

The Curious Case of Erysichthon

A central aspect of Callimachus' *Hymn to Demeter* is the changing age of the main character in the narrative section (Ambühl 2005). Erysichthon, after offending the goddess, is punished with hunger and regresses into infancy (φῶτα, 45; παῖς, 56; βρέφος, 100). Distraught at the financial consequences of his son's ravening hunger, Erysichthon's father wishes that Apollo had stricken down his βρέφος (96-110). Erysichthon's fate, however, is "begging for morsels and filth cast out from the feast" (αιτίζων ἀκόλως τε καὶ ἔκβολα λύματα δαιτός, 115). This line has been oft-noted for its allusion to the beggar imagery in the *Odyssey* (Bulloch 1977), but Stephens (2015) comments that ἔκβολα "suggests the practice of exposing unwanted children in public places."

Before Callimachus, in fact, the adjective appears only in Euripides (six times). *Brephos*, too, is most common in Euripides (ca. thirty times in Euripides vs. ca. ten times before Euripides), who uses the word almost every time to describe a royal male exposed at birth, except when he appropriates the language of exposure as a framing device for other tales. The frequency of this motif in Euripides led Huys (1995) to rigorously schematize its features (without undertaking a philological analysis of the term βρέφος). While Euripides' exposure tales belong to the world of myth, they have been understood to anticipate or influence the more realistic depiction of exposure in New Comedy (Huys 1995).

Callimachus, I argue, draws elements of the exposure motif from both genres in the *Hymn to Demeter*, a poem that blends together tragedy and comedy in other ways. For example, on the one hand, the poet innovates on the heir exposed at birth found frequently in Euripides. The involvement of Apollo in the successful enthronement of the *brephos*, found not only in

Euripides, but also in Pindar, is turned on its head in the *Hymn to Demeter* and is inventively foiled by lines in *Hymn to Apollo*, a poem where other verbal parallels have been located (Müller 1987). From New Comedy, on the other hand, Callimachus imports financial instability as a reason for exposure. In some cases, glimpses of reality (e.g. male authority in matters of female fertility) are also present in the poem.

At the same time, the exposure motif becomes in Callimachus a metapoetic expression that conveniently fits the mold of Ptolemaic propaganda. In several passages in the *Hymn to Demeter*, Erysichthon is described as if he has deformities (e.g. 91-3, 100-1), which are associated with the exposure of some infants in myth (e.g. Oedipus) and possibly with actual exposure (cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1335b19-21). Deformity serves as a metaphor elsewhere in Callimachus in contexts of giving birth to unhealthy children (*Dian.* 127-8; fr. 203.13-4 Pf.) and contrasts sharply with the image of health and vitality regularly associated with Callimachus and his poetry (e.g. fr.1.31-6 Pf.).

These themes correlate, in turn, with the strength and fertility of the Ptolemies, especially Berenike II, whose personal fecundity mirrored the productive outcomes of their rule. Furthermore, as the only male child, Erysichthon's exposure terminates the family line. By contrast, Callimachus celebrated the birth and succession of the Ptolemaic male line in the very poetry that he hoped would reverberate throughout the ages.

Bibliography

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