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*Stesichorus: The Poems, Edited with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*  

Of the last ten volumes in the series of the Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries three volumes alone are by Patrick Finglass. Now his fourth is "a work of genuine collaboration" (preface, p. xii) with Malcolm Davies. In the mid-1970s Davies began a commentary on the until then known fragments of Stesichorus, a work which was subsequently awarded the Conington Prize of the University of Oxford. For his own work Finglass took Davies's thesis as its starting point, though the present work is not a revised or updated version of the original dissertation. Finglass is the sole author of the book's sections which have no corresponding sections in the original thesis, i.e. “the Introduction, the Text and Apparatus, the Commentary (...) on fragments on papyri (...) not discovered when Davies wrote his thesis, the Bibliography, and the Indexes" (preface, p. xii). Henceforth the newly-numbered fragments should be cited as "Stesichorus fr. 1 Finglass" etc.

The whole volume has been “significantly improved by James Diggle, Neil Hopkinson, Michael Reeve, Henry Spelman, and Martin West; we have additionally benefited from comments on selected passages by Simon Hornblower and Alan Sommerstein” (preface, pp. xii f.). Time and again this fact is indicated by the use of initials (e.g., in n. 98 on p. 16); the list of these initials on p. 612, however, suggests a much wider circle of contributors. The volume consists of mainly four large parts: the introduction (pp. 1-91), the text of the fragments (pp. 93-205), the commentary (pp. 207-608), and the bibliography (pp. 609-676). Short indexes (pp. 684-691) conclude the volume, and the “comparatio numerorum” has only Finglass’ new edition and PMGF.

The introduction follows an established scheme in this series. The introduction’s way of presenting the material may be exemplified by the conclusion of its first part on Stesichorus’ date (p. 6): “Our search has been frustrating, but not quite fruitless. If we say that Stesichorus’ career covered some of the period between 610 and 540, we shall not be far wrong.” The opening of the following section on Stesichorus’ life (pp. 6-18) seems equally cautious: “Stesichorus’ poems tell us nothing explicitly about his life” (p. 6). However, if this suggests that poetry in general tells us something on its author then the statement would miss the central point of Mary Lefkowitz’ study on the lives of the Greek poets.1 Later on, some space is given to a discussion of Stesichorus’ name:

‘he who sets up the chorus’, and the odd fact “that someone who achieved fame as a choral poet was given at birth a name so prophetic of his then unrecognised talent” (p. 15). The ensuing third section on Stesichorus’ works (pp. 18-23) is closely related to the opening pages of the section on transmission (pp. 60-73), and both should be read together.

At the beginning of this chapter on Stesichorus’ works, the combination of two papyrus-fragments (P. Oxy. 2619 fr. 18 and P. Oxy. 2803 fr. 11) is taken for granted (p. 18), though neither in the introduction nor in the commentary (pp. 445 f.) the problems implied by this combination are mentioned (let alone discussed). One may guess that something is wrong from n. 48 on p. 406, but only few would notice. It is certainly possible to combine the fragments, but it is by no means as sure as it is in the case of the new Simonides (where fragments of P. Oxy. 2327 & 3965, two copies of the same book, are combined) that P. Oxy. 2619 fr. 18 and P. Oxy. 2803 fr. 11 belong to the same text. If they are not to be combined, one would have to think again about the number of Stesichorus’ works and on the implications of Quintilian’s remark that Stesichorus’ poetry is ‘overflowing and diffuse’.

The following chapter on performance (pp. 23-32) ends with a bit more than two pages on the “perhaps most contentious question” (p. 30), i.e. the manner of performance of Stesichorus’ works; that we are moving on slippery ground is shown by phrases as these (e.g., p. 31): “It remains possible that Stesichorus composed works intended for performance by a soloist, perhaps with choral dancing; or that his choral works were sometimes so handled.” But why is this “most contentious question” introduced by “perhaps”? The opening of the introduction’s chapter on style repeats this (p. 52): “Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Stesichorus’ poetry to assess is his style.” Be that as it may, Stesichorus’ style is not at all difficult to characterise; it may be indistinguishable from, for instance, Ibycus’s (a fact known to the author, as n. 299 on p. 55 seems to indicate), but is clearly different from the one so characteristic of Pindar, or the one so typical of Bacchylides.

The chapter on myth (pp. 32-39) gives a good survey, pointing out how Stesichorus innovates—not only when he “gives prominence to themes and ideas that Homer downplays or avoids altogether” (p. 38), but also by “differentiating himself from his own previous work in his quest for mythological originality” (p. 39). The following, careful discussion of language (pp. 40-46) is followed by a chapter on metre (pp. 47-52), largely based on Haslam’s studies (as, for instance, Stesichorean Metre, QuCC 17, 1974, 7-57). The spirited as well as paradoxical statements of ancient scholars are discussed in the chapter on style (pp. 52-60), and one cannot but heartily approve of the author’s well balanced criticism of Quintilian’s “tendentious verdict” (p. 60). The chapter