

# ANACREON'S SENSE OF HUMOUR AND THE GREEK LANGUAGE

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## EL SENTIDO DEL HUMOR DE ANACREONTE Y LA LENGUA GRIEGA

**ABSTRACT:** On the basis of an analysis of the relevant terminology and *topoi*, passages of Anacreon which certain critics have misunderstood are explained.

**RESUMEN:** Con un análisis del léxico y de los tópicos correspondientes se explican varios pasajes de Anacreonte que algunos estudiosos no han sabido interpretar acertadamente.

**KEY WORDS:** Greek lyric poetry, Anacreon, textual criticism.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Lirica griega, Anacreonte, crítica textual.

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In this short, but I hope instructive, paper I shall endeavour to explain certain passages of Anacreon's poetry which the latest editor, Dr. A. Rozokoki<sup>1</sup> and her supervisors have misunderstood. I shall, at the invitation of numerous interested colleagues, dilate with helpful purposes on what I more succinctly wrote in my review of the edition, which is due to appear in *Veleia*. Ancient Greek humour is always elegant, but often *risqué*, as my eminent colleague H. White and I have shown many times, for instance in our study of Sappho's *epithalamium*<sup>2</sup>, and Anacreon's humour is no exception to this rule: I shall try to deal with his ribaldry as discreetly as I can.

<sup>1</sup> *Ἀνακρέων* (Ἀθήναι 2006).

<sup>2</sup> "Aspectos del sentido del humor en la Grecia antigua", *Veleia* 20 (2003) 273-379.

I shall quote from the above mentioned edition published by Dr. Rozokoki, which is the latest and most useful as a diligent *Materialsammlung*, but, I regret to say, defective because Dr. Rozokoki, evidently mistaught by her supervisors whom she thanks on p. 10, has not understood any of the erotic poems by Anacreon, which, as everybody knows, constitute the most important part of his poetic production.

I have long ago demonstrated -and my demonstration has been generally accepted by scholars<sup>3</sup>- that Anacreon is, as far as we can see, the creator of the genre called “epigram”. The characteristics of this genre have been well illustrated in a famous paper by K. Barwick<sup>4</sup>. An epigram is a short poem which contains a “pointe”, i. e. a witticism, a final surprise: mostly -but not always- the “pointe” is at the end of the poem, and it rests on an ambiguity (“Zweideutigkeit”, Barwick) which we must penetrate by means of the “logique Cartésienne” -a method which my learned colleague H. White has applied with superb success, as my dear renowned friends, the lamented Herman van Looy and N. Livadaras, have more than once emphasized when praising her publications. As a rule, the witticisms accomplished by Anacreon are erotic: love inebriated by wine is the *Leitmotiv* of his poetry.

Let us now examine fr. 90 Rozokoki:

κού μοκλὸν ἐν θύρῃσι διζῆσιν βαλῶν  
ἥσυχος καθεύδει

Dr. Rozokoki comments as follows: “Gentili... ὑποθέτει ὅτι λέγεται γιὰ κάποιον φτωχὸν ποὺ δὲν φοβάται τὴν ἐπίσκεψη κλεφτῶν, ἐνῶ σύμφωνα μὲ τὸν Giangrande ὁ ποιητὴς σατιρίζει ἓνα ἀγόρι ποὺ ἐπειδὴ ἔχει μεγαλώσει δὲν τὸ ἐπισκέπτονται πιά οἱ ἐραστῆς, παρ’ ὅλο ποὺ ἀφήνει (μάταια) τὴν πόρτα τοῦ ξεκλειδῶτη”. She misunderstands the syntax: καθεύδει is consequent on aoristic οὐ βαλῶν. She has not understood that, as Gentili conceded orally in Geneva, at the meeting where I explained the problem, my explanation<sup>5</sup> is the correct one, as demonstrated by the emphatic “pointe” placed where it is expected to, i. e. at the end of the passage (ἥσυχος καθεύδει). If the passage satirized, as Gentili surmised, a man who was so poor that he did not fear the visits of thieves, the poem would express a banality and would be inane -in sum, it would not be humorous or satirical, because it is perfectly normal, natural and logical for a poor man not to fear such visits. Moreover, to say that the man left the door unbolted and could in consequence sleep in the silence of the night (ἥσυχος καθεύδει) would be a

<sup>3</sup> Cf. “Βασκανίης ὄλοδὸν γένος”, *Πλάτων* 50 (1998) 261-269 (263)

<sup>4</sup> “Martial und die Zeitgenössische Rhetorik”, *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaft zu Leipzig, Philol.-historischer Klasse* 104.1 (Berlin 1959) 1 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Now printed in “Symptotic Literature and Epigram”, *L'épigramme grecque* (Genève 1969) 118 ff.

