BOOK REVIEW


Horace’s Epistles are well served in English by the Cambridge “Green and Yellow” of Mayer, but this expansive Italian commentary by Cucchiarelli offers numerous gems, an exhaustive up-to-date bibliography, helpful and erudite lemmata and a strong introduction, which make it an informative and valuable investment. This volume reworks and expands his previous edition of the Epistles for Marsilio, bulkimg up the introduction, offering a new prose translation and fleshing out details as well as increasing entries in the notes. There is no doubt that this will be the commentary for scholars to consult for future work on the Epistles.

The introduction opens by stressing how Horace’s decision to return to hexameters deliberately evokes his previous Satires and allows him (and the reader) to reflect on similarities and differences in world view as well as philosophical, political and poetic motivations. Cucchiarelli is particularly good in his discussion of the various ramifications of writing poetic letters and the way in which Horace manipulates his poems to capture the potential of this generic form. He goes far beyond previous worries about whether the corpus is “fictional” or “real” and emphasizes instead the philosophical and literary varietas that this genre allows him. Cucchiarelli discusses the philosophical underpinnings of a number of the Epistles but cautions, “Certo, Orazio è un poeta, o quanto meno da poeta scrive le Epistole” (28). That being said, his introductory material on Horace’s Academic leanings including the possible influence of Plato’s letters on this work, makes up the bulk of the introduction and is an intriguing direction with tangible results. Such Academic resonances reappear throughout the commentary itself and are detailed with a conviction that leads to persuasive suppositions. While others

---

have noted Horace’s Socratic modeling in the Epistles;3 Cucchiarelli takes this persona further and his section on the ancient audience of the Epistles points out both how the elite were primed for these poetic philosophical musings and how the possible Republican overtones of such sermones would be received by that elite. Cicero thus becomes an important exemplum for Horace’s work, and Cucchiarelli details the various ways in which Cicero’s works inform the Epistles’ ethical perspective, generic form and irony. His coverage of Horace’s style, language and the manuscript tradition are rather brief (one might want to turn to Mayer’s illuminating section on Horace’s style), but ultimately the introduction is a rewarding read with many revealing insights.

The meat of the volume, as one would expect, is the commentary itself. At 371 pages, it offers thorough and nuanced readings of each poem (an appendix to the volume notes articles and chapters pertinent to each poem – a nice touch). One finds the expected loci communes, textual criticism and intratextual connections between letters of the collection, but Cucchiarelli adds more explicit interpretations of significant terms, imagery and passages.

In the interest of space, I’ll restrict my comments to the first Epistle, but I want to stress that I learned a great deal throughout this commentary and found it to be a lively and meticulous guide to these poems. As might be expected from Cucchiarelli’s previous writings,4 he is especially good at pointing out moments in which Horace is reimagining the Satires and teases out the implications for such reworkings. Philosophical matters are stressed throughout; so the lemma for Ep. 1.1.7: purgatum … personet aurem highlights how Horace refashions the Socratic inner voice (Pl. Apol. 3.1 d2-4) into a medium for poetic exempla and ethical reflection, which can also touch upon the idea that philosophy is medicine for the soul and remind the reader of comedic applications (Plaut. Mil. 774). If Mayer’s note on Ep. 1.1.10: et versus et cetera ludera pono was a concise ten lines long, Cucchiarelli spreads his wings and gives us a strong page and a half with copious parallels, remarks on the irony and authorial modesty on display, as well as an analysis of the metapoetics of the phrase. One may have expected more reference to Panatetus with the note on decess (Ep. 1.1.11), but I appreciated how Cucchiarelli uncovered the irony of omnis in hoc sum where Horace, the neophyte

philosopher, is “all in” (like one of our undergraduate students) and espouses the school that fits his current thinking with zealous fervor. He rightly sees Aristippus behind the allusion of Ep. 1.1.15 and strong in his explication of the Aristippian flavor of Ep. 1.1.15-19. Horace’s use of regam at Ep. 1.1.27 probably deserves a note in that it foreshadows other forms of rex/regein in this poem as well as the obvious connections between being a rex and acting recte (expertly examined by Cucchiarelli at Ep. 1.1.59-60: rex eris… / si recte facies and reinforced at 1.1.63: regnum recte facientibus). In notes dealing with what it is to be liber (1.1.69, 1.1.106-8) I missed the work of Johnson and McCarter, both of whom stress how Horace’s personal definition of freedom vis à vis slavery or patronage or political entanglements underlies many of these poems. Cucchiarelli, however, does offer a strong reading of the ramifications for Maecenas’ laughter at Ep. 1.1.95 and how it indicates a difference in perspectives that helps to define Horace’s sense of independence. His final notes on the ironic Stoic “sage” who can’t take a head-cold go well beyond a precis of Stoic philosophy and delve into the mirage of the sapiens in Horace’s Rome.

This is the work of a scholar at the top of his game. Cucchiarelli fathoms the power of Horace’s poetic language and the real philosophical work he is attempting to get across in the Epistles. I’d also like to note that we owe the publisher thanks for making a paperback commentary of this breadth and heft available for only 25 €. There is certainly a lot of bang for the buck.

CHRISTOPHER V. TRINACTY

Oberlin College, ctrinact@oberlin.edu

---


6 Readers may be interested to know that there is a commentary to selected Epistles aimed at intermediate Latin students available at www.oberlinclassics.com.