PARTHENIUS AND ROMAN POETRY

BY

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Parthenius is one of the most puzzling figures in Roman literature of the first century B.C. Many commentators and literary historians have virtually ignored the influence of this Greek writer. "I do not understand" says Clausen in his well-known article on Callimachus, "why those who have written recently on the New Poetry make so little of him: Quinn in his The Catullan Revolution (1959), Wimmel in his Kallimachos in Rom (1960), Fordyce in his edition of Catullus (1961), unless I am mistaken, do not even mention him" 1). Yet others believe that Parthenius is the guiding force behind much of the poetry produced by Catullus and the other New Poets at Rome 2). It is the purpose of this article to review briefly the main data concerned with Parthenius and Roman poetry which have given rise to these diametrically opposed views, and to present a sober examination of the evidence.

Chronology

The traditional dates for the life of Parthenius, based largely on the Suda, seem to be right. We are informed that he was captured in the Mithridatic Wars by a certain Cinna 3), was freed because of his learning and brought to Rome 4). The date could be as early

1) W. Clausen, Callimachus and Latin Poetry, GRBS 5 (1964), 188.
3) The relationship of Parthenius to Helvius Cinna and the identity of this Cinna are discussed infra.
4) The statement of the Suda (ed. Adler) is as follows: ὁ δὲ ἔλθω ὅπο Κίννα λάφυρον, ὅτε Μιθριδάτην Ἄρωμαίοι κατεπόλεμησαν, εἶτα ἡρεῖθν διὰ τὴν παῖδευσιν καὶ ἔβας μέχρι Τιβέριον τοῦ Καίσαρος.
as 73 B.C. when Parthenius’ home town of Nicaea was captured, or as late as 66-65 B.C. when the forces of Mithridates were finally defeated ⁵). We are also told by the same source that he lived until the time of Tiberius, that is to at least 14 A.D. If this information is correct, Parthenius must have lived in Rome for more than eighty years after his upbringing in Asia Minor. However, since Parthenius was known for his learning while still in Nicaea, one may presume that he already had there a reputation as a poet ⁶), and that the Suda accredits to him a lifespan longer than is credible ⁷). At all events he was alive in the middle of the first century B.C. and lived for a time at Rome.

Poetry

Unfortunately no complete poem of Parthenius has survived to determine exactly what it was like. The surviving fragments are of a grammatical, mythological and geographical interest, many of them quoted by Stephanus of Byzantium ⁸). The longest of these fragments consists of six verses written in hexameters and shows the same metrical technique of the spondaic hexameter which was common at Alexandria and also among the New Poets at Rome (Amat. Narr. 11, 1) ⁹). It treats the bizarre, mythological story of the death of Byblis who fell in love with her brother Caunus. It may be that this type of subject-matter is representative of his poetry, since it is not unlike the themes of his thirty-six love stories in prose, Amatoriaes Narrationes or Love Romances, which treat the unnatural passion of daughter for father, of sister for brother, and similar, and from which the above fragment is taken. Similarly, a prose summary from the lost Metamorphoses (fr. 20) recounts the story of Minos and Scylla.

⁵) The term ξιναμολεμέω may suggest the final defeat of Mithridates’ forces, about 66-65 B.C.
⁶) Cf. Pfeiffer (supra n. 2), 30 f.
⁷) Is it believed that Parthenius lived until the time of Tiberius since he was a favourite poet of the Emperor? Cf. Suetonius Tib. 70.
⁸) Cf. I. Cazzaniga, I frammenti poetici di Partenio da Nicea, SCO 10 (1961), 44 f. The text used is that of Martini (Leipzig 1902).