

The Democracy of Love and Suffering in the Erotic Epigrams of Meleager

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Abstract : The Greek anthology, first put together in the tenth century AD, gathers in two separate books a large number of epigrams devoted to love and its consequences, both of hetero (book V) and homosexual (book XII) nature. While some poets wrote epigrams of only one genre –that is the case of Strato (II cent. BC), the organizer of a wide-spread garland of homosexual epigrams –, several others composed within both categories, often using the same topics of love and suffering. Using Plato's theorization of two different kinds of Eros (Symp. 180d-182a), the popular (pandemos) and the celestial (ouranios), homoerotic epigrammatic love is more often associated with the first one, while heterosexual poetry tends to be connected to a higher form of love. This paper focuses on the epigrammatic production of a single first-century BC poet, Meleager, aiming to look for the similarities and differences on singing both kinds of love. From Meleager, the Greek Anthology –a garland whose origins have been traced back to the poet's garland itself- preserves more than sixty heterosexual and 48 homosexual epigrams, an important and unprecedented amount of poems that are able to trace a complete profile of his way of singing love. Meleager's poetry deals with personal experience and emotions, frequently with love and the unhappiness that usually comes from it. Most times he describes himself not as an active and engaged lover, but as one struck by the beauty of a woman or boy, i.e., in a stage prior to erotic consummation. His epigrams represent the unreal and fantastic (literally speaking) world of the lover, in which the imagery and wordplays are used to convey emotion in the epigrams of both genres. Elsewhere Meleager surprises the reader by offering a surrealist or dreamlike landscape where everyday adventures are transcribed into elaborate metaphors for erotic feeling. For instance, in 12.81, the lovers are shipwrecked, and as soon as they have disembarked, they are promptly kidnapped by a figure who is both Eros and a beautiful boy. Particularly –and worth-to-know why significant – in the homosexual poems collected in Book XII, mythology also plays an important role, namely in the figure and the scene of Ganymedes' kidnap by Zeus for his royal court (12. 70, 94). While mostly refusing the Hellenistic model of dramatic love epigram, in which a small everyday scene is portrayed –and 5. 182 is a clear exception to this almost rule –, Meleager actually focuses on the tumultuous inside of his (poetic) lovers, in the realm of a subject that feels love and pain far beyond his/her erotic preferences. In relation to loving and suffering –mostly suffering, it has to be said –, Meleager's love is therefore completely democratic. There is no real place in his epigrams for the traditional association mentioned before between homoeroticism and a carnal-erotic-pornographic love, while the heterosexual one being more evenly and pure, so to speak.

Keywords : epigram, erotic epigram, Greek Anthology, Meleager

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