A Lesson for the King: Sotades’ Invective against Ptolemy (Fr. 1 and 16 Powell) and Callimachus’ Epigram 1 Pfeiffer

Abstract. Kwapisz Jan, A Lesson for the King: Sotades’ Invective against Ptolemy (fr. 1 and 16 Powell) and Callimachus’ “Epigram” 1 Pfeiffer.

The paper discusses the fable-like form of Callimachus’ Epigram 1 Pfeiffer and of Sotades’ fragmentary Invective against Ptolemy, and suggests that the former poem may contain an allusion to the latter. In the light of this reading, both poems are to be viewed as playfully encouraging the Ptolemies’ incestuous marriage.

Key words: Callimachus, Sotades, Hellenistic poetry, ancient fable.

Traditionally and almost instinctively one assumes Greek didactic literature to be a part of the great classical project of training in moral excellence. Although “didacticism” is a very capacious term when one speaks of Greek literature, and there is no easy definition of it, that traditional association with the paideia presupposes that at least some notions and qualities can be immediately excluded from consideration. For instance, if one were asked to name several characteristics of Greek didactic poetry, we would not expect to hear as an answer that such poetry is sometimes obscene, or vulgar, or aggressive, or vituperative in language and contents toward its addressee. The present paper aims at discussing an extremely abusive poem which I would nevertheless like to locate in the margin of didactic literature. This will be possible after I will have presented another poem, undoubtedly containing a moral lesson, which I hope to prove to be dependent upon the former one. The two poems under discussion are Sotades’ famous invective.

* I should like to thank my audience in Poznań for stimulating comments. I wish to acknowledge a grant from the Lanckorowski Foundation, which has enabled me to make some important bibliographical additions to the present discussion.
against Ptolemy, as it has been reconstructed by Roberto Pretagostini,\(^1\) and Callimachus’ *Epigram* 1.

Let us start from Callimachus’ poem, which has to be quoted here in full length (Call. *Ep.* 1 Pfeiffer = Diog. Laert. 1.80, *Anth. Pal.* 7.89; the translation is by Kathryn Gutzwiller\(^2\))

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\begin{align*}
\text{Ξείνος Αταρνεύτης τις \textit{τις} \textit{άνείρετο Πιττακόν οὐτως τὸν Μυτιληναῖον, παίδα τὸν ὶγραδίον·}} \\
\text{“ὅτα γέρον, δοῦσι με καλεῖ γάμος· ὥ μία μὲν δὴ νύμφη καὶ πλούσιω καὶ γενεῆς κατ’ ἐμέ,}} \\
\text{ἡ δ’ ἐξέρχετο προβεβηκε. τί λόιδον; εἴ δ’ ἄγε σύμ μοι βουλεύοντο, ποτέρην εἰς ῥρήμα τιναν ἄγω”.} \\
\text{εἰπέν} ὃ δ’ ὃ σκόπων γεροντικὸν ὅπλον ἀείρας·} \\
\text{“ἡμεῖς κεῖνοι οἱ πᾶν ἐρέωσιν ἔπος (οἱ δ’ ἄρ’ ὑπὸ πληγήσανθως βέβισι κακῶς ἔχοντες ἔστερον εἰρέω, παῖδες ἐν τριόδῳ),}} \\
\text{κεῖνων ἔρχορ. φησὶ, μετ’ ἤγινα”, χω ἡμὲν ἐπέστη πληροῦν· ὁ δ’ ἔλεγον: “ὔπειρα κατὰ σαυτὸν ἔλα”.} \\
\text{ταῦτ’ ἄρ’ ὁ ξείνος ἐφεσίασε μείζονος σῶμα} \\
\text{δράκασθαι, παῖδων κληδόνα συνθέμενος.}} \\
\text{τὴν δ’ ὄλιγην ὡς κεῖνος ἐς οἰκίαν ἠγατον νύμφην, οὕτω καὶ ὧ γ’ ἰών τὴν κατὰ σαυτὸν ἔλα.}
\end{align*}
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A stranger from Atarneus questioned Pittacus
the sage of Mitylene and son of Hyrras:
“Honoured sir, I have the choice of two marriages,
with a bride who is my equal in wealth and rank
or with a superior bride. What is better? Please
advise me which marriage I should pursue”. 5
Lifting his staff, an old man’s weapon, he replied,
“Those boys there will tell you all you need to know”.
(Using whips to turn their tops swiftly, the boys
were spinning them in the wide crossroads). 10
“Follow their example”. The man stood near them
as they repeated, “Follow your own course!”
Hearing this, he avoided grasping the more prestigious
marriage, since he understood the boys’ message.
And just as that man led the poor bride to his home,
so you, too, go on and follow your own course. 15

The textual variant of the final line is: “so you too, Dion, follow your own course” (cf. my brief apparatus under the Greek text).

