The Inviolate Garden of Girls in Ibycus 286 PMG

In spring both the Kydonian quince-trees, watered from the streams of rivers in the inviolate garden of girls, and the blossoms of the vine, growing beneath the shady shoots of the vine-leaves, thrive—but as for me, erōs is at rest in no season; and Thracian Boreas, burning with lighting flashes, darting from beside the Kyprian with parching madnesses, dark, undaunted, forcibly guards my heart from the ground up (my own translation).

Ibycus 286 PMG is preserved for us in Athenaeus (13.601b) as an example of Ibycus’ love poetry, and scholars have struggled to reconcile the contrasting representations of erōs in the two halves of the 13-line poem. Indeed, the lush imagery of the garden in its first half strongly suggests eroticism, yet even in the first few lines, complications already appear: the girls within the garden are labelled parthenoi, “maiden,” and the landscape itself is defined as akēratos, “untouched.” In this paper I will argue that the garden, although full of erotic imagery, is distinctly lacking in erōs and thus the contrast between the two halves of the fragment is not of differing types of erōs, but of its anticipation and subsequent arrival.
Most commentators argue that the garden is itself a site of erotic activity, based on the eros symbolism of its plant life. William Tortorelli sees the contrast as between two types of erōs, one the “gentle ideal of love” and the other “the speaker’s own negative experiences” (Tortorelli 2004: 375). Vanessa Cazzato, too, argues that the two halves are linked by their shared erotic nature, and thus the contrast must be between a particular kind of erōs in the world of the garden and a different erōs in world of the speaker (Cazzato 2013: 272–73). I will show in this paper, however, that there is no erōs present for the parthenoi in the garden, but that they are being nurtured for the purposes of future sexual availability, much as the plants are being cultivated for future harvesting.

I will first establish that the kēpos is distinct from other loci amoeni due to its cultivated nature (LSJ s.v. κῆπος). I will then argue that not only the quince-trees and grapevines of the garden, which have as yet to put on fruit, but the parthenoi as well are purposefully cultivated towards “ripeness.” The cultivation of the kēpos keeps the plants and the parthenoi unviolated (akēratos) by outside and harmful forces, such as those seen in the latter half of the fragment: harsh winds, violent lightning, and above all erōs. As Anne Carson states, “female beauty grows until the moment of plucking”; after a woman has taken part in sexual relations, she loses her previously untouched desirability (Carson 1990: 148 n. 29). I will therefore argue that the immature parthenoi of the garden must be cultivated to preserve their inviolacy up until the moment when they are ripe and ready to be picked—their opōra. Thus the first half of the poem serves as a “prelude that leads on to the consummation of desire,” rather than as a space for erotic activity itself (contra Calame 2013: 169).

My main contribution to the scholarship on Ibycus 286 PMG is therefore that the contrast of the fragment is first and foremost one of growth and maturity: the protected time
of *partheneia* in the first half is contrasted sharply with the violent moment of *opōra* in the second. The apparent disjunction between the two halves of Ibycus 286 *PMG* is thus not of differing types of *erōs*, but of its anticipation as built up by the cultivation of the *parthenoi* in the first half and its presence as lamented by the speaker in the latter half.

Bibliography


