

Erinna at the Crossroads: Genre-Crossing and Gender-Crossing in Early Hellenistic Literature

The pre-Hellenistic poet Erinna is broadly recognized as the first woman poet to break down certain barriers of genre in her epyllion, the *Distaff*, dated to the mid-4th century. In this poem, Erinna uses the hexameter of Homeric epic to meditate on her friendship with a woman named Baucis, who had just recently become married, and to lament her death that soon followed. Skinner (1982) described the *Distaff* as the melding of *goos* (a feminine form of lament) and *threnos* (a masculine form of lament). More recently Levaniouk (2008) argued that the *Distaff* is actually a *hymenaios* in epic form, which invites a comparison between a bride's procession to the groom's house and the adventures and travails of male heroes. Though modern surveys of Hellenistic literature acknowledge that Erinna's introduction of themes from the melic genre into hexameter was innovative and influential (e.g. Fantuzzi and Hunter 2004, 28-29; Morrison 2007, 19), they do not generally recognize the gendered dimension of her influence. This paper will argue that Erinna's rendering of feminine subjectivity in hexameters—*i.e.* her simultaneous crossing of genre and gender lines—set the precedent for further experimentation with gender-crossing in early Hellenistic literature,.

The women poets of the early Hellenistic period carried on in Erinna's tradition: Anyte often employs a masculine-gendered voice while retaining a feminine outlook (Greene 2005), and Nossis adopts the conventions of expression in masculine genres to explore the relationships among women (Skinner 2005). For the first time, moreover, men's poetry adopts narrative voices which may have actually reflected women's real concerns. This enthusiastic reception of the *Distaff* and Erinna's epigrams (though possibly spurious) by male Hellenistic poets introduces feminine subjectivity into mainstream, traditionally masculine, poetics. For example, Callimachus' *Lock of Berenike* borrows heavily from the *Distaff* to create an intensely feminine

narrative voice (Gutzwiller 1992, 375ff). Theocritus uses women as ekphrastic focalizers who express Alexandrine aesthetic values in *Idyll* 15 (Burton 1995, 102-4; Skinner 2001, 214). Herodas deems it worthwhile to lampoon this feminine poetics in three of his mimiambi (Skinner 2001, 221). Epigrams praising Erinna in the *Anthologia Graeca* show that male poets admired her poetics, with its traditionally feminine qualities of sweetness, delicacy and brevity. We shall understand the aesthetic revolution of the Hellenistic period better if we understand Erinna as she was known by her earliest admirers in the few centuries following her death, before her poetics was subsumed by Callimacheanism and her significance became obscured to the modern readership.

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