

TWO EROTIC EPIGRAMS BY ASCLEPIADES

A.P. V, 153:

Νικαρέτης τὸ Πόθοισι βεβαμμένον ἠδὺ πρόσωπον,
πυκνὰ δι' ὑψοπόφων φαινόμενον θυρίδων,
αἱ χαροπαὶ Κλεοφῶντος ἐπὶ προθύροις ἐμάραναν,
Κύπρι φίλη, χλυκεροῦ βλέμματος ἀστεροπαί.

Translation by W.R. Paton (*The Greek Anthology*, Loeb edition, London 1969, reprint, vol. I, page 201):

NICARETE'S sweet face, bathed by the Loves,
peeping often from her high casement, was blasted,
dear Cypris, by the flame that lightened from the
sweet blue eyes of Cleophon, standing by her door.

In their commentary on this epigram, Gow-Page¹ noted that «the fact that Nicarete is often to be seen at her window probably indicates that she is a hetaera, or at least not unduly modest». They then quoted the following fragment, which is often considered to be Asclepiades source:

ᾧ διὰ τῶν θυρίδων καλὸν ἐμβλέποισα,
παρθένε τὰν κωφαλάν, τὰ δ' ἔνερθε νύμφα.

Translation by J.M. Edmonds (*Lyra Graeca*, Loeb edition, London 1967, reprint, vol. III, page 77):

«O you that look so prettily at me through the window,
a maiden in face but a wedded bride below.»

This fragment from Praxilla has puzzled the critics. Thus Professor Alan Cameron² noted that «most commentators have inferred from 1.2 that the girl is a whore with the face of a virgin». Cameron then added, however, the following statement: «While one can say in most languages that a girl has the face of a virgin but the heart or body of a whore, it is surely very odd to say that she has the head of a virgin but is a *bride* (or married woman) beneath. Marriage marks the end of virginity, to be sure, but most people consider it respectable enough».

I would like to point out that Praxilla has made use of an obscene pun. The noun νύμφη means both «married woman» or «bride» and «*clitoris*»: cf. LSJ s.v. IX. For a similar obscene pun employed by a Greek poetess cf. my *Essays In Hellenistic Poetry*, Amsterdam 1980, page 19f. where I underline

¹ Cf. *Hellenistic Epigrams*, Cambridge 1965, reprint, vol. II, page 119.

² Cf. A. Cameron, *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (ed. H.P. Foley), London 1981, page 279.

the fact that Greek poetesses were not puritanical. It should be noted, moreover, that my proposed interpretation of Praxilla's fragment suits the erotic nature of Asclepiades' epigrams: cf. G. Giangrande, *Scripta Minora Alexandrina*, Amsterdam 1981, vol. 2, p. 367 A.P.V. 158:

Ἑρμιόνη πιθανῆ ποτ' ἐγὼ συνέπαιζον, ἐχούση
ζωνίον ἐξ ἀνθέων ποικίλον, ὦ Παφίη,
χρύσεια γράμματ' ἔχον· διόλου δ' ἐγγέγραπτο,
"Φίλει με·
καὶ μὴ λυπηθῆς, ἦν τις ἔχη μ' ἕτερος."

Translation by Paton (*op. cit.*, vol. I, page 203):

I played once with captivating Hermione, and
she wore, O Paphian Queen, a zone of many colours
bearing letters of gold; all round it was written,
«Love me and be not sore at heart if I am another's».

This epigram has been discussed by Cameron³. According to Cameron, «the point of the poem is that Hermione is *not* a whore». I would like to point out that Cameron has completely misunderstood the epigram. The *lemma* states that Hermione is a hetaera: εἰς Ἑρμιόνην ἑταίραν.

Hermione is wearing a girdle which has a message written on it in gold letters. This is an allusion to the literary *topos* of Aphrodite ἑταίρα: cf. *Mus. Phil. Lond.*, vol. 4, page 192f. In other words, we are meant to understand that the hetaera Hermione makes a lot of money from her many lovers.

Cameron has, moreover, failed to understand that the verbs συνέπαιζον (line 1) and φίλει (line 3) both refer to sexual intercourse: cf. Gow-Page, *Hellen. Epigrams*, vol. II, page 120 and A.P. 5, 181, lines 9-11:

αὔριόν αὐτὰ καλῶς λογιούμεθα, νῦν δὲ πρὸς Αἴσχραν
τὴν μυρόπωλιν ἰὼν πέντε λάβ' ἀργυρέας·
εἶπέ δὲ σημείον Βάκχων ὅτι πέντ' ἐφίλησεν
ἔξῃς, ὦν κλίνη μάρτυς ἐπεγράφετο.

Translation (Cameron, *op. cit.*, page 286);

tomorrow we'll get it straightened out.
Now go to the perfume-seller Aeschra and get five
silver flasks. And for identification tell her
that I am the Bacchon who made love to her five times
in a row: the bed is a certified witness.

The words on Hermione's girdle state that her lovers should make love with her (φίλει) but they should not be upset if she has other lovers too. Obviously Hermione wants to make

³ *Op. cit.*, page 281.

as much money as she can from her different lovers. For the *topos* of the greedy hetaera cf. *A.P.* 5, 2:

Τὴν καταφλεξίπολιν Σθενελαΐδα, τὴν βαρύμισθον,
 τὴν τοῖς βουλομένοις χρυσὸν ἐρευγομένην,
 γυμνὴν μοι διὰ νυκτὸς ὅλης παρέκλινεν ὄνειρος
 ἄχρι φίλης ἡϋς προῖκα χαρίζομένην.
 οὐκέτι γουνάσομαι τὴν βάρβαρον, οὐδ' ἐπ' ἑμαυτῷ
 κλαύσομαι, ὕπνον ἔχων κείνα χαρίζομενον.

Translation by Paton (*op. cit.*, vol. I, page 129):

SHE who sets the town on fire, Sthenelais, the
 high-priced whore, whose breath smells of gold for
 those who desire her, lay by me naked in my dream
 all night long until the sweet dawn, giving herself
 to me for nothing. No longer shall I implore the
 cruel beauty, nor mourn for myself, now I have
 Sleep to grant me what he granted.

Cf. also *A.P.V.*, 31.

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