

N. M. Kay (ed.), *Ausonius, Epigrams: Text with Introduction and Commentary*. London: Duckworth, 2001. Pp. 315. ISBN 0-7156-3105-5. UK£40.00.

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This is one of the best and most helpful commentaries I have seen in recent years. It presents unpretentious translations, general comments, and detailed remarks on the Latin texts it comments on, discussing content, grammar, metre, style, and broader cultural issues. It does not avoid difficult issues, such as obscenities in the original or puzzling elements, but sheds light on all that calls for comment. In the end the reader is left with a firmer grasp of the texts in question and, in short, has become wiser.

In theory, such general praise ought to apply to any modern commentary on an ancient text, but unfortunately things are mostly otherwise. Often a commentary is either too short to qualify as a serious new contribution or, more often, much too long and too detailed to be of any real help to readers of the ancient text, overshadowing rather than illuminating the ancient source.

The new commentary on Ausonius' epigrams by Kay (who published a commentary on Martial's eleventh book in 1985),[[1]] has found exactly the right balance. It is perhaps an advantage to the commentator if his texts have been rather neglected, as is the case with these fourth century epigrams, which have often been put aside as bookish, unoriginal, or artificial. Such a lack of scholarly interest in past centuries means that there is not much earlier work to be quoted and discussed. This saves space or, in more positive terms, leaves fresh ground to explore.

Ausonius' epigrams form only a small proportion of his collected poems (among which the long *Mosella* is probably the best known and appreciated). The small corpus consists of 121 epigrams, mostly between two and ten lines in length (the longest being twenty lines). They deal with themes that are familiar to anyone who has ever read the Greek Anthology or Martial, to mention Ausonius' most obvious models in the genre: criticism of other people (often biting and sarcastic), descriptions of works of art, riddles, and puns. There are epigrams on doctors, on love, disgusting habits or sexual 'abnormalities', and anecdotes or *bons mots* in general.

Ausonius was a versatile and learned author, and in these short poems he shows his considerable talents no less than in his larger creations. The brevity and pointedness inherent in the genre make his epigrams perhaps even more readily enjoyable than much of his other work, where one is occasionally struck by the poet's self-indulgent long-windedness.

Having said this, I shall not contend that these epigrams are compulsory reading to every Latinist, although Kay makes a good case for Ausonius' originality in developing standard themes. At best, Ausonius indeed seems to add something to the old tradition of epigram. For example, the motif of Myron's bronze cow -- a piece of sculpture celebrated in epigram before Ausonius (thirty-seven examples in the Greek Anthology), gets nine more variations from Ausonius, in which the models are taken a stage further (for example in *Ep.* 67, where the brazen animal is able to low -- a motif found in the Greek models -- but declines to do so, fearing to detract from Myron's art). Furthermore, Ausonius has some clever bilingual epigrams with alternating lines in Greek and Latin ('macaronic' poems, as Kay calls them), and there is an interesting, personal poem (*Ep.* 20, starting in Catullan fashion *uxor, vivamus quod viximus* . . .) in which the poet celebrates his wife and their happy marriage, a rather unusual feature in ancient epigram.

Literary puzzles too are one of Ausonius' stronger points, especially when combined with an erotic theme. *Ep.* 87, for instance, is a highly complicated, obscene epigram about the female member, as illustrated by Greek letters (the delta for the pubic area being one of the simpler examples). It is not always easy to establish what the text means or alludes to, but Kay discusses everything candidly and fairly, without either inhibition or sensationalism. Puzzles that may seem more innocent are also aptly solved by Kay. In a string of poems on depilation and shaving of the genital zone (another theme one recognizes from Martial), there is a curious remark on the 'Clazomenae' of someone's buttocks, where Kay patiently explains the matter and convincingly argues for a connection with Greek KLA/W 'to break' (cf. Latin *fractus* and *mollis*), and so detects a fitting and recherché allusion to a homo-erotic pathic.

To illustrate Kay's approach, let me quote one epigram to illustrate his approach/ *Ep.* 102 is translated as follows (I omit the Latin, which is, of course, included in the volume):

'I love a girl who hates me, but I hate a girl who loves me. Sort it out amongst us, if you can, gentle Venus!
'I'll do it easily. I'll change their characters and preferences in love. Let the latter hate you, and let the former love you.'
'But I'll suffer the same again.'
'Do you want to love both?'
'If both would reciprocate, yes!'
'Settle it for yourself, Marcus. To be loved, love!'

After the translation, Kay gives a short paraphrase and points in some detail to the main themes: a lover always wants the girl he cannot have, the theme of 'erotic preference', and the conflicting emotions of love and hate (most famously expressed in Cat. 85). All of this is illustrated with helpful references, in less than a page. He then discusses a false title of the poem and adds well over a page of notes on the six Latin lines, discussing, for example, a textual variant in line 1, the juxtaposition of *mos* and *amor*, an a clear echo from Martial 6.11.10 (with further echoes in the Greek tradition and in Ovid). In less than three pages (pp. 266-68), the reader has been adequately and pleasantly informed about all that matters here (although Kay strangely fails to note the obvious reference to Lucretius (1.2) in line 2 *alma Venus*).

Likewise, Kay's notes are instructive and clear right until the end. (Well, almost until the end: the closing string of epigrams on Silvius Bonus, 'who is a Briton and therefore should be called *Malus*', a pun varied in no less than six poems, is clearly not to Kay's liking, given his amusingly terse comments there . . .).

In the end it is perhaps not the content of Ausonius' epigrams that is most surprising. Many of them could have been written by any of his predecessors, including Martial. What seems most interesting is rather the fact that Ausonius took the time and trouble to write them in the first place, more than 250 years after Martial. He obviously considered all of pagan literature as a large corpus of inspiring, *actual* texts, a continuous unbroken whole, a body of literature to which he could still gain access. The link with antiquity was still there. But in many instances this retrospective approach led Ausonius to produce poems that had only marginal relations to contemporary reality. Notably the obscene poems in Priapean or Martial fashion seem rather detached from the cultural climate in which Ausonius lived, with its increasingly strict sexual rules and morals. In his days, a series of epigrams on cunnilingus or pederasty could perhaps only be defended as traditional literary exercises. Any suggestion of realism would have caused serious problems.

For Ausonius then, poetry and literature have become a world apart, a separate area of learning and education, a world in which there is still life, but not much real life. Kay might easily have given more attention to this sociological or cultural development. For it is the texts themselves that raise questions like: How can the learned Ausonius have written such an insulting poem? What would the emperor have said about this? Could the poet explain to his wife why he wrote this obscene piece? But let me be clear; Kay certainly offers at least some good starting points for further thoughts about the function of this type of poetry.

The commentary provides ample assistance to readers in understanding these polished poems. On every page, Kay's sensible and patient attitude is extremely helpful to the reader, whether beginning or advanced. It makes his work an excellent research tool, but also a pleasant course book for students of Latin poetry, particularly those interested in Martial. The volume is a great pleasure to use and consult; one never feels disappointed. It is very welcome indeed, and Kay may be thanked for this valuable contribution to Ausonian and Latin studies.

