Korinna's "Shuttle Maidens" and "Daughters of Minyas": protreptic myths for good Boeotian girls

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The Boeotian poet Korinna of Tanagra is known to have bested Pindar five times; she may have flourished in the early fifth century. Many of her extant poems concern local, Boeotian mythology, especially the heroes Minyas and Orion, and their children.

Two of Korinna's poems, now surviving in prose epitomes, were given in the Loeb edition Lyra Graeca by J.M. Edmonds (New York 1927) 22-7, but were not included in D.L. Page's Lyrica Graeca Selecta (Oxford 1968); perhaps because of this omission they have not made it into the standard translations of Greek women writers (J.M. Snyder, The Woman and the Lyre, Carbondale 1989; D. Rayor, Sappho's Lyre, Berkeley 1991; J. Balmer, Classical Women Poets, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1996).

Although these two works are now mostly lost to us as poems (some of the prose contains glyconics, Korinna's meter of choice), they should nonetheless be considered when we discuss Greek women writers, and especially when we attempt to understand the role of these writings in women's society. Applying feminist and queer theories (cf. Dowden, Death and the Maiden, and Detienne, Revista di Occidente 102, 1989, 29-41), this paper examines the protreptic elements in these stories and their intended results.

The first poem, "Minouaiê" or "The Daughters of Minyas," tells of the three grown-up daughters of king Minyas of Orchomenos, Leukippê, Arsippê, and Alkathoê. These three love weaving so much that they scorn their women neighbors "for leaving the city to go and be Bacchants in the mountains." Dionysos is affronted and appears to the maidens as a bull, a lion, and a leopard (analogues of male sexuality), while their loom streams nectar and milk (analogues of their sexuality and motherhood). The women are frightened and draw lots as to who would make the sacrifice; it falls to Leukippê, and with the help of her sisters, they tear her own son Hippasos to pieces, and go up into the hills to be Bacchants. Eventually, Hermes turns them into a bat, a white owl, and an eagle owl, "and all three fled the light of the sun" (cf. Praxilla 1, to Adonis).

The second poem, "Koronaiê" or "The Shuttle Maidens," tells of Orion's two daughters Metiochê and Menippê, who are raised by their mother (unnamed) after Orion's apotheosis by Artemis. An oracle demands that "parthenoi two" dedicate themselves to "deities two" to avert a plague. As soon as the girls hear the oracle, they dedicate themselves to Persephone and Hades and slit their throats with their shuttle, "accepting death for their
neighbors' sake.” In reward, the two deities raise their ashes to the sky as two bright comets, and the people of Boeotia, giving thanks for their deliverance, build a shrine to their honor at Orchomenos.

Both stories have female homosocial settings with slight differences. In the Minouaiê the subjects are adult; their actions, according to queer theory, amount, however, to a “betrayal” of their social subset, just as their belated attempt to (re-) enter it brands them as “interlopers” who must be banished from the “light of the sun.” The adult sisters present anti-models of behavior that are stark, and their fate is miraculous, both exaggerations appropriate to an audience of prepubescent girls beginning their socialization as women.

In the Koronaiê, the female homosocial world is again assumed, but within the larger context of the entire community which expects civic duty of its citizens. Early feminist theory would postulate a “male” authorial voice (or gaze) for the poem, advocating female participation in the maintenance of patriarchy (cf. Ortner) even though that voice is actually female in the poem, as is its insistent female setting (the “natural” crisis of the plague, the death at the loom, the apotheosis as comets [not fixed stars], and the establishment of a female shrine [perhaps off limits to males; contrast Myrtis 1 concerning a male shrine in Korinna’s Tanagra that is “anembaton” to females]).

The audience for the Koronaiê should be slightly older than that postulated for the Minouaiê. The duty expected of them is total, requiring greater fidelity than just to loom and female society. As with ephesbes, parthenoi must be ready to consecrate their life for their city (see Anyte, AnthPal 7.492; and Connelly, AJA 100, 1996, 53-80, esp. 61-4). To avert the plague, the girls must be clever and devine the riddle of the “deities two,” not the common deities of plague, Apollo and Artemis, but Persephone and Hades, who serve as the positive models for what would have been the upcoming marriages of these young women. Their civic success is measured by the honor their community pays them by building them a shrine, akin to the “demosion sema” for fallen youths.

