BROKEN APPOINTMENTS IN ASKLEPIADES

BY

K. J. McKay

P. M. Fraser has argued that "Asklepiades is a figure of great significance in the history of the epigram, since it is in his hands that it liberates itself from its traditional bondage to epigraphical convention, and becomes the vehicle of personal feelings and of portrayals of the most varied and passing experiences")

This assessment of the poet's standing may profitably be tested by examinations of three epigrams built around the failure of a hetaera to keep an appointment: 9, 10 and 13 Gow-Page (Anth. Pal. 5, 7, 150, 164). The lines, I think, are most clearly drawn in 10:

\[
\text{ἐκλόγησα ἢξειν εἰς νύκτα μοι ἡ πιθώτης}
\text{Νιχω καὶ σεμνὴν ὃμοσε Θεσσαλόρον,}
\text{καὶ ἢξει, φυλακὴ δὲ παροϊχεῖται. ἅρ' ἐπιορκεῖν}
\text{ἐθέλε; τὸν λύχνον, παιδεῖς, ἀποσβέσατε.}
\]

W. G. Arnott has suggested that ἐπιθώτης is deliberately ambiguous and that it is not until the suspicion of perjury is voiced in the third line that we can define an association with blame rather than praise. The ploy is certainly not rare in Hellenistic poetry, but is it necessary here? Whether as 'famous' or 'notorious', ἐπιθώτης indicates status. The contemporary reader, to be sure, will have to wait to learn who has accepted an appointment, but when he meets Niko at the beginning of the second line he will also know where he stands with the epithet.

It is reasonable to assume that this is the same Niko as in Askl. 13 and 36 Gow-Page, possibly also the Niko of whose magic wheel (the sine qua non of erotic enchantment: cf. Theokr. Id. 2) anonymous, but enthusiastic, claims are made in Anth. Pal. 5, 205 (Anon. 35

Gow-Page): it had the power to draw a man even across the sea and
brides from their bridal chambers. But, whether or no, the poet
presents her as ‘a player in a big league’. The notion that she
agreed to make a house-call is presented as memorable. Is it also
presented as incredible?

In other words, does the addition of ἐπιβόητος define the genre as
‘barracks bravado’, the ego-building claim to power over women
who can pick and choose, a daydream comparable with the noctur-
unal fantasy of Anth. Pal. 5, 2? The epithet would then set Niko apart
from those accommodating flute-girls who were available at short
notice.

The poet is at pains to commit the lady: ‘She swore by the
awesome Lawgiver’. W. Ludwig concluded that “Dem. Thesmophoros wurde als Hüterin der heiligen Satzungen, auf
denen das Leben der Familie und Ehe beruht, verehrt. Als Hüterin
der Satzungen des staatlichen Lebens war sie zur offiziellen
Schwurgöttin geworden”. Waltz in his Budé edition (1960) similarly took the reference very seriously: Demeter appeared as
‘législatrice de l’institution du mariage’ (p. 72 n. 4), although it
may be objected that the present casual relationship would seem to
leave the goddess little opportunity to officiate. If, on the other
hand, the epigram opens on a note of ego-building, the reader will
good-humouredly recognize that Asklepiades protests too much. If
she swore by Demeter, it was the normal woman’s oath, μᾶ τὴν
φιλην Δήμητρα, or the like; it is the poet who has tried to fabricate
something immutable from it. ‘Did she deliberately commit per-
jury?’ is similarly the tongue-in-cheek language of one bent on
enlarging molehills; the ancient lover knew how little credence was
assigned to the Ἀφροδίσιος ὅρκος.

If the tone is nicely mock-serious, how are we to evaluate the
final thought: τὸν λύχνον, παίδες, ἀποφέβεται? From Wilamowitz onwards, ‘lustige Selbstironie’ has rightly been detected by
scholars, but in the form: ‘She’s not coming. So much the worse.
I’m off to bed’. This, however, does not do full justice to the words
which Asklepiades has chosen. And those we can assess in one of

3) MH 19 (1962), 158 n. 10.
4) Hellenistische Dichtung in der Zeit des Kallimachos (Berlin 1924, repr. Dublin-