

Eva ANAGNOSTOU-LAOUTIDES

Women and Dogs in Herodas' Mimiamb 7: A New Interpretation

Students of Herodas duly acknowledge the importance of his poetic representations in allowing the modern reader a glimpse of everyday life at Cos of the 3rd century BCE. In particular, they offer us a rare opportunity to observe the sexual tastes of contemporary Greeks and their manifestations in their private lives. Mimiamb 6 and 7, now accepted as a sequence (Cunningham 1964 and 1971), shed light in the popularity of dildoes which women are desperate to acquire. One expression in mimiamb 7.62-3 has attracted extensive scholarly attention because of its obscure meaning, but also because it is regarded as one of three points that emphasise the coherence of the two mimiamb (Rist 1993). In this gnomic phrase, Kerdon, the skilled manufacturer of the dildoes, urges his eager clients to “speak whatever the heart of each desires that [they] may perceive in what way women and dogs ‘eat’ leathern things.” The expression has been variably interpreted as a reference to women’s keen interest in buying/wearing shoes (Lawall 1976; contra Schmidt 1968; Levin 1976) or as an entendre to women’s obsessive use of dildoes (Williams 1959; Cunningham 1971: 34). By unravelling a number of sexual allusions which the audience would have picked up and stressing the performative aspects of the mimiamb, Rist (1993) expanded on the understanding of the phrase in a sexual context where the women’s use of dildoes is compared with the dogs’ inability to resist to a nice sausage once they have tried it. However, in my view, this interpretation relies on Graeco-Roman proverbial references to “dogs and leather” only and assumes that Kerdon used a similar expression to extend the attitude of dogs to that of women. In addition, it seems to me that although in ancient comedy “leather” denotes the phallus and/or a dildo (Henderson 1975: 221) and dog the sexual organs (both male and female, Henderson 1975: 127, 133), the phrase that Kerdon is assumed to coin is slightly incompatible in tone with the rest of his speech which is full of sexual innuendos. In other words, the dogs’ habitual chewing of leather delicacies does not add anything to the women’s “devouring” of dildoes.

As a counter-suggestion, I argue that Kerdon employs the term “dog” to refer to male prostitutes who also made use of dildoes. The reference would be especially appropriate for the Herodian context where the women are depicted as interested in double dildoes (Cunningham 1964: 34nn 2 and 5; Rist 1993: 443). The term is borrowed from near eastern cultures where it denotes in an offensive way male prostitutes in the service of Ishtar (Lambert 1992: 152-3; Gibson 1982; Burns 2000). Moreover, in Deuteronomy 23.19, written mainly in the late 7th century BCE, female prostitutes and “dogs” are associated: “You shall not bring the cost of a prostitute or the price of a dog into the house of YHWH your god.” Nissinen has pointed out that the cuneiform signs for male prostitute were UR.SAL, meaning dog or woman (1998: 32; Burns 2000). Based on the proximity of Cos to the ancient Near East, but also, the intensified interaction of Greeks and Orientals in the 3rd century BCE, I shall argue that Herodas is simply referring to the common use of dildoes by women and passive homosexuals. This understanding of the phrase is in accordance with the use of dog metaphors in ancient Comedy, but also effortlessly substantiates Kerdon’s point and the sexual tone of the mimiamb.

*A full bibliographical list will be available at the paper presentation.