

„I, Philaenis”: Ventriloquizing the Female Voice in Ancient Greek Epigram of the Hellenistic Period *Abstract for the general public*

Goal of the project

This project focuses on Ancient Greek literature in the Hellenistic period (4th–1st century BCE), in particular on the genre of the epigram, a short poem written in the metre of elegiac couplet. Its aim is an analysis of the manner in which male authors of that period ventriloquize the female voice, or in other words construct the way female characters speak in their poems. For this purpose, around a hundred epigrams will be scrutinized, in which male authors speak through the mask of a woman, for example a mother lamenting the death of her children, a courtesan donating a votive offering to Aphrodite in gratitude for her guidance, or a woman praying to Artemis to ease her labour pains. These poems will then be compared with the poems of female Hellenistic poets in an attempt to uncover whether male and female authors construct the female voice differently.

Description of research

As part of preliminary research, I have identified 35 Hellenistic epigrams written by male authors in which one can directly hear the female voice, i.e. a woman is speaking in the 1st person, and a further around five dozen in which the voice of a female character is mediated, e.g. the subject of the poem is a woman giving an offering to a god or goddess and the speech is indirect. These texts, together with the 38 extant epigrams by Hellenistic poetesses and the 3 epigrams ascribed to Sappho in that period, will constitute the main corpus of writings subjected to research. This corpus will at times be confronted with other writings, in which male authors speak from a male perspective as a backdrop against which the specificity of the female voice becomes more apparent.

While scrutinising the epigrams of male poets in which they ventriloquize the female voice as well as epigrams written by female authors in which they too speak through female characters I will be guided by the following research questions:

- what are the subgenres of epigram in which female characters speak (e.g. votive, funerary, erotic, which is the most common)?
- what are the most common stylistic devices employed and instruments by which the poem situates itself in regard to the literary and cultural tradition (e.g. intertextual elements, cultural motifs, such as the brides of Hades)?
- what are the circumstances in which female characters speak (e.g. what gods do they pray to, in what environments are they presented: the interior of a home or in public spaces, in what company do they appear)? – how do they present themselves (e.g. do they use patronymics or matronymics, when describing their lives in funerary epigrams, what parts of those lives are mentioned, which features of it do they focus on)?
- what social norms and expectations do the analysed epigrams convey (e.g. why is the woman whose voice male authors appropriate so often a courtesan)?

Reasons for attempting a particular research topic

The question of the female voice in Hellenistic epigram is intertwined with the larger question of gender norms and stereotypes in Ancient Greek communities. Through analysing the way it is constructed in epigrams written by both male and female authors, it will be possible to uncover also the broader norms in which this female voice is embedded, which set the limits of what it can say, in whose presence, and under what circumstances.

While Hellenistic literature in general and the works of the women poets of that period in particular have become of greater interest to scholars in recent decades, it has never been approached in the manner proposed in this project. The epigrams written by male poets from the perspective of women have never heretofore been analysed in a synthetic and comprehensive manner, nor have they been compared to the output of female poets. This constitutes a significant gap in literary studies and Classics which this project aims to fill.

Substantial results expected

Answering the above research questions will allow me to verify the main hypothesis of the project, namely that there are no distinctive characteristics which differentiate the way female and male poets ventriloquize the female voice in Hellenistic epigrams, which points to the fact that the female voice is not inherent but socially constructed and thus can be used by both male and female poets.