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Weaving while singing Sappho's songs in Epigram 55 of Posidippus

January 7, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy, Sappho Comments off Edit This

Epigram 55 of Posidippus, a poet who flourished in the third century BCE, refers to the songs of Sappho. That is what I argued already in my postings for 2015.11.19 and 2015.12.03. This epigram, as we can see from those postings, is about a girl named Nikomakhe whose happy young life was sadly interrupted by a premature death. Nostalgically, the words of the epigram recall the happy times when this girl together with her girlfriends were singing the love songs of Sappho, sung one after another. In the present posting for 2016.01.07, I will argue that the poet pictures the singing of Sappho's songs by these girls as a recurrent event that is simultaneous with their weaving at the loom.

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Elizabeth Jane Gardner Bouguereau (1837–1922), "Philomela and Procne." Oil on canvas, 80 x 62.2 cm. Private collection. Photo, Art Renewal Center Museum via Wikimedia Commons.

Once again this time, Epigram 55 of Posidippus

§1. This posting for 2016.01.07 picks up from where I left off at the posting for 2015.12.03 on Epigram 55 of Posidippus. Since that posting, I have engaged in further e-conversations about this epigram with various experts, who also happen to be dear friends, and our conversations have helped me readjust my thinking. What follows here in the present posting for 2016.01.07 reflects these readjustments.

§2. I proceed by quoting once again the text as re-edited by Bernd Seidensticker 2015, followed by my translation:

> $|_1$ πάντα τὰ Νικομάχης καὶ ἀθύρματα καὶ πρὸς ἑώιαν $|_2$ κερκίδα Σαπφώιους ἐξ ὀάρων ὀάρους $|_3$ ὤιχετο Μοῖρα φέρουσα προώρια· τὴν δὲ τάλαιναν $|_4$ παρθένον Ἀργείων ἀμφεβόησε πόλις, $|_5$ Ἥρης τὸ τραφὲν ἔρνος ὑπ' ὠλένος· ἆ τότε γαμβρῶν $|_6$ τῶν μνηστευομένων ψύχρ' ἔμενον λέχεα.
>
> $|_1$ Everything about Nikomakhe, all her pretty things and, come dawn, $|_2$ as the sound of the weaving pin [kerkis] is heard, all of Sappho's love songs [oaroi], songs [oaroi] sung one after the next, $|_3$ are all gone, carried away by fate, all too soon [pro-hōria], and the poor $|_4$ girl [parthenos] is lamented by the city of the Argives. $|_5$ She had been raised by the goddess Hera, who cradled her in her arms like a tender seedling. But then, ah, there came the time when all her would-be husbands, $|_6$ pursuing her, got left behind, with cold beds for them to sleep in.

Posidippus Epigram 55[1]

§3. This epigram, as we can see, is about a girl named Nikomakhe whose happy young life was sadly interrupted by a premature death. Nostalgically, the words of the epigram recall the happy times when this girl together with her girlfriends were singing the love songs of Sappho, sung one after another. That is what I argued in my postings for 2015.11.19 and 2015.12.03. In the present posting for 2016.01.07, I will argue that the poet pictures the singing of Sappho's songs by these girls as a recurrent event that is accompanied, as it were, by their weaving at the loom.

The instrument that is used for the weaving

§4. One readjustment in this posting for 2015.01.07 is reflected in the wording of my translation here, which differs in one significant detail from the way I translated the same text in my postings for 2015.11.19 and 2015.12.03. I now render the word kerkis at line 2 not as 'weaving shuttle' but as 'weaving pin'. I owe this readjustment to my friend Marie-Louise Bech Nosch, who tells me in an e-communication (2015.12.02): "in my team we have chosen to translate kerkis as weft-beater or weaving pin. The shuttle with integrated spool for yarn is a medieval invention and carries connotations from the early industrial societies."[2]

§5. I supplement this valuable formulation about the kerkis by citing further observations to be found in a detailed essay by my friend Susan Edmunds (2012), which is available online at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hlnc.essay:EdmundsS.Picturing_Homeric_Weaving.2012.

