

ERINNA'S DISTAFF

SUIDAS tells us that Erinna wrote a poem of 300 lines, in Aeolic and Dorian dialect, called ἡλακάτη.¹ There happens to be preserved on papyrus² part of a hexameter lament for Erinna's friend Baucis, the subject of two epigrams also by Erinna, *AP* 7. 710 and 712. 'Distaff' is a strange title for a lament, it would seem, and there have been various attempts both to explain it and to explain it away. The matter is not, however, quite straightforward, since there are two epigrams about Erinna herself which actually use the word ἡλακάτη. *AP* 9. 190, an anonymous poem of uncertain date, refers to Erinna's 300 lines and her youth, and then continues

ἦ καὶ ἐπ' ἡλακάτη μητρὸς φόβῳ, ἦ καὶ ἐφ' ἰστῶ
ἐσθήκει Μουσέων λάτρεις ἐφαπτομένη. (5-6)

AP 7. 12, also anonymous, but probably Meleagrian, says that Erinna, immediately after writing her poems, was driven to Hades by

Μοῖρα, λινοκλώστου δεσπότης ἡλακάτης. (4)

Though much has been made of it, not much help is provided by the papyrus itself; it contains the word ἡλακάτη once, but in a quite uncertain context,³ and makes allusion to wool-working.⁴

Crusius contended⁵ that ἡλακάτη is merely a mistaken Byzantine inference from *AP* 9. 190, which clearly lies behind the notice in *Suidas*.⁶ But why should anyone have picked out the one word ἡλακάτη from that poem and assumed that it was the title of Erinna's poem on Baucis? It is by no means a natural assumption. P. Maas,⁷ on the other hand, suggested that the ἡλακάτη and the lament for Baucis were two separate poems, and that the 300 lines mentioned in *AP* 9. 190 and taken up in *Suidas* are the total number in both poems together. But this goes against the evidence. For in *Suidas* it is clearly stated that the ἡλακάτη itself had 300 lines; no other poem is mentioned. *AP* 9. 190, too, clearly refers to only one poem:

Λέσβιον Ἡρίνης τόδε κηρίον· εἰ δέ τι μικρόν,
ἀλλ' ὅλον ἐκ Μουσέων κιννάμενον μέλιτι. (1-2)

And two more epigrams on Erinna imply that there was only one poem by her that was of any importance. The first is *AP* 7. 11, by Asclepiades:

ὁ γλυκὺς Ἡρίνης οὗτος πόνος, οὐχὶ πολὺς μὲν,
ὥς ἂν παρθενικᾶς ἐννεακαίδεκέτευς,

¹ s.v. Erinna: . . . ἔγραψεν Ἡλακάτην· ποίημα δέ ἐστιν αἰολικῇ καὶ δωριδί διαλέκτῳ ἐπῶν τ'. ἐποίησε δὲ καὶ ἐπιγράμματα. τελευτᾷ παρθένος ἐννεακαίδεκέτις. οἱ δὲ στίχοι αὐτῆς ἐκρίθησαν ἴσοι Ὀμήρῳ . . .

² Most conveniently, see C. M. Bowra, *Greek Poetry and Life, Studies presented to Gilbert Murray*, Oxford (1936), 325-42. Partial text in D. L. Page, *Greek Literary Papyri*, i (1942), 486-9. See also K. Latte, *Nachr. Gött. Ges.*, phil.-hist. Kl. 3 (1953),

79-94, and F. Scheidweiler, *Philologus*, c (1956), 40-51. For bibliography up to 1962 cf. D. N. Levin, 'Quaestiones Erinneae', *HSCP* lxxvi (1962), 200-1. Most recently, Gow and Page, *Hellenistic Epigrams* ii (1965), 281-2.

³ Line 39.

⁴ Lines 22-3.

⁵ *R.E.* 6. 456 f.

⁶ Cf. 9. 190. 3-4:

οἱ δὲ τριηκόσιοι ταύτης στίχοι ἴσοι Ὀμήρῳ, τῆς καὶ παρθενικῆς ἐννεακαίδεκέτευς.

⁷ *Hermes* lxxix (1934), 206-9.

