
The Birthday Book: Censorinus translated by Holt N. Parker
Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. xiv + 102.
ISBN 978-0-226-09974-3. Cloth \$25.00

Reviewed by
Robert Hannah
University of Otago, New Zealand
robert.hannah@otago.ac.nz

The little *Birthday Book* (*De die natali liber*) by the third century AD grammarian, Censorinus, was originally presented as a birthday gift to his friend Quintus Caerellius in AD 238—the date is derived from the text itself, where it is expressed allusively and eruditely as the year 986 of the era of Nabonassar [*De die nat.* 21.9]. The *Birthday Book* uses the idea of the birthday as the starting point for a brief but virtuosic survey of the measurement of time itself.

What the book says about time is not particularly original, but it is useful from a cultural perspective inasmuch as Censorinus demonstrates a breadth of learning that was typical of his class and time. From an antiquarian point of view, the essay is especially valuable for what it reports from earlier authors whose works have not survived, notably the early Imperial polymath Varro. In what has survived of the *Birthday Book* itself, the first half [cc. 1–13] takes the idea of the birthday as the starting point in an analysis of the development of human life from conception to death. The second half [cc. 16–24] then discusses the various measures of time from eternity down to the hour. It may be, as Parker suggests [56–57], that the work was meant to be balanced around the encomium to Caerellius in chapter 15, and to finish with a further five chapters to provide a coda that returned to the honorand's own birthday, perhaps with his horoscope: this would also nicely draw together some of the preceding themes.

The book is a compilation-piece, then, but one in which Censorinus demonstrates his own remarkably wide knowledge and his easy ability in passing it on to his reader(s). One may reasonably judge that he knew a little about a lot and had skill in knitting it all together, however disparate the items may look at first glance. Underlying this knowledge lies the basic curriculum of ancient Classical

© 2007 Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

All rights reserved

ISSN 1549-4497 (online)

ISSN 1549-4470 (print)

ISSN 1549-4489 (CD-ROM)

Aestimatio 4 (2007) 201–206

education, revolving around the four disciplines of geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music—Platonic in origin, if not earlier, and to be found a couple of centuries after Censorinus bound together as four of the seven liberal arts in the work of Martianus Capella. Characteristic of the ancient world also is Censorinus' starting point of religious observance, specifically to the Genius of the birthday. Religion provides an appropriately cosmic context for the study of time.

Something of the discursive mode adopted by Censorinus may be gleaned from a simple analysis of the first half of the *Birthday Book*. The initial task is to honour the Genius of one's birthday. But who is this Genius? Censorinus defines him as 'our companion from the moment we are taken from our mother's womb' [3.5]—we might think of the Christian guardian angel as a close relative—a definition that becomes the impetus for a discussion of how mankind came to be, and indeed how we got into our mother's womb in the first place. Once there, so to speak, Censorinus uses a mixture of (in our terms) mythology, early natural philosophy, and astrology to explore the growth and maturation of the child in the womb, down to the right month for its birth. The introduction of astrology into the discussion becomes the cause for a description of some elements of the art, notably the 'aspects' of the signs one to another around the zodiac. Censorinus returns to the issue of the lengths of pregnancies, and highlights—from Pythagorean philosophy—the seven-month and the 10-month pregnancies, each of which has its own internal ratios of numbers of days for development, from seed to milky humor to blood to flesh to the full formation of the body. These ratios are 'harmonies'—a digression briefly explains musical harmonies so as to assist in defining the developmental ratios. Harmony in the microcosm of the human body is matched by harmony in the macrocosm of the universe, with the planets set at distances from each other that correspond to musical intervals.

This summary takes us to half-way through the surviving text (to chapter 13). The second half, driven as it is by its emphasis on gradually diminishing units of time (eternity, ages, centuries, the Great Year, the year, months, days, hours), is generally more logically constructed and less digressive to our modern mind (although there are still excursions into the calendar and the history of the world), but one needs the first half to appreciate the allusive mode of thinking so characteristic of ancient philosophy.

As anyone who has worked on matters calendrical in the Greek and Roman worlds will know, the *Birthday Book* is a mine of information. One just has to glance at A. E. Samuel's still valuable *Greek and Roman Chronology* [1972], to see how often he refers to it. I did the same in my *Greek and Roman Calendars* [2005], but in translation. Well-regarded in Late Antiquity, the text was known through many manuscripts in the medieval period, and was one of the earliest books to be printed [first edition, 1497]. Better known authors have fared much worse from the vagaries of fortune. It is therefore remarkable, on the one hand, that the book has become the preserve mainly of scholars engrossed in the niceties of the Greek and Roman calendars and, on the other, that this translation by Parker is the first into English. (A German one by Sallmann [1988] exists, and it is Sallmann's Teubner text [1983] that forms the basis of Parker's translation.) It is a nice touch, but perhaps also indicative of the modern 'boutique' nature of the work, that this translation was prepared and presented as a birthday present from Parker to a significant other. Yet more people should certainly find Censorinus valuable and this excellent translation will assist in the wider dissemination of the text.

