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## THE MOTIF OF THE LAMP IN BOOK V OF THE *PALATINE ANTHOLOGY*

**ABSTRACT:** In the present paper I focus on the occurrences of the motif of the lamp (λύχνος) in the fifth book of the *Palatine Anthology*. It turns out on numerous occasions the lamp is not merely an element of night scenery but it also performs functions typical of people or gods. An analysis of twelve epigrams from Book V shall demonstrate the variety of contexts in which the lamp appears and give a few remarks about the language used in the poems in which this motif occurs.

**KEY WORDS:** Agathias Scholasticus, Asclepiades, erotic epigram, Greek epigram, lamp, Marcus Argentarius, Meleager, *Palatine Anthology*, Paulus Silentarius, Philodemus, Statilius Flaccus

The origins of the epigram, that is, verse inscription, in Greece date back at least to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and are related to poems written for special and solemn occasions, for example the death of someone or bestowing on someone a specially dedicated object. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC the range of topics covered by this literary genre was gradually becoming wider, as it began to include also personal experiences and emotions.<sup>1</sup> It was a particularly representative form for the Hellenistic period, while in the times of the Roman Empire it was still a genre which enjoyed popularity.

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<sup>1</sup> Tarán 1979: 1.

In a singularly concise form, embracing only a few verses, epigram authors were able to encompass a wide variety of thoughts, emotions and feelings, either their own or those of fictional characters. A great interest in poetry of such type contributed to the creation of anthologies.<sup>2</sup> The first poem collection known to us is Meleager's *Garland*<sup>3</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> century BC). The times of the Roman domination brought other anthologies: "Garland" by Philippus of Thessalonica (probably at the time of Nero),<sup>4</sup> and a collection of sympotic and satirical epigrams, by Diogenianus (during the reign of Hadrian). Years went by, but the fascination with these brief poems did not decline. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the *Palatine Anthology* is created, based on older epigram collections and divided into books according to the topics that the poems explore: sympotic, funerary, votive, inscriptional or erotic ones.

The fifth book of the *Palatine Anthology*, dedicated to erotic epigrams, includes 309 poems. The rich variety of topics and motifs which can be found in the poems is astounding. We will find there verses written from perspectives of both men and women; addressed to young boys as well as to hetairas; glorifying sweet love but also expressing pain and sorrow; describing love scenes in their entirety and contemplating small details.<sup>5</sup>

It turns out that sometimes it is an inconspicuous, typical element of the scenery that becomes crucial for the whole poem or adds a new, unusual meaning – and this is why it cannot be disregarded. The following paper will focus on all the twelve poems from Book V which include the motif of the lamp (λύχνος).

It is very common for the poets to present the lamp not just as a typical element of the setting. Instead, it becomes the main witness of erotic

<sup>2</sup> For general remarks regarding the creation of anthologies of epigrammatic poetry see Rodríguez Alonso 1999: 31–35.

<sup>3</sup> Cameron 1993: 19–33; Gutzwiller 1997: 169.

<sup>4</sup> Cameron 1968: 323–349; Cameron 1980: 43–62.

<sup>5</sup> The epigrams included in Book V of the *Palatine Anthology* are, to a great extent, variations on the same topic – composed by the same author or by different authors distant in time. This is why it is often difficult to identify which text served as a prototype for the later versions. Among the imagery typical of epigrams we will find, for example: motifs (e.g. *carpe diem*, evanescence of youth), symbols (arrows, fire, apples), similes (e.g. the lover compared to a deity), or just common love scenes (oaths, kisses, betrayals).

encounters, confidant of a lover who complains about his unfaithful paramour or even it seems to be as important as a god in the presence of whom love oaths can be sworn. The motif will be discussed based on particular poems of various authors: Philodemus, Statilius Flaccus, Marcus Argentarius, Agathias Scholasticus, Paulus Silentarius, Asclepiades and Meleager.

Let us first consider the poem of Philodemus (*AP* V 4). The person speaking tells his servant to make the lamp, literally, drunk with oil (ἐλαιηρῆς ἐκμεθύσασα δρόσου)<sup>6</sup> and then just go away and shut the door. The lamp (λύχνος) is here depicted as “the silent confidant of things we may not speak of” (σιγῶν συνίστωρ τῶν ἀλαλήτων), as opposed to the servant who could have been a living witness of the encounter with the lover.