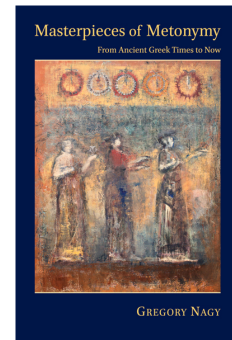
§6. Edmunds (2012 §40) likewise argues that the word 'shuttle' is an inaccurate translation of kerkis, and she goes on to say (§42): "A more accurate (though less poetic) translation of kerkis is 'pin beater'. [In her n70 at this point, she offers valuable bibliography, including Barber 1991:273–274.] A pin beater is a tool used on looms that do not have the reed typical of [the more modern] horizontal treadle-operated looms."

§7. Persuaded as I am by the reasoning of Nosch and Edmunds, I now translate kerkis not as 'shuttle' but as 'weaving pin'—which sounds to me slightly more poetic than 'pin beater'.

§8. Although neither wording—whether we choose pin beater or weaving pin—may sound all that poetic, the actual function of this instrument for weaving lends itself to metaphors for poetry and for songmaking in general. An example in English is the expression strumming the warp, referring to a procedure involving the interaction of the pin beater or weaving pin with the vertical or warp threads of the loom. Edmunds (2012 §48) describes the procedure this way:

> When the shed is changed and the warp threads cross past each other, they often tend to stick together, particularly if they are wool. Strumming causes them to separate and release themselves back in place. It is for this strumming action that the pin beater (or, by extension, the loom) is called " 'tuneful.' "

§9. Parallel to the metaphor of a "tuneful" use of the pin beater or weaving pin in the process of strumming the warp threads of the loom is a metaphor used in ancient Greek songmaking for referring to a comparable process. In terms of the Greek metaphor, the kerkis or 'weaving pin' is pictured as a 'singer' who makes the warp threads of the histos or loom 'respond in song' to the strumming. In Aristophanes Frogs 1316, we see one side of this two-sided metaphor: κερκίδος ἀοιδοῦ 'the weaving pin [kerkis], which is a singer [aoidos]'.[3] And in Euripides Iphigeneia in Tauris 222–224, we see the other side: ἱστοῖς ἐν καλλιφθόγγοις | κερκίδι . . . | . . . ποικίλλουσ(α) '[I am] pattern-weaving [poikillein], with my weaving pin [kerkis], on looms that have beautiful voices of their own'.[4]



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§10. Here I find it relevant to note the etymology of the noun kerkis: it corresponds to the verb krekein, to be defined as 'hit the strings noisily with a sharp instrument'—a meaning that corresponds to the process of 'strumming the warp'. More specifically, the verb krekein can be interpreted to mean 'hit the web home with a twang' or 'run the tip of the pin beater across the taut warp threads to free them from each other'. These formulations are based on the analysis of Elizabeth Barber (1991:275), who also addresses the fact that there are sporadic attestations of krekein where the verb refers to the twanging of a stringed instrument. I cite a clear summary of such contexts in the Suda, kappa 2367.2: κυρίως δὲ κρέκειν τὸ τὴν κιθάραν κρούειν 'in its proper sense, krekein means to strike [krouein] the kithara'. Barber goes on to say (again, 1991:275): "From looking at the Greek [attestations of the verb krekein], one has trouble telling whether the meaning began with weaving or playing a stringed instrument, but since all the [Indo-European] cognates outside of Greek [such as Old Norse hræll, meaning 'pin beater'] have to do with weaving, we can assume weaving as the semantic base for Greek too."

§11. Going back to the basic meaning of krekein as 'hit the strings noisily with a sharp instrument', I must now readjust my translation at §1 of my posting for 2015.12.03, where I rendered this verb as 'work the shuttle' in the context of quoting a fragment of Sappho. I now retranslate this way:

> γλύκηα μᾶτερ, οὔτοι δύναμαι κρέκην τὸν ἴστον | πόθωι δάμεισα παῖδος βραδίναν δι' Ἀφροδίταν
>
> My dear sweet mother! I just can't work the weaving pin [krekein] on my loom [histos], since I'm overcome by desire for a young one—and it's all because of delicate Aphrodite.

