

Our Medusa: A Gorging Gorgon in Hedylus 9

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καὶ γυναικὰ δέ τινα Κλειῶ ἐπὶ τοῖς ὁμοίοις σκώπτων φησίν·

Ὅψοφάγει, Κλειῶ· καταμύομεν. ἦν δὲ θελήσης,
ἔσθε μόνη· δραχμῆς ἔστιν ὁ γόγγρος ἅπας.
θῆς μόνον ἢ ζώνην κῆ' ἐνώτιον ἢ τι τοιοῦτον
σύσσημον †τὸ δ' ὄρα'ν μὴ μόνον οὐ λέγομεν.†
ἡμετέρη σὺ Μέδουσα· λιθοῦμεθα †πάντα πάλαι που†
οὐ Γοργοῦς γόγγρου δ' οἱ μέλει λοπάδι.

1-3 ὄψοφαγεῖ ... καταμυομενην δὲ ... ἐσθεμον ἢ ... θεσμὸν ὄν A, corr. Heraldus | 1 Κλειοῖ Heraldus, cf. *HE* | 3 κῆ' add. Musurus | 4 ναὶ μὰ τόν, οὐ σθένομεν Jacobs | 5 λιθοῦμεθ' ἅπαντα A, λιθοῦμεθα πάντες C πάλαι που A, ἀπλάτου Kaibel, om. C | 6 γόγγροι A, corr. C

He (sc. Hedylus of Samos) also makes fun of a certain woman named Clio in similar terms and says:

Gorge yourself,¹ Clio; our eyes are closed. And if you're willing,
Eat by yourself. The whole conger-eel costs a drachma.
Just put down a sash or an earring or something like that
As a token ...
You are our Medusa; we are petrified ...,
Poor us, by a plate of conger, not Gorgon.

—Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* VIII 345a-b²

Athenaeus quotes this epigram in the course of a discussion of gluttons. The Clio here addressed is surely presented as such; she may be the same as the Cleo with whom, according to Phalaecus, 'nobody could ever compete in drinking' (Phalaecus 1 *HE* = Ath. X 440d-e). The point of the epigram is the pun in the last line: the speaker and his companions are petrified by a plate of *gongros* (conger-eel), not by a *Gorgo*.

¹ Ὅψοφαγία was a term of opprobrium, not a morally neutral term for gourmet dining. 'Most people in classical Athens would have recognized the vice of *opsophagia* when they witnessed it, though the accused might have denied the charge or someone else might have disputed what exactly it was in this kind of eating that made the epithet applicable' writes James N. Davidson, *Courtesans & Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (New York 1998) 34. It applied particularly, and in a later period apparently exclusively, to fish (ibid. 3, citing Plutarch, *Moralia* 667c-669e; cf. W. Geoffrey Arnott, *Alexis, The Fragments: A Commentary* [Cambridge 1996] 368 on Alexis fr. 129 K-A).

² The epigram appears in A.S.F. Gow and D.L. Page, *The Greek Anthology. Hellenistic Epigrams* (Cambridge 1965, hereafter *HE*) as Hedylus 9; it is their text that I have reproduced here.

We might appreciate this epigram more if we could read it with confidence, but unfortunately it is hard to make sense of the ends of the fourth and fifth lines. Kaibel in his Teubner text of Athenaeus³ printed the text with no *obeli*, offering the ingenious suggestion ἀπλάτου for πάλαι που: the Gorgon who is not in the plate is *unapproachable*, and the vowel at the beginning of the word allows us to retain the reading πάντες, ‘all of us’, instead of the meaningless πάντα, ‘all things’, without violating the meter. If we are willing to be somewhat imaginative in our understanding of the Greek, the rest might be parsed. I do not know of any place where Kaibel explained his reading, but I would guess it to be something like

Just put down a sash or an earring or something like that
 As a token. We refuse to watch you in company (μη̄ μόνον).
 You are our Medusa; we are all petrified,
 Poor us, by a plate of conger, not of unapproachable Gorgon.

This is not very satisfactory. ὁρᾶν μη̄ μόνον should mean ‘not only to see’, and τὸ ὁρᾶν is not exactly what we want with οὐ λέγομεν; indirect discourse takes an infinitive without the article. And what is so petrifyingly ugly? In line five it is Clio herself who is ‘our Medusa’, but in line six it is the plate of conger. Nor is it clear why the plate is mentioned at the very end; it does not seem much of a punchline, and furthermore, although the plate of conger is understandable enough, what in the world could be meant by ‘a plate of Gorgon’? Gow and Page ad loc. suggest that the word may have been unconsciously imported by a copyist from Athenaeus’ previous citation. Despairing, they obelize the ends of lines four (which ‘seems hopeless’ to them) and five; ‘the situation is not plain’, they admit, ‘but it would seem that Clio is eating greedily of the conger which was intended for *all* present and is told that she can eat it all herself (or take it away and eat it alone) if she will pay what it cost.’ Well, maybe. I think we can do better than that.

