

A swan song of Philoxenus: overeating and philosophical death in Machon's *Chreiai*

In this paper, I focus on the anecdote about dithyrambic poet Philoxenus (fr. 10 Gow) that was preserved by Athenaeus in *Deipnosophistai* as a part of a pseudo-philosophical collection with the title *Chreiai* by the third-century B.C.E. Hellenistic comic writer Machon. Philoxenus from Cythera was known as an innovator in music and poetry, he served at the court of Dionysius, a tyrant of Siracuse, and died in Ephesus in 380/379 B.C.E. One of Philoxenus's poems, *Cyclops* or *Galatea*, according to several sources, was a political satire against Dionysius of Sicily. Machon's anecdote focuses on the famous trait of Philoxenus's character – gluttony: it satirizes Philoxenus's wish to enhance the length of his neck to prolong the enjoyment from the food he consumes. I argue that this anecdote implicitly refers to Plato's *Phaedo*, its discussion of philosopher's virtue, and the representation of the philosophical death.

In my analysis of this anecdote, I provide a new reading of several key elements that allows me to supplement our understanding of the punch line of the anecdote and, at the same time, to connect its interpretation to the wider context of Machon's work. In the first part of my paper, I compare Machon's fragment with other similar accounts about Philoxenus and examine the vocabulary that refers to the neck anatomy using Greek scientific writings, such as Aristotle's *Historia Animalum*. I argue that by employing the term *larynx* instead of *pharynx*, Machon builds his joke on the incongruity between two functions of the *larynx*: food consumption and voice production. Then I demonstrate that unlike in other versions of this anecdote, in this fragment, Philoxenus is imagined as a swan, the animal that is connected both to poetry and to philosophy. To support my argument, I provide the evidence from another Machon's anecdote dedicated to Philoxenus (fr. 9 Gow), in which the last words of Philoxenus (lines 85–86) parody

the last words of Socrates, philosopher's "last song", as transmitted by Plato in *Phaedo*. Thus, I interpret the humor of this fragment as based on the incongruity between Philoxenus's wish and its purpose: instead of producing a beautiful and meaningful song, Philoxenus plans to use his newly acquired throat to satisfy his desires. At the same time, I suggest, this anecdote reflects the fact that Philoxenus's gourmet habits embody his art: besides the well-known *Cyclops* poem, he also wrote a poem with the title *Deipnon* ("Dinner party") which in a form of a dithyrambic poem celebrates lavish symposium.

With my analysis of this anecdote, I supplement the reading proposed by Pauline LeVen in the monograph *The Many-Headed Muse: Tradition and Innovation in late Classical Greek Lyric Poetry*. LeVen argues that "the phantasy of a monstrous throat allowing endless mélange to enhance pleasure echoes commentaries on New Music and its practice as presented by conservative critics" (2014: 123). LeVen's interpretation also takes a political turn: the image of Philoxenus created by Machon with the emphasis on the grotesque body, bodily functions, and satisfaction of lower desires, opposes the image of elitist symposiast and inverts the values that would characterize the ideal citizen: self-restraint and self-control. My analysis of Machon's parody of philosophical *topoi* takes LeVen's argument even further. By juxtaposing Philoxenus and Socrates, Machon creates an alternative image of a professional of intellectual labor whose body becomes a tool to take control over his own fate. Being a critic of the tyrant of Syracuse, I argue, Machon's Philoxenus parodies Plato's experience of royal service and simultaneously reflects on Machon's troubles at the court of Demetrius Poliorcetes (or his son Antigonus Gonatas) that forced him to flee Athens and move to Alexandria under the Ptolemaic patronage.

## Bibliography

LeVen, P. A. (2014) *The many-headed Muse: Tradition and innovation in late Classical Greek lyric poetry*. Cambridge University Press.