Translating Censorinus is, I think, a relatively straightforward task—teachers of Latin take note: this text would provide an excellent resource for beginners' courses, along with a pleasant introduction to ancient culture—and Parker handles the job well. The pleasing quality of his translation may be judged from a comparison between my own literalist translation and his of a passage that demonstrates also something of the quality of Censorinus' Latin and the detail of his information on the Roman calendar.

adeo aberratum est, ut C. Caesar pontifex maximus suo III et M. Aemilii Lepidi consulatu, quo retro delictum corrigeret, duos menses intercalarios dierum LXVII in mensem Novembrem et Decembrem interponeret, cum iam mense Februario dies III et XX intercalasset, faceretque eum annum dierum CCCXLV, simul providens in futurum, ne iterum erraretur: nam intercalario mense sublato annum civilem ad solis cursum formavit. Itaque diebus CCCLV addidit decem, quos per septem menses, qui dies undetrice nos habebant, ita describeret, ut Januario et Sextili et Decembri bini accederent,

ceteris singuli; eosque dies extremis partibus mensium adposuit, ne scilicet religiones sui cuiusque mensis a loco summoverentur. Quapropter nunc cum in septem mensibus dies singuli et triceni sint, quattuor tamen illi ita primitus instituti eo dinoscuntur, quod nonas habent septimanas, ceteri tres omnes alii reliqui quintanas. [De die nat. 20.8–10]

Things had deviated so much that Gaius Caesar, as *pontifex maximus* in his third consulship and that of M. Aemilius Lepidus, in order to correct the past mistake, inserted between the months of November and December two intercalary months of 67 days, since he had already intercalated 23 days in the month of February, and made that a year of 445 days, at the same time taking care that the mistake would not be repeated in future; for with the intercalary month done away with, he shaped the civil year to the course of the sun. And so to the 355 days he added 10, which he distributed through the seven months which had 29 days as follows: two days were added to January, Sextilis, and December, and one to the others; and he placed these days at the ends of the months, evidently so that the religious ceremonies of each month might not be moved from their place. Therefore now, although there are 31 days in seven months, nevertheless four are distinguished by this feature of the original tradition, that they have the Nones on the seventh day,

Things got so bad that Julius Caesar, when he was *pontifex maximus*, during his third consulship, which he shared with M. Aemilius Lepidus, in order to correct the accumulated errors, had to insert two intercalary months with a total of 67 days between November and December, even though he had already made the usual addition of 23 days in February, adding up to a total of 445 days for that year. At the same time he made sure that the problem would not return in the future, for he removed the additional month from the calendar and made the civil year conform to the course of the sun. He added 10 days to the old 355, dividing them up among the seven months that had 29 days. January, Sextilis [August], and December got two, the others (April, June, September, November) got one. He added these days at the end of each month, so that the religious festivals would not be moved from their usual places in the month. That is why to this day we have seven months with 31 days, but we can recognize the four which were set up

while the other three remaining ones have them on the fifth. [Hannah 2005, 113]

in the ancient system by the fact they have the Nones on the seventh day, but the other three long months and all the short months have them on the fifth. [Parker, 47]

Of late my own approach to translation has been consciously to seek to replicate the sentence structures of the original Latin or Greek, however long or compressed or contorted they may seem to our English eyes. The often awkward structures of the original are a window into the minds and mental processes of the ancient (and let us not forget, foreign) writers. Thucydides and Tacitus, for instance, are not particularly easy 'reads' in the original, and I personally prefer to allow modern readers to gain a sense of the sometimes difficult structures that they use but which most modern translations attempt to smooth out into something more accessible to our ways of thinking and reading. The more we read like them, I tell myself, the more we may think like them and so ultimately appreciate how they saw the world around them. In a world where most of our students in Classics are devoid of Latin and Greek, exposure to the ancient modes of thought and expression increases in importance. I, however, am not necessarily trying to sell my translations to the wider, general public which may know nothing of the Classical world, so perhaps I can afford to play the 'purist'. Parker, on the other hand, is selling his translation and, one hopes, to a wider public which will not be conversant with this author. More use, therefore, is made by him of colloquialisms which capture, more or less, what the Latin says. Sentence structures in Parker's translation tend to be shorter, giving at times a sharper focus to what Censorinus says than he provided himself. I see these as good things, making an underservedly obscure author more accessible to Classicists, Latin-less students, and the 'educated public'.

Parker provides also a glossary [59–68], which very usefully gives definitions for and brief information on a variety of topics, principally individuals (real, divine, and mythological) and places named by Censorinus.

The book ends with a body of notes [69–102], tagged to the sections of each chapter in the text. These endnotes are not signalled in

the body of the text by superscript numbers, and so they have to be consulted on an *ad hoc*, ‘need to know’ basis. While this allows the main text itself to be read on its own without visual interruption, it also means that the less well-versed reader may often have to flip to the back of the book in case a note happens to explicate a curious or obscure passage. So, for some readers, interruption is probably inevitable, and for them superscript numbers in the text would be a better way to indicate the presence of notes. The endnotes provide useful, accurate background information on the wide variety of general topics dealt with in each chapter or group of chapters, along with an introductory bibliography of important critical editions and recent secondary works on the topics. Detailed explanatory notes follow, pertaining to individual items in the chapters, often referring to relevant material from other ancient sources. Given the breadth of Censorinus’ compass in the *Birthday Book*, Parker is to be commended on his grasp of up-to-date scholarly literature in what are nowadays quite diverse specialisms, from medicine to music to chronology.

This is a book to enjoy, as was indeed originally intended. It has no pretence to be deeply intellectual or highly sophisticated, although I suspect that some of the sections will seem obscure to some readers. Parker, like Censorinus, not only makes the material accessible but also elucidates it without overwhelming his readers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Samuel, A. E. 1972. *Greek and Roman Chronology*. Munich.
- Hannah, R. 2005. *Greek and Roman Calendars: Constructions of Time in the Classical World*. London.
- Sallmann, K. 1983. ed. *Censorini de die natali liber ad Q. Caerelium*. Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana. Leipzig.
- 1988. *Betrachtungen zum Tag der Geburt*. Weinheim.