

## HADRIAN'S FAREWELL TO LIFE: SOME ARGUMENTS FOR AUTHENTICITY

*Historia Augusta, Hadrian 25. 9–10*: et moriens quidem hos versus fecisse dicitur:

animula vagula blandula  
hospes comesque corporis  
quae nunc abibis in loca  
pallidula rigida nudula  
nec ut soles dabis iocos!

tales autem nec multo meliores fecit et Graecos.

T. D. BARNES has recently impugned the authenticity of these verses and calls for a defence of their genuineness.<sup>1</sup> Although I agree with Fergus Millar that 'the problem of the *Historia Augusta* is one into which sane men refrain from entering',<sup>2</sup> yet I think we can at least counter Barnes's objections.

Barnes musters four arguments which he naturally calls 'quite conclusive'. He first points out that the verses are omitted in the epitome of Dio by Xiphilinus, who is our sole source for Dio here, and claims that it is unlikely that Xiphilinus could have omitted such a 'striking poem'. This is putting an extraordinarily high value on Xiphilinus, who is quite capable of omitting things of greater moment than five Latin verses which he would presumably have had to translate into Greek; as an epitomator of Dio, he is inferior to Zonaras, and his account of Hadrian's reign is particularly poor.<sup>3</sup>

Barnes subjoins Xiphilinus' description of Hadrian's death, λέγων καὶ βοῶν τὸ δημῶδες ὅτι πολλοὶ ἱατροὶ βασιλέα ἀπώλεσαν, as evidence that Hadrian could not have composed the verses as he lay dying. This is a reasonable observation in principle, but how safely can we use Xiphilinus as proof for anything? Anyway, we need not press the literal meaning of *moriens* or *fecisse* too literally. Hadrian's last illness was protracted<sup>4</sup> and he could have composed the verses at any stage; we do not have to assume that they represent his last gasp. And if they were, it might be that he was reciting some lines composed earlier rather than extemporizing with his dying breath.

Barnes's second argument is based on the claim that the Hadrianic poem is 'almost certainly' modelled on Septimius Serenus, fr. 16,

animula miserula properiter obiit,

which he regards as deriving from Laevius, fr. 19,

cupidius miserulo obito.

Barnes maintains that the *Historia Augusta* takes over the diminutives and the *animula* motif from Serenus. But no confidence is possible. Serenus' date is uncertain and it remains just as likely that Serenus copied Hadrian. Nor is Barnes's case helped by his apparently false statistics at this point.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *CQ* N.S. xviii (1968), 384 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford, 1964),

124.

<sup>3</sup> See Millar, *op. cit.* 2–3 and especially 60 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *HA, Hadrian* 24–5.

<sup>5</sup> Barnes says that *miserulus* occurs only in the two passages cited. But the word is also found in a line of Turpilus (ap. Non. 146. 18): *ut illius commiserescas miserulae orbitudinis*.

His third point is that the introduction to the poem in the *Historia Augusta* is 'almost apologetic'. This, along with the absence of Hadrian's last words as given by Xiphilinus, leads Barnes to the suggestion that the verses are counterfeit. Not very cogent. I find it hard to detect any apology in the simple formula *hos versus fecisse dicitur*. A similar expression is used to introduce some verses by Gallienus, *ita dixisse fertur*. No note of apology is possible here, since the author goes on to praise Gallienus' poetry as outstanding in his own time.<sup>1</sup> The discrepancy between the *Historia Augusta* and Xiphilinus proves nothing, as I have argued above.

Barnes's final argument is the suspicious frequency of the motif of verses and comments upon them in the *Historia Augusta*. At first blush, this appears to be his most forceful point. However, this is not a usual affectation on the part of Spartianus. In the other six biographies ascribed to him, there seem to be no examples of verses given to emperors.<sup>2</sup> And the motif is not extensively used in the other biographies in the *Historia Augusta*; only three examples are apparent.<sup>3</sup>

So far the negative aspects of the issue. What of the verses themselves? Barnes does not discuss their merits or demerits. That Hadrian dabbled in poetry is beyond question. Apart from his exchange with Florus,<sup>4</sup> the *Historia Augusta* claims that he wrote *Catachannas libros obscurissimos Antimachum imitando scripsit*,<sup>5</sup> also that he was *versu promptissimus*.<sup>6</sup> Of particular significance is the statement that the emperor *amavit praeterea genus vetustum dicendi*.<sup>7</sup> Fronto confirms this taste for archaism.<sup>8</sup> The flood of diminutives in the verses under discussion is very much in the manner of Roman Comedy; *animula*, for example, is cognate with the Plautine use *animule*.<sup>9</sup> There is also a pronounced flavour of erotic terminology in the verses.<sup>10</sup> This, too, accords with the character of Hadrian. And, if the verses are counterfeit, the forger was something of an innovator; *blandula*, *nudula*, and *vagula* are cited by Lewis and Short as *hapax legomena*, and *animula* is no common term.<sup>11</sup> Although there is always the possibility that these words occurred elsewhere in lost works, I suggest that it is more likely that the archaizing poet Hadrian hit upon such words than some forger. The tone of the verses, with their comic and erotic elements, strongly suggests that Hadrian is taking off the conventions of classical epitaph.<sup>12</sup> The *Historia Augusta* claims that he was fond of debating with scholars and philosophers through the medium of pamphlets or poems;<sup>13</sup> perhaps our verses were born in one of these exchanges and recalled by the emperor on his deathbed.

My conclusion is that the arguments of Barnes can be rebutted, and that

<sup>1</sup> *HA*, *Gallieni* 11. 6-9.

<sup>2</sup> Those on Aelius, Didius Julianus, Severus, Pescennius Niger, Caracalla, and Geta.

<sup>3</sup> *HA*, *Macrinus* 11. 3-7; *Severus Alexander* 38. 5-6; *Gallieni* 11. 6-9.

<sup>4</sup> *HA*, *Hadrian* 16. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 16. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 15. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 16. 5.

<sup>8</sup> 'Veteris eloquentiae colorem adumbratum ostendit Hadriana oratio' (Haines 2. 138).

<sup>9</sup> On diminutives see F. Conrad, *Gl.* xix (1930-1), 127 ff.; *Gl.* xx (1930-1), 74 ff.;

G. E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (Princeton, 1952), 334 ff.; C. J. Fordyce on Catullus 64. 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Animula*, *vagula*, and *nudula* have obvious erotic connotations; see P. Pierrugues, *Glossarium Eroticum Linguae Latinae* (Paris, 1826), s.v. *nuditas*, *vagus*.

<sup>11</sup> Apart from the Hadrian passage and Serenus fr. 17, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* cites only Sulpicius Rufus, *Ad Fam.* 4. 5. 4; Cicero, *Att.* 9. 7. 1; *CIL* 5. 4712.

<sup>12</sup> See R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Illinois, 1962), passim.

<sup>13</sup> *HA*, *Hadrian* 15. 10-11.

there are sound positive reasons for accepting the poem as genuine. My faith in the *Historia Augusta* is as limited as that of any sober man, but its plethora of forged letters and state documents need not preclude acceptance of five verses which survive independent linguistic analysis and emerge as Hadrianic as anything could be.

*University of Calgary*

BARRY BALDWIN