



Reviews

Hieronymus' Witwenbüchlein für Salvina (epist. 79): Text, Übersetzung, Einführung und Kommentar. Philip Polcar. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021. 373 pages, 77.10€

Reviewing commentaries is often difficult. As compilations of lore from throughout classical scholarship, they often cross the borders between the disciplines and exceed the meager confines of a single reviewer's competencies. Nevertheless, reviews are necessary, especially for a late antique text, where a commentary can often remain the only one for the foreseeable future. Serving as the unwary reader's *accessus* and companion to an ancient text, it can wield disproportionate influence for generations, rendering quality control all the more important. To start with the conclusion: from a philologist's perspective, Philip Polcar's commentary on Jerome's *epistula 79* is a highly competent piece of craftsmanship. It fulfills its core function as a commentary well, answering most questions that a reader could conceivably have about the text in a way that generally enriches the reading experience. Notwithstanding any criticisms in the following, it is a worthy addition to any well-stocked library on patristic authors.

In the monograph under review, a revised version of a dissertation submitted at the University of Konstanz in 2019, Polcar sets out to provide a full-scale commentary on a single letter of Jerome's correspondence such as will be familiar to those who have read the work of Scourfield, Adkin, and Cain. The letter under investigation, *epistula 79*, is addressed to the newly widowed Salvina, containing both consolation for the loss of her husband, Nebridius, and exhortation to chaste widowhood. After a brief introduction to Jerome and the letter's place in the ancient epistolographic tradition (pp. 11–19) and a survey of the edition and the manuscripts consulted (21–24), there follows a Latin text with a facing translation (pp. 24–45). The Latin is – with a few notable exceptions – a reproduction of Hilberg's CSEL edition (1910–1918), which remains the standard to this day. This is not due to a lack of philological craftsmanship or enterprise – Polcar has consulted Carolingian manuscripts unknown to Hilberg and regularly comments on variant readings – but rather a testament to the solidity of the text as transmitted. The rendering into German is not slavish and often

seeks to replicate Jerome's lively style by eschewing Latinate syntax. It does, however, hew closely to the sentence and clause divisions of the original, making it easy to consult the translation at a glance whenever the Latin should prove intractable. The substance of the monograph is made up of a section written in continuous prose that deals with problems of a broader nature (pp. 47–171), followed by a lemmatized commentary on the problems that can more easily be isolated to a single word or line (pp. 173–326), capped with a conclusion summarizing the most important findings (pp. 327–329).

In the introduction, Polcar attempts to situate the letter in its historical and cultural context as well as within Jerome's oeuvre. A prosopographic chapter delineates the background of Salvina and Nebridius, her deceased husband. Both are shadowy figures that would scarcely have been known if not for Jerome, which inevitably results in several tentative conclusions and inferences. Thus, two pages (pp. 55–56) are devoted to the fraught question of whether Salvina's famous father Gildo was a Donatist – a hypothesis Polcar rejects as unfounded – which could serve as an indication of the religious persuasion of his off-spring. Polcar recognizes the limitations of the evidence and is careful to distinguish between hypotheses and facts. For example, he suggests that Nebridius might have served as *comes rei privatae* immediately before his death, which would allow the use of the tenure of the following office holder, Studius, as a *terminus ante quem* for Nebridius' death. This, in turn, would allow for more exact dating of the letter (pp. 105–106). The problem is that this edifice hinges on a maximalist interpretation of a single line in the letter (79.5.12) that is perhaps more suggestive than probative. However, the suggestion is never represented as more than a pet hypothesis and is always flagged with a *caveat*. Overall, Polcar manages to paint a coherent picture of the sort of people Salvina, Nebridius, and their associates must have been, which gives the reader a good sense of the intended audience for Jerome's letter.

The question of the audience naturally segues into the question of the genre of the text. Polcar resolutely declares himself in favor of the widely – if not universally – accepted view that letters do not constitute a genre. Except for a few external characteristics, such as carrying the addressee's name at the head, they are principally defined by their potential for infinite variability. The seeming tension between the text that is both a *libellus* intended for public consumption and an *epistula* directed at an audience of one is not so much resolved as dismissed as only apparent. Like Jerome himself, Polcar will refer to this and other of Jerome's letters alternatively as a “Traktat,” as a “Brief,” or

as a "Büchlein" without much distinction, see, e.g., p. 163 for all three in rapid succession. Accepting that a text can without contradiction be both a letter and a treatise is, to some extent, necessary to Polcar's further argument. As he demonstrates in the taxonomical chapter (pp. 67–79), *epistula* 79 is composite, consisting of a consolatory section that addresses the specifics of Salvina's situation (chapters 1–6) and a protreptic section on the proper behavior of widows that seems to have a wider audience in mind and that at times becomes incongruent with Salvina's circumstances (chapters 7–11). This is all the more paradoxical considering that the first section talks about Salvina in the third person, while she is addressed in the second from chapter 7 onwards. That fact seemingly caused Polcar sufficient discomfort that he felt compelled to address it in a truly Teutonic two-page footnote, which has been tucked away in a comment on the word *sciat* (pp. 184–185, n. 52). The term "letter" must consequently be flexible enough to include a text that has not only two similar but separate purposes but also two similar but separate audiences.

