PROLOGUE: AT THE SYMPOSIUM

We are at a symposium in the house of Lysiteles of Athens in the last month of the 111th Olympiad, 328 BCE. The guest of honour is Charicles, a handsome and athletic young Athenian of good family, lately returned from abroad. Dinner has been lavish – the finest Copaic eels and the largest sea pike, Boeotian in their luxury – but this has now been cleared away. The slaves have distributed garlands of myrtle and roses, the pretty flute-girls have struck up their tune, and the symposiarch, master of festivities, has declared his rules for the mixing and drinking of the wine (old Chian, and chilled with snow). Next comes the question of entertainment. The company immediately rejects philosophy and gambling, but Ctesiphon's proposal is taken up with enthusiasm: they will play at riddles, each expressed in the form of a short and witty poem. These, then, are *epigrams*.

In this short book we offer a concise account of what epigram is, how it began, how it reached us, and why it is worth getting excited about (Introduction). Beginning with the earliest examples on stone (Chapter 1), we explore epigram's rise to prominence as a literary genre in the Greek world after Alexander (Chapter 2), and investigate its journey from Hellenistic culture into the very different world of Rome (Chapter 3).

Greek epigram did not end when Latin epigram began; instead it mutated, while still maintaining the pretence that nothing had changed. Latin epigram, meanwhile, went its own strange way, and the genre continued to flourish in both languages right through into Late Antiquity and beyond (Chapter 4). Through the *Greek Anthology* (Introduction) and the collected works of Martial, the remains of ancient epigram continued to exert influence in the Renaissance and after.

So many of these short poems survived that any translation had to be selective; any account of the genre had to leave some things out and emphasize others. As the new mass readership of the Victorian age began to discover the classics through cheap translations and popular handbooks, this propensity for intense editorial activity became a blessing and a curse. Epigram could be used to tell *any* story about

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the ancient past (and of course this applies to our own account as well). In a culture that looked to Greece and Rome to confirm its own ideals and truths, new narratives could be dangerous; the 'wrong' selection of epigrams could and did provoke moral panic, as our final chapter (Chapter 5) reveals.

One can see the anxiety begin to stir at Lysiteles' symposium. These poems look like epigrams, a literary form which very much belongs there; but they are *not* real ancient poems. Nor is this a real symposium – but it is the next best thing, or ought to be. In fact, the gathering at Lysiteles' house is taken from an educational novel by a German classics professor, Wilhelm Becker. *Charicles, or Illustrations of the Private Life of the Ancient Greeks, with Notes and Excursuses* was first published in English in 1846 in the translation of the Revd Frederick Metcalfe, a Fellow of Lincoln College in Oxford and by all accounts quite a character (his entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* makes fascinating reading). Metcalfe abridged as he went along, aggressively cutting back the indigestible detail of the professor's scholarly apparatus to make his version of *Charicles* less of a grind.[1]

Metcalfe's version is itself now practically unreadable, but he had his finger on the pulse of his society: his *Charicles* (unlike Becker's) stayed in circulation through sixty-odd years of editions and imprints, answering a real need. Becker himself had never actually visited Greece, but his classical reading was prodigious, and he aimed at nothing less than a total recreation of daily life in the autumn years of classical Athens. (His earlier work, *Gallus*, had done the same for early Augustan Rome.) *Charicles* immersed its readers in an educational virtual reality, every detail of which was determined by the relevant ancient texts. Each striped cushion, each tiny basket is justified and documented with direct quotation of the original Greek. The smattering of local colour in our opening paragraph – Copaic eels, snow-chilled wine – gives only the smallest hint of *Charicles*' obsessive completism, even in Metcalfe's stripped-down version for the Anglophone market. In its desire to present a total simulacrum of antiquity to the visual imagination of its readers, it resembles nothing so much as the elaborate moving panoramas that dominated the visual culture of the mid-nineteenth century. Immersing their

[1] Metcalfe's mutilations of Becker, savage even by the standards of his age, were partly directed at making *Charicles* physically shorter to please his publishers; his fellow dons pestered him to restore some of the cut material in subsequent editions (Becker 1895: v).

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socially inclusive audiences in worlds that they could never visit for real – scenes of Arctic exploration were a favourite – and enhanced by ingenious special effects, these carnivalesque touring spectacles were always accompanied by a barker, whose scripted patter of plausible detail glossed the spectacle as a compressed education, offering a total experience that could not be had from mere book-learning. *Charicles*' aim is the same. Becker is always *Professor* Becker in Metcalfe's introductory banter; the panorama showmen called themselves 'professors' too.[2]

Total simulation, of course, was not the same thing as the whole truth and nothing but the truth; Metcalfe's speeded-up *Charicles* cut not only the redundant citations but also Becker's juicier appendices.[3] There were certain things that the British public was not ready to see in its ancient Greece, any more than they expected their Arctic panoramas to show their navy's finest succumbing to scurvy and the temptation of cannibalism. No mention, then, of what other services those flute-girls might be contracted for; and certainly no hint of pretty boys, for reasons that we will explore later.

But these strategic omissions were Metcalfe's, not Becker's. Figure 1 shows some of Becker's pseudo-epigrams in their translated publication context. In the surrounding material, the author's mania for accuracy shines through, undiminished by Metcalfe's showmanship. Why then has he broken his own rules this one time and *faked* a whole sequence of Greek epigrams? And why has he taken the trouble, when there are thousands of real ones to hand in the *Anthology*?

We must begin by looking at *how* he has faked them. As his footnotes acknowledge, Becker's pseudo-epigrams are cut down and adapted from fragments of Athenian tragedy and Middle Comedy of the fourth century BCE – the period of *Charicles*, with Plato a recent memory. Becker's underlying problem is chronological: at this date,

[2] On the 'Arctic spectacles' in particular, but with more general relevance, see Potter 2007.

[3] Metcalfe brags of his bowdlerizing 'labours' as an improving update at Becker 1895: ix–x: 'It has…been deemed advisable to depart occasionally from the author's principle of *ὀνομάζειν τὰ σῦκα σῦκα*; by an over-tenacious adherence to which his narrative has here and there become offensive to good taste, without much being gained thereby. Accordingly, one entire Excursus has been left out, and the one on the *ἑταῖραι* [*hetairai*, courtesans] much curtailed, though the translator rather regrets the necessity of making the latter omissions.' The missing Excursus is about pederasty, although Metcalfe is careful not to say so. He even goes into Greek to 'call figs, figs' (*ὀνομάζειν τὰ σῦκα σῦκα*), the classical equivalent of 'calling a spade a spade'. Metcalfe retains what he decently can of the *hetairai*, not from prurient interest but because of the light they throw on the awful consequences of loveless Athenian marriages – how very unlike the home life of our own dear Queen.

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epigram does not yet exist outside of inscriptions on stone. Literary epigram will be the defining genre of the symposium, but *not yet*: the great names of the Hellenistic period – Callimachus, Posidippus, Asclepiades – are a generation or more in the future. If Becker wants to populate his symposium with epigrams, he must make them up himself from the remnants of writers who have nothing to do with epigram at all.

Now that we know what he is doing, the questions become if anything more acute. *Why* does Becker feel the need to push sympotic epigram back into the fourth century, where he knows it does not belong? (We suggest one likely motivation in our Introduction.) And why *these* epigrams, cut implausibly from Athenian cloth, when he could have taken his pick of hundreds of anonymous *Anthology* originals? Our final chapter will revisit Becker's Victorian epigram-factory and suggest some possible answers.

In the meantime, we must begin by defining what it is we mean by 'epigram'. What is this genre that provoked the respectable nineteenth century into an orgy of fibbing?

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