WHAT IS AN EPIDEICTIC EPIGRAM?

BY

M.D. LAUXTERMANN

The present paper questions the validity of the term ‘epideictic epigram’, which many modern scholars use without explaining what they mean by it. In his classic study on the epideictic genre Burgess states that in the title of AP IX the term ‘epideictic’ “is used in its most vague and general meaning” and that “a few (of the epigrams in AP IX) are purely epideictic in motive”, whereas most are not 1). In his recent study on epideixis Pernot writes the following: “Cette poésie encomiastique manque généralement d’ampleur. Les textes de Mésomèdes, la plupart des hymnes, la presque totalité des épigrammes sont des poèmes épideictiques, peut-être, mais en miniature” 2). “Peut-être”, but as Pernot notes, it is the nature of epigrams to be relatively short and short texts simply lack space for rhetorical expansion. Epideixis is a rhetorical genre with a long tradition, initially denoting any speech that is not forensic or deliberative 3), but later assuming a more distinct, encomiastic character 4). The epideictic genre is divided into various types of encomiastic speech according to the specific occasion for which the orator writes his encomium: epithalamium (wedding), monody (funeral), etc. Ancient rhetoricians, such as Ps. Menander, describe the structure of these various epideictic speeches in detail, from prologue to epilogue and passing through all the intermediate stages. By the very nature of epideixis encomiastic speeches can not be short and, in fact, the majority of the speeches of the Roman period fill many pages in any modern edition. Long poems, such as Theocritus’ Idyll 17 5) or Statius’ Silvae 6),

2) L. Pernot, La rhétorique de l’éloge dans le monde gréco-romain (Paris 1993), II, 641.
3) Aristotle, Ars Rhetorica, 1358a-1359a and 1366a-1368a.
5) See F. Cairns, Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry (Edinburgh 1972), 100-112.

may appear to display the structure of certain epideictic types, but it is questionable whether the term ‘epideixis’ can be successfully applied to the epigrammatic genre given its limited scope and extent. While it is certainly true that many epigrams in *AP IX* are encomiastic by nature and celebrate contemporary persons or events, the cursory treatment of encomiastic themes in these epigrams does not seem to justify the label ‘epideictic’.

In order to understand the term ‘epideictic epigram’ we have to go back to its source, the anthology of Cephalas (c. 890-900), from which the Palatine and Planudean anthologies derive. There is a problem here regarding the manuscript tradition that has led many scholars astray. The exemplar used by the Palatine scribes (i.e. the scribes called B¹, B² and B³ respectively) appears to have missed three or four quaternia between *AP IX*, 583 and 584⁷). Gow estimates that the anthology of Cephalas contained some 450 epigrams between IX, 583 and 584—quite a serious lacuna, it would seem⁸). Fortunately most of these epigrams can be found in the Planudean Anthology: nrs. *AP XVI*, 32-387 in modern editions; some others can be found in the Palatine manuscript itself as later additions by the twelfth-century scribe Σχ (e.g. *AP IX*, 823-829 and XV, 41-51). Gow and Aubreton assume that the Palatine Anthology does not only miss a fair amount of epigrams, but also a title and a prooemium separating the ‘epideictic’ epigrams (*AP IXa*, up to no. IX, 583) from the ‘ephrastic’ ones (*AP IXb = AP XVI*, 32-387 + the additions by Σχ + *AP IX*, 584-822)⁹). This hypothesis does not seem to have met with much approval¹⁰), but I think that Gow and Aubreton are basically right. There are three important arguments in favour of their theory. Firstly, the evidence of the Planudean Anthology. Planudes puts the ephrastic epigrams (*AP IXb*) in his fourth book, whereas his first book contains the epideictic and protreptic epigrams (*AP IXa* and *AP X*). Planudes not only neatly separates the ephrastic from the epideictica, but, more importantly, he repeats Cephalas’ prooemium to book *AP IXa* (see below) at the beginning

⁷) A. Wilstrand, *Studien zur griechischen Anthologie* (Lund 1926), 66-86.