Michael SQUIRE

Speaking for Pictures: The Epigrammatic Inscriptions from the 'House of Propertius' at Assisi

This paper examines the ten surviving Greek epigrams from the cryptoporticus of the 'House of Propertius' at Assisi alongside the paintings which accompanied them. Rather than functioning as mere captions, the epigrams offered a competing programme for conceptualizing the images to which they refer. While the few scholars who have discussed the inscriptions have studied them in isolation from their pictorial frames, this paper posits a dynamic relationship between the room's combined visual and verbal stimuli. On the one hand, it sheds light on the role of inscriptions as prompts for learned discussion on mythological and literary themes. On the other, it situates the specific combinations of image and epigram in the 'House of Propertius' within broader theories of verbal and visual relations.

The epigrams from the house (also known as the 'Domus Musae' and the 'Casa degli Epigrammi'), underneath the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, probably date from the late first or early second century AD; they were published by Margherita Guarducci in 1979. Only a handful of scholars have studied the epigrams, however, and still fewer have considered their visual and material contexts (cf. Medaglia 1981; Giangrande 1991). Three of the room's paintings survive complete, along with a fragment of a fourth. The overriding modern tendency is to assume that inscriptions subtitle pictures and images illustrate inscriptions. But only four of the epigrams explicitly name the purported subjects of the paintings, and many of the epigrams seem to have been purposely at odds with them. The fourth epigram (the only one written in hexameter rather than elegiacs), for example, quotes an extract from the long and bloody Iliadic battle between Hector and Ajax; but it seems to have been set against an image depicting the madness of Ajax. Rather than 'captioning' the picture in any straightforward sense, the inscription invited readers to contemplate Ajax's present pathetic plight against the literary evocation of his more heroic exploits. Although the first epigram is similarly ambiguous about the subject of the painting, the language in which it is couched is echoed in the seventh: the intertextual resonance between these two epigrams, at opposite extremes of the same wall, created an alternative cycle for understanding the assemblage of paintings, independent of any iconographic and visual programme.

The epigrams at Assisi demonstrably complicated rather than resolved pictorial ambiguities, just as the pictures complicated responses to the epigrams. The juxtaposition of the two media certainly flexed the intellectual muscle of the proprietor, challenging his guests to showcase their own literary erudition: the scenario can thus be compared with numerous other parallels from the Empire, as is suggested by Mireille Corbier's preliminary survey of 1995. This notion of replying to a visual stimulus with a sophisticated verbal response, however, also relates to the development of a new culture of artistic rationalization, especially in the first and second centuries (cf. Tanner 2006). The images at Assisi, like those purportedly described in Philostratus the Elder's *Imagines* and Lucian's *De Domo*, were evidently conceptualized as sites for ecphrastic *logos* – as opportunities for erudite literary showmanship. But in juxtaposing pictures and epigrams, the scenario at Assisi frustrates the unidirectional movement from image to verbal response that so many so-called 'Second Sophistic' texts, and their modern interpreters, would have us assume. Exploring the phenomenon from the perspective of epigraphic and material culture rather than texts alone thus provides an opportunity to rethink the purpose of epigrammatic inscriptions, the process of artistic rationalization, and indeed the nature of ancient ecphrasis at large.