

BOOK REVIEW

The Poets of Alexandria. By SUSANA STEPHENS. *Understanding Classics*. London, UK and New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2018. Pp. xiv + 194. Paperback, \$20.00. ISBN 978-1-84885-880-0.

Susan Stephens provides an introduction to the poetry of Alexandria, focusing on Posidippus of Pella, Theocritus of Syracuse, Callimachus of Cyrene and Apollonius of Rhodes, in the series *Understanding Classics*. An introduction places the poets in their historical and literary contexts, highlighting the experience of Alexandria on the border of the Greek and non-Greek worlds and as the context for Ptolemaic self-presentation. Four chapters on the key poets are the heart of the book, surveying their central works, major themes and innovations. A final chapter introduces the poets' receptions. While formally an introduction for readers newly encountering the Alexandrians, Stephens delves into substantial issues and pioneers new approaches, making the volume an important contribution for scholars also.

The first chapter examines Posidippus, focusing on the Milan papyrus (aka the "New Posidippus"). Stephens identifies key themes: the new "literary" epigram, aesthetics of the miniature, authorial arrangement, quotidian subjects and engagement with the Ptolemaic court. The latter she contrasts with the traditional understanding of Alexandrian poetry as detached from its political context. The central focus is the ten sections of the Milan papyrus. Close readings of individual epigrams, demonstrating their miniature aesthetic and principles of arrangement balance broader themes. Discussing the *lithika*, Stephen pairs the geographic movement from India to Alexandria with the fifteenth epigram's figuration of Lynceus as the ideal reader, able to discern the finest detail. Noting the turn to humbler subjects in the *iamatika* and *tropoi*, Stephens concludes with the suggestion that Posidippus presents the Ptolemies an ideal of moderation.

In the second chapter on Theocritus, Stephens, while recognizing the centrality of the bucolics, seeks a rapprochement between the diverse poems in the corpus. She presents the poems on Ptolemy II and Hiero (*Idylls* 17 and 16) as model and anti-model for Hellenistic kingship. Correspondingly, the "failed bucolics" of *Idylls* 4 and 5, set in war-torn Croton and Thurii, align with Hiero, but the

optimistic *Idyll* 7 suggests Ptolemy II through its setting on Cos (Ptolemy's birthplace, made explicit in *Idyll* 17). Within this innovative frame Stephens includes traditional approaches to Theocritus, such as how the ecphrasis of the cup in *Idyll* 1 rewrites in Alexandrian terms its epic predecessors in the *Iliad* and Hesiodic *Shield*, or how *Idyll* 24 deflates Pindar's heroic presentation of the infant Heracles. Stephens passes over some approaches that might be expected in an introduction, such as Theocritus' creation of ironic distance between the reader and narrator, or his contribution to Alexandrian interiority, as in *Idylls* 2 and 11. Nevertheless, the discussions of genre and patronage promise to be engaging for new readers.

The following chapter turns to Callimachus, comprising a synopsis of "Callimachus' aesthetics" and a survey of his major works. Stephens contextualizes Callimachus' poetic program, separating Roman reuses and mitigating difficulties caused by our fragmentary knowledge of his Ptolemaic milieu. She focuses on Callimachus' reformulations of Greek poetic self-definition familiar from Pindar, Aristophanes and Timotheus, finally arguing for poetic style and refinement as his core criteria. The Cyrenean's avoidance of continuity in preference to a mosaic-like arrangement of shorter narratives (familiar from the discussion of Posidippus) emerges as a further important theme. The *Aetia* naturally dominates the survey of Callimachus works. Stephens emphasizes the movement from the first two books' Muses and legends from the heroic age to the last two books' engagement with contemporary Alexandria, with the latter prompting rereading of the former: early aetia ultimately point to contemporary cultural practices. The chapter leans heavily on thematic approaches (variety, recasting poetic models and engagement with the Ptolemaic court), where a balance with close reading might have been expected in light of Stephens' identification of style and refinement as central to Callimachus' program.

Transitioning to Apollonius of Rhodes, Stephens summarizes the recent scholarship in presenting the "quarrel" between Apollonius and Callimachus as an invention, but uses it to introduce a consideration of substantive differences. Apollonius engages contemporary Alexandria less directly: setting the *Argonautica* in epic time, he challenges a Homeric classicism. Where Homer served as a model for the Greek *poleis*, Apollonius focuses on the edges of the Greek world, representing the contemporary shift of political power to the Hellenistic kingdoms. Stephens also explores Apollonius' rewriting of Pindar's *Pythian* 4, particularly the Libyan episode and Jason's cloak, but touching other intertexts, such as Euripides' *Medea* and Xenophon's *Anabasis*, engaging the central issues of

Apollonius' play with the literary tradition and the "problem" of Jason. She suggests reading him in terms of Pindar's Jason, as a man of destiny, recreating the cosmic order in the heroic realm and adumbrating Ptolemy's imperial order. Though attractive, this reading risks appearing straightforwardly triumphalist and minimizing the moral failures of Jason and Medea.

The final chapter examines the reception of the Alexandrians, beginning with a warning that the outsized reception of Callimachus' programmatic statements should not overshadow the other poets' contributions to creating an Alexandrian poetics. Stephens devotes short sections to the later Greek tradition, the Romans, and then the modern period from the Renaissance, identifying key works that reference the Alexandrians and noting the scope and emphases of each period. Final sections look at the reception of the idea of Alexandrianism in the 20th century by modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and a selection of works in various media that look to our poets. The chapter suggests the range of reception; it does not aim at comprehensiveness, but at pointing out possible paths for the reader to explore.

The book as a whole is successful in introducing these four Alexandrian poets to a variety of audiences, placing them in their contexts of cosmopolitan Alexandria and the Ptolemaic empire. Stephens aptly represents the change in critical consensus that they are not isolated scholar-poets pursuing *recherché* vocabulary and antiquarian tidbits for their own sakes, but engage the tradition to update it and make it relevant to their Alexandrian context. No introduction can do justice to every facet of these poets, of course; Stephens favors political engagement, offering a useful corrective to the earlier view of the poets as apolitical, and also explorations of arrangement and the poetry book. Some traditional topics receive less attention, such as innovations in interiority and subjectivity (my favorite) and verbal and metrical refinement (naturally difficult to convey in translation), but Stephens' distribution is broadly judicious and offers multiple points of entry for a broad audience. Stephens' deep knowledge of the field and fresh approaches make the volume a pleasure to read for specialists also, even if they may disagree on specific points. Formal features of the book also contribute to its utility as an introduction: passages from the poets are presented in translation, and where Stephens makes a point about word-choice or sound in Greek, the text is transliterated into Latin letters; notes are collected at the end of the volume and appropriately limited in scope; a bibliography and index conclude the volume.

PAUL OJENNUS

Whitworth University, pojennus@whitworth.edu