Sappho Fragment 102

§12. With these contexts of the words kerkis as 'weaving pin' and krekein as 'work the weaving pin' in mind, I return to the first three lines of Epigram 55 of Posidippus, where we see the same word kerkis in a comparable context. At the beginning of my essay here, I already translated the relevant wording this way:

> |1 Everything about Nikomakhe, all her pretty things and, come dawn, |2 as the sound of the weaving pin [kerkis] is heard, all of Sappho's love songs [oaroi], songs [oaroi] sung one after the next, |3 are all gone, carried away by fate, all too soon [pro-hōria].

§13. Now I focus on the wording πρὸς ἑώιαν |2κερκίδα, which I have translated 'come dawn, |2as the sound of the weaving pin [kerkis] is heard'. At §4 of my posting for 2015.12.03, I indicated my original understanding of what this wording really meant. To say it more literally, I understood the meaning to be temporal: '. . . and, on the occasion of the at-dawn |2 weaving-pin . . .'. As I argued, the preposition pros (πρὸς), translated here as 'on the occasion of', can be used with the accusative case in a temporal sense to mark either (1) a stretch of time that extends up to a given point or, more simply, (2) a point in time. In terms of this understanding, as I argued, the singing of Sappho's songs can be heard at dawn, that is, 'toward dawn'. Accordingly, I gave this title to the paragraphs that start at §4 in that posting: The dawn that links the night before and the day after.

§14. But now, in the light of a new e-correspondence with my friend Bernd Seidensticker (2015.12.03), I can see another dimension that is more circumstantial than temporal. In contexts having to do with the singing of songs, the preposition pros (πρὸς) together with the accusative of nouns referring to a musical instrument can mean 'to the accompaniment of' the given musical instrument'. I choose here just one example from among many others I could have chosen: we read in Plutarch's Life of Aratus 53.6 μέλη δ' ᾖδετο πρὸς κιθάραν 'songs were sung to the accompaniment of [pros] the kithara'. Accordingly, the songs of Sappho in Epigram 55 of Posidippus are being sung by the girls 'to the accompaniment of the weaving pin [kerkis]', and this weaving pin is being figured here metaphorically as a musical instrument.

§15. Even in terms of this further interpretation, however, my original translation of πρὸς ἑώιαν |2κερκίδα can stand: 'come dawn, |2as the sound of the weaving pin [kerkis] is heard'. Whether the singing of the girls is being pictured temporally as being synchronized with the weaving pin as it makes its sound at dawn or circumstantially as being accompanied by the sound made by the weaving pin at dawn—or both temporally and circumstantially—the point of the wording is in any case the same: the girls are weaving at dawn, as signaled by 'the weaving pin at dawn', while they are singing the songs of Sappho.

Once again this time the dawn that links the night before and the day after

§16. The question remains: has the singing and the weaving of the girls started at dawn or, alternatively, has it been ongoing all night, extending into the dawn? In my posting for 2015.12.03, I treated this question as if there were two mutually exclusive alternatives: either the girls were singing and weaving all night till dawn or they started their singing and weaving at dawn. In what follows, however, I will argue that we do not need to choose between such alternatives—if we keep in mind the traditional poetics of references to singing while weaving, weaving while singing. In terms of such poetics, as we will now see, the realities of singing while weaving and weaving while singing can be transformed into a metaphorical world of singing as weaving and weaving as singing. In such a metaphorical world, the singing and the weaving can be ongoing night and day. It is an eternal cycle, and the recycling from night to day back to night back to day back to night and so on is signaled by the dawn, which eternally links the night before to the day after.

§17. Such a picturing of dawn is elegantly symbolized in a set of three complementary passages that we find in the Greek Anthology. The first of these three is a stylized epigram commemorating a kerkis or 'weaving pin' that has been dedicated to the goddess Athena, patroness of women weavers:

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κερκίδα τὰν ὀρθρινὰ χελιδονίδων ἅμα φωνᾷ | μελπομέναν

[Telesilla daughter of Diokles has dedicated this] weaving pin [kerkis], which would be singing [melpesthai] at the same time as the sound of the swallows [khelidones] is heard at dawn.

Antipater of Sidon Greek Anthology 6.160.1–2

The second of these three passages, which is another stylized epigram, actually compares the sound made by the kerkis or 'weaving pin' and the sound made by swallows as they start singing at dawn:

Κερκίδας ὀρθρολάλοισι χελιδόσιν εἰκελοφώνους

[The old woman Aisione has dedicated these] weaving pins [kerkides] which make a sound that is just like the sound made by swallows [khelidones], who go la la la at dawn.