ἀλλ' ἐτέρων πολλῶν δυνατώτερος· εἰ δ' Αἰδᾶς μοι
μὴ ταχὺς ᾗλθε, τίς ἂν ταλίκον ἔσχ' ὄνομα;

And compare also 7. 713, by Antipater, probably of Sidon:

Παυροεπὴς Ἥριννα καὶ οὐ πολὺμυθος αἰοδαῖς,
ἀλλ' ἔλαχεν Μούσας τοῦτο τὸ βαιὸν ἔπος.
(1-2; the rest of the 8-line poem continues this theme)¹

All these poets comment on the smallness of Erinna's output; it would be complicating things too much to suppose that there were *two* poems, of even smaller compass. A third suggestion comes from Bowra, who, noting the allusions to woolworking in the papyrus, concludes² that the lament for Baucis was indeed called *ἡλακάτη*, because 'it emphasized this side of Erinna's life'. In support he cites *AP* 7. 12 as though it referred to Erinna herself as 'mistress of the distaff'; in fact, however, it is Moira who is so described. Bowra then concludes that the title *ἡλακάτη* may derive from Alexandrian conjecture, not from Erinna herself.³

The consensus of opinion thus seems to be⁴ that *ἡλακάτη* as the title of Erinna's lament for Baucis is at least suspicious; if it is a title at all, it is likely to be a scholarly guess, probably Alexandrian. We believe on the contrary that *ἡλακάτη*, or rather *ἀλακάτα*, is indeed the title of Erinna's poem, and that it is Erinna's own.

Firstly, Erinna's work was obviously very well known to the Alexandrians. Equally obviously, the cornerstone of her reputation was her 300-line hexameter poem, as we can see from *AP* 7. 11-13, 713, and 9. 190. Though we have three epigrams by her besides the papyrus poem (*AP* 7. 710, 712; 6. 352) as well as two hexameters attributed to her by Athenaeus,⁵ the epigrams *about* her concentrate exclusively on her one main hexameter poem. Clearly, again, she had a well-defined place in relation to the Hellenistic poets who followed her.⁶ Asclepiades, Leonidas, and Antipater wrote epigrams about her, and she is linked with Callimachus in a poem from Philip's *Garland*, by Antiphanes, as the type of author favoured by pedantic grammarians,

ἐπ' Ἥρίννη δὲ κομῶντες,
πικροὶ καὶ ξηροὶ Καλλιμάχου προκύνες. (*AP* 11. 322. 3-4)

Antipater's closing words in his epigram on her, indeed, seem to bring us within the familiar world of Alexandrian acrimony—

λωίτερος κύκνου μικρὸς θρόος ἢ ἐκολοῦν
κρωγμὸς ἐν εἰαρναῖς κινδνάμενος νεφέλαις. (7-8)⁷

¹ *AP* 7. 12-13 and 713, and 9. 190 use very similar language, e.g. the images of honey and bees, of the chorus of the Muses, the mention of Erinna's age, and the image of the swan. So too Christodorus, *AP* 2. 108-10 (quoted below).

² Art. cit. 340.

³ So too Levin, art. cit. 199, A. Lesky, *Hist. of Greek Lit.*² (1966), 640 n. 2.

⁴ Levin, art. cit. 199-200, advances all the hypotheses with apparently equal conviction.

⁵ 7. 283 D. *AP* 9. 190. 7 may possibly imply that Erinna also wrote lyrics; see Gow and Page, ii. 282.

⁶ For Erinna's date cf. Gow and Page, ii. 281, associating her with the generation of Theocritus. But we see no reason not to accept the mid-fourth-century date given by Eusebius, *Ol.* 106. 4, 107. 1. See G. Luck, *Mus. Helv.* xi (1954), 170.

⁷ Cf. also 7. 12. 2.

There are obvious resemblances, too, between Erinna's papyrus poem and Theocritus.¹

It is true that the epigrams which refer to Erinna show a strong resemblance to each other.² Nevertheless, the two which use the word *ἡλακάτη* use it in quite different ways and surely independently. This is strong evidence that the title was known. Nor is it likely that it was an Alexandrian guess. If Erinna was a standard author, as is clear, would the Alexandrians really have been reduced to making unlikely guesses about the title of her poem? If the poem was indeed entitled *ἡλακάτη*, it was surely Erinna who gave it that name. Only if the poem was already firmly known by this title would there be any point in the insistence in *AP* 9. 190 on Erinna's connection with spinning. And the allusion to Moira as 'mistress of the distaff' in *AP* 7. 12. 4 would gain a welcome and necessary significance: it is an allusion to Erinna's poem itself. There is a further piece of evidence, albeit late. In his *ekphrasis* on the statues in the bath of Zeuxippus in Constantinople, written about A.D. 500, Christodorus says of a statue of Erinna

Παρθενικὴ δ' Ἡριννα λιγύθροος ἔζετο κούρη,
οὐ μίτον ἀμφαφώωσα πολύπλοκον, ἀλλ' ἐνὶ σιγῇ
Πιερικῆς ῥαθάμυγας ἀποσταλάουσα μελίσσης. (*AP* 2. 108-10)

Again the assumption that Erinna is to be associated with spinning; again a veiled, but graceful, allusion to the poem.

