

BOOK REVIEW

Asclepiades of Samos: Epigrams and Fragments. Edited with Translation and Commentary by Alexander SENS. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Hardcover, £100.00/\$150.00. Pp. cxvi + 354. ISBN 978-0-19-925319-7.

This long-awaited work fully satisfies the reader's expectations. Sens' new edition with English translation of and commentary on Asclepiades' epigrams proves page by page to be the result of thorough research and profound meditation on this text, and will provide much to consider for both those specifically interested in Asclepiades' poetry and those concerned with epigram as a whole.

The book's contents are as follows: after a list of abbreviations (xiii–xxiv), a wide and comprehensive introduction, rich in ideas and clever suggestions, which treats the main topics and problems concerning Asclepiades' life and work (xxv–cix); text, critical apparatus and English translation of the *testimonia* (cx–cxiv); critical edition, English translation of and commentary on 52 poems, including 5 fragments at the end (1–345); subject index (347–50) and index of Greek words and phrases discussed (351–3). A final *comparatio numerorum* would have been welcome, as well as a complete word index. For the latter one must refer to the work of L. A. Guichard (Bern 2004), which is the most important edition (with Spanish translation and commentary) of Asclepiades' epigrams prior to Sens'.

Throughout the book constant attention is paid to Asclepiades' literary past, present and future. Such a perspective implies the conviction that collections in which poetry was "treated as a written form separate from its original performance context" helped to "blur the boundary" between other genres and epigram (xliv). This is a productive approach to epigram, which must be examined with other genres in the background but also with regard to its own subgenres and history (see xxxviii–xlii). Sens is always careful to detect in the texts the distinctive features of different kinds of epigram, whether they be funerary, dedicatory, ephrastic, or other types, even when such generic clues consist only of a single word, or when they are mixed up. This allows him to catch Asclepiades' intent in

each text and to cast light on the genre as a whole. An excellent example is given by his analysis of ep. XV (96–102). As Sens well observes, the opening words establish the expectation of an epitaph, in which the first-person speaker is the dead person. But the poem “disappoints this expectation and inverts the traditional lamentation of the *mors immatura*, since ... the speaker is still alive, and his point is ... that the pain of his life leaves him ready for death”; moreover, “the final couplet ... resonates against the common funerary convention that the death ... profoundly affected the lives of surviving friends and family,” because “the speaker’s death changes nothing for the Eroles” (97). Sens’ reading brings to light further intriguing aspects of the poem, such as the change of tone from the pathetic seriousness of the beginning to the cool playfulness of the final line, and the ironic effect of the emphasis placed by the speaker on his age. Also in ep. IV the first-person amatory narrative of the lyric tradition combines with the voice of the inscribed epigram (20–1), whereas in ep. VI (36–7) funerary, dedicatory and equestrian epigrams play with one another.

This interest does not lead the author to neglect other aspects of the subject matter: textual criticism, language, metre, and style. Sens’ welcome concision never excludes a substantial discussion of the problems and a survey of the best arguments. His book is a rare combination of scholarly acumen and light, pleasant writing. Such clarity makes this book suitable for teaching: the pages describing Asclepiades’ literary context (li–lxv), especially the chapter focusing on the relationship between Asclepiades and Posidippus (lvii–lx), as well as the limpid description of the manuscript tradition of Asclepiades’ epigrams (c–cvii), should be recommended to all students of Greek poetry.

Sens has the virtue of prudence in his treatment of uncertain questions. The language of Asclepiades (lxv–lxxii), as well as that of other epigrammatists, presents thorny problems; the manuscript tradition is unreliable on this matter, because the original dialectal coloring is likely to have been distorted (lxv–lxvi). Sens reasonably notes that “any editor who seeks to regularize in one direction or another in passages where forms from different dialects coexist must proceed with great caution” (lxvi). In his edition and commentary Sens makes his choices on a specific basis text by text (see, e.g., 4, 55–6, 106), and in his introduction to Asclepiades’ language he illustrates the main tendencies in the corpus, such as Ionic dialectal coloring strongly influenced by Attic, features common to most Doric dialects, and the avoidance of markedly epic forms. In general, he admits that Asclepiades’ language may give examples of “dialect ‘mixing’” and follows the reasonable principle that “in the absence of more information, it seems best to

preserve the dialectal inconsistency rather than to regularize in one direction or the other" (lxx). As a result, we cannot use dialect to help us decide whether or not a given poem is by Asclepiades.

The question of authorship is also difficult (xcvi–c). Like Guichard, Sens marks texts from XXXIV onward with an asterisk, as poems doubtfully ascribed by ancient sources alternatively to Asclepiades and other authors, especially Posidippus; unlike Guichard, he excludes from the corpus of Asclepiades' fragments Ath. 594d (fr. 2 Guich.), a couplet transmitted as Archilochus' and conjecturally ascribed to the Samian by M. L. West (*Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus* (Berlin–New York 1974) 140). In Sens' opinion not only dialectal coloring but also "[t]heme, style, and metre [...] are unreliable indexes" for accepting or rejecting an ascription to Asclepiades, because his corpus is small and influenced by Meleager's editorial work (xcvii). As a general rule, the question of ascription must be considered open and in most cases Sens wisely confines himself to merely admitting that "the scales incline in one direction or another" (xcvii). Discussing the texts ascribed alternatively to Asclepiades and Posidippus, Sens first pays attention to the fact that an epigram has a specific subject-matter in common either with another epigram of the corpus or with an epigram by Posidippus, and then wonders whether the epigrams in question must be regarded as companion pieces composed by the same author or as texts responding to each other and composed by different authors. Nonetheless, even such a criterion may sometimes appear too subjective. For example, Sens inclines to attribute ep. *XXXV to Posidippus: its subject is too similar to that of Asclepiades' ep. VI to be the work of the same author, and the competition between courtesans described in *XXXV would be "a metaphor for literary rivalry" between Posidippus and Asclepiades (236). Guichard too regards the ascription to Posidippus as more plausible: he observes that the similarity of epp. VI and *XXXV cannot be compared with that of other pairs in Asclepiades' corpus. This argument is questionable: as Guichard admits (389), Asclepiades might have composed pairs of epigrams on a similar subject, and, although the two epigrams play with the same sexual metaphor, they describe two different scenarios, a courtesan in one case (ep. VI) and two women competing in the other (ep. *XXXV). Moreover, the humorous engagement with Posidippus' *ἰππικὰ* identified by both Guichard (390–1) and Sens (235–6) seems to make less sense as self-parody, if we regard Posidippus as the author of ep. *XXXV. However, even considering Posidippus as the author of that poem, one can hardly find arguments for reading the competition between two courtesans as a metaphor for literary rivalry.

