

14.2. Theocritus / Women at the Adonis Festival

Theocritus was a Greek bucolic poet who flourished in Syracuse, Cos, and Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE. His surviving work, mixed in with that of other, similar poets whose works were once attributed to him, can mostly be found within an old compendium of 30 poems about country life known as the “Idylls of Theocritus.”

The scene of this mime is Alexandria, and the chief characters are two fellow-countrywomen of the author. Gorgo, paying a morning call, finds Praxinoa, with her two-year-old child, superintending the spinning of her maids, and asks her to come with her to the Festival of Adonis at the palace of Ptolemy II. Praxinoa makes some demur, but at last washes and dresses and sallies forth with her visitor and their two maids. After sundry encounters in the crowded streets, they enter the palace, and soon after, the prima donna begins the *Drie*—which is really a wedding-song containing a forecast of a *dirge*—with an address to the bride Aphrodite and a reference to the deification of the queen of Ptolemy I. The song describes the scene—the offerings displayed about the marriage-bed, the two canopies of greenery above it, the bedstead with its representation of the Rape of Ganymede, the coverlets which enwrap the effigies of Adonis and Aphrodite, the image of the holy bridegroom himself—and ends with an anticipation of the choral *dirge* to be sung on the morrow at the funeral of Adonis.

Theoc. *Idyll* 15. Source: Mitchell Carroll, *Greek Women*, (Philadelphia: Rittenhouse Press, 1908), pp. 369-375.

GORGO (*with her maid Etychis at the door, as the maid Eunoia opens it*)

Praxinoa at home?

PRAXINOA (*running forward*)

Dear Gorgo! at last! she is at home. I quite thought you'd forgotten me. (*to the maid*) Here, Eunoia, a chair of the lady, and a cushion on it.

GORGO (*refusing the cushion*)

No, thank you, really.

PRAXINOA

Do sit down.

GORGO (*sitting*)

O what a silly I was to come! What with the crush and the horses, Praxinoa, I've scarcely got here alive. It's all big boots and people in uniform. And the street was never-ending, and you can't think how far your house is along it.¹

PRAXINOA

That's my lunatic; came and took one at the end of the world, and more an animal's den, too, than a place of a human being to live in, just to prevent you and me being neighbours, out of sheer spite, the jealous old wretch! He's always the same.

GORGO

My dear, pray don't call your good Dinon such names before Baby. See how he's staring at you. (*to the child*) It's all right, Zopyrion, my pet. It's not dad-dad she's talking about.

PRAXINOA

Upon my word, the child understands.

GORGO

Nice dad-dad.

PRAXINOA

And yet that dad-dad of his the other day—the other day, now I tell him 'Daddy, get mother some soap and rouge from the shop,' and, would you believe it? back he came with a packet of salt, the great six feet of folly!

GORGO

Mine's just the same. Diocleidas is a perfect spendthrift. Yesterday he gave seven shillings a piece for mere bits of dog's hair, mere pluckings of old handbags, five of them, all filth, all work to be done over again. But come, my dear, get your cloak and gown. I want you to come with me (*grandly*) to call on our high and mighty Prince Ptolemy to see the Adonis. I hear the Queen's getting up something quite splendid this year.

PRAXINOA (*hesitating*)

Fine folks, fine ways.

GORGO

Yes; but sightseers make good gossips, you know, if you've been and other people haven't. It's time we were on the move.

PRAXINOA (*still hesitating*)

It's always holiday with people who've nothing to do. (*suddenly making up her mind*) Here, Eunoia, you scratch-face, take up the spinning and put it away with the rest. Cats always will lie soft. Come, bestir yourself. Quick, some water! (*to Gorgo*) Water's wanted first, and she brings the soap. (*to Eunoia*) Never mind; give it me. (*Eunoia pours out the powdered soap*) Not all that, you wicked waste!² Pour out the water. (*Eunoia washes her mistress's hands and face*) Oh, you wretch! What do you mean by wetting my bodice like that? That's enough. (*to Gorgo*) I've got myself washed somehow, thank goodness. (*to Eunoia*) Now where's the key of the big cupboard? Bring it here. (*Takes out a Dorian pinner—a gown fastened with pins or brooches to the shoulders and reaching to the ground, with an overfold coming to the waist—and puts it on with Eunoia's aid over the inner garment with short sleeves which she wears indoors*)

GORGO (*referring to the style of the overfold*)

Praxinoa, that full gathering suits you really well. Do tell me what you gave for the material.

