A Woman's Suicide for a Man's Death: Gendered Constructions of Humor in Epigrams

This paper takes as its starting point a conceptual polarity in Greek thought between suicide by the sword, which literary and cultural materials associate with men, and suicide by the noose, which these same sources associate with women. This sword/male, noose/female paradigm underlies most of the suicides in preclassical and classical literature. However, the suicides presented by Hellenistic and Imperial epigrams often subvert this schema, assigning male suicides to the noose and female suicides to the sword.

Of specific interest are the epigrams that depict a man employing the female noose in his suicide. Such epigrams are all of the humorous (skoptic) variety, such as one by Loukillios which chuckles at a poor man's suicide: Ποιήσας δαπάνην ἐν ὕπνοις ὁ φιλάργυρος Ἕρμων / ἐκ περιωδυνίας αὑτὸν ἀπηγχόνισεν (*G.A.* 11.264). As a whole, these epigrams cleverly blend the seriousness of suicide with comedically inadequate characters and their equally ridiculous behavior, and thus give their audience permission to laugh at a subject usually too serious to be funny. This appropriation of the suicide theme from high literature aligns well with epigrams and their interest in testing literary boundaries. They revisit a traditional theme, but from a completely different perspective, in order to shock and amuse their audience.

Most scholarship has dismissed these hangings as an immaterial or circumstantial part of the jest. However, I argue that, far from a meaningless aesthetic choice, hanging serves a critical role in constructing the epigram's humorous suicides. When these epigram authors subvert the tone of high literature in their portrayals of suicide, they also very intentionally subvert the *modus moriendi*; it can not be overstated that all humorous suicide epigrams both feature men employing the noose. By drawing on the theoretical framework established by Judith Butler, which understands gender as performative behavior, I argue that epigrams use gender-transgressive modes of self-killing to construct their humorous portrayals of suicide. Since hanging is a performatively female behavior, men who employ the noose appear feminine. It is not a coincidence that these suicides are

humorous: the feminization of a male character identifies these suicides as distinctly laughable to a Greek audience, in no small part due to embedded associations between female suicide and disgrace in Greek thought. The female noose, while not the only factor in constructing the epigrams' comedic color, thus plays a critical role in reducing the male suicide to a humorous punchline.

On the surface level, this argument allows for a richer understanding of how epigram authors manipulated the suicide paradigm of high literature for their unique purposes. The humorous suicides transform the weighty topic of suicide into a laughing matter, which aligns well with the unconventional spirit of epigrams and their interest in pushing the traditional boundaries of literature. But more importantly, examining these manipulations of gendered norms facilitates a close interrogation of the interdiscursive mythologies around Greek suicide. Through these suicide epigrams, we can better understand the cultural meaning-making processes that ascribed gendered significance to certain modes of death and what it means when those modes were subverted. In short, the very telling ways that suicide was gendered in the Greek imagination.

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