First I would like to consider the conger itself. Gow and Page are correct to say that conger-eels ‘do not seem to have been regarded as a particular delicacy, but they are large’. Matt Endacott, a fishmonger who bought a conger almost twice as long as he is, was more explicit: ‘it’s a large, ugly and slimy looking beast.’⁴ Athenaeus himself (VII 288c) cites Eudoxus as saying that at Sicyon many were ἀνδραχθεῖς, ‘as much a man can carry’, and some ἀμαξιαῖοι, ‘wagon loads’. Nor was he exaggerating.⁵ Endacott’s eel⁶ was three meters long and weighed 46 kilos when gutted; the world record, as of 2009, was 139 kilos. The average is only a meter long and five kilos, but that still makes quite a plateful.

³ *Athenaeus: Dipnosophistarum libri XV*, ed. Georg Kaibel (Leipzig 1887).

⁴ “Pictured: The giant 10ft conger eel that makes feeding the 5,000 seem possible”, *Daily Mail* 1 October 2009, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1217457/Pictured-The-whopping-10ft-conger-eel-makes-feeding-thousand-possible.html>, access date 15 May 2014. A web search for “conger eel images” will uncover many similar pictures.

⁵ Matro the parodist, on the other hand, presumably exaggerated in his mock-epic description of a conger spread over nine tables (Ath. IV 135c).

⁶ To give credit where credit is due, it was Dean Corbett of Torquay, Devon, who caught the fish; Endacott merely marketed it.



Figure 1: A conger face on. Source: Wikipedia

This is not to say that the conger does not have its partisans. Endacott — who had almost fifty kilo of the fish to sell — claimed that it was delicious, though ‘certainly underrated’. If Hedylus’ conger cost a drachma for the whole thing, a character in comedy complains of having been charged five drachmas just for the neck and the ‘first slices’ — probably the least appetizing parts.⁷ The fishmonger seems to have thought that conger was a delicacy, though one suspects that the author may have thought otherwise: perhaps that was part of the joke. Another comic character pays a drachma and four obols for conger — the most expensive fish item on the list.⁸ These prices were certainly not for an entire fish, but for a few slices. A comic cook boasting about how well he prepared a ‘muck-eating river-fish’ says that if he had gotten his hands on ‘a conger from dear Sicyon’ it would have turned anyone who ate it into a god.⁹ Hedylus, at any rate, was apparently among those who found the conger repulsive. In his restaurant the whole snaky thing cost only a drachma, and Clio’s partners at table do not seem to think they have gotten a particularly enticing dish.

⁷ Archedicus 3 K-A = Ath. VII 294b.

⁸ Alexis 15 K-A = Ath. III 117e.

⁹ Philemon 82.22-4 K-A = Ath. VII 289a.

I would suggest that the problem with line four began when a copyist, perhaps influenced by ἔσθε μόνῃ in line two, misread something in line four as being a form of μόνος. If so, the obvious candidate is a middle participle: reading μόνος for -μένος is a common error. Could the speakers be ἡμενοι, ‘sitting’? If so, the line would be:

σύσημον· τόδ’ ὄραν ἡμενοι οὐ λέγομεν.

... as a token; we do not say that we can sit down and see this.

This reading is not without problems. As anyone can see, the word ‘can’ that I have snuck into the English is not in the Greek; the Greek merely says, ‘we do not say that we see this sitting down’. I do not think that is too much of a stretch for an epigram; poetry regularly relies on the reader to understand the meaning of a line that is less than explicit. I would be happier if instead of ‘we do not say that we can sit down’ I could translate ‘we say that we cannot sit down’, and maybe that is possible, but the use of “οὐ adherescent”, where the negative negates not the verb of saying but the thing said, is usually restricted to φημί rather than λέγω.¹⁰ Perhaps Hedylus counted on his readers for this, too.

There would be a much more serious objection if we believed, as Olson takes for granted in his deservedly praised new Loeb Athenaeus, that Clío is ‘clearly a courtesan, given that she is dining with a group of men.’¹¹ The oft-cited idea that only courtesans ate with men derives from [Demosthenes] 59.24-5, where witnesses testify that Neaera, the subject of the discourse, drank together with men ὡς ἑταίραν οὔσαν, a passage that is obviously describing a symposium.¹² If Hedylus was imagining a symposium, ἡμενοι is impossible; the diners at a symposium did not sit but rather reclined, and no form of κλίνεισθαι will fit the meter.¹³ But I do not think that we are dealing with a symposium. Members of a symposium did not pay for their meals, and I doubt that they would normally know how much their host had paid. Nor would they be likely to suggest to a *hetaera* that she remain and pay for her food while they leave her to eat alone; on the contrary, she would normally be the one serving them, and she would be there not to give payment but to receive it. The diners here are imagined to be eating at καπηλεῖον or a

¹⁰ Raphael Kühner and Bernhard Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache*³, (Hanover 1898-1904; reprint, Munich 1963) II 180 Anm. 3.

