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What Drives a Writer to Epitomise His Own Work?

I work on the methodology and ideology behind the use of epitomes in the ancient world. Their dynamic reuse of earlier material can give valuable insight into how people in the ancient world used texts and responded actively to what they read. The focus of my research is on works which 'self-identify' as epitomes in a preface where the writer explains what he is doing. It is hoped that this short paper, which focuses on the preface to one particular work, will demonstrate what can be done with epitomes and why they are worth understanding better.

Galen's Synopsis of his own works on the pulse (Kühn, Claudii Galeni opera omnia, vol. 9, 1825 repr. 1965, 431-3) is an 'autoepitome', that is to say, an epitome produced by the author of the work epitomised. All epitomes show readers interacting with a text, but autoepitomes represent an interesting further twist. In the preface to his Synopsis, Galen suggests how epitomes might be used both destructively, as easier but inferior replacements for their original work, or constructively, as 'learning aids' in conjunction with their original work. This impression of how ancient readers made use of this type of text can be augmented by looking at other epitomes and autoepitomes. Galen then expresses a general disapproval of epitomes, before carefully explaining how 'incorrect' epitomising of his works by other people has driven him to write his own epitome of his work. It is a fascinating and unique account of an original author's attitude to epitomisation of his works. The second paragraph. You get the idea!

This work is significant since we can see it not only in the general context of other epitomes, but also in the specific context that it was written in. Galen's works on the pulse themselves survive, allowing us to consider how his Synopsis relates to the works it is based upon and to explore why this epitome was produced through what it does that the works it epitomises do not. We can also set the work in the context of the extensive corpus of Galen's work available to us. Furthermore, the wealth of information this corpus contains about Galen, his career and literary life, allows us to suggest how these particular circumstances influenced his decision to write this work and to develop a nuanced reading of Galen's Synopsis, its presentation and production.

The paper concludes by considering briefly how what can be gleaned from this work may contribute to a general understanding of epitomes and the practice of epitomisation in the ancient world, and, ultimately, to our picture of how ancient literary culture worked with its texts.

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