*non sequitur* if referred to a visit by thieves: thieves operate in τὸ ἤσυχάζον τῆς νυκτός because they need to be neither seen nor heard by the occupant of the house they want to visit: accordingly, if nocturnal thieves had found the door unbolted they would have opened it silently and crept in. On the other hand, the κωμασταί habitually tried to break down noisily the door of young boys they wanted to visit for erotic purposes, and they would have made such noise if they had come to visit with erotic intentions the person satirized in the poem and had found the door bolted: he had left the door unbolted because he hoped that the κωμασταί would come, but they did not come because he was too old to be erotically desirable, and so he sleeps in the silence of the night, his hope having proved vain. In conclusion: the absence of noise (ἤσυχος) as a consequence of the door being left unbolted can only refer to the absence of κωμασταί, not to thieves as visitors. The “logique Cartésienne” -a quality Rozokoki and her supervisors patently lack- has enabled us to comprehend the “pointe” of the fragment.

I shall now examine poem 76 Rozokoki. In a famous poem consisting of 4 lines, Theognis, using a “*metáfora ecuestre*”<sup>6</sup>, describes (ll. 257-260) a girl whose lover does not satisfy her because he is an incompetent *fututor*, “*amante*” (κακὸν ἠνίοχον). The words κακὸν ἠνίοχον conclude the poem. Anacreon, in his equally famous poem 76 Rozokoki, describes the same girl. In the first 5 lines he says, by means of metaphors, that the metaphorical mare (i. e. the girl) cannot effect a satisfactory copulation, and in the final line he concludes that this is so because her *fututor* is incompetent: δεξιὸν γὰρ ἵπποπείρην οὐχ ἕξεις ἐπεμβάτην. In Theognis, ἠνίοχον denotes a metaphorical “*rider*”, “*mounter*” (not a charioteer), i. e. a *fututor* (cf. Calderón *ad loc.*). Rozokoki asserts that all the metaphors used by Anacreon are discreet (διακριτικοί), not crudely ambiguous (χυδαῖοι), i. e. not entailing a sexual connotation like Aristophanes’ ἀναβῆναι, and that it is doubtful whether the poem is complete. Both her assertions are mistaken. The final metaphor which concludes the poem is crudely explicit as can be. The word ἐπεμβάτην means “*mounter*” of a horse, and, *sensu obscaeno*, “*mounter*” (i. e. *fututor*) of a woman. Ἐπεμβάτην, at the end of poem, is just as crudely (i. e. sexually) ambiguous as the compound ἀναβῆναι in Aristophanes, which means “*mount a woman*” (ἀναβῆναι τὴν γυναικα), because compound words containing the notion of βατεῖν can denote, as ἐπεμβάτης here, *fututio*, i. e. the act of “*mounting*” a woman sexually<sup>7</sup>. The poem, in consequence, is complete, because ἐπεμβάτην, exactly like Theognis’ ἠνίοχον, concludes Anacreon’s sextet: ambiguity, as I said before, often constitutes the closing “*pointe*” of a poem. Since the mss. reading οὐχ ἕξι- is not unmetrical

<sup>6</sup> Cf. E. Calderón, *Theognis* (Madrid 2010) 65.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. H. White’s demonstration in “A case of Pastoral Humour in Theocritus”, *Mus. Phil. Londi.* 7 (1986) 147-149 (148).

(-- = -- ~ ~)⁸, we can conclude that the future ἔξεις denotes here certainty, i. e. that the future is “inferential” or “presumptive”, the sense being “I am certain that you do not have a competent *futuro*”⁹. The future ἔξεις was trivialized into ἔχεις by Stephanus. Rozokoki and her supervisors have understood nothing of this.

I shall now examine and explain the witty poem 15 Rozokoki:

Σφαίρη δηῦτέ πορφυρέη  
βάλλων χρυσοκόμης Ἔρωσ  
νήνι ποικιλοσαμβάλῳ  
συμπαίξειν προκαλείται.  
Ἴδ' ἔστιν γάρ ἀπ' εὐκτίτου  
Λέσβου, τὴν ἐμὴν κόμην,  
λευκὴ γάρ, καταμέμφεται,  
πρὸς δ' ἄλλην τινὰ χάσκει.

I elucidated the humorous “pointe” of these lines in several papers, which, once again, Rozokoki has not comprehended. The obligatory starting point of our textual analysis is the fact that the girls from Lesbos had the reputation of being *fellatrices*: this fact, that nobody can deny, throws light on Anacreon's words. The poem ends with a final surprise, i. e. a “pointe”, which, as usual, is found at the very end, i. e. with the word χάσκει. Anacreon says that he would like, at a banquet, to make love to a Lesbian girl, but she, instead of kissing him, turns away from his head. The poet at first thinks that this is because (γάρ, line 5) she is a precious girl from the refined town of Lesbos, who avoided white-haired, i. e. old customers like him, but then the truth becomes evident to him: the girl, being a *fellatrix*, turns her mouth (χάσκει) not towards his head, but towards “a certain other hair” (ἄλλην τινά), i. e. his pubic hair, as *fellatrices* do<sup>10</sup>.

