

NIKLAS HOLZBERG, *Persius. Satiren, Lateinisch - deutsch*, Sammlung Tusculum, Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2022, 139 pp., 29.95€, ISBN 978-3-11-077290-6.

There exists scarcely a student of ancient literature in the German-speaking world who has not, at some point in their academic journey, sought guidance from the works of Niklas Holzberg. In addition to his role as co-editor of the esteemed Tusculum series—a cornerstone for bilingual editions of Greek and Latin texts utilized by students and researchers for over a century—Holzberg is also recognized as a skilled translator. His translations cover a wide range of texts, from Aesop to Virgil, and he has written numerous introductions on genres, including ancient epigram, fable, and elegy, as well as on authors such as Ovid, Horace, and Aristophanes.

His new translation of Persius' Satires is especially noteworthy, considering the work's relative neglect in university courses and its near-total absence from secondary education. The scarcity of German translations of Persius underscores the significance of Holzberg's work. While the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries produced several hexameter translations, only Otto Seel (in verse, 1950; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1974) and Walter Kißel (in prose, 1990, as part of his extensive commentary) have ventured into this task since 1950. A contemporary translation that meets the needs of today's readers is both timely and imperative.

Holzberg's new volume, which replaces the bilingual edition by Otto Seel in the Tusculum series, features an introduction (pp. 9-37), the text and translation of the satires and the *vita Persi* (pp. 40-97), an appendix outlining textual deviations from Kißel's critical edition (pp. 101-2), and explanatory notes with paraphrases of each poem (pp. 103-29). The book concludes with a well-organized bibliography (pp. 131-5) and an index of proper names (pp. 137-9). It would have been advantageous to include brief explanations with the index entries, following the practice observed in other volumes of this series and similar bilingual editions. Holzberg's inclusion of conjectures not listed in Kißel's Teubneriana (2007) is valuable, though specific bibliographic references would have been useful. Many of the noted deviations pertain to punctuation. Notably, the typographical error "crititicus" (p. 92, paragraph 5) in the text of the *vita*—where *criticus* should replace *tragicus* as conjectured by Glenn Most—is vexing.<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction, Holzberg offers a nuanced discussion of the complexities surrounding biographical details and key aspects of Persius' poetry, including its close connection to Horace's satires. However, an exploration of Persius' frequent use of food metaphors—central to Roman satire—would have been beneficial, particularly in light of Shadi Bartsch's insightful book (*Persius: A Study in Food, Philosophy, and the Figural*, 2015). Bartsch connects Persius' distinctive use of

<sup>1</sup> The conjecture referenced by Holzberg likely originates from pages 2045-6 of Most's ANRW-article: "Cornutus and Stoic Allegoresis", in W. Haase, *Philosophie, Wissenschaften, Technik. Philosophie (Stoizismus)*, Berlin 1989 (=ANRW II.36.3), 2014-65.

(violent) metaphor and (repulsive) imagery to his Stoic thoughts about abstract truth, interpreting them as an anti-Lucretian response to the question of whether philosophy can be conveyed through poetry. Holzberg also draws attention to the stylistic features, such as the use of dense and heavily abbreviated conjunctions that challenge comprehension, and the literal application of metaphor (“Metaphern beim Worte genommen”). However, he interprets these techniques, along with the use of intertextuality, as elements of a sophisticated game of recognition and an intellectual exercise—essentially, a form of entertainment. Furthermore, Holzberg argues that Persius’ *libellus* can be interpreted as a cohesive narrative unfolding across the six satires. This narrative comprises a philosophical course of study (satires 2-5) that parallels the maturation of a young man,<sup>2</sup> culminating in an epilogue (sat. 6) where the speaker reflects on the ‘golden mean’ and engages in a dialogue with a potential heir. Finally, Holzberg sheds light on the history of Persius’ reception, highlighting Augustine’s crucial role in shaping its trajectory. He also addresses the negative critiques from 17<sup>th</sup>- to 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers and scholars, who accused Persius of having an incomprehensible style and a lack of originality. This section transitions seamlessly into the philological study of Persius, which also serves as the foundation for the final part of the introduction.

