

Olga LEVANIUK
Traditional Aesthetics of Erinna's *Distaff*

(olevan@u.washington.edu)

Almost since the discovery of its fragments in 1929 Erinna's *Distaff* has been recognized as a lament: the "Erinna" of the poem laments for Baukis, who died on her wedding night. The "feminine" themes in the poem are usually seen as a "personal" layer aimed at the contemporary audience. The dialect, a mixture of West Greek and Lesbian, is seen as a separate details suggesting either Erinna's place of origin or her literary persona. I suggest, instead, that the dialect corresponds to the genre of the poem: both the themes and the language define the *Distaff* in terms of a poetic tradition to which it belongs.

The *Distaff* is not only a lament but a *hymenaios*, and many of its "feminine" elements are especially suitable for this genre. Apart from the fact that Hymenaios is invoked, the poem is full of wedding themes, including the forgetfulness associated with Aphrodite, the girl's fear, the figure of the mother etc. Indeed, the title of Erinna's poem, *Elakate*, and the central theme of weaving, or rather, of not wanting to weave, may have something to do with marriage. Wedding songs have an area of intersection with funeral songs: both have to do with sending someone off (e.g. Xenophon, *Hellenika* 4.1.9, Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* 1059, Plato, *Laws* 800e2). The *hymenaios*, in particular, tends to be a processional song (as opposed to the *epithalamion*, see e.g. *Iliad* 18.491-5, Aristophanes, *Peace* 1331-1357). It is at this point of intersection between the *hymenaios* and the lament that Erinna's *Distaff* is positioned. The intersection of the two genres is no doubt itself traditional (Alexiou 1974). In Pindar, Hymenaios himself dies on his wedding night (fr. 128c7-8 Snell-Maehler).

The language of the *Distaff* correlates with the poem's genre. The combination of hexameter with West Greek and Lesbian has some antecedents: Sappho composed hexameters in a toned-down Lesbian which appear mostly in wedding songs (fr.104, 105 Voigt), and there is epigraphic evidence for hexameters composed in a dialect mixture similar to Erinna's. These examples include a fifth-century inscribed *threnos* from Boiotia (*CEG* 114), the "patchwork" hexameter line in a fifth century school scene by Douris (ARV 431.48), Aeolic forms on Corinthian vases (Wachter 2001 *COR* 36 and *COR* 96) and dedications containing the imperative *divdoi* (*CEG* 326, *CEG* 334), a badly understood form which has been viewed as a Lesbian feature (Strunk, *Glotta* 39 (1961)114-23) and which might be a poetic hyper-Lesbianism. The same dialect mixture is exhibited by the *prosodion* fragment of Eumelos (*PMG* 696).

There is evidence, then, for a hexameter poetry which uses a West Greek-Lesbian dialectal mixture and which is neither narrative nor heroic, in contrast to Ionic hexameters. This is the hexameter of small occasional genres such as processional songs, prayers, *hymenaios* and *threnoi*. Erinna's *Distaff* imitates this kind of poetry both in genre and in dialect.