Rozokoki, turning a blind eye to the practices of *fellatrices*, maintains that, since “κόμη προσδιορίζει κυρίως τὰ μαλλιά τοῦ κεφαλιοῦ”, my explanation and the one offered by Gentili, according to whom the girl directs her mouth γὰρ τὸ ἐφηβαῖο ἐνὸς ἄλλου νεώτερου ἄνδρα, are both impossible. A linguistic analysis of Anacreon's words shows that Rozokoki is totally wrong. First of all, the word κόμη, when preceded by the article, as a rule -as grammar demands- denotes the κόμη used κυρίως, i. e. the κόμη κατ' ἐξοχὴν, the cephalic κόμη (here, τὴν ἐμὴν κόμην: examples in *Theo. s. v. κόμη*): there did, however, exist some other kinds of

<sup>8</sup> Cf., besides Rossbach, Gentili-Lomiento, *Metrica e ritmica* (Città di Castello 2003) 265 and 115.

<sup>9</sup> On assertive ἔξεις cf. “Texto y lengua de Marco Aurelio Antonino”, *Myrtia* 18 (2003) 225-236 (230).

<sup>10</sup> The verb χάσκω has, as I am told by my illustrious colleague G. Chrysafis, retained its erotic sense in modern Greek. Cf. Rozokoki 182, who correctly refutes West's ineptness.

non-cephalic hair which covered other parts of the body: κόμη denotes the beard in Epictetus (cf. *Thes.* s. v. 1776 A), and as far as Anacreon is concerned he certainly had a κομητήν κεφαλὴν, but no less certainly was κομητής τὰ αἰδοῖα<sup>11</sup>.

Having clarified that Anacreon was κομητής τὰ αἰδοῖα, we can now add that Rozokoki has not perceived that Gentili's interpretation of Anacreon's words is grammatically impossible: ἄλλην τινά in Greek can only mean "another kind of hair"<sup>12</sup>. The meaning "la chioma di un altro" can not be expressed in Greek, as Gentili ungrammatically suggests, by ἄλλην τινά: the meaning suggested by Gentili could only be expressed, in Greek, by the so-called *comparatio compendiaria*, i. e. by ἄλλου τινός = "another's", "someone else's". Gentili has of course the merit of having understood my demonstration to the effect that the girl is a *fellatrix*.

Finally, let us examine poem 53:

Πολιοὶ μὲν ἡμῖν ἦδη  
κρόταφοι κάρη τε λευκόν,  
χαρίεσσα δ' οὐκέτ' ἦβη  
πάρα, γηραλέοι δ' ὀδόντες  
5 γλυκεροῦ δ' οὐκέτι πολλὸς  
βίотου χρόνος λέλειπται.  
Διὰ ταῦτ' ἀνασταλύζω  
θαμὰ Τάρταρον δεδοικώς·  
Ἄϊδεω γάρ ἐστι δεινὸς  
10 μυχός, ἀργαλέη δ' ἐς αὐτὸν  
κάτοδος· καὶ γὰρ ἐτοῖμον  
καταβάντι μὴ ἀναβῆναι

I have explained these witty lines in every detail in several papers known to Rozokoki: she asserts that my ἐρμηνεία is ἐσφαλμένη (214). I shall show that it is her ἐρμηνεία that is ἐσφαλμένη, not mine. Since ἀναβαίνω can mean "go up", and since, as everybody knows, nobody who had gone down to Hades could come up again, the critics, whom Rozokoki blindly follows, have taken the words ἐτοῖμον καταβάντι μὴ ἀναβῆναι to mean that Anacreon is frightened of going down to Hades because he will not be able to come up again. Rozokoki (213) maintains that Anacreon is scared of Hades because he φοβάται τὸν θάνατον. She has not understood Anacreon's clear Greek words: the poet fears Hades for one precise reason, i. e. because (καὶ γὰρ, line 11), once he has gone there, he can-

<sup>11</sup> For phrases like κομητής τὰ σκέλη, κομητήν κεφαλὴν cf. *Thes.* s. v. κομητής. Cf. LSJ s. v. θρίζ, "hair of head", and "hair of limbs". In Hesychius we read (*Thes.* s. v. κόμη 1776 B) κόμη, αἱ τρίχες τῆς κεφαλῆς καὶ χωρίων (χωρίων = "parts of the body": the reading χωρίων is meaningless, since κόμη, unlike κόμη, can not signify "place", χωρίον, whereas "part of the body" is attested in Hippocrates, and χωρίων is necessary to fulfil the incomplete statement τρίχες τῆς κεφαλῆς).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. LSJ, s. v. τις "joined with adjectives".

