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The Erotic Conception of Ancient Greek Landscapes and the Heterotopia of the Symposium

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Jo Heirman,
"The Erotic Conception of Ancient Greek Landscapes and the Heterotopia of the Symposium" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss3/12>

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Abstract: In his article "The Erotic Conception of Ancient Greek Landscapes and the Heterotopia of the Symposium" Jo Heirman discusses the conception of natural landscapes in ancient Greek lyric poetry from the seventh until the fifth century BC and its ideological background. Heirman analyzes lyric poems by Sappho, Ibycus, and Theognis in which landscapes of fields, gardens, and meadows are presented. Heirman's analysis reveals a recurrent erotic pattern in the conception of ancient Greek landscapes constructed as places which suggest various forms of eroticism ranging from lesbian desire to homosexuality. Further, Heirman discusses the preoccupation with eroticism by suggesting a connection with the "symposium," i.e., the performance of lyric poetry. Building on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, the erotic conception of the natural landscapes in lyric poems performed in the symposium is explained as the projection of eroticism that went beyond the urban norms of spaces outside of the city.

Jo HEIRMAN

The Erotic Conception of Ancient Greek Landscapes and the Heterotopia of the Symposium

In this study I take a look at natural landscapes in ancient Greece as constructed in lyric poetry from the seventh until the fifth century BC. The main questions I posit are the following: how are these landscapes conceived, which narratives lie behind their conception and what are the ideological stories behind the construction of ancient Greek landscapes? I discuss these questions in two steps. First, I examine a number of lyric poems which present fields, gardens, and meadows, and identify a recurrent pattern in the conception of these natural landscapes. The poems under consideration come after the Homeric epics about Troy and Odysseus (eighth century BC) and precede the Greek tragedies (fifth century BC): the best-known lyric poets are Sappho and Pindar (see Budelmann). In a second step, I aim to uncover the ideological background of the particular way of constructing landscapes in ancient Greek poetry by suggesting a connection with the "symposium," in which the lyric poems were performed and that I define in terms of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia.

I begin by discussing a description of fields in a poem by Sappho, which, unfortunately, has been preserved only partially (Fragment 96). Sappho was a poetess of the sixth century BC from the island of Lesbos to whom we owe the term "Lesbian" because of her erotic poetry for young women: "Sardis … often turning her thoughts in this direction … she honoured you as being like a goddess for all to see, and she took most delight in your song. Now she stands out among the Lydian women like the rosy-fingered moon after sunset, surpassing all stars; and its light spreads out over the salty sea and the flowery fields alike. The dew is shed in beauty, and roses bloom and tender chervil and flowery melilot. Often as she goes to and fro, when remembering gentle Atthis doubtless her tender heart is consumed by strong desire" ("pol]laki tuide [n]oon echoisa / oosp … ooomen, … ch… — / se theai s' ikelan ari- / gnootai, sai de malist' echaire molpai. / nun de Ludaisin emprepetai gunai- / kessin oos pot' aelioo / duntos a brododaktulos selanna / panta perrechois' astra· faos d' epi- / schei thalassan ep' almuran / isoos kai poluanthemois arourais- / a d' eersa kala kechutai, tetha- / laisi de broda kapal' an- / thruska kai melilootos anthemoodes· / polla de zaphoitais', aganas epi-/ mnastheis' Atthidos imerooi / leptan poi frena / k[a]r[teroo<i>] boretai") (Campbell, *Greek Lyric I* 120-23).

In this poem, the lyrical I addresses a girl called Atthis about a woman who has moved away from their female circle to Lydia, but who deeply misses her. A simile in which the beauty of the Lydian woman is compared with the brightness of the moon turns into a description of fields covered with dew and rich in flowers. The references to dew and flowers make clear that the landscape is constructed as erotic. In Sappho's poetry, flowers are associated with female desire; this especially pertains to roses, because these are connected with the goddess of love, Aphrodite (see Fragments 78, 94, 98 of Sappho; McEvilley 265-69; Snyder 51). The sweet, seductive smell of the melilot, a subspecies of the lotus, might underscore the erotic overtones of the latter flower in other ancient Greek poetry. These are suggested by a scene in Homer's Iliad (Book 14, line 348) in which lotus and other flowers spring up as a result of the erotic encounter between the god Zeus and the goddess Hera. The erotic connotations of the chervil are clear from its adjective "tender," which refers to (body parts of) women in an erotic atmosphere elsewhere in Sappho's poetry (see Fragments 82, 94, 126; Hutchinson 181). In addition to flowers, dew, too, is erotically charged: in the scene from the Iliad mentioned above, dew appears as a result of the erotic activities of Zeus and Hera, and in some (badly preserved) fragments of Sappho (23, 71, 73), dew is mentioned in connection with love and female beauty (Boedeker 54-60).