Philippos Greek Anthology 6.247.1

And the third of these three passages, which is yet another stylized epigram, compares the sound made by the kerkis or 'weaving pin' and the sound made by the nightingale:

κερκίδα δ' εὐποίητον, ἀηδόνα τὰν ἐν ἐρίθοις, | Βακχυλὶς, εὐκρέκτους ᾇ διέκρινε μίτους.

[The girl Bakkhylis has dedicated this] weaving pin [kerkis], well-made, which is the nightingale [aēdōn] of women who work on wool. With this [weaving pin] she kept the warp threads uncrossed, and they were beautifully strummed [krekein].

Antipater of Sidon Greek Anthology 174.5–6

So, the nightingale too is a weaver.[5]

§18. Both these two kinds of bird, the khelidōn 'swallow' and the aēdōn 'nightingale', are represented as making sounds that are comparable to the sound made by the kerkis 'weaving-pin'. And the comparison is complementary. We have already seen that swallows sing in the daytime, starting at dawn.[6] But now we will see that the singing of nightingales, which happens at nighttime, is traditionally represented as complementary to the singing of swallows in the daytime. Here is an example I have found in a rhetorical handbook:

ὅτι ἀηδόνες καὶ χελιδόνες ὑμᾶς καταμουσίζουσαι καὶ κατακηλοῦσαι νῦν μὲν εἰς ὕπνον καθέλκουσι, νῦν δὲ πάλιν ὑπὸ τὴν αὐγὴν τερετίζουσαι ἀναστήσουσι μεμυημένους

[Say] that (1) nightingales [aēdones] and (2) swallows [khelidones] put you into a songmaking frame of mind and enchant you. At one point they (1) lull you to sleep, and then, at another point, just before daybreak, they (2) bring you back to consciousness with their twittering, and now you are fully initiated.

Menander the Rhetorician 408

Since nightingales naturally sing at night, these are the birds who will lull you into a mystical trance with their song when you fall asleep, but the swallows who naturally sing in the morning are the birds that will wake you up from your trance. In the rhetoric of this complementarity, the fact that the sounds of both these kinds of birdsong can be compared to the sound of the weaving pin shows that weaving as singing is ongoing around the clock, as it were. Or, to say it another way, singing while weaving can be imagined poetically as ever ongoing, both night and day. The songmaking of the nightingale and of the swallow becomes in this way an eternal cycle.

Procne and Philomela, Nightingale and Swallow

§19. The eternal recycling of such birdsong is encoded in a traditional myth about two sisters who are named Procne and Philomela in some variants of the tradition (I will spell the names in their latinized forms), while in other variants their names are more overt: Aēdōn and Khelidōn, that is, Nightingale and Swallow.[7] These two mythical characters are women who become transformed respectively into the prototypical Nightingale and the prototypical Swallow in the course of their tragic interaction with a third mythical character, a man whose name in some versions is Tereus. This man in turn becomes transformed into a bird known by the name Upopa epops in the Linnaean taxonomy—or, to say it in plain English, the hoopoe. Today the best-known rendition of the whole myth can be found in Ovid Metamorphoses 6.401–674, where we read why Procne and Philomela and Tereus were transformed into birds.[8] It is a story about an Eternal Triangle. Tereus marries Procne and then violates her sister Philomela, only to be punished for his crime when Procne takes revenge on her husband by killing their own son and then serving up the child's cooked body to an unsuspecting Tereus, who thinks he is eating the meat of an animal. Once he discovers that his own stomach has become the tomb of his own son, Tereus experiences a grief that matches the grief of the two sisters. The combined grief becomes too much for all three to bear, and the gods take pity by transforming them all into birds.

§20. If we consider all the traditional retellings of this myth in all their variations, we find that the two sisters Procne and Philomela are both expert weavers. As I will now argue, this detail about the sisterhood of two mythical women who become the prototypical Nightingale and Swallow highlights the complementarity of their birdsong.

