

BOOK REVIEW

The Psychomachia of Prudentius: Text, Commentary, and Glossary. Edited by AARON PELTTARI. Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. Pp. xvi + 327. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-8061-6402-1.

In this handsome volume, Pelttari has created the first modern student edition of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, one of the premier poems of the 4th century and the favorite poem of the Middle Ages. It is a thorough book, containing a robust introduction, an extensive and varied commentary, appendices on meter and literary devices and a complete glossary of the *Psychomachia*'s vocabulary. In short, Pelttari's work is not only the first of its kind, but competent and useful.

An instructive introduction to the poet and his poem opens the text. In addition to Prudentius' life and the structure and sources of the poem, we also find an overview of 4th-century literature, the manuscript tradition (with notice given to the evidence of the early illustrations) and reception. One might wish for a discussion of the relative novelty of classical Christian poetry in Latin (Juvenius is mentioned, but without a treatment of his significance in the tradition of Latin Christian poetry), but a concise, yet comprehensive introduction to Prudentius is practically impossible. Without becoming unwieldy, the introduction provides the necessary background to read the *Psychomachia*, even for a student with no prior knowledge of Prudentius or his era.

The text itself follows, with a minimalistic apparatus below. Although giving a clear account of his editorial methodology, Pelttari does not explain why he felt a need to create another edition, following Cunningham's essentially eclectic approach. The most significant contribution lies in the commentary, which comprises half of the contents. Overall, the comments are clear and concise, offering grammatical, referential and contextual information. Pelttari does not presuppose that his reader is familiar with the range of texts upon which Prudentius frequently draws and so he provides summaries of referenced episodes (for example, the scriptural story of Judith); this ensures that the text will be accessible to the broadest possible range of Latin students. In his preface, Pelttari promises to

“enable rather than forestall interpretation (xiv).” This principle is admirably at work throughout. Hence, there are very few entries with which I can find fault. Moreover, the editorial work is thorough; the only typographical mistake I encountered was “the half-line mirrors the poet’s disgust at disgust” where the last word should be “vice” or some similar term. Overall, Pelttari’s comments are scholarly and impartial yet suggestive and they provide the information necessary to approach the text for the first time.

The comments with which I took issue were, in general, because of what they omitted instead of what they contained. Pelttari’s notice of literary devices was sporadic and inconsistent: for example, he notes the alliteration of *suasit suamque suasor exemplum dedit* (*ad loc.* Ps. praef. 10), but not *inter confertos cuneos Concordia forte* (*ad loc.* Ps. 670). As regards deficient contextual comments, I take as an example one episode where the commentary displays significant lacunae. In the scene in which Avarice attacks a column of clerics, Pelttari makes no comment on Prudentius’ puzzling statement that Reason alone is the “invariably staunch companion of the tribe of Levi” (Ps. 502-503, translation mine). Surely Pelttari does not expect the average intermediate Latin student to know that “Levite” commonly designates Christian clergy during this period? And is not this tight association between clerics and logic worth problematizing? Or the fact that these clerics are the only characters whom Prudentius identifies as heroes (*heros*, Ps. 509)? There were also a few inaccuracies; for example, Pelttari identifies Pudicitia’s dedication of a sword as the (customary) consecration of spoils (*ad loc.* Ps. 108) without noting that the sword is in fact her own (and therefore not spoils). He similarly states that “Job is the only human who appears on...the psychic battlefield” (*ad loc.* Ps. 162-77), although in point of fact there is a rank of Christian priests whom Avarice attacks (see Ps. 497-501). I would also have appreciated references to the many scholarly articles written on particular verses or scenes in the *Psychomachia*; their inclusion would have given curious readers jumping-off points for further reading.

The appendices, on meter and literary terms, are very appropriate for the range of readership which Pelttari foresees. I particularly enjoyed his definitions of literary figures, which often demonstrate as well as define. For example, for *polysyndeton*, he offers “repetition or reiteration or reduplication of a conjunction, usually at the beginning of successive phrases or clauses” (234). Clever and playful, the integration of definition and example is effective pedagogy.

Pelttari has created a serviceable English commentary, which renders the *Psychomachia* accessible to advanced students of Latin. For scholars, Pelttari’s work

does not supplant Franchi's far more thorough Italian commentary (Paola Franchi, "La battaglia interiore: Prova di commento alla *Psychomachia* di Prudenzio," PhD diss, University of Vienna: 2013), but that is perhaps to his credit. With an affordable and user-friendly volume, Peltari has significantly broadened the potential readership of the most influential poem of the 4th-century. It is only to be hoped that instructors and students will now take advantage of the possibility.

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