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A Lesson for the King

Scholars used to feel disappointed by the story told in the epigram. Gow and Page had no mercy; in their commentary they wrote: “it must be said that if the ascription were absent nobody would suppose an anecdote so flat and straightforward to be Callimachus’.” But it seems today that a more reasonable approach would be to assume not that the wit is entirely missing, but that it takes some effort to discover it, and not because the poem is clumsy, but because it is very refined. Obviously two crucial questions about the ending of the epigram must be asked: To whom is the final line addressed? And what is the meaning of the metaphorical expression “to follow one’s course” when it is repeated at the end of the poem?

Two independent efforts to answer these questions and to restore the missing wit were recently made. Enrico Livrea proposed to establish a link between the metaphorical imaging in the epigram and Callimachus’ literary programme. The person addressed at the final line would be, depending on which textual variant one prefers, either a poet known as Dion or Callimachus himself. “To follow one’s own course” would mean “to walk the untrodden path” of Callimachus’ poetry – Livrea points at the famous programmatic Prologue to the Telchines in the Actia. Livrea’s proposal has found some acceptance, notably from Kathryn Gutzwiller and Roberto Pretagostini. Nevertheless it is vulnerable to criticism; one scholar called it simply “overimaginative”. Indeed, the connection between the anecdote on a marriage and Alexandrian literary programmes does not appear obvious to modern scholars, nor, I suppose, it would have seemed such to Callimachus’ contemporary audience.

Another reading was proposed by Pamela Bleisch. She reads the variant οὐχ οὐκ αὐτός, Δίων in the final line, and suggests that a clever anagram should be detected there. Once the order of several letters is altered (οὐχ οὐκ αὐτός, Δίων), one can read the name of the true addressee: Διωνυσιακός, “the two Dionysians”. Those would be Ptolemy and Arsinoe, who have much to do with the cult of Dionysus in Alexandria. According to Bleisch, the epi-

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6 N. Hopkinson in an untitled review of Gutzwiller’s Poetic Garlands... (above, n. 2), CR 49, 1999, p. 257.
gram is a witty comment on the incestuous marriage of the Ptolemies. What Callimachus actually expresses at the final line is the encouragement for Ptolemy to the incest – “to keep all in the family”, as Bleisch puts it. The justification of the incestuous marriage is playfully put by Callimachus into the mouth of one of the Seven Sages.

I think that the alleged anagram is a mere delusion of the postmodern scholar. The idea is obviously forced; the anagram strangely uses only one letter of the word ὀφτω, the dual form Διωνυσιακό with the epic lengthening in the second syllable seems very unusual, and the fact that in the text there is no hint for the reader of a hidden riddle-message raises further suspicion. Nonetheless, what I find attractive in Bleisch’s reading of the epigram is her suggestion that the poem is likely to allude to the Ptolemies’ famous incestuous marriage. The story in the epigram and Pittacus’ advice – “keep to one of your own sort” – fit Ptolemy’s situation so perfectly that I can hardly think of this fact as of a coincidence. As we will soon see, the royal marriage is a popular issue among the Alexandrian poets, and moreover often receives humorous treatment.

But does not the specific reference to some Dion in the final line prevent such an interpretation now, when I have done away with Bleisch’s anagram? One can hardly assume that the name “Dion” was somehow meant by Callimachus to make the reader think of Ptolemy. This apparently serious objection can be in fact easily dismissed, alongside of Dion himself. Διών is just one textual variant, the reading preserved in Diogenes Laertius (1.80). The MS of the Palatine Anthology (7.89) provides us with another variant: γ’ιών. Διών is usually preferred on the basis that it is supposed to be a lectio difficilior. Yet this is not a heavyweight argument, and that the other lection fits a more attractive reading appears a good enough reason to accept it. There is no need to assume that the obscure mention of an unknown individual must be retained at all costs.