This leads to the two most ambitious chapters in the introduction. In chapter 5, "How to get a Camel through the Eye of the Needle" (pp. 81–104), Polcar addresses the practical motives behind sending the letter to Salvina, treating the text primarily as private communication. In chapter 7, "Jerome's Widow Trilogy" (pp. 107–171), *epistula* 79 is viewed as a part of Jerome's broader program on widowhood. Chapter 5 delves into the dire state of Jerome's finances in the years around 400 AD, his need for support, and his reputation as an inheritance chaser or *captator*. While Polcar is careful to distance himself from Jack Goody's thesis that the reason that patristic authors favored virginity and widowhood was that they benefitted from childless people leaving everything to the church (p. 81–82), he nonetheless assigns much weight to the practical benefits accruing from the *amicitia* of a wealthy and influential widow for one in Jerome's position. In this way, he bolsters the view that the addressee and the letter's focus on charity as a central theme were chosen out of opportunistic concerns in the short term.

Chapter 7 addresses the long-term ideological concerns by considering the letter a "Fachbuch" for public consumption. In this chapter, Polcar compares the three letters on widowhood, *Ep.* 54, 79, and 123. He discusses the themes covered in each letter and how they supplement each other to complete the subject when viewed together. This results in a thorough overview of the thoughts not merely of Jerome but many patristic authors on various themes related to widowhood, from charity to remarriage. Moreover, it shows how Jerome's treatment of the topic

harmonizes with ideas he expressed much earlier and later, elevating the content over the immediate concerns at the moment of composition. This perspective, however, also introduces one of the more daring hypotheses. The subsequent letters, Polcar contends, were written with the preceding letter(s) in mind in such a way as to avoid redundancy, indicating that Jerome wrote for the audience either familiar with or with easy access to his prior letters (p. 165). This touches on the more delicate subject of how ancient texts and letters were “published” and circulated, which is bound to prove contentious. Polcar is, as always, aware of the limitations of his evidence and concedes that it admits of different interpretations. In this case, Jerome’s choice of themes may have been influenced by the circumstances of his addressee, but the general trend of Polcar’s argument is towards an interpretation of the texts as carefully crafted to be consumed by the general public, to be read within the context of Jerome’s broader *oeuvre*. It is, however, thoroughly fitting that a text as composite as this written by a character as complex as Jerome is subjected to a treatment that pulls in so many often slightly contradictory directions.

The lemmatized commentary is broad in scope, as indeed it must be to evince 150 pages of notes from just over ten pages of text. Polcar comments on stylistics, grammar, linguistics, classical and biblical allusions, philosophy and theology, cultural and church history, and more. This displays an impressive breadth of knowledge and interests that does the author credit. Particularly useful are the notes commenting on Jerome’s tone and rhetorical strategies. Polcar has a keen ear for the coloration of words, for irony and satire, and for the development of the argument. This manifests both in the details and the broader strokes of each chapter. For example, he explains that the word *marsuppium* is colloquial and is typically used by Jerome in satirical contexts (p. 181), an aspect of coloration that the reader reliant on Lewis and Short would have missed. The explanation of the Biblical allusion behind the “furnace of Babylon,” its use in patristic literature, and the punning on *fornix* / *fornax* (p. 227–228) similarly makes it much easier to follow the thread of argument for those readers unused to the rhetoric of Christian polemics. Shortly afterwards, Polcar explains how elements of Jerome’s consolation show similarities with the precepts of classical rhetoric for eulogies (p. 233). The mix of classical and Christian culture is a healthy one that will not only help make the text accessible to readers of various backgrounds but is also invaluable to properly understand Jerome.

The notes are perhaps, if anything, too copious. They contain all sorts of odds and ends from the antiquarian’s cabinet of curiosities

that do not necessarily help the reader better interpret the text, calling to mind the didactic *variorum* commentaries of the late Renaissance. In 7.18, for example, Jerome lists a series of dishes from which Salvina abstains, starting with the *Phasides aves* or pheasants. The reader is told that Isidore, drawing on Martial, erroneously derives their name from the Greek island Phasis (p. 262–263). This leaves one with two unanswered questions. Firstly, why is Isidore's etymology relevant? Secondly, what is the correct etymology? – To spare the curious a trip to their Pauly-Wissowa on the second count: The derivation is etymologically sound, the error consists in calling Phasis, a river in Colchis, an island. – Polcar continues: Aristophanes is the first to mention pheasants. Pliny the Elder was fascinated by their “feather ears.” Then follows the pertinent information: Pliny, Seneca, Galen, and Ambrose regarded pheasant as an extravagant delicacy, explaining why it is given pride of place among the luxuries, and some otherwise vegetarian ascetics made an exception for fish and poultry, marking Salvina as morally superior for not resorting to such dubious loopholes. Several similar notes could have benefited from some tightening and a clearer sense of the implicit question(s) to which they provide the answer. If, however, the most grievous fault one can find with a commentary is that it is excessively informative, it is a good commentary indeed.

To end on a literary-aesthetic note: as a non-native speaker, I cannot speak with authority about the elegance of Polcar's prose, but I can say that it is uniformly clear and immediately intelligible. Polcar eschews the labyrinthine periods characteristic of the German academic style in favor of briefer, punchier sentences that seldom exceed three lines and never do so gratuitously. The tone, though suitably scholarly and laden with subjunctives, is unpretentious and at times playful. Thus one chapter heading reads “Poor monk seeks filthy rich widow” (p. 89), parodying an advertisement from a lonely hearts column. The problems that Polcar attempts to solve are mostly concrete and specific to the text. Consequently, his prose is relatively free from abstruse abstractions and technical jargon borrowed from anthropology and literary theory. Whether this is ultimately a strength or a weakness is perhaps a matter for debate, but it does make for an easier read. One never feels the need for a commentary to the commentary. The volume itself is handsomely produced and typeset, and apart from a few minor complaints to be directed at the copy editor – inconsistencies in whether a comma or a dot is used in references to classical texts (7,13 or 7.13), a missing space on p. 237, an aberrant apostrophe in “durch's” *passim*, etc. – gives a very professional impression.

Willum Westenholz