The erotic symbolism of the flowers and the dew reveals that the landscape is constructed as a place suggestive of the fulfilling of erotic desire. The intriguing question is: whose desire does it reflect? First and foremost, it seems to be that of the Lydian woman for the girl Atthis, as the former's heart is said to be consumed by strong desire in the stanza that follows the description of the fields. However, it could also be that of Atthis for the Lydian woman: since "Sappho" is the lyrical I who addresses the girl and describes the woman in erotic terms, she might project her erotic desire for the woman onto the addressee. In any case, a sense of pain is caused by their separation, which makes it impossible to fulfil the desire.

Another example of the erotic conception of fields in archaic Greek lyric is a fragmentary poem by Anacreon (Fragment 346.1), a poet of the fifth century BC, famous for his work about women, wine, and song: "nor … but you have a timid heart as well, lovely-faced girl. And (your mother) thinks that she tends you (at home), keeping a firm hold on you. But you … the fields of hyacinth, where the Cyprian goddess tethered mares with yoke straps. And you darted down in the midst (of the throng?), so that many citizens find their hearts excited by passion; Herotime, public highway, public highway" ("oude...[.]s.f..a..[...]..[/ foberas d'echeis pros allooi / frenas, oo kallipro[s]oope paid[oon. / kai se dokei men e[n do]moisi[n / pukinoos echousea [meter / atitallein. s[.].[…]…[/ tas uakin [thinasar]ouras / i]na Kupris ek lepadnoon / …]´[.]a[s k]atedesn ippous. / …]d'en mesooi kate<i>ksas / .....]ooi di' assa polloi / pol]ihteoon frenas eptoeatai. / leoof]ore leoofor' Ero[t]ime") (Campbell, *Greek Lyric II* 40-41). In this poem, the male lyrical I addresses a girl called Herotime. In line 6b, the scene shifts from the indoor space of the house, in which the girl's mother believes that she keeps a firm hold on her, to the outdoor space of the "fields of hyacinths." The fields are constructed as an erotic space through the mention of the hyacinth flowers, as these are associated with Aphrodite in early Greek poetry, probably because of their seductive smell: in Cypria Fragment 4, Aphrodite is clothed in perfumed garments of flowers, including hyacinths; in Alcaeus Fragment 196b Aphrodite is presented with youths garlanded with hyacinth; in Sappho Fragment 194, girls are led into the bridal room together with Aphrodite, whose hair is bound with hyacinth. In Anacreon's fragment, too, hyacinths are associated with Aphrodite, who "tethered mares with yoke straps" in the fields of hyacinth. The image of mares yoked by Aphrodite seems to be an erotic metaphor for girls' loss of virginity, as is clear from the parallel image of Aphrodite yoking a girl who was previously an "unyoked filly" in Euripides's *Hippolytus* 546-54 (see also Calame 165). The connection between the fields of hyacinth and Herotime seems to render the metaphor of the yoking of the mares as the imagination of the girl's own desire for the loss of virginity; this would be further underscored if the verb lost in line 6b expressed her longing for the fields, as Bernsdorff proposes in his commentary.

Turning from fields to gardens, I will now discuss a poem by Ibycus (Fragment 286), a poet of the sixth century BC who is known for his erotic poetry. The poem begins with a description of a garden of girls: "In spring bloom Cydonian quince trees, watered from flowing rivers, where is an untouched garden of girls, and vine flowers growing under the shady vine shoots. But for me love is quiet at no season: like the Thracian North Wind blazing with lightning and rushing from the Cyprian goddess with parching madness, dark and unabashed, it [love] powerfully crushes my heart from the roots" ("eri men ai te Kudooniai / melides ardomenai roan / ek potamoon, ina parthenoon / kepos akeratos, ai t'oinanthides / auksomenai skieroisin uf' ernesin / oinareois thalethoisin. emoi d'eros / oudemian katakoitos ooran· / all' ath' upo steropas flegoon / Threikios Boreas ais- / soon para Kupridos azaleais mani- / aisin eremnos athambes / egkrateoos pedothen lafussei / emeteras frenas") (Campbell, *Greek Lyric III* 254-55). The first half of the poem describes a spring garden with watered quince trees and shady vines. The garden is undefiled rather than cultivated, as one would expect. The connection between the undefiled garden and the young virgins who are sexually untouched reveals that the former symbolizes the youthful virginity of the latter, as the garden is conceived of as a place where love has not yet been made. At the same time, the incipient sexuality of the girls is symbolized by the Cydonian quince trees in the garden and the spring season. Cydonian quinces, fruits sacred to Aphrodite, were offered to brides on their wedding night to awaken sexual desire in them for their husbands (see Stesichorus Fragment 187, and a prescription by Solon mentioned in Plutarch's Solon 20.3; see also Brazda and Faraone 69-78). The reference to blooming Cydonian quince trees implies that the girls will be sexually active in the near future. This is further illustrated by the spring, as this season is associated with the awakening of love in other ancient Greek poetry. In Alcaeus, for example, Aphrodite appears "when the gates of spring are opened" (Fragment 296b) and in Theognis "Love rises in season, when the burgeoning earth blooms with spring flowers" (1275-76).

