

## BOOK REVIEW

*Persius: A Study in Food, Philosophy, and the Figural*. By SHADI BARTSCH. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 264. Hardcover, \$50.00. ISBN 978-0-226-24184-5.

Persius' *Satires* have always received contrasting—even contradictory—views. On the one hand, Persius has received criticism for being obscure, with a style difficult to follow, loosely linked images, and stiff language, odd at times, altogether making the reader feel uneasy. On the other hand, he has been praised for his metaphors, his skills in allusion and most importantly for the elaborative way in which he attacks his contemporaries in his satire.<sup>1</sup> Bartsch is well aware of these diverging receptions and offers a reading of Persius' satires that bridges what seems contrary and in parts inconsistent: his metaphors. In fact, her book comes in a period when literary criticism seems to take Persius seriously (again), either because his satires also apply to the modern world or because we are better capable of understanding his meanings in depth. Thus, it is "modern criticism" that the reader can find in this book, as is epitomized by the author in her concluding chapter (182).

The book's first part ("Cannibals and Philosophers", 15–130) stands as "an invitation" to the reader to re-read the satires, now with the notion that the metaphor of reception of food underlies them, and at the same time it stimulates a re-evaluation of the relationship between poetry and philosophy, not least in the satiric sphere. The employment of the analogy between food and medicine is a known Stoic trope, handled here competently by an author who has evident experience in working with Roman Stoic authors. However, Persius seems more concerned about the digestive problems that come as the repercussions of bad food. Bartsch proves that this stands as a metaphor for receiving bad poetry, and thus the analogy of food and philosophy applies to poetry, too. The reader of the satires gets a first hint on the aesthetic attitude that serves as a paradigm for this new approach to the satires.

<sup>1</sup> This contradiction in Persius reception is articulated in the opening lines of Bartsch's Introduction.

How then is the relationship between philosophy and poetry construed in Persius' corpus? He does take philosophy into consideration, as it is emphatically self-evident in Satires 3 and 4. The key element to understanding the link between the two is his metaphors, which Bartsch exploits in the scrupulous analysis of the two next chapters. Chapter 2 ("Alternative Diets") argues for the diet Persius considers harmless, how it is related to medicine and thus how *decoctius* can be further nuanced. Chapter 3 ("A Philosopher's Love") underlines the significance of introspection and theorises its presence in usage in Persius corpus, with S. 4 as the initiative.

The interrelations between food metaphor, philosophy and satire, discussed in the first part) set the ground for a look at Persius' Stoic (?) poetics in the second part of the book ("The Metaphorics of Disgust", 133–end). A student of Stoic lectures, Persius, nonetheless, does not offer a positive direction to balance the negativism of criticism. By showing that in literature, as in society, one needs to focus on what really matters, his reader shall not be misdirected by the pleasure of the sweetness in the language, but focus on the content; it is *what* and not *how* one writes in literature. Over-rich poetry, with excessive ornamentations in style pleases the senses, but at the same time it causes indigestion to the receiver. Persius' metaphors are structured on juxtaposition: they convey the truth, well hidden, but their purpose is not to please. His satires are a medicine, for the truth in them is authentic and intended for the reader who has a keen ear for it. Bartsch underlines the usage of oxymoron, prominent in Persius' metaphors, which has been noted in previous scholarship but is here thoroughly discussed. This oxymoron supports our understanding of the *acris iunctura* and Persius' poetics.

Medicine and food have been known subjects for Roman satire.<sup>2</sup> Bartsch takes our knowledge to the next level; their application in Persius' work is of interest here. The problems in interpretation of his metaphors are not overlooked, but they are thoroughly scrutinized and the analogy is used as a sufficient vehicle to shed light to the satirist's intentions and ways. The reader of the satires is motivated to look more deeply into the poems in order to exploit their meaning fully: "it is not enough to read the *Satires*. Having been through their dietetic regime, we must act on their aim to help us leave the material world behind by showing that it is inconsistent, unappetizing, false" (211).

<sup>2</sup> Indicative: Gowers, E. (1993), *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature*, Oxford.

The book is of the highest-quality and carefully produced, with minor slips. The reader definitely needs to allow some time in-between reading the chapters to reflect on the previous reading-experience of Persius' corpus and to engage with the many contexts Bartsch employs. The thorough discussion on the metaphor of stomach ailments and the regular references to the appropriate medicine in the Roman World (mainly in Chapter 2) is supported by an Appendix with a list of the prescriptions mentioned by Pliny (213–233). It is a thought-provoking book, with an exemplary methodology, and whose readership will include even those who are not only Persius enthusiasts or students of Roman Satire.

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