Sens provides his readers with only a select bibliography: this is apparent in both the critical apparatus and the commentary. Whatever the reasons for this choice are, scholars will find it annoying not to be provided with complete bibliographic information. The readers deserve to know, for example, in what publication the “Martorelli” mentioned in the critical apparatus of ep. *XXXIV conjectured ἐρχομένην instead of the transmitted ἐρχόμενοι at line 2 (226). Moreover, a compendious list of the most important discussions of each of these epigrams would have been welcome, allowing readers go back to the sources of the editor and form their own opinion. For this purpose too, one must still use Guichard’s edition.

The texts edited and commented are enumerated following *Hellenistic Epigrams* by Gow and Page (Cambridge 1965), which includes only 47 texts (see p. xcvi); like Guichard, Sens adds ep. *XLVII (and Gow–Page’s XLVII turns into Guichard’s and Sens’ *XLVIII), and, unlike Guichard, adds 4 fragments (XLIX–LII) instead of 5. Sens’ textual choices are led by a rare sensitivity to, and familiarity with, Asclepiades’ work: as a result, in several cases his text is the best available. Sens’ lines—as well as Guichard’s—contain far fewer obeli than those of Gow–Page: Sens improves a text obelized by both Gow–Page and Guichard in VIII 4 (Sens’ good conjecture ἔδακεν gives the epigram an interesting final point and is palaeographically plausible), XX 3 (the transmitted text can be understood without emendation following Sens’ interpretation), *XLV 3 (Jacobs’ χερί instead of the transmitted περί makes good sense) and reasonably keeps Gow–Page’s *crucis* at least in XXIV 2 (although ἂ μῆτ’ ἀνθει μῆτε γένει γ’ ἐν ἴσῳ—printed by Guichard as a combination of conjectures found in the apographs **G** and **V**—“seems on the right track semantically,” as Sens admits, it is stylistically rather problematic) and XXV 8 (the *hapax θέσμυκες* which produces the only case of a pentameter with a spondaic foot in the second hemistich cannot be accepted as such). In ep. V 1 Sens prints Wilamowitz’s conjecture τῶφθαλιμῶ, rightly refusing τῶ θαλλῶ of the manuscripts (obelized by Gow–Page, regarded as sound by Guichard and many other editors), which does not give acceptable sense. Sens’ translations deserve consideration for their effort to adhere to the Greek text: see e.g. ep. V (27). This makes Sens’ book even more suitable for students. Many readers will also appreciate that he does not indulge in peculiar English idioms in translations, or in the book as a whole.

The structure of the commentary is clear: after text, critical apparatus and English translation, readers are given a brief summary of the epigram’s contents

and point, which helps them to focus immediately on the implications of the epigram. An overall commentary on the poem as a whole follows, giving much space to intertextual remarks: in particular, attention is consistently paid to later Greek and Latin texts and authors influenced by Asclepiades or alluding to his epigrams, within both the literary and the epigraphic traditions (see, e.g., 22–3 on ep. IV; 69–70 on ep. XI; 83 on ep. XIII; 113–14 on ep. XVII; 121–2 on ep. XVIII; etc.). A line-by-line commentary closes the discussion on each epigram.

Sens' commentary contributes to a deep understanding of the texts: his attention to every nuance makes him at ease with such a refined poet. Of course, one might disagree about a few interpretations. In the second couplet of ep. V, for example, in Sens' opinion, the point is that "the speaker, having been burnt by Didyme's heat, sees her as a lovely rose, even while those who have not been scorched ... do not" (28): the active voice of the transitive verb *θάλψωμεν*, with *ἄνθρακες* as direct object, may suggest that we regard the black Didyme not only as the person who excites the narrator's passion, but also as a passive victim of love's passion herself; the topos of a man "melting like wax by the fire" for a woman's beauty seems to be unexpectedly completed by the less usual image of the woman burning like coals heated by a man.

Sens' interpretation is balanced with regard to possible sexual double entendres: it seems wise, for example, to reject (137–8) the interpretation of *πέτασος* (ep. XX 4) as referring to Dorcion's genitals; on the contrary, at the end of ep. V (*ρόδευ κάλυκες*) an obscene allusion does not seem to be "out of place here," as Sens claims (35), given the erotic contents of the poem and the attested use of the term *ρόδον* for the female genitals (as Sens records ad loc.).

Scholars will certainly benefit from this volume: it provides many novel and well-founded answers, but it also raises as many questions and provides plenty of direction for further research. We are dealing with a very important book in scholarship on Asclepiades, which works in synergy with Guichard's edition. Those interested in Asclepiades have now at their disposal two major scholarly works, which, taken together, mark a great advance on Gow–Page and the other editions, and will support further work in the fields of both textual criticism and exegesis.

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