PLAYING BALL WITH HOMER
AN INTERPRETATION OF ANACREON 358 PMG

BY

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1) 358 PMG is 14 Bergk, 5 Diehl, 13 Page (302, p. 153, in his Lyrica Graeca Selecta), 13 Gentili. Its source is Athen.13.599c. It has, to the best of my knowledge, never been disputed that the poem is complete.


Although the poem is generally admired for its effective simplicity, almost every aspect of its interpretation is a matter of dispute.
There is no scholarly consensus about the precise nature of the situation described in the opening strophe, the relevance of the first γάρ-phrase in 5-6, the function of the epithet εὐκτίτοιο in 5, whether κόμην in 6 refers to cephalic, facial or pubic hair, the girl’s motive for turning the lyric ‘I’ down, and the reference of ἄλλην τινά in the concluding verse. Moreover, there is one important aspect of the poem that has not been recognized: the fact that the opening strophe, by the poet’s deliberate design, activates the audience’s awareness of an episode of the Odyssey. In the first part of this article I shall undertake a detailed re-examination of the poem; in the second I shall attempt to demonstrate exactly how Anacreon refers his audience to the Odyssey and in which way this reference contributes both to the thematic organization of the poem and to its primary theme. The combination of both exercises will hopefully lead to a better understanding and appreciation of this elegant and witty, but far from simple poem.

The First Stanza

The opening strophe sets the scene: ‘Once again golden-haired Eros hits me with a purple ball and challenges me to play with the girl with the fancy shoes’ (1-4). The lyric ‘I’ has fallen in love, this time with a girl distinguished by the elaborate style of her sandals.

There are two dominant interpretations of the opening stanza. Some scholars believe that Anacreon describes a deliberate and premeditated action on the part of the girl, throwing her ball at the lyric ‘I’ on purpose in order to draw his attention or challenge