That brings us to closer examination of the final line, which will enable us to place Epigram 1 in its proper genre. After all, Gow and Page were not far from the truth when they stated that “neither inscriptional nor epideictic, [Epigram 1] has no claim to be called an epigram at all”. Yet the composition of the poem is very typical – though not typical of an epigram – a fact that persists unnoticed despite a correct diagnosis having been given already in 1940 by Ben Edwin Perry. He recognized Callimachus’ poem as a

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9 See P. Bleisch (above, n. 7), p. 397 n. 9.
10 This is what is done by K.J. Gutzwiller (above, n. 2), p. 224-225 with n. 84. See now esp. Pretagostini, *Vita e poetica...* (above, n. 5), p. 141-147.
fable, but this suggestion seems not to be widely known. Perry is surely right. As any fable, Epigram 1 contains the anecdote that serves as a moral lesson. Most significantly, the lesson is pointed by the final line of special character, which we can correctly recognize now as a form of the so-called epimythium. In its early form, as we can reconstruct it from fables or quasi-fables embedded in another narrative, the epimythium always made the application of the preceding anecdote personal and specific. The application was conventionally through a phrase the variant of which is already well-known to us from Callimachus: “so you too...”, cf. Stes., fr. 281 a Page (= Aristot. Rhet. 2.1393b), Soph. Ai. 1147, Aristoph. Vesp. 1432 (συν έν δε και έμεισ/σε/ευ).

In the course of evolution of the fable its application became general, but at first the form of the epimythium remained unchanged; as Perry notes, “[t]ransition from the strictly personal to the generic sense of the second-person pronoun is, of course, very natural”. It seems likely that Epigram 1 is to be located at this stage of the evolution, and it is noteworthy that Perry intuitively favours the textual variant γ’ ιόν which, as he puts it, “would make the application general in meaning though personal in form”. What I suggest, in turn, is that the epimythium in Epigram 1 is an essential element in Callimachus’ elaborate play on the narrative convention; the narrative situation which Callimachus creates is rich in allusive potential, and so is the epimythium, which therefore, though apparently general, at the end turns out to be applicable to a very specific person. The narratee which Callimachus constructs and to whom the anecdote is addressed is to be recognized as Ptolemy. This is not all there is to be said about restoring the poem’s missing wit, but for a moment let us leave Epigram 1 aside.

Up till now we have speculatively established the text of the epigram, and more importantly placed the poem in its proper literary context. We have also observed that the situation to which the epimythium can be applied is the marriage of the Ptolemies. Now let us turn to Sotades’ invective.

Twenty five years ago all that was known of Sotades’ notorious poem was a single line. This is a very infamous and highly offensive comment on Ptolemy’s marriage with his sister (fr. 1 Powell = Athen. 14.621a, [Plut.] De lib. ed. 11a; the translation of the following three fragments of Sotades and Callimachus is by Alan Cameron):

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12 B. E. Perry, The Origin of the Epimythium, TAPhA 71, 1940, p. 396.
13 Ibidem.
14 Ibidem.
It’s an unholy hole he’s shoving his prick in.\textsuperscript{16}

However, in 1984 Roberto Pretagostini came out with a proposal to see in this line a surprising ending of the poem which would begin with the verse in Sotadean metre that he found anonymously preserved in Hephaestion (fr. 16 Powell = Hephaest., p. 36.12 Consbruch).\textsuperscript{17}

They say that once upon a time Zeus who delights in thunder and Hera...