Korinna’s two poems, ”The Daughters of Minyas” and “The Shuttle Maidens,” give us precise instructions for inculcating proper gender roles in young women. The two stories, however, address two most important and sequential stages in the socialization process: in the Minouaiê, the audience is prepubescent girl, while in the Koronaiê, the audience is pubescent woman. The stories’ authorial voices differ appropriately for their different audiences; both are female, but that of the Minouaiê is motherly, raising specters against bad behavior, while that of the Koronaiê is official, commending good behavior with state honors. The gendered voices of these two myths, while ostensibly female, betray, however, the overriding concerns of a patriarchal system.
28. Κορωναίη (cf. Ovid, Metamorphoses 13. 692)
Antoninus Liberalis, Metamorphoses 25 (2nd c. CE): "Μητιόχη καὶ Μενίππη" ἵστορεῖ Νίκανδρος "Ετεροιουμένων" δ’ καὶ Κόριννα "Γεροίων" α’.

cf. Euphronios vase (Birt, Die Buchrolle in der Kunst, 148 [Anschutz]) with rolled-up book with "title written across the back ... Χιρώνεια, an epic poem presumably on Chiron the centaur" (Edmonds, J.M. 1922. “Sappho’s Book as Depicted on an Attic Vase,” CQ 16:4-5)

' Ωρίωνος τοῦ 'Υρίεως ἐν Βοιωτίᾳ θυγατέρες ἐγένοντο Μητιόχη καὶ Μενίππη· αὐταί, ὡς 'Ωρίωνα ἡφαίνειν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων "Ἀρτεμίς, ἔτρεφοντο παρὰ τῇ μητρί. καὶ Ἀθηνᾶ μὲν ἐδιδακέν ἀυτὰς ἱστοὺς ἐξυφαίνειν, Ἀφροδίτη δὲ αὐταῖς ἐδωκε κάλλος. ἔπει δὲ 'Αονίαν¹ ὅλην ἐλαβε λοιμός καὶ πολλοί ἀπέθηκαν, θεωροῦ ἀπέστειλαν παρὰ τὸν 'Απόλλωνα τὸν Γορτύνιον.² καὶ αὐτοῖς ἐπεν ὁ θεός ἰλάσσονθαι δύο τοὺς ἐρινίους³ θεούς· ἐφ' ἐκ ταπανάσειν αὐτοὺς τὴν μηνίν, εἰ δύο δυσὶν ἐκούσαν παρθένωι θύματα γένοιτο.⁴ πρὸς δὲ δὴ τὸ μαντεῖον οὐδεμία τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει παρθένων ὑπήκουσαν, ἀχρι⁵ γυνὴ θῆσαν⁶ τὸν χρησμὸν ἔξηγεικ πρὸς τὰς θυγατέρας τοῦ 'Ωρίωνος· αὐτὰς ἐπιθύμουν παρ’ τὸν ἱστόν ἔχουσαι, τὸν ὑπὲρ ἀστῶν βάναυν ἐδέξαντο πρὶν ἐν τῇ ἐπίδημῳ ἐπιπεσοῦσαν αὐτὰς ἀφανίσαι νόσου. Τρὶς δὲ βοησάμεναι χθονίους δαιμόνος, ὅτι αὐτοῖς ἐκούσας θύματα γίνονται, ἐπάταξαν⁷ εὐαὐτὰς τῇ κρικῇ²⁸ παρὰ τὴν κλείδα⁹ καὶ ἀνέρρησαν¹⁰ τὴν σφαγήν. καὶ αὐται μὲν ἀμφότεραι κατέπεσον ἐς τὴν γῆν, Φερσεφόνη δὲ καὶ "Αἴδης οἰκτίραντες τὰ μὲν σῶμα τῶν παρθένων ἡφαίνασαν, ἄντι δὲ ἐκείνων ἀστέρας ἀνήγεγκαν ἐκ τῆς γῆς· οἱ δὲ φανέντες ἀνηγεγκασαν εἰς οὐρανόν, καὶ αὐτοὺς ἀνόμοισαν ἀνθρώπων κομῆς.¹² ἱδρύσαντο δὲ πάντες "Ἀνες ἐν 'Ορχομενοῦ τῆς Βοιωτίας ἱερὸν ἐπισήμιον τῶν παρθένων τοῦτων, καὶ αὐταῖς καθ’

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¹Boiotia.
²City in central Crete.
³of aid. ἐριούνημι, give aid. ἐριοῦν, wool.
⁴Edmonds: "the oracle apparently ran ἐλάσσονθαι θεῷ ἐριούνθη τὰ καὶ γενώντα ὡμύμιν ὢμυμι δούσι κόραι δύο θεοῖς εκοίσασι."
⁵until.
⁶苷η ἀνθίσα = old crone.
⁷strike (from πατάσσω)
⁸the rod for damping down the weft
⁹key, clasp, carotid artery
¹⁰tear open, fulfill (from ἀναρρήγγυμι)
¹¹aor. pass. of φέρω.
¹²Ovid has 2 young men, "Coroni," emerge from their ashes.
Might this poem have been on the occasion of an annual meteor shower?

29-30. Μινουαίη
Antoninus Liberalis, Metamorphoses 10: "Μινυάδες" ἵστορεῖ Νικάνδρος
"Ἐτεροιουμένων" δ’ καὶ Κόριννα.

