


LESBIANTIQUITY

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**ASKLEPIADES
BITTO & NANNION
OFFENDERS
AGAINST
APHRODITE**

LESBIANTIQUITY © Georgina Barker (Portknockie: Sapphizdat, 2024)

Asklepiades translation, introduction, and notes © Em Setzer 2024

Greek text from: Jeffrey Henderson, ed., *The Greek Anthology*, Vol. V
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918)

Back cover art: 'Root & Branch Tree' © Emily Setzer 2024

THE TRANSLATOR

Em Setzer

I am a translator and poet interested in romantic or erotic literature. In particular, I am drawn to what history may have deemed unorthodox or even perverse; as a queer scholar, this often means I seek out representations of queer sexuality and sensuality. Recent endeavors of mine include translations of Stesichorus, and my undergraduate thesis, which examines the multi-faceted nature of love in Ancient Greek erotic poetry. I am now a Master's student in Cornell University's Creative Writing MFA.



ἌΣΚΛΗΠΙΑΔΗΣ (ΣΙΚΕΛΙΔΑΣ) Ὁ ΣΑΜΙΟΣ

An early Alexandrian poet of the third century BC, Asklepiades (usually spelled Asclepiades; his patronymic was Sikelidas and he came from the Aegean island of Samos) was active during the ‘golden age’ of the epigram, and was one of the earliest poets to write erotic epigrams. While he also likely composed choral and lyric pieces, most of Asklepiades’ surviving body of work consists of epigrams, preserved in a number of ancient compilations and anthologies, such as the *Anthologia Palatina*.

Throughout his epigrammatic corpus, Asklepiades employs a distinct narratorial voice and identity; it is often absurd and ironic, and achieves a certain amount of distance between author and subject. Most of his epigrams are conversational in tone, spoken by a narrator who is singularly concerned with his own experiences as a victim (always passive, oftentimes pathetic) of love and pleasure. This narrator is presented by Asklepiades to be naive, ridiculous, and self-obsessed. This remains true in the following epigram, AP 5.207,¹ in which Asklepiades’ narrator considers the simple fact of two women’s disinterest in him (or men in general) to be worthy of disproportionately strong condemnation.

In comparison to other epigrams by Asklepiades, AP 5.207 has received minimal attention. Outside of academic scholarship, it is occasionally referenced by writers on account of its homosexual possibilities; one such example is found in Sofia Parnok’s collection of poetry *Roses of Pieria*, in which the epigram is expanded upon and adapted for a personal, Sapphic context.² Within the realm of

¹ AP refers to *Anthologia Palatina* (‘The Greek Anthology’). AP 5.207 = GP (Gow & Page, 1965) 7.

² Barker (2024).

scholarship, the nature of the offense committed by the Samian women has proved a particular point of interest for analysis; while it is clear the women are engaged in acts that are considered improper (at least by the narrator), it is unclear what these acts are. Scholars are largely divided between understanding the women to be homosexuals or sex workers.³ Despite the ambiguity, AP 5.207 has most commonly been referenced in scholarship as a possible example of female homoeroticism.

³ For a thorough analysis of AP 5.207, see Boehringer (2021).



ROOT & BRANCH READING GUIDE

Our translations branch out to explore
a variety of options for the text:
any variants in the original <Greek> texts
Latin
and the various possible meanings in English.

Our translations are rooted in the words
of the original text, replicating when possible
word order, root meanings of words, and
grammatical gender $\left(\begin{matrix} [n] \\ [f] \\ [m] \end{matrix} \right)$ of words about people.

You, the reader, will choose which branches you prefer to follow.

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AP 5.207

On Bitto and Nannion

The Samians [f], Bitto and Nannion, < ^{do not want}
are not willing >
to < ^{attend}
frequent > Aphrodite's, in accordance with her < ^{laws}
customs > ,
but desert it for other things that are not (^{proper}
good beautiful). O mistress Kypris,
< ^{abhor}
hate > the < ^{fugitives}
deserters > from your bed.



εἰς Βιττῶ καὶ Νάννιον

Αἱ Σάμιαι Βιττῶ καὶ Νάννιον εἰς Ἀφροδίτης
φοιτᾶν τοῖς αὐτῆς οὐκ ἐθέλουσι νόμοις,
εἰς δ' ἕτερ' αὐτομολοῦσιν ἃ μὴ καλά. δεσπότι Κύπρι,
μίσει τὰς κοίτης τῆς παρὰ σοὶ φυγάδας.

NOTES

In this epigram, Asklepiades invokes the goddess Aphrodite to rebuke two women who refuse normative sexual practices.

1 Samians [f]: while Samian women do not necessarily have the same lascivious reputation as Lesbian ones came to have (with more hypersexual than homosexual connotations), Philaenis, a possibly fictional female author of an 'ancient sex manual', was from Samos. Both Martial and Lucian play with Philaenis's homosexual reputation in *Epigrams* 7.67 & 70, and *Erotes* 28, respectively. Boehringer (2021 pp. 167–9) argues that the narrator's disappointment is intensified by the fact that the women are from his birthplace.

1–2 *εἰς Ἀφροδίτης φοιτᾶν*; attend/frequent Aphrodite's: φοιτάω, 'visit' / 'attend', with a genitive (Ἀφροδίτης) strongly suggests 'attending' the 'school of (Aphrodite)' more than simply 'visiting' her 'temple' / 'house' (as explained by Dover 2002 p. 223). Note that 'school/temple/house' must be supplemented or provided by the reader, and is not technically present in the Greek itself. One could even supply a vague or ambiguous location – such as Aphrodite's place or realm – as the key feature is its association with the goddess.

3 The manuscript has left the relative clause unpunctuated: εἰς δ' ἕτερ' αὐτομολοῦσιν ἃ μὴ καλὰ rather than εἰς δ' ἕτερ' αὐτομολοῦσιν, ἃ μὴ καλὰ. Overall, this epigram does not present any major editorial issues, and this matter of punctuation is perhaps the only variation which might affect its meaning. Ultimately this clause's punctuation, or lack thereof, emphasizes the ambiguity of relative clauses. Dover (2002 p. 224) addresses this, and, following his analysis, the meaning could either be 'they desert it for other things that are not proper' or 'they desert it for other things, and/but those things are not proper'.

4 *μίσει*; abhor/hate: as far as Greek expressions of hate go, μισέω is less intense than others, such as στυγέω; μισέω means to feel hatred, whereas στυγέω means to show it. That being said, the speaker's imperative command that Aphrodite 'hate' these women is striking.



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