This line sounds like extracted from a fine encomium of the Ptolemies. One finds the same comparison of their marriage to the \textit{ιερός γάμος} of Zeus and Hera in Theocritus’ \textit{Encomium of Philadelphus} (Id. 17.131–4), and we are told by Plutarch (\textit{Quaest. conv.} 736f) that such was the beginning of an epithalamium sung by a certain rhapsode at the Ptolemies’ wedding.\textsuperscript{18} So, too, Sotades’ poem surely proceeded safely and predictably as a conventional wedding poem, until at the end the reader was unexpectedly attacked with the insult clearly addressed to the king. Pretagostini’s ingenious reconstruction of the invective is widely (and rightly) accepted, and so is his suggestion that a certain passage in Callimachus’ \textit{Aetia} should be viewed as an allusion to the poem of Sotades.\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{16} During the discussion of my paper, Professor Jerzy Danielewicz interestingly proposed that “unholy” here may refer to an illicit sexual practice different from incest, i.e. to \textit{pedicatio}. This might have numerous consequences for our understanding of the fragment; I suppose that the most radical (but not necessary) interpretation founded on this ground would be to assume that the line was erroneously taken to comment on the Ptolemies’ wedding. Of course, Sotades’ poetic strategy enables the reader to seek for new meanings (cf. R. Pretagostini, \textit{Intelletuali e potere politico nell’età ellenistica: la duplice valenza metaforica di κέντρον in Sotade fr. 1 Powell, [in:] idem, Ricerche sulla poesia alessandrina II. Forme allusive e contenuti nuovi, Roma 2007, p. 135-138). Yet I remain skeptical and would argue for the traditional reading. It appears to me that in the literary code that is well established in Greek literature at the time of Sotades the expressions such as \textit{οὐχ ὀσίν}, when they are referred to sexual intercourse, immediately make the reader think of incest; cf. Aesop. 304 Hausrat-Hunger, Soph. \textit{Oed. Col.} 945–946, Aristoph. \textit{Ran.} 850, Plat. \textit{Leg.} 838b (ἀνδρόν / γάμοι ἄνδροι) / μηδάμως δόει in reference to incest). I hope to treat this more fully elsewhere.
\textsuperscript{17} R. Pretagostini, \textit{Sotade poetar...} (above, n. 1), p. 144-145.
\textsuperscript{18} See A. Cameron, \textit{Callimachus...} (above, n. 15), p. 20. Something similar was perhaps contained in SH 961 (Posidippus’ epithalamium for the Ptolemies’ wedding?).
The suspected passage of Callimachus is from the elegy *Acontius and Cydippe*. The context (lines 1–3 of the fragment) suggests that the narrator is about to tell the story of the ἵερος γάμος, but he suddenly cuts it short (Call., fr. 75.4–5 Pfeiffer = *P. Oxy*. 1011):

"Ἡρὴν γὰρ κοτέ φασι πον, κόνο, ἱσχεο, λαιδρεθμέ, σὺ γ' ἀείης καὶ τὰ περ ὀχὺ σώη.

They say that once upon a time Hera – dog, dog, hold back, impudent soul! You would sing even what is not lawful.

One clearly sees that the beginning of the story is an almost exact quotation of what we have just recognized as the first line of Sotades’ invective. In this light it can be plausibly argued that the expression ὀχὺ σώη alludes to the analogous epithet in the abusive ending of Sotades’ poem. Pamela Bleisch thinks that “Callimachus deliberately parrots Sotades’ phrase … to signpost his pointed rebuke of the tactless lampoonist”, and suggests that Callimachus’ *Epigram* 1 is “another retort to Sotades”.20 But her understanding of the allusion in the *Aetia* must be incorrect, and so is, as I will soon demonstrate, her reading of *Epigram* 1. For it would be extremely naïve to take seriously Callimachus’ criticism of “singing what is not lawful”. On the contrary, the passage is full of joyful sarcasm. Obviously the fact that the narrator hastily breaks off the quotation from Sotades not only does not conceal anything, but naturally such a reticentia puts a very strong stress on what is suggested but remains untold. The effect is not less forceful than if the whole poem were quoted. Hence, the passage of the *Aetia* is not a “retort

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20 P. Bleisch (above, n. 7), p. 467.
to Sotades’ – in fact, this is another instance of the assault on the king, although this time it is more elegant, and its humour is surely more refined.\(^{21}\)

Before we think of the true nature of Callimachus’ *Epigram* 1, let us consider for a while the text of Sotades’ famous insult. The fragment is preserved in the works of Plutarch and Athenaeus. There are three transmitted variants of the grammatical form of the final word in this line to choose from, and four possible interpretations of it:

1) \(\omega\delta\varepsilon\iota\zeta\) ([Plut.] *De lib. ed.* 11a) – the 2nd person present indicative. This variant was usually accepted in older editions and discussions of Sotades.\(^{22}\)

2) \(\omega\delta\varepsilon\iota\) (Athen. 14.621a, variant A) – the 3rd person present indicative.

3) \(\omega\delta\varepsilon\iota\) (Athen. 14.621a, variant B) – this can be interpreted as the unaugmented 3rd person imperfect indicative. Such is the text and interpretation accepted by Pretagostini in accord with his reconstruction of the poem,\(^{23}\) and either this or the previous one is printed by most recent students of the subject.\(^{24}\)

4) However, \(\omega\delta\varepsilon\iota\) can be also taken as the 2nd person imperative. This is my choice.