§21. In most versions of the myth, only Philomela is shown explicitly in the act of weaving a web, and the corresponding expertise of Procne as weaver is only implicit. For example, in the version that is best known to us today, that is, at lines 576–578 of Ovid Metamorphoses 6, we read that Philomela the would-be Swallow weaves into a web the story of her violation by Tereus. She cannot express the story in words, since Tereus had cut out her tongue and now keeps her imprisoned in a fortress, hidden away from her sister. But even in this version, at lines 581–582, we see an implication that the sister Procne, the would-be Nightingale, is also an expert weaver: after the woven web, neatly folded, is secretly sent to her by Philomela, Procne unfolds it (581) and literally legit 'reads' the carmen miserabile 'pitiful song' about her sister's grief (582). By implication, you have to be an expert weaver to be able to 'read' the full meaning of a song made by another expert weaver. Aristotle in his Poetics 1456b tells us that Sophocles, in a tragedy entitled Tereus (F 595 ed. Radt), makes reference to 'the sound of the weaving pin [kerkis]' (ἡ τῆς κερκίδος φωνή) as the decisive signal for the recognition of Philomela by her sister Procne.[9] For Philomela, the act of weaving a web substitutes for the act of singing a lament in expressing her grief, since her tongue has been cut out. Likewise for Procne, after she 'reads' the wordless lament that her sister has woven into the web, her own tongue simply cannot find the words to sing her own lament. Ovid says it most perceptively in his own words as he describes how Procne cannot find the words for her own tongue:

> verbaque quaerenti satis indignantia linguae | defuerunt
>
> In her search for words to say fully enough how she was aggrieved, such words failed to come to her tongue [lingua].

Ovid Metamorphoses 6.584–585

So, not only Philomela the would-be Swallow but also Procne the would-be Nightingale fail to sing any further as humans: the art of weaving is now the only language in which they communicate, since the art of singing has failed them. But these sisters can sing again wordlessly after they are transformed forever into the Swallow and the Nightingale, since the weaving pin that they had used for their expert weaving at the loom can now once again accompany their wordless singing, day and night. And the sisters sing in relay as they weave: the Swallow starts singing at daybreak while the Nightingale starts her song at nightfall.

§22. We have seen, then, in the retelling by Ovid—and we can see it also in most other versions of the myth—that only one of the two sister birds-to-be is shown explicitly in the act of weaving, though it is clear in all versions that Procne the would-be Nightingale is implicitly just as much an expert weaver as is Philomela the would-be Swallow. Before I go any further, however, I highlight a version of the myth where the would-be Nightingale herself is caught, as it were, in the act of weaving in her own right.

§23. This version of the myth is transmitted by Antoninus Liberalis, Metamorphoses 11.1–11, and the author reports that his narrative originates from the city of Ephesus (11.1).[10] I paraphrase here the relevant parts of the story, section by section:

> (11.1) The father of the two sisters is named Pandareōs, and he lives in a region of Asia Minor belonging to the city of Ephesus.
>
> (11.2) One of his two daughters is named Aēdōn or 'Nightingale', who gets married off to a tektōn 'carpenter' by the name of Polutekhnos, which means 'the one who has many crafts [tekhnai]'.[11] This Polutekhnos lives in the neighboring city of Colophon. The couple produces a son named Itus.
>
> (11.3) As a married couple, Aēdōn and Polutekhnos are at first so happy that they boast of a mutual love surpassing even the marital bliss experienced by that ultimate married couple, Hera and Zeus. Hera punishes Aēdōn and Polutekhnos for this boast by making them mutually envious of each other's crafts. Aēdōn and Polutekhnos must now compete with each other in a contest that challenges each one of the two to work on a personal masterpiece and to bring this work to completion before the rival work of the competitor is completed. The masterpiece to be crafted by Aēdōn is the weaving of a web, while the rival masterpiece to be crafted by the carpenter Polutekhnos is the building of a chariot. It is agreed that the loser of the contest will forfeit to the winner the prize of a servant girl.
>
> (11.4) Aēdōn wins the contest by being the first to complete her work, since she weaves her web with the help of the goddess Hera herself.[12] Now Polutekhnos, as the loser, must bring to his victorious wife a servant girl. But he contrives a malicious plan to humiliate Aēdōn by bringing to her as a servant girl her own sister, named Khelidōn or 'Swallow'. To make the plan work, Polutekhnos goes off to ask for permission from Pandareōs as the father of Khelidōn to allow him to escort the girl to Aēdōn, supposedly for a sisterly visit.
>
> (11.5) The father unsuspectingly gives his permission for Polutekhnos to get temporary custody of Khelidōn for the false purpose of a sisterly visit to Aēdōn. But now, instead of escorting Khelidōn, Polutekhnos secretly takes the girl aside and violates her, even disfiguring her beyond recognition before bringing her to Aēdōn as her servant girl. This way, both sisters have been utterly humiliated.
>
> (11.6) Khelidōn, at first unrecognized by her sister Aēdōn, is worked nearly to death as a servant girl. But finally, when Aēdōn once overhears Khelidōn singing a lament about her grief, she recognizes her sister, and now the two women plan their revenge for being so utterly humiliated by Polutekhnos.