In this last section of the introduction (“Persius ohne Muhme”, pp. 34-7), Holzberg offers insights into the motivation behind his own work as a translator of Persius. He justifies his decision to provide a new translation, particularly his choice of prose, and outlines his approach to translation. Holzberg himself is renowned for his occasionally explicit translations of ancient obscenities, a facet that, until recently, remained largely unaddressed. He has delivered well-received translations of ancient poetry in both verse and prose. In the case of Persius, Holzberg has opted for a prose translation, adhering to a *verbum ad verbum* principle (p. 35). Acknowledging the needs of the targeted (non-professional) readership (“ein nicht fachlich ausgebildetes Lesepublikum” p. 35-6), he distinguishes the verbatim translation from the explanatory comments which include paraphrasing the meaning of a verse. Furthermore, he argues that the older translations retained outdated vocabulary (such as “Muhme” [~“Tante” (aunt)]) and “classicist patina”. The hexameter renditions, he argues further, adhere to the tradition initiated by Johann Heinrich Voß, this including Kissel’s prose translation, despite claiming otherwise, aligning with the hexameter rhythm, thus creating challenges in maintaining the satirist’s linguistic nuances. As a consequence, he contends that Persius, in particular, with his “idiosyncratic doctrine, compressed formulations, abrupt transitions, the amalgamation of vulgar and poetic language, and other peculiarities,” („mit seiner eigenwilligen Doktrin, den gedrängten Formulierungen, abrupten Übergängen, der Mischung von Vulgär- und Dichtersprache und anderen Besonderheiten”) necessitates a translation that preserves these nuances. Consequently, the cover of the volume already promotes

<sup>2</sup> Cf. K.J. Reckford, *Recognizing Persius*, Princeton 2009, 144-50.

the translation as “very literal” and “reliable.” This decision for extreme literalness in translation, justified by the unique qualities of Persius’ satires, is underscored by the necessity for detailed explanations, making Walter Kissel’s commentary an indispensable resource despite criticisms. Furthermore, Holzberg presents his literal translation as a deliberate response to more recent interpretations (vaguely distinguishing between philological “Textarbeit” and interpretation, informed by postmodern literary theory) that, in his view, deviate too far from the original wording of the text. While this stance might be somewhat exaggerated, one could argue that his prose translation also pays minor attention to preserving the metrical form, an essential aesthetic feature especially for verse satire in its parasitic relation to epic poetry. Naturally, achieving every objective of a translation simultaneously is not always possible. As this example illustrates Holzberg’s overall helpful introduction is weakened by some unnecessary generalizations and inaccurate critiques of ‘Anglo-American research.’ The claim that Anglo-American researchers tend to ignore foreign scholarship, and particularly Kissel’s commentary, which relies on some criticism of Kissel’s commentary by Zetzel, is easily contradicted by evidence such as Bartsch’s seminal book, which contains approximately 30 references to Kissel’s commentary and includes explicit praise on page 3.<sup>3</sup> The same inaccurate generalization applies to Holzberg’s critique (p. 12) that recent Anglo-American research tends to overemphasize political allusions and search for implicit criticism of Nero, a claim he does not substantiate with evidence or references.

The most significant part of the book is, of course, the translation. Overall, the translation has been well-executed and is appropriate. However, it often feels more like a provisional, initial attempt that primarily decodes the Latin grammar—a working tool for deeper engagement with the original text—rather than a polished translation that effectively recodes the text for contemporary German-speaking readers. In accordance with his method, Holzberg seems to endeavor to translate all Latin words into German, which sometimes becomes somewhat unwieldy and cumbersome, such as the literal translation of anaphoric demonstratives – rarely used in German – that simply refer to the following infinitive constructions or subordinate clauses (e.g. 2.63: *quid iuuat hoc, templis nostros inmittere mores* [...]?; – „was nützt dies, in die Tempel unser Sitten eingehen zu lassen [...]?”; 5.1: *Vatibus hic mos est, centum sibi poscere voces.* – “Die Dichter haben diesen Brauch, für sich hundert Stimmen zu fordern...”: or 5.98: *naturaque continent hoc fas, ut teneat uetitos inscitia debilis actus.* „[...] und die Natur beinhaltet dieses Gebot, dass schwächliche Unwissenheit sich verbotenen Handelns enthalten soll”). In some cases, an interpretive and explanatory translation, rather than a literal one, would have been more appropriate. For example, in 1.3, *vel duo vel*

<sup>3</sup> A similar appreciation can be found in the monographs by D. Hooley, *The Knotted Thong. Structures of Mimesis in Persius*, Ann Arbor 1997, viii, and K.J. Reckford (as above, p. 11).

*nemo* (“Entweder zwei oder niemand.”), which, as Casaubon already observed,<sup>4</sup> might be a variant of a Greek colloquial expression meaning ‘one or the other/a few.’ In this instance, a more informative translation or at least an explanatory note would have been advisable. Another example, where the literal translation obscures the meaning, is *nucibus relictis* (1.10), which Holzberg translates as “wenn wir die Nüsse hinter uns gelassen haben.” The term “nuts” (as explained by Holzberg in the notes) refers to “children’s toys,” which would have been easily understood by a Roman contemporary reader. In contrast, Kießel skillfully preserved the cultural unfamiliarity of nuts as children’s toys while providing an explanatory context by translating it as “den Jahren des Nussspiels entwachsen” (outgrown the years of playing with nuts). This approach avoids creating additional obstacles to comprehension. At times, Holzberg proceeds to the opposite extreme, exemplified by his rendering of *populo marcentes pandere uuluas*, (4.36) as “den Leuten die ausgeleierte Arschfotze ausbreiten.” Holzberg undeniably delivers on his commitment to refresh outdated vocabulary. (cf. e.g. Seel’s „dem Volke die Lefzen zu bieten!”). The punchline, which has sparked discussions among editors and commentators prompting conjectures (*bulbos*, *valvas*), warrants clarification. In this context, *vulva* (matrix/uterus) extends to denote the vagina, suggesting that the accused is a pathic, hence his anus being likened to a vagina, a joke often made by Martial. While an argument may be made for retaining the explicit nature of the joke, the translation “Arschfotze” introduces a vulgar nuance not inherent in the Latin word *vulva*.<sup>5</sup> Holzberg here appears to have transferred the connotation of the vulgar term *cunnius* commonly used derogatorily to refer to the anus of a male pathic.<sup>6</sup>

