

BOOK REVIEW

Pindar's Library: Performance Poetry and Material Text. By TOM PHILLIPS. Oxford Classical Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 352. Hardcover, \$125.00. ISBN 978-01987-4573-0.

Tom Phillips' *Pindar's Library: Performance Poetry and Material Text*, a revised version of the author's Oxford DPhil thesis completed in 2012, seeks to push the boundaries of Pindaric studies by focusing on "recontextualizations" or "resitings" of Pindar's poems in later Greek literary culture and on the ways in which Pindar's texts anticipate or even prompt such acts of "readers' imaginative recreation" (14). What enables such anticipation, Phillips suggests, is the awareness Pindar shows of being one of the first poets to inhabit the domain of textuality and employ the written medium. More adventurously, Phillips argues that Pindar's intention, in his handling of mythic narratives and gnomes, was not to communicate specific meanings but to create "open-ended scripts requiring supplementation by readerly response" (41). In *Pindar's Library*, we encounter a very sympathetic Pindar, a poet of nuance and unobtrusive ambiguity, a stranger to moralism—in short, a figure very unlike the Pindar that modern European poets and scholars have struggled to emulate and elucidate.

The book consists of two parts, as well as an Introduction and a Conclusion (the latter is particularly concise and lucid in stating the author's objectives). The first part of the book, "Contexts: To Alexandria and Beyond," contains a helpful summary of our current knowledge of how Greek classics were read, edited and commented on in the Hellenistic period. The highlight here is the discussion of epigrams on Pindar and his *Vitae* (92–101); the section on editorial critical signs (102–117) is perhaps the one least obviously pertinent to the book's subject matter.

The second part, "Singing Pages," dwells on Pindar. The chapter "Edited Highlights" considers the poems placed at the beginning and end of individual books of *Epinikia* in light of their later reception, tentatively in the case of *Olympian* 1 and *Pythian* 1, and more concretely in the discussion of possible echoes of *Olympian* 14 in Theocritus's *Idyll* 16. The issue of closural significance of *Olympian* 14 and *Pythian* 12 is also at the center of the last two chapters. In between the reader will find a highly rewarding chapter, "Marginalia: Textual Encounters

in the Scholia”, which details the mentions of Homer in Pindaric scholia, as well as citations of Pindar in the scholia to Homer, Apollonius Rhodius and Theocritus (167–210). This chapter, in particular, will be essential to any future inquiries into Pindar’s early reception.

In the final chapter, the reader will also find an illuminating discussion of Pindar’s *Pythian* 11 (241–255), which concludes on a note characteristic of Phillips’ approach in the rest of the book: rather than trying to attribute a meaning to Pindar’s decision to include a violent version of the Orestes myth in the poem, Phillips argues that we should appreciate “the interpretive challenge of reconciling the exemplum to the situation” which Pindar intends to be “itself important ethically and intellectually, both for the listener and for Thrasydaeus himself as an internal reader of the poem” (250). One wonders whether, in this case, opting for indeterminacy may represent the path of least resistance.

Pindar’s Library has two major and interlinked objectives: to reconstruct the early phase of literary reception of Pindar’s poetry and to argue for a new way of reading Pindar’s work as an “archive” or a set of “diachronic texts.” While the validity of the former goal is self-evident, the methodological move implicit in the latter is quite novel to Pindaric studies and therefore deserves closer scrutiny, particularly seeing that it also has molded the distinctive approach Phillips takes to issues that are traditionally treated under the rubric of reception studies. Most tellingly, the notion of “intertext” (or “intertextual field”, cf. p. 234) employed by Phillips is much more expansive than the one to which Classicists have grown accustomed, indeed truer to the original force of this concept as put forward by Julia Kristeva. Texts are not autonomous constructions made out of signs sitting on the page; they exist in the mind of the reader, and as such cannot be extricated from a web of relationships with other texts, most of them postdating the text being read.

Phillips aspires to bring to life the interpretive processes in the minds of Pindar’s ancient readers, who could not but place Pindar’s poems *qua* texts in relation to other, thematically related texts familiar to them, while recognizing that these poems originally circulated in a performative, pre-textual culture that was in many ways at odds with their own. From this perspective, Pindar’s work appears no longer as a collection of abstruse documents from a distant era of literary history, which scholars strive to make sense of by embedding them ever more deeply in the context of that era, but as living elements of an energetic reading culture, in which Pindar’s poems were read in schools, quoted in conversation,

taken as offering guidance on how to live one's life. The invitation to read Pindar in this fashion, advanced by *Pindar's Library*, is quite compelling.

The downside of such an inclusive notion of Pindar's poems and fragments as "diachronic texts", in which traces of reception claim the same efficacy as formal structures introduced at the moment of composition (whether or not they are laden with authorial intention), is obvious. It provides the scholar collating such diachronic texts with a very broad license in choosing what to include as relevant to the given act of interpretation, which, by the logic of the same argument, itself becomes a moment in the constitution of Pindar's diachronic text. In reception studies, this dilemma is usually obviated by defining "diachronic" extensions of the text as encounters between two particular authors or two distinct cultural-historical moments. In the case of *Pindar's Library*, however, maintaining such a focus is usually not possible, due to a large extent to the nature of Pindar's scholia, the main body of evidence marshaled by Phillips, which are difficult to date or contextualize, let alone attribute.

Pindar's Library is an unusual and ambitious book, experimental in its method and well-grounded in philological detail. While most of the readings it advances are tentative, as the author repeatedly and readily acknowledges, Classicists who are interested in the *longue durée* of Greek literary history and in Pindar's afterlife will find the book stimulating and thought-provoking.

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