(11.7) As in the other versions, the child of Aēdōn and Polutekhnos is now killed by the mother and served up as cooked meat to the unsuspecting father. Polutekhnos feels unspeakable grief upon discovering that he has unwittingly eaten his own child. Then he experiences further grief as further punishment for his wrongdoings.

(11.8) The story of the further grief experienced by Polutekhnos continues here.

(11.9–10) Seeing the combined grief experienced by all the members of this dysfunctional family, Zeus takes pity and transforms them all into birds.

(11.11) Predictably, Aēdōn is transformed into a nightingale and Khelidōn, into a swallow.

Back to Epigram 55 of Posidippus

§24. I return to the expression . . . καὶ πρὸς ἑώιαν |2κερκίδα . . . at lines 1–2, which I have translated this way: '. . . and, come dawn, |2as the sound of the weaving pin is heard . . .'. That sound, we can now see, can be made by the weaving pin of either one of the two primordial Sisters, the Nightingale or the Swallow, who sing night and day, in relay. Before dawn, it is the nightingales that sing their song. After dawn, it is time for the swallows to take over as they now sing their own song. And, we can now also see, these birds are weaving as they sing. That is why the sound of their song is the sound of the weaving pin. The Nightingale and the Swallow weave in relay, night and day, just as they sing in relay.

§25. In my postings for 2015.11.19 and 2015.12.03, I argued that the expression Σαπφώιους ἐξ ὀάρων ὀάρους 'Sappho's love songs [oaroi], songs [oaroi] sung one after the next' at line 2 of Epigram 55 indicates that these songs too are sung in relay, from one song to the next. Each singer is followed by the next singer in singing her song. I went on to say that such relay singing, as I have argued in other projects, is typical of performances at private symposia arranged by and for male participants, as also at public concerts where kitharōdoi 'kithara-singers' or aulōidoi 'aulos-singers' compete with each other for prizes as they take turns in singing citharodic or aulodic songs respectively.[13] Similarly in Epigram 55, as I further went on to say in my postings for 2015.11.19 and 2015.12.03, we see a reference to the taking of turns in singing citharodic songs of Sappho at a symposium—but the difference here is that the singers are represented as girls, not as boys or men. Essentially, we see here a female symposium. In terms of this argument, then, as I first said in §3 of my posting for 2015.11.19, "Epigram 55 pictures those happy times long ago when a girl named Nikomakhe would be partying all night with her girl-friends while singing and listening to the love songs of Sappho."

§26. We can imagine Nikomakhe and her girlfriends as singing love-songs of Sappho while they are weaving at their looms, but I don't worry any more whether the wording of Posidippus indicates that the singing and weaving ends at dawn or starts at dawn. In mythological and poetic traditions about nightingales and swallows, as we have seen, the dawn signals a continuum of singing and weaving in relay. You can party all night as you sing while you weave and, come dawn, you can work all day as you weave while you sing.

