

AN EROTIC IMAGE IN ASCLEPIADES 5

Asclepiades 5 (*A.P.* 5.210)

Τῷ θαλλῷ Διδύμη με συνήρπασεν, ὅμοι ἐγὼ δέ
 τήκομαι ὡς κηρὸς πᾶρ πυρὶ κάλλος ὄρων.
 εἰ δὲ μέλαινα, τί τοῦτο; καὶ ἄνθρακες· ἄλλ' ὅτε κείνουσ
 θάλπωμεν λάμπουσ' ὡς ῥόδευι κάλυκες.

Compared with the enigmatic θαλλός in v. 1, the coal-metaphor in 3-4 has received relatively little attention. G.O. Hutchinson (over-read, perhaps, on Shakespeare's sonnets or Proust) makes quite an elegant attempt at an explanation:

"The choice of coal to defend beauty makes a fresh surprise; this in turn enhances our astonishment at the close. [...] The deliberately curious clause 'whenever we heat them' looks for an equivalent in the case of Didyme. The suggestion is insinuated that her ugliness has been transformed by the fire of Asclepiades' passion—transformed, that is, in the eyes of the deluded Asclepiades."¹)

Nevertheless, I think Asclepiades is aiming at a rather more concrete image. It has been noted by McKay that θάλπειν here as in Theoc. 14.38 has erotic overtones.²) The reference must however in this case be to the effect the erotic heat has on the woman,³) not the man, deluded as he may be. Asclepiades is, I believe, describing the particular effect of that heat on the woman's *body*; hinting at the fact that even a black woman has certain parts of her body which are red, even parts that appear more clearly as they are heated by a lover. Plainly speaking, I would say that the coals turning red are a metaphor for the opening of the labia of Didyme, as she is becoming sexually aroused in the presence of her lover. As erotic heat is applied, redness shines forth from an otherwise black body, just as in the case of the coals.⁴)

The proof of this is of course that ῥόδον is a Greek euphemism for vagina: cf. sch. in Theoc. 11.10 with Cratin. *fr.* 116 (Kassel), Pherecr. *fr.* 113.29 (Kassel), Hsch. s.v. ῥόδον (ῥοδών?), *A.P.* 5.36 (Rufin.) and perhaps also *A.P.* 5.62 (Rufin.), 5.81 (Dionys.), 5.170 (Noss.). I think the same notion is intended by the ἄνθεα χλοερά in *A.P.* 5.55 (Diosc.). For a similar motif, cf. also McKay 171 f. on Theoc. 3.12 ff.

I have not been able to find a good parallel to the meaning 'Jugendfrische'⁵) of θαλλός in v. 1, but the synonym θάλος, although it is most often conceived as identical with a young person ('scion, child' LSJ), may perhaps sometimes be interpreted as a quality or an attribute: cf. Eur. *El.* 15 and Aristid. 3.28, the parallel offered by Knauer.⁶)

McKay defends θαλλῷ and points out that the branch is conceived as a bait (as in Pl. *Phdr.* 230 d, the parallel offered by Toup) by which the lover is lured into the trap. It might perhaps deserve mention that 'crotch'

in some languages, for instance Swedish, is denoted by a word (*gren*) which also means 'branch' and 'fork'.

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1) G.O. Hutchinson, *Hellenistic Poetry* (Oxford 1988), 269.

2) K.J. McKay, *A Hellenistic medley*, *Mnemosyne* 21 (1968), 172 f.

3) *θάλλειν* is otherwise often, as in Theoc. 14.38, used of erotic attraction on a man: cf. *A.P.* 5.165, 5.173, 12.125, [Aesch.] *Pr.* 590, 650

4) The interpretation 'soften by heat' for *θάλλειν* given by LSJ (referring to *Od.* 21.179: cf. also 21.184, 21.246) deserves mention here.

5) Cf. O. Knauer, *Die Epigramme des Asklepiades von Samos* (Würzburg 1935), 17; repr. in S.L. Tarán (ed.), *The Greek Anthology II* (New York 1987).

6) Cf. also the meaning of the plural τὰ θάλλα in, e.g., *Il.* 22.504. LSJ's definition 'good cheer, happy thoughts' has no apparent support from most extant occurrences; 'abundance', 'lushness' or 'exuberance' might be possible.