Most probably, it is silence that makes it possible for the lamp to be present during the encounter. The poet expresses his opinion explicitly: “for Love alone loves no living witness” (μαρτυρίην γὰρ Ἔρως μόνος οὐκ ἐφίλησεν ἔμπνουν). When the servant leaves, the person speaking addresses his beloved Xantho and then to the bed: now it is time to learn Aphrodite’s secrets.

The lamp as a witness of love appears also in the epigram of Statilius Flaccus (*AP* V 5). It is depicted as if it was a person and it speaks for itself.<sup>7</sup> It mentions being a gift from Flaccus for Nape. The unfaithful girl is now with another lover and the lamp watches the scene; it emphasizes its own discontent and disappointment with Nape’s betrayal, claims to be fading away and withering (μαραίνομαι) because of the girl’s unfaithfulness. In the last verses it sympathizes with Flaccus’s pain and tells him: “But thou, Flaccus, liest awake, tormented by cruel care” (χαλεπαί [...] μέριμναι), adding later: “both of us are burning away (καίόμεθα) from each other”. In an interesting way the poet uses here the verb καίομαι

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are based on: *The Greek Anthology I (books I–VI)*, 1916, transl. W. R. Paton, London.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noticing that the beginning of this poem is typical of the votive epigram, as it includes elements such as description of the object and its function, as well as the names of the one who gives and the one who receives the gift (cf. e.g. *AP* VI 6, VI 7, VI 49). There is also an interesting syntactic parallelism: “με [...] ἔδωκε” (in the poem under discussion) and “με [...] ἀνέθηκε” (in the above-mentioned epigrams from Book VI).

(“to burn”), literally with reference to the lamp, and metaphorically with reference to Flaccus, who loves with great passion and yet goes through pain and sorrow.

Also Marcus Argentarius in his short poem (*AP* V 128) depicts the lamp as an observer of the lovers’ encounter. The poet begins with a description of a love scene: “Breast to breast supporting my bosom on hers, and pressing her sweet lips to mine I clasped Antigone”. Then, we can notice the characteristic motif of being silent about the rest – at a certain point it is no longer decent to describe love (τὰ λοιπὰ σιγῶ)<sup>8</sup> – and finally, the speaker states that it was only the lamp that was summoned as a witness of the encounter (μάρτυς λύχνος ἐπεγράφετο).<sup>9</sup>

Agathias Scholasticus, a poet of the Byzantine period (6<sup>th</sup> century), created an epigram in which the speaker is a woman (*AP* V 263). She entrusts her worries to the lamp, asks it not to fade away, so that her beloved can always find the way to her. The girl mentions here the mythological pair of lovers, Hero and Leander.<sup>10</sup> According to the myth,<sup>11</sup> every night Leander would swim across the Hellespont to Hero, guided by the light of the lamp which the girl put in the window of her tower.

One night, however, during inclement weather, strong winds blew the light away and the young man drowned. When Hero discovered his dead body, she committed suicide in desperation. The woman in the epigram mentions only that the mythical pair was united by Aphrodite, and she suddenly becomes silent (θυμέ, τὸ λοιπὸν ἔα). She does not want her love to have the same tragic end as the story of Hero and Leander did. Then, she speaks to the lamp: “Thou art Hephaestus’s, and I believe that, by vexing Cypris, thou fawnest on her suffering lord”. The first part of that sentence reminds us of Hephaestus’s work in which he used fire and light – and this is why he can be regarded as a divine protector of lamps. The “lord’s suffering” alludes probably to Aphrodite’s marital

<sup>8</sup> Another interesting motif occurring in erotic epigrams. See for example *AP* V 252: “τᾶλλα δὲ σιγῇ / κρυπτέον· ἔχθαίρω τὴν ἀθυροστομίην”; *AP* V 219: “φώρια δ’ ἀμφοδίῳ λέκτρα μελιχρότερα”.

<sup>9</sup> Phraseology typical of forensic speeches has been used here (ἐπιγράφεσθαι μάρτυρας – to be called as a witness in court). See for example Dem. 54, 31: “ἐπιγράφεται μάρτυρας ἀνθρώπους οὓς οὐδ’ ὑμᾶς ἀγνοήσιν οἶομαι”.

