanasius performing ratifiable baptisms, quoted by G., and not entirely rejected, at the beginning of ch. 1. Too often such stories are left to speak for themselves, as are many of Athanasius’ claims about his own motivations, and at times I should have liked to see a shrewder and more sceptical approach. Yet elsewhere the volume is a model of judicious explication, as in the outstandingly close and careful attention with which (as in his previous work) G. traces the vagaries and contingencies of doctrinal debate in the Arian controversy. And

If I welcome this book warmly (and I do), it is not because of the clarion-call 'The Hamartigenia is a splendid poem: it displays the effects of sin on the world' (16), but because of its philological erudition, its careful attention to manifold allusions, its acute and imaginative judgements, and a style that is consistently clear and courteous, and often wry. The book is a landmark in Prudentian studies and a valuable contribution to the literary criticism of Late Antiquity. It begins with some helpful introductory comments on various critical terms that Dykes will use, and on various critical issues, and a lucid plan of how the argument will be developed. There are valuable short sections on Prudentius' life and other works, on early versions of the Bible, and on Mcion, the poet's second-century antagonist, on whom D. is in some ways more illuminating than many a fuller textbook. An appendix discusses the suitability of the title, first evidenced by Gennadius at the end of the fifth century; the poem's theme is not the origin of sin or the 'initial' sin of Adam and Eve — these two are relatively inconsiderable, though admittedly the index does not do them justice — and still less is it an exposition of the doctrine of original sin that was maturing in the mind of Augustine when Prudentius wrote. There is certainly plenty of 'actual' sin, although, as D. rightly says, the poem is in no way 'preachy'.

The poem focuses on human responsibility and the use and abuse of free will (via libertas), but as well as describing them 'through manipulations and reversals of anterior texts', and with specific injunctions to the reader, the book 'actually calls into being a responsible reader' (15). The operations of this reader correspond to the making of moral choices in an imperfect world, and the poem actually reflects that world. Creating 'disorientation' is one way in which the poet creates the 'responsible' reader, who must make choices and interpretations of various kinds. This key notion is explained carefully throughout the book, but may here be illustrated by some things that D. calls irresponsible: taking the word demique in its commonest sense at l. 484 (this would be to misapprehend the logic), or failing to interpret aright the mix of genres, a matter to which D. gives great attention (175), since 'Prudentius is writing at a time when there is both a renewal and a fracturing of the traditional genres'. Probta the centonist is also irresponsible, and her work is 'just a phase to be passed through' for the Christian reader (158).

The poem's preface is full of shocks and surprises. First (117) 'a narrative shock': Adam and Eve are missing. By beginning with Cain and Abel, the poet makes it, in D.'s words, like a detective story that begins with a body, 'a Murder in the Vicarage moment, when something nasty appears in the pseudo-rustic locus amoenus'. (Why this is 'pseudo-rustic' will appear to the diligent reader, passim.) The preface opens with the three words fratres ephelbi fessor, to each of which D. assigns its erotic sense: for frater 'as boyfriend' he reminds us of the Petronian use, adding that this reference is given in the Vatican's recent Lexicon Recens Latinitatis. The erotic suggestions are inexplicable, as in the opening words of Vergil's second Eclogue. Another puzzle is that the Biblical words behind nee tu lege recta deditas, used to criticize Marcion, are (as often pointed out) nowhere in the Vulgate; but since earlier editions have something comparable, we can relax.

Finally, D. sees strong influence of Persius in the preface: but iambics are not choliambic, and the possibility that the words nemo poe in the collection that Prudentius read seems very small. But, in general, the challenge issued to the reader at least twice (202, 246) to see the preface as an integral part of the poem is one that critics of late antique poems should note. In the body of the work there are some fine studies of allusion, intertextuality, and meaning, especially in relation to Lucretius and Vergil: the movement from sponte sua to sponte tua, and