If we judge the reconstruction of Sotades’ invective made by Pretagostini to be correct – and I see no reason not to do so – then we ought to think of this composition as of something with which we are already well familiar. The narrative part consisted of a mythical tale. This was pointed by the ending by which the story received its specific application. Again, this is the form of a fable. Such an observation is reinforced by the fable-like phrasing in what we suppose to be the first line of Sotades’ poem; one will note \(\pi\omicron\tau\omicron\varsigma\kappa\acute{\iota}\varsigma\) and \(\varphi\alpha\varsigma\omicron\varsigma\): “once upon a time, as they say…”

My conclusion is that I would expect to find some variant of the expression \(\sigma\omicron\tau\omicron\varsigma\kappa\acute{\iota}\varsigma\) \(\kappa\acute{\iota}\varsigma\) in the lost line that once preceded the line rightly supposed by Pretagostini to be the end of the poem. It is convenient to note that such an expression in various forms can be easily conformed to the flexible Sotadean metre.\(^{25}\) Hence I would like to hear something like “so you too go on and marry your sister, do as the gods do”, a pungently ironic advice addressed to the king Ptolemy. Of course, that would be a rather perverse lesson. But it would not stand alone. If my reading of both Callimachus’ *Epigram* 1 and Sotades’ invective is acceptable, what we have right now

\(^{21}\) Cf. A. Cameron, *Callimachus*... (above, n. 15), p. 21-23.


before us are the poems of the same composition, and of the same purpose. Both pretend to instruct Ptolemy in the traditional manner of didactic fable. The relationship between the two poems is evidently much closer than it was suggested by Pamela Bleisch. Besides, in this light Epigram 1 stands akin to the already discussed passage of the Aetia. They both repeat in a more elaborate form Sotades’ act of “unlawfulness”.

How is it possible that such poetry could ever be conceived in Ptolemaic Alexandria? And we speak not only of Sotades, a poet of the notoriously bad reputation, but also of Callimachus, the Ptolemies’ favourite court poet. Moreover, I think that two or three more similar instances can be added to those already discussed, which however I will pass over now. Modern scholars usually point at the symposium, since we are aware that sympotic conventions sanctioned several forms of violent verbal abuse. But my explanation is different. It seems striking to me that one encounters each of the poems and passages under discussion in the context of the wedding. I think that what we have here are echoes of the ritual nuptial obscenity which is easily found in many different cultures, but has never been convincingly traced in Greece. This would be the case of the Greek Fescennines. However, if this theory is to find acceptance, it has to receive a more extensive treatment than I can give at the present occasion.

A LESSON FOR THE KING: SOTADES’ INVECTIVE AGAINST PTOLEMY (FR. 1 AND 16 POWELL) AND CALLIMACHUS’ EPIGRAM 1 PFEIFFER

Summary

The present discussion develops Roberto Pretagostini’s proposal of reconstructing Sotades’ invective against Ptolemy as beginning with fr. 16 and ending with fr. 1 Powell,

26 Meanwhile see J. Griffin, Augustus and the Poets: ‘Caesar qui cogere posset’, in: F. Millar, E. Segal (eds.), Caesar Augustus. Seven Aspects, Oxford 1984, p. 193-194; A. Cameron, Callimachus... (above, n. 15), p. 22-23; P. Bleisch (above, n. 7), p. 468. I will limit myself to mentioning briefly Theocr. Id. 15.64 πάντα γυναικές δοκεῖν, καὶ ὃς Ζεὺς ἄγαγθε “Hephaestus—according to J. D. Reed, Arsinoe’s Adonis and the Poetics of Ptolemaic Imperialism, TAPhA 130, 2000, p. 337, this is “a reference that in poetry written under Ptolemy II inevitably goes back to the royal couple”. Note that the tone of the line seems ironic, and here, as in Callimachus, the well-known story of the union of Zeus and Hera is classified as a secret (“you can’t hide anything from women, not even about the ιζερκος γάμος”). Is there again the shadow of Sotades to be seen in the background?


28 For a suggestion of a trace of the Greek Fescennines in Theocritus see D. Konstan, A Note on Theocritus’ Idyll 18, CPh 74, 1979, p. 234.
and his suggestion that Callimachus, fr. 75.4–5 Pfeiffer contains an allusion to Sotades’ poem. An examination of Callimachus’ Epigram 1 shows on the one hand that it can be read as a jocular comment on the Ptolemies’ marriage, and on the other that its form is conventional and typical of the early Greek fable. Since Sotades’ invective appears to share these characteristics, it is argued that Epigram 1 is another instance of when Callimachus alludes to Sotades.