

BOOK REVIEW

The Elegies of Maximianus. Edited and translated by A. M. JUSTER. Introduction by MICHAEL ROBERTS. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Pp. IX + 224. Hardback. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4979-8.

Maximianus is an interesting and fascinating poet of Roman barbarian age (probably 6th century), author of six elegies dealing with the main themes of love and old age. The poet presents himself indeed as an old man and describes all sorts of pain brought on by old age: weakness, deterioration of physical and mental faculties, loss of health and clarity and so on. However, the worst issue is the sexual impotence, which deprives man of one of life's great pleasures and brings harsh suffering, because of the persistence of desire and failure to satisfy it. Thus, the poet regrets the loss of his youthful vigor, when he was a handsome and educated boy that every girl loved; but he admits he did not enjoy pleasures of love even back then, when he had the chance. At that time, in fact, he loved chastity and looked for the perfect beauty of an ideal girl who never came in his life. In his elegies, he recalls some experiences he had in youth and manhood that ended in renunciation or failure: in his old age, he reviews phantoms of women he loved but he never possessed, and he regrets missing them, now that it is too late.

A. M. Juster is not a classicist: he is a poet and translator who already realized other translations of classics, such as Horace's *Satires* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) and Tibullus' *Elegies* (Oxford University Press, 2012). In this book devoted to Maximianus' *Elegies*, he provides a rather faithful, but not literal, translation of these captivating and enigmatic poems. He tries to replicate the feeling of the Latin elegiac distich with couplets of iambic hexameter and pentameter, adopting the customary substitution of formal poetry in English. He also imitates, as far as possible, the structure and rhythm (including figures of speech and patterns of sound) of Maximianus' verses. His translation proves to be as elegant as effective, far from slavish to the Latin text, but definitely not arbitrary. In my view, it is a complete success. It is enough to read the incipit of the first elegy (lines 1-6) for proof of this: *aemula quid cessas finem properare senectus / cur et in hoc fesso corpore tarda uenis / solue precor miseram tali de carcere uitam / mors est iam requies uiuere poena*

mihi / non sum qui fueram periit pars maxima nostri / hoc quoque quod superest languor et horror habent. “Jealous old age, why hold back hastening the end / and why come slowly for this weary body? / Release my wretched life, I beg, from such a prison! / Death is now my rest, my life a punishment. / I am not who I was: my greatest part has perished. / Fatigue – and dread too – cling to what survives.”

There are some points worth arguing, of course. For instance, I cannot agree with the interpretation of line 110 of elegy 5, where the *Graia puella* says: *non fleo priuatum set generale chaos*, translated by Juster as “I mourn a public, not a private, hell.” I think that here the word *chaos* means a roll-over, an overturning of the world, while the translation “public” seems to me rather weak for the Latin adjective *generale*, involving not only men, but all living beings and the world as a whole. Sex failure is viewed here as a general disaster affecting everyone and everything, undermining the stability and continuity of life. However, few points like this are not enough to change the overall judgment on this translation, which remains effective and appealing.

As for the Latin text, Juster is right to follow Webster’s reliable critical edition (Princeton, 1900) rather than Baehrens’ (Leipzig, 1883), as the latter entails the drawback of the *libido coniectandi* that is typical of late 19th-century philology. However, sometimes Juster feels the need to amend the text: he flags the change with an asterisk and states his reasons for doing so in the notes. I counted 39 cases of this kind, where he accepts a *uaria lectio* from another branch of tradition, or replaces the manuscript reading with a conjecture (formulated by previous scholars). I acknowledge that his text is often improved, compared to Webster’s; but he does not explain his reasons and criteria clearly and comprehensively: a serious philological discussion on the chosen and alternative readings is lacking. What is worse, Juster presents Maximianus’ text without any punctuation, “as it stood in the sixth century” (as he writes in the *Preface*, viii). Actually, punctuation was not used at the time; but this is not a good reason to print a text that, in such conditions, is extremely difficult to understand and interpret.

The commentary, though not exhaustive, is balanced, well informed and well worded: it turns out therefore to be a valuable tool to enter the psychological tangle and to enlighten a certain expressive obscurity of this charming and elusive poetry. There are some minor deficiencies. For instance, p. 138, *ad* 1.217: the reference to the old man peering down “suggests that he is animal-like,” since human beings “look up at the sky,” while beasts “look down at the ground”; Juster is right to recall Ovid, *Met.* 1.84-86, but he seems to ignore Lactance, *Diu. inst.* 2.1-2, who reuses Ovid’s point in a Christian perspective, and it is probably to him that

Maximianus makes his hit through that allusion. P. 157, *ad* 3.5: “Lycoris” is “a name for a lover used” not “by Gallus and Catullus,” but by Gallus and Martial. P. 192, *ad* 5.117: I do not think the sense is that “a woman who is not having sex cannot stay beautiful because sex is essential to the spiritual bond that sustains her physical beauty”; I rather believe that a woman without sex “loses her value” (*pretium ... perdit*) since her beauty is not useful (from a sexist point of view). P. 194, *ad* 5.131-134: why should the “virgin” be Aquilina? Juster provides no justification for this outlandish statement. However, despite these points and some others along the same lines, his commentary is generally reliable and effective.

The book has an *Introduction* by Michael Roberts, who addresses Maximianus’ profile and elegies. Roberts deals synthetically, in a clear and precise manner, with the main themes of this collection, literary genre and style, without neglecting individual aspects and interpretative issues, such as the role of Boethius in poem 3, the critical division between a serious and a parodic reading of the two speeches of the *Graia puella* in poem 5 and so on. The presentation of the poet and his work is the “flagship” of this fine book.

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