PRAXINOA

Don't speak of it, Gorgo; it was more than eight golden sovereigns, and I can tell you I put my very soul into making it up.

¹ "You can't think how far," etc. : or perhaps 'You always live too far away.'

² "Wicked waste" : the Greek is "pirate-vessel."

GORGO

Well, all I can say is, it's *most* successful.

PRAXINOA

I'm inclined to agree with you.¹ (*to Eunoia*) Come, put on my cloak and hat for me, and mind you do it properly. (*Eunoia puts her cloak about her head and shoulders and pins the straw sun-hat to it*). (*taking up the child*) No; I'm not going to take you, Baby. Horse-bogey bites little boys. (*the child cries*) You may cry as much as you like; I'm not going to have you lamed for life. (*to Gorgo, giving the child to the nurse*) Come along. Take Baby and amuse him, Phyrigia, and call the dog indoors and lock he front-door.

(*in the street*) GORGO

Heavens, what a crowd! How we're to get through this awful crush and how long it's going to take us, I can't imagine. Talk of an antheap!

PRAXINOA

I must say, you've done us many a good turn, my good Ptolemy, since your father went to heaven. We have no villains sneaking up to murder us in the streets nowadays in the good old Egyptian style. They don't play those awful games now—the thorough-paced rogues, every one of them the same, all queer!

Gorgo dearest! what *shall* we do? The Royal Horse! Don't run me down, my good man. That bay's rearing. Look, what temper! Stand back, Eunoia, you reckless girl! He'll be the death of that man. Thank goodness I left Baby at home!

GORGO

It's all right, Praxinoa, We've got well behind them, you see. They're all where they ought to be, now.

PRAXINOA (*recovering*)

And fortunately I can say the same of my poor wits.² Ever since I was a girl, two things have frightened me more than anything else, a horrid chilly snake and a horse. Let's go on. Here's ever such a crowd pouring after us.

GORGO (*to an Old Woman*)

Have you come from the palace, mother?

OLD WOMAN

Yes, my dears.

GORGO

Then we can get there all right, can we?

OLD WOMAN

Trying took Troy, my pretty; don't they say where there's a will there's a way?

GORGO

That old lady gave us some oracles,³ didn't she?

PRAXINOA (*mock-sententiously*)

My dear, women knew everything. They know all about Zeus marrying Hera.

GORGO

Do look, Praxinoa; what a crowd there is at the door! It's marvellous!

PRAXINOA

Give me your arm, Gorgo; and you take hold of Eutyichis' arm, Eunoia; and you take care, Eutyichis, not to get separated. We'll all go in together. Mind you keep hold of me, Eunoia. Oh dear, oh dear, Gorgo! my summer cloak's torn right in two.⁴ (*to a stranger*) For Heaven's sake, as you wish to be saved, mind my cloak, sir.

FIRST STRANGER

I really can't help what happens; but I'll do my best.

PRAXINOA

The crowd's simply enormous; they're pushing like a drove of pigs.

FIRST STRANGER

Don't be alarmed, madam; we're all right.

PRAXINOA

You deserve to be all right to the end of your days, my dear sir, for the care you've been taking of us (*to Gorgo*) What a kind considerate man! Poor Eunoia's getting squeezed. (*to Eunoia*) Push, you coward, can't you? (*they pass in*)

That's all right. All inside, as the bridegroom said when he shut the door.

GORGO (*referring, as they move forward towards the dais, to the draperies which hang between the pillars*)

Praxinoa, do come here. Before you do anything else I insist upon your looking at the embroideries. How delicate they are! and in such good taste! They're really hardly human, are they?

PRAXINOA

Huswife Athena! the weavers that made that material and the embroiderers who did that close detailed work are simply marvels. How realistically the things all stand and move about in it! they're living! It is wonderful what people can do. And then the Holy Boy; how perfectly beautiful he looks lying on his silver couch, with the down of manhood just showing on his cheeks,—(*religioso*) the thrice-beloved Adonis, beloved even down below!

SECOND STRANGER

Oh dear, oh dear, ladies! do stop that eternal cooing. (*to the bystanders*) They'll weary me to death with their ah-ah-ah-ing.