§27. As I think further about all-night partying by girls singing love songs in relay, I return to what I said in my posting of 2015.12.03 about an e-correspondence with my friend Claudia Filos, dated 2015.11.27, where she reminds me of two passages in Pindar's Pythian 3 that refer to such partying. In the first of these two passages, the merry sounds of wedding songs sung for a bride are described this way:

> |17 . . . ἅλικες |18οἷα παρθένοι φιλέοισιν ἑταίρᾳ |19 ἑσπερίαις ὑποκουρίζεσθ' ἀοιδαῖς
>
> . . . just as girls [parthenoi] who are age-mates [of the bride] love to do sweet-talk [hupo-kor-izesthai] in their songs sung for their companion [hetaira = the bride], come evening.
>
> Pindar Pythian 3.17–19[14]

At a later point in the same song, a mother goddess is described this way:

> |78 . . . τὰν κοῦραι παρ' ἐμὸν πρόθυρον σὺν Πανὶ μέλπονται θαμὰ |79 σεμνὰν θεὸν ἐννύχιαι. . .
>
> . . . that venerable goddess, whom the girls [kourai] at my portal, with the help of Pan, celebrate by singing and dancing [melpesthai] again and again [thama] all night long [ennukhiai] . . .
>
> Pindar Pythian 3.78–79

A brief look at typological parallels

§28. If we look beyond ancient Greece and consider evidence from other song cultures of the world, we can find typological parallels for what I am positing here, namely, that women could engage in the practice of weaving and singing—and partying—all night long. I am engaging here in typological comparison, by which I mean a kind of comparative method that has to do with the study of parallelisms between structures as structures pure and simple, without any presuppositions of any historical connectedness.[15]

§29. The working definition of typological comparison that I have just formulated here is taken from another work of mine where I happened to be comparing ancient Greek song culture with the historically unconnected song culture of my own people, the Hungarians. In that context, I was typologically comparing ancient Greek lament and Hungarian lament.[16] Now, once again this time, I delve into a Hungarian

typological parallel. This time, I am comparing what I just posited for ancient Greek song culture, which is the practice of all-night singing by girls while they are working on the production of cloth, with a practice that is well documented in ethnographic studies of Hungarian song culture. I cite a particularly lively summary by Elizabeth Barber:

> In Europe, too, unlike the Near East, looms were and are set up indoors and worked during the long periods of stormy weather and winter darkness, when little else can be done around the farm. A typical Hungarian evening in the villages consisted of a group of women getting together and spinning or embroidering all evening, while the men entertained them with stories, music, songs, and dances. Some of the men might be plying small craft also, and invariably some of the girls would drop their work for a bit to add to the entertainment with dancing and games. Singing, talking, and flirting, of course, didn't stop the handwork, and singing makes the work easier.[17]

Barber adds:

> I am aware of such customs in several other areas of central Europe and Scandinavia. "Quilting bees" in rural America were also very similar in both economic and social function.[18]

In a related context, Barber also compares the custom of singing waulking songs in rural Scotland, and she explains that this kind of song is not for "walking" but for "trampling the newly woven tartan cloth, soaking wet, on a corrugated board so as to make it waterproof and windproof."[19]

§30. For another typological example, I turn to a pathfinding study by my friend Vassiliki Koutsobina on a five-voice chanson composed by Josquin des Prez (died 1521) and entitled Je me complains de mon amy 'I make laments about my man friend'.[20] In the final two lines of this chanson, as Koutsobina shows, the composer makes an explicit reference, both musically and verbally, to a popular song and tune that stems from a medieval songmaking tradition known as the chanson de toile or 'cloth-making song'. Here is the text of Josquin:

> |1 Je me complains de mon amy |2 qui me souloit venir veoir |3 la fresche matinée. |4 Or est il prime'et s'est midi |5 et si n'oy nouvelle de lui. |6 S'approche la vesprée. |7 La tricoton, la tricoton, |8 la belle tricotée.
>
> |1 I make lament about my man friend |2 who used to come visit me |3 at morningtime, when all is fresh. |4 But now it's prime time. And now it's noontime, |5 and I have no news of him. |6 And now it's vesper time. |7 The cloth [tricoton], the cloth [tricoton], |8 the pretty cloth-girl [tricotée].

The words show a switch in speakers. First the girl speaks at lines 1–6, and then at lines 7–8 a commentator speaks of the girl's insincerity, referring to her as the belle tricotée, which I translate as a 'pretty cloth girl'. Here I am following the analysis of Koutsobina, who shows that the verb tricoter in such contexts can mean not only 'work on cloth' but also 'have sex'.[21] As Koutsobina also shows, the superius in the melodic transcription of the final two lines corresponds to a tune attached to various different wordings in texts dating from the 15th century.[22] I quote the wording of one of these texts:

> |1 La tricotée est par matin levée, |2 sa pris sa harpe, au bois s'en est allée. |3 La tricoton, la tricoton, |4 la belle tricotée.
>
> |1 The cloth-girl [tricotée] got out of bed in the morning. |2 She grabbed her harp and went off to the woods. |3 The cloth [tricoton], the cloth [tricoton], |4 the pretty cloth-girl [tricotée].

