

Lucillius' Boxer Epigrams

The extant works of the epigrammatist Lucillius comprise approximately 140 poems in the *Palatine Anthology*. Almost all these poems were preserved among the satirical epigrams in Book 11. Little information about Lucillius survives, although a few epigrams refer to the emperor Nero, providing a likely *floruit*. My concern in this paper is a set of six poems that mock boxers, *AP* 11.75-81. Although Lucillius portrays the boxers as contemptible losers, his recurring theme is that they would have suffered equally even if they were better boxers. Throughout these poems, Lucillius repeatedly blurs the distinction between defeat and victory. While Nisbet interprets this gesture as merely a serio-comic combination of humor and advice (2003, 73-74), I argue that the boxer series indicates Lucillius' deep suspicion about the value of competition and his mistrust of glory obtained in athletic contests.

All six poems mock boxers by showing the futility of their sport: the faces of both winners and losers are inevitably mutilated. While many details of their injuries resemble those in real inscriptions set up as unironic monuments to athletic victories (Robert 1967, 196-8), Lucillius emphasizes the losses the boxers experience even in victory. For example, the boxer in poem 11.75 literally loses his identity to boxing, because he has received so many facial injuries that nobody can recognize him. He is consequently prosecuted by his brother and deprived of his inheritance. On the other hand, several of Lucillius' boxers receive the honors of victors despite being defeated: Apollophanes is assured that after being thoroughly mutilated in previous contests he may now fight "fearlessly" because he has nothing left to lose (11.78.5-6). Another boxer, Androleos, describes his (unconscious) exit from the stadium as graced by a herald, his father, and a celebratory group of his fellow citizens (11.81). There are some drawbacks

(Androleos may actually be dead: ἄπνοος, at line 4, is ambiguous), but they are no worse than the detriments associated with successful competition. As Lucillius makes victory and defeat almost interchangeable—a loser can become famous and honored in his community, just as a victor is supposed to be—he also points out that boxers cannot even quit their profession, as one boxer who chooses to cease competing is instead pummeled by his wife (11.79).

Lucillius mocks the boxers not only for their incompetence, but for their victories as well. His boxer poems present something unusual in Greek culture: a complete lack of interest in the glory associated with success in competition. The boxers win and lose, become famous and are forgotten, but Lucillius rejects any connection between ability and result. The boxer poems bring into question the goals of Lucillius' other poems, as well: the futile contest between boxers resembles the futile contest between poets. This combination of defeat and victory, and cynicism about both, is typical of Lucillius' programmatic poem, *AP* 9.572, in which he both exalts and dismisses epic poetry. In *AP* 9.572, Lucillius reproduces or adapts the first lines of the *Theogony*, *Iliad*, and *Odyssey* (Floridi 2014, *ad loc*), only to conclude "I would not have survived if Nero Caesar hadn't given me a few bucks" (οὐκ ἂν ἐσώθην, / εἰ μὴ μοι Καῖσαρ χαλκὸν ἔδωκε Νέρων, 9.572.7-8). In contrast to the famous lines of Homer and Hesiod, Lucillius' poetry is made to sound petty, with little reward. Like the boxers, Lucillius cannot win, whether or not he plays the game: although capable of quoting famous epic, he does not value it enough to imitate it, and by his own admission his poetry is not worth much.

Lucillius' boxer poems are part of a larger theme in his epigrams. As he mocks the competitors, he implies that the competition is itself unwinnable. The futility on display in Lucillius' epigrams is not just a witty combination of humor and advice, but the total rejection of traditional competition and aesthetic judgment.

Bibliography

Floridi, Lucia, ed. *Lucillio, 'Epigrammi' Introduzione, Testo Critico, Traduzione e Commenti*.

Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014

Nisbet, Gideon. *Greek Epigram in the Roman Empire: Martial's Forgotten Rivals*. Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2003.

Robert, Louis. "Les Épigrammes satiriques de Lucilius sur les athlètes: parodie et réalités."

Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique. Vol. 13 (1967): 179-295.