<sup>10</sup> The story of Hero and Leander is also mentioned in *AP* IX 215.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. for example Ovid. *Her.* 18, 19.

unfaithfulness, which makes her husband suffer. Hephaestus's sadness is calmed down, at least temporarily, by the fading lamp which caused Leander's death and, eventually, also Hero's tragedy. The situation is a source of pain also for Aphrodite. It can be noticed that in this epigram the lamp is initially an element of the poem setting (a real one), and then it gains a wider mythological context. It does not lose, though, its function as the poem's addressee.

The speaker of Paulus Silentiarius's poem (*AP* V 279) is waiting in vain for his beloved's arrival. In a monologue he states first that the third lamp wick is drooping and its light is wavering (ὁ δὲ τρίτος ἄρχεται ἤδη / λύχνος ὑποκλάζειν ἤκα μαραινόμενος). The wait for the girl causes excruciating pain. What is most sorrowful about this situation is the certainty that even if the lamp eventually fades away, the lover's vexation will not pass. "Would that the flame in my heart would sink with the lamp and did not this long while burn me with sleepless desire," the man complains. The poem ends with a statement full of discouragement: "Ah! How often she swore to Cytherea to come in the evening, but she scruples not to offend men and gods alike". The mood of the poem evolves from a mere statement that Cleophantis is late, to an expression of an ardent, largely unfulfillable, desire that the fading of the wick would put an end to the torments of love. Finally, the last distich comes back to the girl for whom oaths, even those taken in the presence of the gods, do not have any meaning.

An equally unfulfilled, unrequited love was depicted in Asclepiades's epigrams. In both poems the speaker waits for a girl: in V 7 it is Heraclea, and in V 150, Nico. In the first epigram the poet entrusts his sorrows to the lamp on which the beloved woman had three times<sup>12</sup> sworn that she would come to visit his lover. This time, though, she is not coming. In this situation the man begs: "Lamp, if thou art a god, take vengeance on the deceitful girl. When she has a friend at home and is sporting with him, go out, and give them no more light". His demand is resolute. The lamp, most probably the only witness of the couple's encounters, is treated like a deity who can punish for unfaithfulness.

The other Asclepiades's poem shows a somewhat different situation. The lover, waiting for Nico, also recollects the girl's promises. This

<sup>12</sup> The same motif can be found also in *AP* V 245: "τρισὶν ὥμοσα πέτραις".

time, however, she swore not on the lamp but on the goddess Demeter, which adds to her words even more seriousness. Yet Nico does not arrive; the speaker observes that the first watch of night is past, which gives him a reason to suppose that his lover has broken her promise. Distraught, he finally asks his servants to put the light out (τὸν λύχνον, παῖδες, ἀποσβέσατε). This laconic statement, preceded by a rhetorical question (“Did she mean then to forswear herself?”), intensifies the feeling of disappointment and sadness caused by unrequited love. As long as the speaker believes that Nico will arrive, the lamp is burning. But when the wait becomes too long and the girl is not coming, the dream about the encounter has to fade away, just like the wick.

Among the works of Meleager, five erotic poems include the motif of the lamp. Four of them associate with it the topic of disappointed love. In the first epigram (*AP* V 8), the lamp – together with the night – is chosen as a witness of love oaths. The lovers swore to each other love and faithfulness (στέρξειν [...] οὐ ποτε λείψειν [...] ὠμόσαμεν). But now one of them regards these promises as meaningless and says that they were written in water.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the speaker says: “thou, o lamp, seest him in the bosom of others”. We can assume that the lamp may have been an old gift from the speaker for the unfaithful man, who is now gone and has taken the lamp.

The poem V 165 is a prayer to the Night which brings to mind Sappho’s famous hymn to Aphrodite, not only when it comes to the language.<sup>14</sup> The lover tells the goddess, called here the “Mother of all the gods” (παμμήτειρα θεῶν), about his personal situation, and then begs for help. He suspects his beloved Heliodora of unfaithfulness. If it is so for real – says the man – then let the lamp fade away and the other lover lie like “a second Endymion”. The speaker is very decisive: the lamp, symbol of the ardor of love, faithfulness and night-time encounters, has to “close its eyes”. Moreover, the new lover of Heliodora has to fall into deep sleep. It may be as well an everlasting sleep from which the girl will try in vain to wake him up.

