

Sun, Moon, and Cucumbers? The Eternal and the Ephemeral in Praxilla's *Hymn to Adonis*

This paper argues that the juxtaposition of the sun, moon, and stars with ripe fruits in Praxilla's *Hymn to Adonis* is not comedic, but rather reflects the opposition in Archaic poetry between man's vegetal nature and the immortality of "unwithering" fame that is symbolized by eternal celestial bodies. The second-century CE sophist Zenobius records a proverb "sillier than Praxilla's *Adonis*" (*ēlithiōteros tou Praxillēs Adōnidos*); to exemplify the poem's silliness, he cites a passage in which Adonis says that what he misses most about the living world is the sun, moon, stars, and also "ripe cucumbers and apples and pears" (*hōraious sikuous kai mēla kai onchnas*). Zenobius opines that only a foolish person would list cucumbers and other fruits alongside the sun and moon (Zenob. 4.21). A number of modern scholars have taken a similar stance and characterized these lines as humorous (Schmid and Stählen 1929; Balmer 2013). A more serious interpretation emerges, however, when one examines the connotations of celestial and vegetal imagery in Archaic poetry. I suggest that we can read this passage of Praxilla's *Adonis* as commenting on the duality of masculinity. The ripe fruits represent the ephemerality of male youth and beauty celebrated by the female-oriented Adonis festival, while the sun, moon, and stars represent the eternal fame that men strive to win in order to overcome their vegetal nature. This can be read as a statement that the quickly-withering "fruit" of Adonis' youth is just as desirable as the *kleos aphthiton*, "unwithering fame" of Homeric warriors. In contrast to the masculine perspective of epic that values a heroic death in battle above all, Praxilla portrays Adonis' ephemeral beauty as being of equal worth as eternal *kleos*.

In Archaic poetry, "the imagery of celestial light typically evokes glory reaching through space and lasting through time" (Spelman 2018: 46), as when Zeus in the *Iliad* tells Poseidon

that his *kleos* will last as long as the dawnlight is scattered” (*Il.* 7.458), or when Theognis tells Cyrnus that he will make him immortal in song as long as the earth and sun exist (254). In Pindar, the light of the sun or other celestial bodies such as the morning star is linked to everlasting fame (Spelman 2018). Vegetal imagery, in contrast, represents both the erotic desirability of young men and the transitory nature of mortal life. Nagy has argued that the vegetal similes in the *Iliad* symbolize the natural cycle of birth and death that warriors seek to transcend by winning *kleos* (1979). In *Iliad* 6, human generations are compared to leaves that die and are born anew each year (6.145-49). Mimnermus laments that “the fruit of youth” (*hēbēs / karpos*, fr. 2.7-8) lasts for a short time.” Doomed warriors in the *Iliad* are compared to trees (4.482-87), young plants (18.56), and flowers (8.349-53). Like plants, mortals “bloom” (*thallō*, *Il.* 3.26) and decay (*phthiō*, *Il.* 21.466), but only *kleos* is *aphthiton* (*Il.* 9.413), “unwithering” (Nagy 1979).

That the fruits of Praxilla’s *Adonis* carry similar connotations of doomed youthful beauty is suggested by the description of them as *hōraious*, “ripe,” an adjective that is frequently used for young men in their prime (Hes. *Op.* 695). Such vegetal imagery is also associated with the Adonis festival, in which the dying youth is represented by the quickly-withering rooftop gardens that women plant in his honor (Reitzammer 2016). The *Adonia* celebrates and eroticizes the link between young men and the vegetal life cycle, portraying the dying plant/man as a precious object of desire (Winkler 1990; Holst-Warhaft 1992).

Praxilla’s characterization of ephemeral beauty as being as pleasing as eternal glory is aptly suited to a hymn to Adonis, a figure who exemplifies the vegetal nature of man. She suggests that rather than deserving the scorn and ridicule that was often heaped upon him in male-authored texts (Reitzammer 2016), Adonis is as worthy of praise as the heroes of epic.

Further, by valorizing man's transitory place in the natural lifecycle rather than reaffirming the exclusive value of eternal fame won in war, she questions hegemonic ideologies of masculinity that emphasize martial prowess and the transcendence of nature over other ways of being.

Bibliography

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