not ἀναβῆναι. Now, why should Anacreon be afraid of remaining in Hades (Τάρταρον δεδοικώς) and not coming up? In post-Homeric times, the life of the dead in Hades was the opposite of fearsome. The “logique Cartésienne” tells us irrefutably that Anacreon could not possibly fear Hades, because, as any handbook of Greek mythology will tell Dr. Rozokoki and her supervisors, the dead could pleasantly continue, in Hades, to do what they had enjoyed doing on earth: to quote two examples relating to professionals, a doctor in *A.P.* 11.281 could continue to successfully exercise his profession in the nether world<sup>13</sup>, and the poet Eutyichides in *A.P.* 11.333 happily continued to recite in Hades his poetry, which he had enjoyed reciting “zu lebzeiten” on earth<sup>14</sup>.

As regards Anacreon in Hades, it was generally assumed, in antiquity, that one could not make love after death. Since Anacreon had been, in life, an exceptionally active *amator*, many variations, in poetry, were written as to whether he could continue to make love after death. These variations have been very instructively illustrated by my colleague H. White<sup>15</sup>: I shall mention a few of them here. According to one such variation (*A.P.* 7.29: cf. White, 68), both Anacreon and Smerdies, in Hades, sleep the sleep of the dead and consequently can not indulge in any amatory activity; in *A.P.* 7.30 (cf. White, 64, 69) the opposite is said: although as a rule death quenched any amatory power, “not even death” (οὐδ’ Ἄϊδης) had extinguished Anacreon’s erotic fire (i. e. Anacreon was an exception to the said rule), although he could only sing about Bathyllus, but not make love to him; the author of *A.P.* 7.27<sup>16</sup> expresses the wish that even in Hades (ἐν μακάρεσσι), where love-making was not possible, Anacreon may still be able to make love because the grace of the gods will allow him to be an exception to the rule. Finally, at *A.P.* 7.25<sup>17</sup> we are told that Anacreon, once arrived in Hades, complained (βαρύνεται) about one thing only, i. e. because he could not make love. In this epigram, Anacreon makes exactly the same complaint that he makes in his poem 53. The two poems patently allude to each other (*A.P.* 7.25 is ascribed to Simonides): Anacreon βαρύνεται for one reason only in the epigram, and is δεδοικώς in his poem 53 for the very same reason: his ἀναβῆναι means “making love”. Conclusion: the “logique Cartésienne”, which never is ἐσφαλμένη, has enabled us to understand Anacreon’s humour. The ambiguous ἀναβῆναι, skilfully placed, as usual in the case of “pointes”, at the end of the poem, is felicitous: at first the reader thinks that Anacreon fears Hades because he will not be able to “go

<sup>13</sup> Cf. what I have written in “Un epigrama satírico mal entendido”, J.-M. Nieto Ibáñez (coord.), *Lógos Hellenikós. Homenaje al Profesor Gaspar Morocho Gayo* (Universidad de León 2003) I, 267-269.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Barwick, *art.cit.* 29.

<sup>15</sup> *New Essays in Hellenistic Poetry* (Amsterdam 1985) 60 ff.

<sup>16</sup> On all this cf. White, *op. cit.* 66, 61 f.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. White, *op. cit.* 65 f.

up” from there, i. e. not be able to leave the nether world, but then it dawns upon the reader that the sole thing about Hades which the great *amator* dreaded was not his having to remain there (*A.P.* 7.25.5ff.: οὐχ ὅτι λείπων ἠέλιον Λήθης ἐνθάδ' ἔκυρσε δόμων), but the fact that he could not make love down there (ἀλλ' ὅτι κ. τ. λ. : *A.P.* 7.25.7ff.)<sup>18</sup>.

I am left with the impression that Dr. Rozokoki's supervisors do not know Greek adequately.

<sup>18</sup> In the light of the precise *Unterweltsituation* as evidenced by epigrams, Anacreon's predicament in Hades as described in *A.P.* 7.25 is clear. He is lonely (μοῦνος) because he alone, as an exception to the rule, amongst the dead who can not make love, is still capable of making love. Those who died took with themselves to Hades, if they could, what they thought they would need in the nether world (Eutychides “bringe seine Oden mit”: Barwick, *ibid.*), but Anacreon could not bring down to Hades with him Smerdies and Bathyllus (λέλοιπε), and therefore he is vexed (βαρύνεται).