As Koutsobina observes about such imagery in these songs, "the garden or the forest was the locus of erotic endeavors, where the maid meets her lover or the knight encounters the lonely bergère."[23] In this context, Koutsobina evokes the pathfinding work of E. Jane Burns on women's working songs dating from the 13th century.[24] These medieval songs, known as chansons de toile 'cloth-songs', dramatize the singing of women while they are working on their cloth-work. As Burns notes, "the women who sew in the chanson de toile sing of love that works, like needles through cloth, pulling desirous partners into mutual embrace."[25] And such medieval 'cloth-songs' are evidently the original inspiration for the imagery that lives on in the later chansons. Koutsobina concludes about the incorporation of the "tricotée melody" into the chanson of Josquin: "while the female subject complains about her lover, the beautiful tricotée gets what she desires by turning her knitting/singing enterprise into love work."[26] So also, I suggest, we can imagine "love work" going on as we read in Posidippus, at line 2 of his Epigram 55: . . . πρὸς ἑώιαν |2 κερκίδα Σαπφώιους ἐξ ὀάρων ὀάρους '. . . come dawn, |2 as the sound of the weaving pin [kerkis] is heard, all of Sappho's love songs [oaroi], songs [oaroi] sung one after the next . . .'.

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H24H. See Nagy 2013.

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Notes

[1] For an apparatus criticus, see Angiò, Cuypers, Acosta-Hughes, and Kosmetatou 2011.

[2] I share some essential information about the organization that is headed by this noted expert on fabric work: Marie-Louise B. Nosch, Ph.D., Research Professor, Director, The Danish National Research Foundation's Centre for Textile Research (CTR). Post adress: Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixensvej 4 DK-2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark Phone + 45 2382 8021. Visit address: Amager fælledvej 56, 2nd floor, Copenhagen S. Web: http://ctr.hum.ku.dk/. CTR on facebook: http://www.facebook.com/pages/Centre-for-Textile-Research/192938927390718

[3] Commentary in Nagy PP 65n25.

[4] Commentary in Nagy MoM 4§167n162.

[5] See again Nagy PP 65n25. On the general topic of metaphorical connections between the nightingale and the process of weaving, see Papadopoulou-Belmehdi 1994:155–156.

[6] See also Papadopoulou-Belmehdi 1994:143n26.

[7] For a survey that cites the major attested variants, I refer to the useful list of Levaniouk 2011:215n6.

[8] For a parallel version, in briefer form, I recommend especially "Apollodorus" Bibliotheca 3.193–195.

[9] See Papadopoulou-Belmehdi 1994:143n24.

[10] I agree with Levaniouk 2011:298 when she argues, on the basis of comparative evidence to be found in the Odyssey and elsewhere, that this version of the myth as transmitted by Antoninus Liberalis is "independent" of other attested versions.

[11] On this name, see Papadopoulou-Belmehdi 1994:145.

[12] For more on the role of Aēdōn as an outstanding weaver, see Levaniouk 2011:297–298.

[13] Nagy 2007, 2010.

[14] Alternatively, if we read ἑταῖραι instead of ἑταίρᾳ, we can translate: '. . . just as girls [parthenoi], companions [hetairai] who the same age [as the bride], love to do sweet-talk [hupo-kor-izesthai] in their songs'.

[15] H24H 3§11.

[16] H24H 3§12.

[17] Barber 1991:294, with further documentation.

[18] Barber 1991:294n4.

[19] Barber 1991:216.

[20] Koutsobina 2008.

[21] Koutsobina 2008:67–68.

[22] Koutsobina 2008:68.

[23] Koutsobina 2008:73.

[24] Burns 2002.

[25] Burns 2002:115.

[26] Koutsobina 2008:73.

Tags: Posidippus, Sappho, weaving

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