<sup>13</sup> A motif known in poetry, cf. Catul. 70.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. “λίτομαί σε, φίλη Νύξ”, “ναί λίτομαι, ([...]) πότνια Νύξ” in Meleager’s epigram and “λίσσομαί σε ([...]) πότνια” in Sappho’s poem. Also in terms of content we can notice similarities: both poets present their love wishes to the deity, add laudatory epithets to the speech and underline the fact that their relationship is close and friendly.

The epigram V 166 seems to be a continuation to the previous one.<sup>15</sup> It also begins with an apostrophe to the Night, yet this time the prayer is rich in other elements: the poet evokes also his longing for Heliodora (ὦ φιλάγρυπνος ἔμοι πόθος Ἡλιοδώρας), past visions of the dawn, full of tears and joy (σκολιῶν ὄρθρων κνίσματα δακρυχαρῇ).<sup>16</sup> Then, he recalls his love and wonders what has been left of it. Next, his thoughts are focused on Heliodora. One thing is certain – the man and his beloved are far away from each other. However, we do not know whether the couple have split or it is just a temporary separation. The speaker asks himself: “Has she no bed-fellow but her tears and does she clasp to her bosom and kiss the cheating dream of me? Or is there another new love, new dalliance?”. There is a ray of hope, and yet a slight anxiety hidden in these words. The epigram ends with the statement: “Mayst thou never look on this, dear lamp; but guard her well whom I committed to thy care”. The lamp must have been, then, a lover’s gift for the girl. The man entrusts to this object an important role of the guardian of Heliodora’s faithfulness, and at the same time he wishes that his worries turn out to be false and that the lamp will not have to “look” at his lover’s encounters with other men.

In the poem V 191 the lamp is treated rather as an element of the setting and it does not play any important role. The epigram begins with apostrophes to the stars, Selene, Night and to ὀργάνιον, a small musical instrument which accompanies the speaker during feasts (κώμων σύμπλανον). The man wonders if he will find his beloved “the wanton one, yet lying awake” (φιλάσωτον ἔτ’ ἐν κοίταισιν ἄγρυπνον) or “crying much to her lamp” (λύχνῳ πόλλ’ ἀποκλαομένην). He also suspects that the woman may have another lover (ἢ τιν’ ἔχει σύγκοιτον;). In desperation, he decides to hang at her door in his own name, which he reveals

<sup>15</sup> On parallelisms in composition of poems V 165 and V 166 see Ypsilanti 2005: 88.

<sup>16</sup> The original text is not very clear there; on various interpretations of the problematic phrases see Daly 1943: 200–202.

to be Meleager, suppliant garlands,<sup>17</sup> which he offers to Aphrodite,<sup>18</sup> as one initiated in her revels (μύστης κώμων). These garlands are described here as “spoils of love” (στοργῆς σκῦλα).<sup>19</sup>

The epigram V 197 describes a peculiar “transaction” between the speaker and Eros. In general terms, the poem’s structure is based on enumerating things dear to the person speaking: “Timo’s fair-curling love-loving ringlets” (εὐπλόκαμον Τιμοῦς κίκιννον), “Demo’s fragrant skin that cheateth sleep” (μυρόπνουν Δημοῦς χρῶτα τὸν ὑπναπάτην), “the dear dalliance of Ilias” (Ἰλιάδος φίλα παίγνια), finally “my wakeful lamp, that looked often on the mysteries of my love-revels” (φιλάγρυπνον λύχνον, ἐμῶν κώμων πολλ’ ἐπιδόντα τέλη). In the end the speaker confesses that he has only a little breath left on the lips (βαιὸν ἔχω τό γε λειφθέν, Ἔρωσ, ἐπὶ χεῖλεσι πνεῦμα). This fragment leaves more than just one possible interpretation; the feeble breath can surely be associated with the last breath of a man, but we can also assume that the lover assures Eros of being ready to give up on everything, even the last breath, just to have the object of desire. Such interpretation may be indicated by the ending of the poem: “if thou wouldst have this too, speak but the word and I will spit it forth” (εἰ δ’ ἐθέλεις καὶ τοῦτ’, εἰπέ, καὶ ἐκπτύσσομαι). Similarly

<sup>17</sup> The motif of garlands (or adorning oneself with flowers) in erotic context appears in epithalamia, cf. for instance Theoc. *Id.* XVIII, 2–3: “παρθενικαὶ θάλλοντα κόμαις ὑάκινθον ἔχουσαι / πρόσθε νεογράφω θαλάμῳ χορὸν ἐστάσαντο”; Catul. 61: “cinge tempora floribus / suave olentis amaraci”; as well as in Roman elegy, cf. Tib. I, 2, 13–14: “Te meminisse decet, quae plurima voce peregi / Supplice, cum posti florida sarta darem”.

