

## Nossis' Dildo: Metapoetic Criticism of Female Poetry in Herodas' Sixth *Mime*

In Herodas' sixth *Mime*, two women named Metro and Koritto discuss a stolen dildo which is now in the possession of "Nossis daughter of Erinna" (20-21). This paper argues that this reference is meant to criticize the work of the woman poet Nossis and the female poetic tradition in general both for their appropriation of the male craft of poetry and as being trivial, obscene, and absurd for their focus on female concerns and female pleasure. This sexualized mockery of Nossis reflects male anxieties about female agency and self-sufficiency in the works of women poets in the Hellenistic period. As others have pointed out, the mention of "Nossis daughter of Erinna" in *Mime* 6 is a clear allusion to the two contemporary female poets of the same names, with the mother-daughter relationship expressing a figurative rather than a literal filiation, a reference to a female poetic tradition in which Nossis follows in Erinna's footsteps (Stern 1979; Skinner 2001). However, no scholar has yet parsed the significance of the association of these two women with the dildo, other than that it is likely to be an insult of some kind. In this paper, I make the case that the dildo represents the male poetic tradition that Nossis and other female poets have appropriated for their own illicit use, and that Herodas presents such an appropriation as both disgusting and laughable.

Stern has argued that *Mime* 6 has a sophisticated metapoetic program, with the exquisitely-made dildo representing the craft of poetry (Stern 1979). The dildo is the product of a cobbler named Kerdon, whose workmanship Metro and Koritto marvel at but could never hope to replicate themselves (65-73). The total reliance of the women on the male craftsman for the production of dildos is shown by Koritto's desperate attempt to obtain a second dildo by seducing the physically repulsive Kerdon (75-8). Herodas makes it clear that poetry is something that women may enjoy, but which only men may properly produce. Koritto tells Metro that the

dildo has been stolen and passed around by a number of different women, with Metro chiming in that she knows that Nossis has it now (20-36). Nossis' participation in the production of poetry is thus portrayed here both as inappropriate insofar as she is making use of something that does not belong to her, as well as distasteful, like the vulgar enjoyment of a sex toy that many other women have previously used. The message is that since poetry is the property of men, women's use of poetry must necessarily be inappropriate and vulgar in this way.

By making Nossis' metapoetic possession a dildo that many different women have used to pleasure themselves with, Herodas is also mocking the homoerotic and gynocentric nature of both Nossis' poetry and the larger female poetic tradition. Nossis' poetry has been described as being primarily for and about women (Skinner 1991), as has the work of other female poets such as Erinna, Anyte, and Sappho (Winkler 1990; Gutzwiller 1993; 1997). Nossis' declaration of allegiance to Sappho (*AP* 7.718) and her claim that she herself has been kissed by Aphrodite (*AP* 5.170) associate her with the female homoeroticism that is explicit in Sappho and heavily implied in the work of Erinna (Rauk 1989; Skinner 1989). The crass image of a group of women sharing a dildo parodies the female intimacy and erotic longing of these works and suggests that women poets' emphasis on such topics is, in a word, "masturbatory"—self-indulgent, obscene, and unfit for poetic representation.

Herodas' metapoetic attack on Nossis shows that the works of female poets of the Hellenistic period evoked hostile reactions in at least some of their male peers. Despite the praise heaped on Erinna in epigrams preserved in the *Greek Anthology* (*AP* 7.11, 7.13, 7.113), it is clear that female poets were not well-received by all and that the success of their work may have produced jealousy in contemporary male poets. My analysis of Herodas 6 paves the way for further study on this topic.

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