But *why* did Erinna choose this strange title? We must go back again to *AP* 7. 12. Surely Moira is there described as 'mistress of the distaff' precisely because Erinna herself had so described Moira in her own poem. The anonymous poet says that Moira carried off Erinna: had not Erinna said, in similar language, that Moira had carried off Baucis? Somewhere in the poem Erinna must have made the point that the spindle of Fate had spun out Baucis' life just as Baucis and Erinna had spun their wool at home. The domestic setting of Erinna's poem would thus have a poignant significance. The point of the allusion in *AP* 7. 12 would be the transference of Erinna's words about Baucis to Erinna herself—naturally suggested by the parallelism between their lives and deaths. This transference was an obvious enough trick, which was adopted also by Leonidas:

Παρθενικὰν νεαοιδὸν ἐν ὕμνοπόλοισι μέλισσαν
Ἡρινναν Μουσῶν ἄνθεα δρεπτομένην
Ἄιδας εἰς ὕμέναιον ἀνάρπασεν. ἥ ῥα τόδ' ἔμφρων
εἶπ' ἐτύμως ἁ παῖς· "Βάσκανος ἔσσι, Ἄϊδα." (*AP* 7. 13)

The closing words are a quotation from Erinna herself—this time from an epigram.³ Baucis was carried off to Hades before her time, and now Erinna's words about Baucis have been proved true by their application to herself.

The *ἡλακάτη*, then, is the spindle of the Fates.⁴ In the surviving fragment,

¹ Bowra, art. cit. 338. But there is no possible connection between the titles of Erinna's poem and Theocritus, *Id.* 28, also called *ἡλακάτη*. Theocritus' poem has that title simply because it accompanied the gift of a spindle.

² See p. 286 n. 1 above.

³ 7. 712. 1-3:
Νύμφας Βανκίδος εἰμί· πολυκλαύταν δὲ
παρέρπων
στάλαν τῷ κατὰ γᾶς τοῦτο λέγοις Ἄϊδα·
"Βάσκανος ἔσσι, Ἄϊδα" . . .

⁴ Cf., for example (from LSJ), *Od.* 3. 208, 4. 208, etc., Bacch. 5. 143, Aesch. *Eu.* 335,

as we have seen, there is mention of spinning, in a context which seems to be intimate and domestic. How much more telling if Erinna had also used the image of the spindle of the Fates. ἡλακάτη in its double sense would then easily suggest itself as the title of the poem.

Such a double image is entirely characteristic of what little we know of Erinna's poetry. In the same epigram on Baucis used by Leonidas Erinna says:

ὥς τὰν παῖδ', Ὑμέναιος ἐφ' αἷς αἰείδετο πεύκαις,
ταῖσδ' ἐπὶ καδεστὰς ἔφλεγε πυρκαῖᾱ·
καὶ σὺ μὲν, ὦ Ὑμέναιε, γάμων μολπαῖον αἰοιδᾶν
ἐς θρήνων γοερὸν φθέγμα μεθαρμόσας. (AP 7. 712. 5-8)

There are difficulties of interpretation here,¹ but the general meaning is obvious—the torches which lit Baucis' wedding also lit her funeral pyre, the songs that were songs of marriage must change to songs of grief. In the ἡλακάτη the Fates were not spinning out the thread of the poem² but the life of Baucis. There are obvious relationships between Erinna's poem and Theocritus', not least in the signs in the ἡλακάτη of a rudimentary refrain.³ Is there not also the germ of another feature of bucolic lament, the universalizing of the poet's grief by the introduction of participant deities, in Erinna the Fates with their spindles, elsewhere the Muses or the Ἑρωτες?⁴

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etc., IG 14. 1389 i 18 γηραιῇσι . . . ἡλακάτησι (met.); add Nonnus *Dion.* 1. 367 δυσηλακάτου λῖνα Μοίρης.

¹ See Gow and Page ad loc. (ii. 283-4).

² Levin, art. cit. 200.

³ Bowra, art. cit. 337.

⁴ e.g. Theocr., *Id.* 1. 64 ff., ἐπιτάφιον βίω-
νος 8 ff., Bion 1. 15 ff., and cf. Catullus 64.
327 ff. (a different exploitation of the Fates
spinning motif), Virg. *Ecl.* 4. 46-7.