Μινύου τοῦ Ὄρχομενοῦ ἐγένοντο θυγατέρες Λευκίππη, Ἐράιππη, Ἀλκαθώ, καὶ ἀπέβησαν έκτόπως φιλεργοί. πλείστα δὲ καὶ τὰς ἄλλας γυναίκας ἐμέμψατον, ὅτι ἐκλιποῦσα τὴν πόλιν ἐν τοῖς ὀρεσιν ἐβάκχευον, ἄχρι Διόνυσος εἰκασθείς κόρη παρήμενεν αὐταῖς μὴ ἐκεῖπειν τελετὰς ἡ μιστήρια τοῦ θεοῦ· αἱ δὲ οὐ προσεῖχον. πρὸς δὴ ταῦτα χαλεπήνας ὁ Διώνυσος ἀντὶ κόρης ἐγένετο ταύρος καὶ λέων καὶ πάρδαλις, καὶ ἐκ τῶν κελεύντων ἐρρύθ νέκταρ αὐτῷ καὶ γάλα. πρὸς δὲ τὰ σημεῖα τὰς κόρας ἐλαβε δείμα, καὶ μετ’ οὐ πολὺ κλήρους ἐἰς ἅγγος ἐμβαλοῦσαι ἀνέπηλαν. ἐπεὶ δ’ ὁ κλήρος ἐξέπεσε Λευκίππης, ἥξεσαν τὸ τῇ βασίλει δώσειν, καὶ Ἕπασον τὸν ἔσωτης παίδα διεσπασε σὺν ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς. καταλιποῦσα δὲ τὰ οἴκεια τοῦ πατρὸς ἐβάκχευον ἐν τοῖς ὀρεσιν καὶ ἐνέμοντο κισσὸν καὶ μίλακα καὶ δάφνην, ἄχρις αὐτὰς Ἂρμῆς ἀφάμενος τῇ ράβδῳ μετέβαλεν ἐἰς ὀρνίθας. καὶ αὐτῶν ἡ μὲν ἐγένετο νυκτερίς, ἡ δὲ γλαύξ, ἡ δὲ βύζα. ἐφυγον δὲ αἱ τρεῖς τὴν αὐγήν τοῦ ἡλίου.

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13. offerings
14. ἄχρι νῦν = to this day
15. The meaning is obscure; it could derive from the adjective κορωνός, bent or curved, as in a curved shuttle, or from the Boiotian city Κορωνεία. Or, like the Minyaiai, it should mean the “Daughters of Coroneus,” perhaps the grand-nephew adopted by Athamas after the destruction of his previous children by Nephele and Ino.
16. i.e., Parnassos
17. "likened himself to a"
18. "the uprights of the loom"
19. fright
20. set in motion, shake out (from ἀναπόλλω)
21. yew (from σμίλαξ)
22. ἡ δὲ γλαύξ = the little owl (Athene noctua); ἡ δὲ βύζα = ὁ βύς, eagle-owl (Strix bubo)

Of Orion son of Hyrieus there were these two daughters, Metiokhê and Menippê, and when Artemis "apotheosed" him, they were reared by their mother. And Athena taught them to weave at the loom and Aphrodite gave them beauty. And when a plague seized Aonia (Boeotia), and many died, they sent an embassy to the oracle of Apollo at Gortyn. And the god said to them that the two gods of Assistance need to be propitiated. He said that they could stop them of their wrath, if two maidens would be volunteer sacrifices to the Twain. In response to the oracle, no maiden in the city obeyed, until an old crone announced the oracle to Orion's daughters. And these, when they heard, standing by their loom accepted on behalf of their city-mates lest the plague fall on them and kill them too. So thrice they called out to the gods below that they were willing sacrifices, and they struck their necks with the weft-tamp and cut through their carotid artery and accomplished the sacrifice; and when both fell to the ground, Persephone and Hades, taking pity, made their bodies disappear and bore them up off the earth as stars. And shining brightly they were born aloft to heaven and we call them comets. All the Aonians made an important sanctuary at Orchomenos for these maidens, and every year youths and maidens bring offerings to them. Even now, the Aonians address them as Koronaia maidens.


King Minyas of Orchomenos had three daughters, Leukippê, Arsippê. and Alkathoê, and they grew up unduly industrious. So much so that they were reproaching the other women for leaving the city to go be bacchantes in the mountains, when Dionysos appeared to them as a maiden and encouraged them not to abandon the rites and mysteries of the god. They, however, did not obey. Becoming vexed, Dionysos, instead of a maiden, became a bull, a lion, and a leopard, and from the loom's uprights flowed nectar and milk. At these apparitions the girls took fright, and soon after they cast lots into a jar, and Leukippê was chosen who vowed a sacrifice to the god and tore apart own own son Hippasos with the help of her sisters. Abandoning the home of their father they ran to be bacchantes in the mountains and wandered through ivy, yew, and laurel until Hermes touched them with his wand and turned them into flying beasts: one became a bat, one a common own and one the eagle-owl, and they flew off, fleeing the light of the sun.