The incipient sexuality of the young virgins in the first half of the poem underscores the contrast with the permanent erotic passion of the mature lyrical I in the second half of the poem, as conveyed by the statement that love is never calm for him as well as by the image of love rushing from Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and burning his heart from the roots (see also Davies 400-01).

The next two examples I discuss are part of the "meadow of love" motif in ancient Greek poetry, which is associated with virginal innocence and abduction: the flowery meadow is presented as a place where a young and innocent girl finds herself, sometimes picking flowers, before being abducted by a man; the most famous example is the abduction of Persephone by Hades, as told in the *Hymn to Demeter* (on this *topos*, see also Calame 165-174; Bremer and Motte 38-48, 208-13). A first instance of this motif in archaic Greek lyric is found in a poem by Anacreon (Fragment 417), which uses the extended metaphor of a rider and a filly for a man addressing a girl (see Hutchinson): "Thracian filly, why, looking at me from the corner of your eyes, do you flee pitilessly from me and suppose that I have no skill? Let me tell you, I could well put the bit on you, and with the reins in my hand turn you around the race-posts. Instead you graze in meadows and play and leap lightly, since you have no skilful rider, experienced in horses" ("poole Threikie, ti de me / lokson ommasi blepousa / neleoos pheugeis, dokeis de / m' ouden eidenai sophon; / isthi toi, kaloos men an toi / ton chalinon embaloimi, / enias d' echoon strephoimi / s' amphi termata dromou. / nun de leimoonas te boskeai / koufa te skirtoosa paizeis, / deksion gar ippopeiren / ouk echeis epembaten") (Campbell, *Greek Lyric II* 94-97). Lines 9-10 present the image of a filly playing and leaping lightly in meadows, which conveys the girl's youthful playfulness and innocence. That the filly is alone in the meadows without being accompanied by a "skilful rider, experienced in horses" (lines 11-12) reveals that the man who presents himself as sexually competent does not have sexual contact with the girl. He only tries to seduce her by expressing his wish to put the bit on the filly and race with her, or indeed, to sexually engage with the girl (lines 5-8; see also the other poem of Anacreon above for the erotic metaphor of yoking mares). As such, the "meadow of love" in Anacreon's poem is associated with seduction rather than abduction. However, the man's wish for sexual activities expressed in lines 5-8 may also predict what he will undertake after speaking to the girl. In that case, the man would mock the girl's youthful innocence before sexually engaging with her after all. This interpretation contradicts the claim of Hutchinson (279) that the man mocks himself by representing himself as a "loser" who cannot erotically conquer even a young girl.

Another lyric poem which is part of the "meadow of love" tradition is a fragment by Archilochus (196a), a poet of the seventh century BC known for his invectives. In this poem, a man recounts a conversation in which he seduced a girl. After the conversation, the following activities take place (lines 42-53): "So much I said. And I took the girl and laid her down in blooming flowers. With a soft cloak I covered her, holding her neck with my arm … as she ceased just like a fawn … and with my hands I gently took hold of her breasts … she revealed her young flesh, the approach of her prime, and touching all over her lovely body I let go my … force, touching her blond hair" ("tos]aut ephoneoon· parthenon d' en anthe[sin / tel]ethaessi laboon / eklina. Malthakei d[e min / chlai]nei kalupsas, auchen' agkalhis echoo[n, / ...]mati pau[s]amenen / toos ooste nebr[/ maz]oon te cherson epioos ephepsamen / …]rephene neon / ebes epelusin chroa / apan t]e sooma kalon amphaphoomenos / …]on apheka menos / ksanthes epipsau[oon trichos") (Gerber 214-15). The emphasis on "blooming flowers" in lines 42-43 implies that, despite the lack of a direct reference to a meadow, these are meadow flowers — the *pars pro toto* that set the scene. These flowers construct an imaginary space with erotic associations connected to the "meadow of love" motif, as they set the scene for an erotic encounter between a girl and a man (see Bremer 272-73; Calame 166-167). As in Anacreon 417 discussed above, the "meadow of love" conjures up associations with seduction rather than abduction, as the man tries to seduce the girl in the meadow. For instance, in lines 13-16, he says that one of the "many delights the goddess offers young men, besides the sacred act" — sexual activities except full intercourse — will suffice; in lines 21-24a, he uses spatial metaphors to refer to female genitals to express his desire for sexual contact by asking the girl not to begrudge him to go "under the coping and the gates," for he will steer "towards grassy gardens." These attempts seem to have succeeded, as, in the end, sexual activities between the man and the girl take place in the meadow.

