

Joke's on Him: Caricature and Male Clients of Prostitutes on Greek-Vase Painting

Red-figure vase painters had several tricks up their sleeve when attempting to instill humor into their finished works. Alexandre Mitchell has gone into great depth examining what he calls “comic mechanisms” in iconography of Greek painted pottery (Mitchell 4: 2004). Mitchell divides the comic mechanisms into four groups: visual puns, situation comedy, parody, and lastly caricature. Caricature is the deliberate exaggeration of a facial feature or body part to the point of being grotesque. A deformed or grotesque individual on vase-painting would have been a source of amusement and laughter for the viewer, which strongly contrasts the Greek ideal of beauty and proportionality. Found predominantly adorning red-figure vessels, caricature subjects a variety of different people –heroes, dwarfs, satyrs, and aged prostitutes - to humiliation and ridicule; however, the comedic strength of caricature is more complex than meets the eye.

This paper examines the use of caricature as a comedic tool in scenes of older prostitutes with a male client. Aging prostitutes were a common target of degradation and humiliation in the Greek literary record. For instance, while citizen wives and even widows were protected by laws, no such luxury was given to prostitutes, even *hetairai*, when they became too old to work (Aeschines 1.28-32). I argue in this paper that the caricatured features of an old prostitute indirectly insult and mock of her male client. These caricatured features include sagging breasts, a double chin, a curved nose, facial wrinkles, fat thighs, and folds of fat. While these characteristics are a sign of prolonged age, they become emphasized by the nude body of the prostitute.

An example of this is found on a red-figure kylix from the Getty Museum, attributed to Phintias (80.AE.31). Both sides of this kylix show a scene of an aging prostitute with a young

male client, but I interpret each side rather differently. On Side B, the prostitute, who is strongly caricatured with sagging breasts, fat thighs, a double chin, and rolls of fat hanging from her stomach, masturbates his erect phallus. The male customer reclines on his back and with his right hand appears to urge the prostitute to move faster. I argue that this scene, through the extreme caricature of the prostitute, mocks the male client, who cannot afford the services of a young and beautiful hetaira.

Side A depicts a prostitute staring straight into a krater held partially with her right hand and by the left hand of her young male customer. Since a krater was used to mix water and wine, the drinking habits of the old prostitute are now on display, in addition to her sagging breasts, fat thighs, and double chin. While the aging prostitute was certainly a target of humor for the viewer, I believe the youth in this scene is main victim of Phintias' use of caricature. Unlike the male client on the previous side, this youth cannot even afford an old, flabby, and wine-loving prostitute, and must masturbate himself.

This paper, by closely examining iconographic scenes of aging female prostitutes with their male client on Greek vase-painting, sheds greater light onto the power of caricature as a tool of humor in the repertoire of the vase-painter.

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