

A Poetics of Fragments

*Ananios of Kleitor: Poems & Fragments and Their
Reception from Antiquity to the Present*
by George Economou (Shearsman, 2009)



Meredith Quartermain

From the moment when you first open your Classics textbooks and read Suetonius, quoting Augustus, *σπεύδε βραδέως* (Make haste slowly), or Ovid, *Video meliora proboque; peiora facio* (I see and approve better things; I do worse things), and those ancient revered voices begin to sonorously echo and ruffle their gold and purple feathers of your imagination; and you venture into fragments of the pre-Socratics—Parmenides: “The mares which carry me, as far as ever my heart may desire . . .” followed by the scholarly note that *θυμοσ* may refer to either horses or poet, although most critics agree on poet, and the further note that the reading only becomes difficult if you try to follow each image separately, making out Parmenides as a traveling philosopher or the horses as an allegory for irrational impulses; and, ever tantalized by these glimmerings of ancient wisdom, you browse Heraclitus, *ἀρμονίῃ ἀφανῆς φανερός χρεῖτων* (An unapparent connection is stronger than an apparent)—very important to keep in mind when reading fragments—or his enigmatic scrap, *εὖρος ποδός ἀνθρώπειου* (the width of a human foot), or his morsel of sense buried in the discourse of Clement, “Fire’s changes: first sea, and of sea the half is earth, the half lightning-flash,” followed by “A summary of the arguments for and against an Ecpyrosis in Heraclitus,” ecpyrosis being the

Stoic belief in the periodic destruction and renewal by fire of the cosmos; and you dip into his famous river wisdom, “Upon those who step into the same rivers different and again different waters flow,” discovering subsequently an entire flowchart of the original river statement down through the offshoots of Plato, Plutarch and Cleanthes whose streams surge and cross-branch into river statements by Aristotle, Simplicius and Seneca, so that by the time you sip the Heraclitan snippet preserved in Plutarch’s amber, “It scatters and gathers . . . it comes together and flows away, approaches and departs,” you are convinced it’s language that’s the river we step into, each time finding it not the same; and you pick up Sappho (at last a female voice) and ponder “[] hope of love [],” encased above and below with square bracketed space, or “[] dewy banks []” followed by “[] all night long [],” leading you to consider what sort of dewy banks she could have been enjoying all night long, “for I would not be so [] / these toys [] // But may I have [] / them all []” – ancient alluring words scattered on moth-eaten papyrus – [] several verses missing [] / [] like the very gods/ [] pure [] / [] toward Ilion”; and, determined, after reading *I Claudius*, to yet speak with these teasing soliloquies, you wander down Via Giullia, past the Palazzo Ricci (a surname shared by a man of a certain reputation living on my street) until you get to via Pellegrino, where there’s a plaque defining the boundary of Claudius’s city, or there was a plaque, the carved-in-stone words almost washed away, which gave rise to Graves’s novel—from that moment that you run your tongue over these splinters and chips of human utterance, you are gripped by ancient speech, the magic of voices whose bodies died 2500 years ago and the voices of all those who’ve since read them, repeated them, like strange ricochets in caves of the human cranium.

The ebb and flow of these clamorous echoes, their gripping elusiveness, and the voices of subsequent spellbound readers, scolding or adulating their predecessors, or mulling and translating¹ their interpretations, are the subject of Economou’s mock scholarly edition of Ananios of Kleitor and his writings, which encompasses not only the fragments of this obscure 4th century BC Greek poet, and the windings and unwindings of commentary on his work, but also loaded letters (“lovingly reproduced”) between scholars of his oeuvre, shady

misappropriation of the texts, and questionable behavior fueled by academic ambition. Along the way, we meet a 2nd century BC anonymous Alexandrian; a 6th century AD cook, Kosmas Logothetes, author of *Recipes for Rhetoric*; Theophanes, an 11th century “Mad Monk of the Morea”; a 20th century German classicist Anastas Krebs who specializes in ancient warfare; a 20th century professor writing a perpetually elusive definitive text—Sir Michael Sewtor-Lowden (the names convey much of the characters) whose sudden death is steeped in scholarly intrigue surrounding Ananios; and several other academics and classical figures.

All the parts of a typical scholarly edition appear, including an Introduction, Note on Spelling, Notes on the Introduction, Translations of the Fragments, Reception, Endnotes and Index Nominum. Straight-faced but with a twinkle in his eye, Economou in his Introduction invites us to “honor the well-worn practice of skipping” the extensive notes to the fragments, but says if we do we must not skip the Index Nominum. We promptly turn to its amusing biographies of the key players forming this strange web of interconnections spanning two millennia.

However, we immediately return to the poetry and read every word of this witty and inventive book, from the delightful play of square brackets running through the fragments to the pompous rantings of Theophanes concerning Ananios’s extreme fish-eating and its links to Jesus Christ. We find everything from raunchy sexuality—a sexual intertextuality—to poignant asides such as the following in the Endnotes:

We have been spilled into an enormous chamber wherein life continuously echoes art and art life, resounding through volumes of ironies bound in a plenitude of tongues. Some hear nothing. Others strive to link their strains to fulfilling termini in the cosmic din, transforming and modulating them thereby into a manner of music, or the illusion thereof.

While enacting hilariously the inevitable failure to put “so firm a hold upon this old poetry as to prevent it from escaping our will to possess it completely,” the narrative rambles through vicissitudes of “scholarly cannibalism,” disquisitions on the history of zero, the lure of sense-making against “the ineradicable albescent state of [the fragment’s] once and absent sense,” and the intractable foreignness of language, playfully linking

almond shells to bomb shells, iambics and trimeters to nooses and gallows.
A wonderfully ironic, thought-provoking, funny exposé.

¹ Transelating—the term comes from Erin Moure. I've always understood it to mean translation with a little added invention.