However, a sense of ambiguity remains concerning the type of sexual activities and the manner in which they take place in the meadow. The man suggests that the girl does not resist his sexual advances, that he is gentle to her, and that he is not violent, but the girl's perspective is not included. What is more, the man does not provide any details and clearly refers to only one sexual action,

ejaculation, thus leaving the end open. In this respect, the meadow scene dovetails with the sexual references in the man's speech of seduction: the alternatives to full intercourse proposed in lines 13-16 are not specified, and, in line with one of the functions of metaphors to express (sexual) experiences in a vague and ambiguous manner (see, for instance, Fainsilber-Ortony; Kövecses), the spatial metaphors in lines 21-24a do not make clear which female genitals — and thus, which sexual activities — are referred to.

In addition to the "meadow of love" poems, two other lyric poems are preserved in which the meadow is constructed as an erotic space. A first instance is a poem by Theognis, a poet from the fifth century BC who composed both aristocratic-political and homoerotic poems. The poem under consideration (lines 1249-52) offers a comparison between a boy and a horse: "Boy, you are just like a horse: after you had got your fill of barley, you came back to my stables, longing for your skilful rider, beautiful meadow, cool spring and shady groves" ("pai, su men autoos ippos· epei krithoon ekoresthes, / authis epi stathmous eluthes emeterous / eniochon te pothon agathon leimoona te kalon / krenen te psuchren alsea te skiera") (Gerber 364-365). The final lines of this short poem depict a *locus amoenus* (a pleasant place in nature) (see also Schönbeck; Hass). It consists of a beautiful meadow, presumably with plants and flowers that make it beautiful, but also with a cool spring and shady groves, both of which imply the presence of a burning sun. The poet uses the image of a horse with its rider, which is a metaphor for the homoerotic, pederastic love between a young boy (*eromenos*) and an older lover (*erastes*). The boy's promiscuity is conveyed by the image of the horse satiated with barley, which represents satisfaction from an encounter with another lover (see Vetta, *Theognis*). That the horse (*eromenos*) ultimately comes back because of his desire for the "skilful" rider (*erastes*) who offers a beautiful meadow, a cool spring, and shady groves, seems to indicate that the meadow scenery is conceived of as place suggestive of homoerotic encounters.

A final example of the erotic construction of the meadow is a hymn by Sappho in which the goddess Aphrodite is invoked to come to a sanctuary (Fragment 2): "Hither to me from Crete to this hallowed sanctuary, where is your graceful grove of apple trees, and altars smoking with incense. Therein cool water babbles through apple branches, and the whole place is put under shade by roses, and from the quivering leaves deep sleep streams down. Therein too a meadow, grazed by horses, blossoms with spring flowers, and the winds blow gently … There, Cypris, take … and pour gracefully into golden cups nectar that is mingled with festivities" (deuru m'ek Kretas ep[i tond]e nauon / agnon, opp[ai toi] charien men alsos / mali[an], boomoi de tethumiame- / noi [li]banootooi. / en d' udoor psuchron keladei di' usdoon / malinoon, brodoisi de pais o chooros / eskiast', aithussomenoon de phulloon / kooma katerrei. / en de leimoon ippobotos tethalen / erinoisin anthesin, ai d' aetai / mellicha pneoisin [/ [ ] / entha de su. … eloisa Kupri / chrusiasin en kulikessin abroos / ommemeichmenon thaliasi nectar / oinochoaison") (Campbell, *Greek Lyric I* 56-59). At the sanctuary, there is a meadow grazed by horses and blossoming with flowers, near a grove of apple trees, altars, and cool water. Some scholars have argued that the poem depicts an actual cult place of Aphrodite in Lesbos (see Ferrari 153-54; Lardinois 78). This cult place features a grove of apple trees: sanctuaries often contained groves of trees as these were considered sacred spaces in which the god or goddess would manifest himself/herself (see Birge). The reason for the specific mentioning of apple trees is that apples were sacred to Aphrodite. The cult place also contains altars: the smoke of the frankincense seems to refer to the kindling of fire on altars for ritual sacrifices. Furthermore, horses are grazing in the meadow as sanctuaries typically had grazing areas for animals. In Sappho 2, horses are referred to because these animals were sacred to Aphrodite. Finally, the reference to cool water links up with the fact that sanctuaries usually included streams, fountains, or springs, not only to supply water for the trees and the animals (in this case, the apple trees and the horses), but also to cleanse celebrants before they partake in the rituals (see Cole; for cultic connotations see Burkert 28, 86-88).