It is a long-standing topos that Persius is difficult to understand—an idea the poet himself reinforced through Cornutus’ characterization of him as skilled in the art of harsh juxtaposition (*iunctura callidus acri*, 5.14) and by describing his own style as ‘condensed’ (literally ‘cooked through,’ *decoctius*, 1.123). Holzberg is certainly right when he points out that Persius requires considerably more commentary than, say, Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Indeed, Kießel’s commentary, which Holzberg praises effusively (though references only twice), leaves little to be desired. It is therefore a difficult task to select and prepare the necessary information in such a way that the text is comprehensible and does not completely exceed the scope of the edition. 26 (small and densely printed) pages of commentary (pp. 103-29) for 56 pages of text and translation (pp. 42-97) appears to be an adequate ratio (Seel had around 20 pages of notes). In general, Holzberg provides valuable insights that enhance the reader’s understanding of the text. However, every user (and reviewer) is likely to identify a few areas for improvement, and this one is no exception. In the introduction, Holzberg identifies literary allusions, particularly the intertextual

<sup>4</sup> Cf. W. Kießel, *Satiren*. Hg., übersetzt und kommentiert, Heidelberg 1990, 113.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, Baltimore 1990<sup>2</sup> [London 1982], 101-6.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 116-17.

dialogue with Horace, as a central feature of the satires, noting that recognizing these references significantly enhances the reading experience. Unfortunately, he does not always follow through on this emphasis in the commentary notes. Here are two examples: First, immediately following the probable quotation from a Lucilius verse with which Persius begins his first satire, an interlocutor interrupts with the question: “quis leget haec?” This phrase was identified by the scholion as a quotation from Lucilius (frg. 2), although this reference has been questioned, with some suggesting it more likely refers to verse 1. In Horace, a similar thought is used to ironically characterize the lack of reader appeal in his own poetry (Sat. 1.4.22f: “cum mea nemo/scripta legat”). Holzberg does not mention either of these points.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the above-mentioned expression *iunctura callidus acri* (5.14) highlights the sharp connections that contribute to Persius’ cleverness as a poet. While Holzberg analyzes the reference to Horace’s Satire 1.4.29-31 in the metaphorical comparison of other poets’ works to a bellow in the previous verses (5.10-11), he does not address the reworking of this expression from Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (47-8: *notum si callida uerbum/reddiderit iunctura nouum*). This omission of this reference (which is also absent in Seel’s earlier Tusculum edition) is noteworthy, as the expression is central to Persius’ poetics, illustrating both his peculiar use of metaphor and his method of innovative engaging with literary tradition, as multiple studies have highlighted.<sup>8</sup> Although it is impossible to list every possible allusion in the notes, the absence of these two references is particularly regrettable.

In summary, Holzberg’s new bilingual edition of Persius’ Satires, while occasionally biased in the introduction and at times overly literal in the translation, is a valuable resource for navigating the complexities of Persius’ satire. Its faithful rendering serves as an excellent tool for making the text more accessible, especially for students grappling with intricate syntax and grammar, encouraging deeper engagement with the text. Readers seeking a more interpretive ad sensum translation for quicker understanding may need to look elsewhere. Consequently, Holzberg’s work lays a strong foundation for incorporating Persius more frequently into the classroom, a contribution that is invaluable and deserves high praise.

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<sup>7</sup> Nor does J.R. Jenkinson in his notes (*Persius. The Satires. Text with Translation and Notes*, Warminster 1980). For a detailed discussion of the problematic statement by the scholion, see Kißel 1980, 109-12; for the Horace reference, see 112-13.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, W.S. Anderson, “Persius and the rejection of society”, in W.S. Anderson, *Essays on Roman Satire*, Princeton 1982 [first 1966], 185-6; Cynthia S. Dessen, *Satires of Persius: Iunctura Callidus Acri*, 1996<sup>2</sup> [first 1968], x; A. Cucchiarelli, “Speaking from silence: the Stoic paradoxes of Persius”, in K. Freudenburg, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Satire*, Cambridge-New York 2005, 77-8, and the excellent discussion by S. Bartsch, *Persius: a Study in Food, Philosophy, and the Figural*, Chicago 2015, 141-60.