

FRANCIS CAIRNS, *Hellenistic Epigram. Contexts of Exploration*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, xviii+516, pp., \$120.00, ISBN 978-1-107-16850-3.

Pointing to the size and importance of the corpus of Hellenistic epigram, which he dates from III BC to I AD, Francis Cairns (C.) offers a comprehensive and learned study of the genre. The book shows a particular focus on the position of Hellenistic epigram in its cultural and historical context, which C. regards as an essential element for a proper understanding of the texts, as he clearly states on p.31:

“The overall thrust of the work is to restore as far as possible the lost or obscured contexts of the epigrams studied and thus arrive at more plausible interpretations of them”.

After an introductory chapter, the epigrams are ordered and discussed in thematic chapters (2-14), in which selections of relevant epigrams are treated in detail. These chapters touch on interesting topics, such as afterlives, literary polemics, or local interests. Particularly interesting are chapters 13 about generic innovation, with a focus on dialogue (p.389-425), and 14 about lexical learning (p.426-459). Other chapters offer very useful surveys of material, like, e.g., chapter 11 about ‘epitymbic speakers and addressees’ (p.321-339).

The book is an impressive work of scholarship and clearly shows the great familiarity of the author with his subject and his wide knowledge of the relevant literature. For each of the epigrams C. discusses future researchers will need to study his work carefully and will profit from the state of the art and in depth discussions C. has to offer. The book may also generate many ideas for further thematic research on various aspects of the epigrammatic genre and contains useful and rich collections of material to start with.

That being said, and notwithstanding my admiration for the book, I do have a few points of criticism, which mainly concern C.’s concept of ‘context’, the organisation of his book and his ways of arguing:

- 1) I have some problems with C.’s treatment of the notion of context. The interpretation of Hellenistic epigram in its context is in itself a laudable aim. However, the way in which C. tries to place the epigrams in a historical or ‘epigraphic’ context (thus challenging the notion of ‘book poetry’) often works with a limited concept of ‘context’ in the sense of specific historical circumstances in which the epigram could have functioned as an inscription. It might have been better to focus more on cultural, ideological or literary contexts as a framework for

the epigrams' interpretation without trying to find concrete historical settings. Thus, e.g., it would have been useful in the chapter about philosophical matters (p.66-94) to discuss the epigrams against a background of the popular reception of philosophic ideas in the various periods to which the epigrams discussed belong and consider their role as a means of popularization in a diachronic perspective. In the chapter on epitaphs the question whether death caused by drink could be a topic for a 'real' inscription (p.243-265) leads only to speculation and is less interesting than the whole issue of the sociology of drinking and concepts of drink causing harm, which could have been discussed on the basis of the epigrammatic material. Similarly, the notion of historical settings could have been widened and need not have been confined to stones on p.33-40, where C. argues for an epigraphic context for Callimachus 33 *HE*: here C. could have made more of the notion that epigrams could be written as a consolation for bereaved family members and thus function in a context of social interaction. Besides, the attempts to connect the epigrams with a specific context are sometimes rather forced or speculative and therefore not convincing. Thus, e.g., on p.24-26 C. uses *CEG* 532 as an argument for the epigraphic character of Callimachus' epigram about Timonoe (40 *HE*), as both texts refer to the *stele* of the dead, but he ignores a fundamental difference between the two texts. In the inscription the dead Praxinus refers to his own *stele*, whereas in Callimachus' epigram a passer-by addresses Timonoe and refers to *her* monument. On p.45-60 the discussion about the context of Callimachus 31 *HE* about Charidas contains a great deal of speculation.

- 2) As to the book's organisation, there is no clear overall line of argument and the individual chapters follow each other without a clear and logical connection between them and usually end with the last epigram discussed in it without offering a conclusion related to the theme of the chapter announced at its beginning. Nor is there a conclusion at the end of the book: it simply ends with the last chapter, which contains a brief final remark on p.458-459. It does not become clear what the reader has learned from the discussions of the epigrams on a more abstract level. There are often interesting hints of themes or tendencies in epigram that would deserve further explorations, e.g., about the choices one may make in life and their outcomes (p.64) or the 'enrichment' of epigrams by the import of material from other sources (p.368). However, C. does not elaborate these in a systematic and exhaustive manner and the reader is not offered an overview of what is at stake. Another possible principle of organisation, the chronology of the epigrams, receives little attention, although it would have been good to pay more attention to the relative chronology of the epigrams

and their authors as this could affect views on their interpretation. For instance, in the chapter on literary polemics (p.125-159) it would have been good to distinguish more systematically between polemics between contemporaries and polemical reactions to predecessors by later poets. Sometimes there are interesting observations on chronological aspects, as on p.178-179 about the decrease of specific anti-Callimachean polemics in late I AD, which makes one regret that these issues have not been elaborated more systematically.

- 3) I am not always happy with C.'s way of arguing. The work contains several bold statements or general assumptions without further arguments, e.g. when C. states without further ado that erotic and scoptic epigrams were written mainly to be entertaining (p.22,) or in chapter 5 about literary polemics (p.125-159). In the latter case it might have been more profitable to approach the subject with an open mind and not take the idea of 'polemics' for granted and accept the much later list of 'Telchines' as a guideline for the discussion. Elsewhere there is sometimes undue speculation, as, e.g., on p.93, with typical phrases like "it takes little imagination to hypothesize ... . If so, ... perhaps ...", which do not really lead to solid results; in chapter 4 about the role of epigrams for the fund-raising of temples (p.95-124); or on p.247-254 about the position and death of Menecrates. The argumentation is generally very dense with many references and quotations and sometimes excursions on the constitution of the text, which may interrupt the line of argument, as, e.g., on p.115-116. Sometimes one may also criticize details of the interpretation of the many passages that are adduced, as in the case of Dioscorides 36 *HE* (p.140-142). There C. seems to miss the point that this epigram probably contrasts serious drama like Euripides' *Temenidae* with mime and that its message is that, as uncultured audiences prefer the latter, it is a waste of time and effort to focus on serious tragedy. Although the phrasing recalls Callimachus' prologue to the *Aetia* (fr.1), the train of thought is therefore quite different. Another example of a not very careful use of textual evidence is p.199 n.67. There C. adduces Callimachean fragments to support the notion that "he could also use rustic topics positively". However, fr.24 is about a boorish farmer refusing food for a starving child, fr.27 is addressed to a child killed by shepherds' dogs, fr.72-73 feature an unhappy and solitary lover in the countryside, so the view of what happens in the country seems grim rather than positive. There can also be surprising omissions, as in the chapter on poetry, sex and the countryside (p.187-215), where one misses a discussion of the bucolic epigrams of Theocritus.

Summarizing, I want to emphasize that my criticisms do not impair my overall judgment of this book. I think this book is an important and valuable

contribution to the study of Hellenistic epigram, particularly because of the thorough and learned discussions of the individual epigrams and the ideas for further thematic research that the various chapters may generate and for which they provide ample material.

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