PRAXINOA

My word! where *does* that person come from? What business is it of yours if we do coo? Buy your slaves before you order them about, pray. You're giving your orders to Syracusans. If you *must* know, we're Corinthians by extraction, like Bellerophon himself. What *we* talk's Peloponnesian. I suppose Dorians may speak Doric, mayn't they? Persephone! let's have

¹ lit. 'you may say so.'

² "I can say the same": the Greek has a pun on 'assembling' troops and 'collecting' one's wits.

³ "Gave us some oracles": i.e. her sententious remarks were about as useful as oracles generally are.

⁴ "Summer cloak": the festival was probably held upon the longest day.

no more masters than the one we've got. I shall do just as I like.
Pray don't waste your breath.¹

GORGO

Be quiet, Praxinoa. She's just going to being the song, that Argive person's daughter, you know, the "accomplished vocalist" that was chosen to sing the dirge *last* year.² You may be sure *she'll* give us something good. Look, she's making her bow.

THE DIRGE

Lover of Golgi and Idaly and Eryx' steepy hold,
O Lady Aphrodite with the face that beams like gold,
Twelve months are sped and soft-footéd Heav'n's pretty
laggards, see,
Bring o'er the never-tarrying stream Adonis back to thee.
The Seasons, the Seasons, full slow they go and come,
But some sweet thing for all they bring, and so they are
welcome home.
O Cypris, Dion's daughter, of thee annealed,³ 'tis said,
Our Queen that was born of woman is e'en immortal made;
And now, sweet Lady of many names, of many shrines Ladye,
They guerdon's giv'n; for the Queen's daughtér, as Helen fair
to see,
Thy lad doth dight with all delight upon this holyday;
For there's not a fruit the orchard bears but is here for his
hand to take,
And cresses trim all kept for him in many a silver tray,
And Syrian balm in vials of gold; and O, there's every cake
That ever woman kneaded of bolted meal so fair
With blossoms blent of every scent or oil or honey rare –
Here's all outlaid in semblance made of every bird and beast.
Two testers green they have plight ye, with dainty dill well
dressed,
Whereon, like puny nightingales that flit from bough to bough
Trying their waxing wings to spread, the Love-babes hovering
go.
How fair the ebony and the gold, the ivory white how fair,
And eagles twain to Zeus on high bringing his cup-bearer!
Aye, and he coverlets spread for ye are softer spread than sleep

Forsooth Miletus town may say, or the master of Samian
sheep,⁴

"The bridal bed of Adonis spread of my own making is;
Cypris hath this for her wrapping, Adonis that for his."
Of eighteen years or nineteen is turned the rose-limbed
groom;

His pretty lip is smooth to sip, for it bears but flaxen bloom.
And now she's in her husband's arms, and so we'll say good-
night;

But to-morrow we'll come wi' the dew, the dew, and take
hands and bear him away

Where plashing wave the shore doth lave, and there with locks
undight

And blossoms bare all shining fair will raise this shrilling lay; –
"O sweet Adonis, none but thee of the children of Gods and
men

"Twi'x't overworld and underworld doth pass and pass agen;
That cannot Agamemnon, nor the Lord o' the Woeful Spleen,⁵
Nor the first of the twice-ten children⁶ that came of the Trojan
queen,

Nor Patroclus brave, nor Pyrrhus bold that home from the war
did win,

Nor none o' the kith o' the old Lapith nor of them of
Deucalion's kin –

E'en Pelops line lacks fate so fine, and Pelasgian Argos' pride.
Adonis sweet, Adonis dear, be gracious for another year;

Thou'rt welcome to thine own alway, and welcome we'll both
cry to-day and next Adonis-tide."

GORGO

O Praxinoa! what clever things we women are! I do envy her
knowing all that, and still more having such a lovely voice. But
I must be getting back. It's Diocleidas' dinner-time, and that
man's all pepper;⁷ I wouldn't advise anyone to come near him
even, when he's kept waiting for his food. Goodbye, Adonis
darling; and I only trust you may find us all thriving when you
come next year.

¹ "Don't waste your breath": the Greek has 'don't scrape the top of an empty measure.'

² "Last year": the day of the festival was apparently regarded as the first day of Adonis' six months' stay upon the earth, the other six being spent in Hades.

³ "Annealed": 'anointed.'

⁴ "Miletus, Samian sheep": Milesian and Samian wool were famous.

⁵ "The Lord o' the Woeful Spleen": Ajax.

⁶ "The first of the twice-ten children": Hector.

⁷ "All pepper": in the Greek 'all vinegar,' which suggests something going bad.