<sup>18</sup> Offerings made to Aphrodite included – besides animals – incense and flower garlands; cf. for example Verg. *Aen.* I 415–417: “Ipsa Paphum sublimis abit, sedesque revisit / laeta suas, ubi templum illi, centumque Sabaeo / ture calent arae, sertisque recentibus halant”.

<sup>19</sup> It is worth quoting here the homoerotic epigram of Meleager, included in Book XII of the *Palatine Anthology* (AP XII 23), in which the poet uses the same motifs – door, spoil and inscription on the garland:

Ἦγρεῦθην ὁ πρόσθεν ἐγὼ ποτε τοῖς δυσέρωσι  
κώμοις ἠιθέων πολλάκις ἐγγελάσας:  
καὶ μ’ ἐπὶ σοῖς ὁ πτανὸς Ἔρωσ προθύροισι, Μυῖσκε,  
στῆσεν ἐπιγράψας ‘σκῦλ’ ἀπὸ Σωφροσύνης.’

On similarities between the epigrams V 191 and XII 23 see Gutzwiller 1997: 191–193.



to the epigram V 191, the lamp is not the most important element of this poem; instead, it is merely one of the objects enumerated by the speaker.

The motif of the lamp in erotic epigrams from Book V of the *Palatine Anthology* is used in numerous ways. Very often the lamp is a participant in the love stories of the poems' protagonists and some human features are attributed to it: it becomes confidant or witness (συνίστωρ, μάρτυς) of lovers' encounters, and because of its being silent, it is a perfect observer of the meetings, as it keeps in secret all things that should not be spoken aloud. Particularly interesting is the epigram in which the lamp speaks by itself, grieving at the girl's betrayal, and it also speaks to the lover, showing compassion in his pain. What is more, in some poems the lamp possesses features which can be attributed both to men and gods – on the one hand, it is a repository of the lovers' complaints, but on the other, it is asked to punish unfaithful women or to lead securely the lover to his expectant paramour. There are also cases when the lamp, together with a deity, is called as a witness of a significant love oath. While we may come across epigrams in which the lamp is only a background for broader reflections or an element of night scenery, or it is mentioned as a gift for the beloved person, its role should not be undervalued, given that the poet decided to include it in such a concise epigrammatic form for a reason.

Also when it comes to the language the motif of the lamp seems to be really intriguing, when we take into consideration the phraseology in which it is used. Functions normally performed only by people, such as a confidant (συνίστωρ; ~ των ἀλαλήτων, ~ νυχίων πίστων ἐρώτων, ~ ὄρκοις), a witness (μάρτυς; ~ ἐπεγράφετο, κοινήν δ' εἶχετε μαρτυρίην), or a guardian (φύλαξ; εἷς [...] φύλαξ), are here bestowed on a nonhuman being. This is also true when it comes to the verbs that take the lamp as their subject: the lamp is said to observe (ὄρᾳς, μήποτε ταῦτ' ἐσίδης, ἐπιδόντα τέλη), weaken (μαραίνομαι, ἄρχεται ὑποκλάζειν) or sleep (κοιμάσθω). Moreover, in both above-mentioned Asclepiades's epigrams we can notice the verb ἀποσβέννυμι 'to put out' (ἀποσβησθεῖς, τὸν λύχνον ἀποσβέσατε). In the poem V 5, in which the lamp speaks in the first person, we may observe the verb καίομαι, 'to burn' (καιόμεθα) used with reference both to the object and the lover. As far as the epithets are concerned, in all the epigrams we can find only two which describe the lamp: silver (ἀργύρεος) and wakeful (φιλάγρυπνος).

It is not a simple task to determine the interdependences between the authors and to state if in these cases we can ascertain a sort of imitation of the predecessors, mainly because of the lack of certainty concerning the dates of births and deaths of particular poets. When we look at all the twelve epigrams it can be observed that in general each poet was willing to equip the lamp with human features, while some of them would put it in the center of the poem, which is especially visible in the often used form of the vocative: *λόχνε*.

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