

BOOK REVIEW

The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist. By THOMAS ARENTZEN. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. Pp. 288. Hardcover, \$59.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-4907-1.

This beautifully produced book is a literary critical study of three *kontakia*, or long hymns, most securely assigned to one Romanos the Melodist of C5-6 Constantinople. The book's author completes this neatly in the course of some prefatory matter, four chapters, a conclusion, Appendix 1 containing the author's own text of *On the Annunciation* derived from the two critical editions followed by his translation, Appendix 2 comprising a catalogue of the hymns referred to throughout the book, sets of numbered notes to each chapter, an extensive bibliography, a general index, and finally his acknowledgments. Although arranging the paratext along these lines is unusual—the purpose and methodology of the study remain unannounced until the end of the first chapter and identification of the primary readership is not anywhere explicitly announced—it is not unsuccessful. A series of ten images of icons, murals, and manuscripts help to deliver some visual context for the reader.

Chapter 1 places Romanos and his poetry in a broad-based, wide-ranging overview of Constantinople of Late Antiquity in which the history of the city and its era are outlined in political, social, and theological terms. We are first given the legendary/historical account of how Romanos became a poet. An apparition of Mary the Virgin Mother appeared on Christmas Eve to a young man of Syrian heritage who was standing at one of Constantinople's more famous shrines. At the Virgin's behest he swallowed the scroll of papyrus which she was offering him. Immediately, and evidently *ex tempore*, he began singing Ἡ παρθένος σήμερον, the hymn now known to us as *On The Nativity I*. That young man was Romanos, Mary was his Muse, and he became known by the epithet 'the Melodist', Ῥωμανὸς ὁ Μελωδός (or the 'Christian Pindar' *per* Trypanis 1971, a title not entirely undeserved despite the two poets' manifest differences).

A career writing poetry followed in which Romanos became regarded as one of the great liturgical poets of the era, specifically a prolific author of *kontakia*. The first chapter continues by throwing light on the literary milieu of the day which is

seen as being vibrant, multilingual, and dramatic. It is not until the end of the chapter that Arentzen makes clear his intentions and methodology: by a close reading of his chosen three *kontakia* he will ‘track three different ways of imagining the Virgin’s corporeal and relational presence in sixth-century Constantinople.’

In turn, each of the next three chapters takes an individual *kontakion* laying it bare by reference to theological issues of the day and, perhaps more importantly, the entire corpus of Greek literature from Aristophanes and Aristotle through Callimachus and Apollonius Rhodius, the Greek novel and Clement of Alexandria to patristic and Biblical texts. It is a delight to see the continuing study of what classicists generally consider ‘late Greek’ (all too often accompanied by the merest hint of a disparaging tone) being considered as competent, valuable high literature in its own right rather than simply as a fount for theological and historical enlightenment. On the back of such panoramic intertextuality it is easy to imagine experts from across our entire spectrum finding new pastures to browse for their own and mutual benefit. Two examples suffice: scholars of all Greek epic and classical drama will be fascinated by the dialogic dimension of these hymns adding ἐνέργεια: references to grapes and gardeners in *On the Nativity II* must be considered by students of Nonnus’ *Paraphrase of the Gospel of St John* who should then reflect their findings into his *Dionysiaca*. This ‘window-opening’ aspect is a clear example of where some of the ongoing value of Arentzen’s study may lie. The running commentary is in fact a metaphor for Romanos’ poetry reflecting as it does its appeal, its vitality, and the enthusiasm with which it engages both past and present audiences.

The notes are collected at the end of the book, a layout which will not please everybody since footnoting involves less work for the user. However, using two bookmarks is a small price to pay for the privilege of partaking in Arentzen’s obvious joy and expertise. Rather less satisfactory (to the reviewer at least) is the manner of dealing with Greek text: all quotations from the poems are presented in English in the author’s excellent translation with occasional buzz words bracketed in Greek proper; in the body of the discussion all Greek is transliterated. Although the prospective readership is never positively identified, the level of critical acumen on display implies that those most likely to be reading it should be capable of coping with the original Greek for themselves, at least alongside a translation.

But these really are two minor complaints, I close by saying that whoever reads this book will be rewarded with not only a lively reading of these three *kontakia* in particular but much more too. The songs’ genre is placed securely into its position within the long history of Greek verse literature with Romanos’ entire

oeuvre being appropriated to achieve that. But there is yet more to be gained, the book is a masterclass of close reading and criticism from which any student-scholar of (Greek) poetry will gain benefit. Romanos is lucky to have found such an attentive and astute reader as Arentzen—and for that we too can be very grateful.

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