¹¹ Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters*, ed. S. Douglas Olson (LCL, Cambridge, Mass. 2006) IV p. 74 n. 117.

¹² I myself have cited this evidence, but a reservation is in order. The language of Apollodorus, the speaker of [Dem.] 59 (συνέπινεν καὶ συνεδείπνει ἐναντίον πολλῶν Νέαιρα αὐτῇ ὡς ἄν) ἑταίρα οὔσα, ‘This Neaera drank with them and ate with them in the presence of many people, just like a courtesan’) is the kind of language lawyers use to lead juries to a conclusion that they want. (‘Yes, that is the sort of women whom men have around when they eat and drink together.’) This indicates that the conclusion was a plausible one, but not that it was a necessary one; on the contrary, the fact that Apollodorus feels it necessary to spell it out suggests that the judges might not have drawn the conclusion on their own. We should be wary of extending his innuendo beyond the context of the symposium to infer that no honest woman ever ate in the presence of men.

¹³ Nor would κείμαι help. κείμενοι would fit the meter, but κεῖσθαι is what people do when sleeping, dying, or dead; they do not lie down at table.

πανδοκεῖον, an eatery or an inn, where one paid for one's food, and where the eating was probably much less leisurely than at the symposium. Reclining at table was an eastern luxury that penetrated to Greece in the archaic period; the symposium itself does seem to have spread to the middle classes,¹⁴ but it was a mode of formal dining, and it is not likely that reclining ever became the everyday position in which ordinary Greeks ate.¹⁵

On this reading, the first four lines are consistent and progressive in their description of the speakers' distaste for what they are seeing. First they simply call it by a bad name (ὄνομάγει); then they close their eyes; then they suggest that Clio eat alone, 'if she is willing'¹⁶; then they say that it does not cost much, and if she has not got the money, they will lend it to her (to get rid of her, presumably), accepting as security an item of clothing that she has on her and can remove without embarrassment;¹⁷ and finally they simply cannot sit there and watch.

The climax comes in lines 5-6 when she petrifies them; but what was written where the MSS now have πάντα πάλαι που? One's first thought is that what we want is πάντες, which would give good sense with the plural verb; but in fact it would add nothing to the verse, and perhaps we should look elsewhere.

The place I propose to look is in the *Placita Philosophorum*, a work transmitted among Plutarch's *Moralia* although it is not by Plutarch. There we read the following explanation of the Milky Way: τίνες δὲ κατοπτρικὴν εἶναι φαντασίαν τοῦ ἡλίου, 'Some say it is a mirror image of the sun'.¹⁸ What interests me here is not the astronomical hypothesis, but the use of the word φαντασία to describe a reflection. This is not a common use; all the more reason why a copyist, realizing that an 'apparition' was not appropriate here, may have been tempted to improve the text. But if we take φαντασία in this sense we can read

ἡμετέρη σὺ Μέδουσα· λιθούμεθα φαντασία που
οὐ Γοργοῦς γόγγρου δ' οἱ μέλει λοπάδι.

You are our Medusa; we are petrified by a sort of reflection
Not of a Gorgon but of a conger, poor us, in a plate.

The progression continues. Clio is Medusa at the beginning of line five, but in fact she is worse: Perseus killed Medusa by turning away from her and keeping his eyes on what he saw in his shield, but we, poor us, are petrified by the very reflection in the plate. The reflection is that of a conger, a distressing enough sight; the reflection of Clio, our

¹⁴ Burkhard Fehr, *Orientalische und griechische Gelage* (Bonn 1971), 102.

¹⁵ Frederick Cooper and Sarah Morris, 'Dining in Round Buildings', in Oswyn Murray, ed., *Symptica: A Symposium on the Symposium* (Oxford 1990) 77-8.

¹⁶ One should not press the point too much, because the choice between βούλομαι and ἐθέλω in poetry is often based on metrical considerations, but in prose ἐθέλω is often used, like the French *vouloir bien*, for something that the person is willing but not necessarily eager to do; 'of consent rather than desire', as *LSJ*⁹ s.v. ἐθέλω puts it. The proposition is not, 'Well, we see you would like to have it all to yourself, and we're willing to go along with that', but rather, 'Do us a favor and eat it by yourself, if you're willing'.

¹⁷ The first suggestion, that she leave her sash (ζώνη), may be a pointed one: she will have loosened her sash to eat, and can easily leave it behind.

¹⁸ *Plac. Phil.* 3.1.2 = [Plut.] *Mor.* 892f.

Medusa, no doubt adds to the revulsion. And the last word is indeed a punchline: unlike Perseus who could look safely at the reflection in his shield, we dare not even look at the plate.

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