Other scholars, by contrast, think that the poem evokes an imaginary space, particularly because of the mysterious absence of human beings from the sanctuary, and because of the magical image of a trance-like sleep that streams down from the leaves (see, e.g., McEvilley 331-33; Williamson 141). Whether based on reality or imaginary, the scenery conjures up erotic associations. This is suggested by the flowers in the meadow (see Calame 167-68). In Sappho's poetry, flowers, especially roses that

are connected to Aphrodite, are associated with female desire (see my discussion of Sappho 96 above). Spring flowers, too, are related to love or Aphrodite in early Greek poetry. For instance, in Cypria Fragment 4, Aphrodite is clothed "in spring flowers" and in Theognis love is said to rise when the earth blooms "with spring flowers" (1275-76). The erotic associations suggest that the sanctuary with its meadow is presented as a symbolic space characteristic of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. This manner of presentation reinforces the purpose of the hymn, as it stimulates the goddess's visit to the sanctuary requested at the beginning and end of the fragment (see also Heirman, "Sappho"). My overview of the representation of fields, gardens, and meadows demonstrates that ancient Greek natural landscapes are constructed in an erotic manner in lyric poetry, as places suggestive of various forms of eroticism from incipient sexuality to homoeroticism (see also Heirman, *Space*).

I finally come to the question as to how we should interpret the erotic conception of these landscapes, or, in other words, which ideological narratives lie behind them. I take my cue from the performance context of ancient Greek lyric poetry. Unlike modern lyric poetry, which is read in silence, ancient Greek lyric poems were orally performed for various audiences and in different modes, from recitation to song with music and dance. The performance context of the poems by Sappho, Ibycus, and Theognis was most likely that of the symposium, or, in the case of Sappho, a female variant of this predominantly male institution (for Theognis, see Bowie; for Ibycus, see Stehle 250-51; for Sappho, see Stehle 262-328; Stigers; see also, in a general context, Gentili and Herington). The symposium constituted an intimate and convivial after-dinner drinking party, which involved discussions, performances of lyric poetry, verbal and physical games, and erotic activities among the symposiasts (see Murray; Vetta, *Poesia*). It may be considered an "other space," or a heterotopia as defined by Michel Foucault in his famous essay "Des espaces autres": it was a real space that was part of society, but also distinct from it, with its own norms of entertainment and its own rituals and drinking codes that were meant to reinforce the cohesion of the social group (see Pellizer). In particular, the symposium can be understood in the light of Foucault's definition of a heterotopia as a space in which "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (trans. Jay Miskowiec 24) ("tous les autres emplacements réels que l'on peut trouver à l'intérieur de la culture sont à la fois représentés, contestés et inverses"). To connect this definition with the symposium, we need to take into account that the symposium was an erotic space, where the symposiasts were involved in all sorts of erotic activities and where erotic games were played, such as the *kottabos*, which involved the flinging of wine lees at targets while calling the name of the beloved and receiving a kiss if met with success. If we combine this with the fact that the symposium constituted an "other space," we can say that the symposium was an institution which had its own erotic norms that revealed a high degree of sexual permissiveness. This might explain why, as Eva Stehle points out, lyric poetry performed in symposia often depicts erotic activities other than those related to marriage or the begetting of children, or, indeed, those beyond the communal interests of the city (250-57). The reason for this, she argues, is the anti-communal, ideological stance adopted in the symposium: while the communal interests of the city are marriage and procreation, the symposium creates a space where erotic activities which go against or beyond the demands of the city community are envisaged.

To link the heterotopic features of the symposium and its sexual permissiveness with the erotic conception of natural landscapes in lyric poetry performed in the symposium, I need to bring in Foucault's "third principle" that heterotopias are particularly able to create other spaces. Performed in the context of the symposium, with erotic norms beyond those of the city community, lyric poems construct a wide range of erotic activities that deviate from communal interests, including homosexual eroticism, and project these onto spaces outside the city, and, in particular, onto landscapes with fields, meadows, and gardens. This reveals that, behind the erotic construction of nature landscapes in ancient Greek lyric, a libertine erotic ideology of the sympotic group may be hidden.

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