

## Case Study II

# Sex and the Single Girl: The Cologne Fragment of Archilochus

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The fragmentary Cologne epode of Archilochus, controversial since its publication, records a poetic interchange in which a man seeks to seduce a nervous girl. Interpretation of this unusual poem, which disturbs many readers, is not a goal here: the purpose of this case study is to see what information about women's lives can be gleaned from this text, through the prism of accepted sexual behaviors as opposed to ideological norms. I exclude most of the standard scholarly considerations to focus specifically on sexual ideology, social class, and female reputation.

To begin with, we do not know how much of the poem is missing. Much inference is required even to make sense of the conversation. The extant text begins in mid-speech: a girl first tells a man to constrain his desire and then suggests he take up a specific lovely young woman. The male speaker responds at length, praising by name (Amphimedo) the girl's mother and proceeding to detail, in metaphors both architectural (below the cornice, over the gates) and agricultural (the garden grass), how he plans to have sex with the girl in such a way as to avoid coitus.

In the middle of his speech, he fulminates against Neoboule, a poetic female who plays a complex role in Archilochus' poetry and his biographical reputation in antiquity. Neoboule, says the male speaker, is over-ripe, twice the age of the girl herself, and has lost not only her virginity but her virtue because she has become oversexed. To take her as a wife would subject him to ridicule, and might result in unhealthy children. He prefers the female speaker because she is faithful, and thus more desirable than a woman who is sexually available to many men. Once he has finished speaking, the man places the girl among flowers and wraps her in his cloak. He explores her body, particularly her breasts, and she is startled or shy or fearful, like a fawn. Her youthful beauty is evident, and the male speaker reaches a (non-coital) climax as he touches her bright hair.

Our questions here concern the social class and values of these two people. We may infer that in the lost opening section the male speaker has made a sexual overture to the girl. When she tells him to marry, we know that the two speakers are citizens, for marriage in antiquity was limited to the citizen classes. Further confirmation of citizen status are his

promise to avoid intercourse, Neoboule's spoiled condition, the risk to his reputation if he should marry Neoboule, the very mention of children, his preference for the virtuous girl, and, finally, his fulfillment of the promise he made her. (His praise of her mother, and the use of her mother's name, may also be considered evidence.)

It is impossible to overstate how peculiar is this poem's representation of premarital sex for a citizen girl. The very idea violates every recorded and accepted sexual ideology for so-called respectable women, even as the poem savagely articulates those very ideologies. (I leave aside the fact that a citizen male could always take recourse to his own slaves and inexpensive, easily available prostitutes, rather than putting citizen women at risk.) The missing part of the girl's speech seems to have included an expression of her anxiety at the prospect of sex, a probability inferable from the male speaker's reassurances that he will avoid coitus.

The girl has much to be anxious about: premarital intercourse puts her at significant risk, as her virginity and her reputation were crucial for her marriage prospects, as is made clear in the male speaker's violent hostility toward Neoboule, discussed below. Pregnancy, of course, would destroy the girl's prospects altogether and render her useless in the social economy of citizen life. (Prostitutes and enslaved women in antiquity also had to fear intercourse, as pregnancy and childbirth were dangerous and would seriously hamper their daily work; however, they did not risk loss of respectability.) So, the representation of premarital sex with a citizen girl, in a poem that makes clear how dangerous and transgressive such sex is, violates our understanding of citizen sexual life—if we are to understand that the girl's reputation will not in fact be damaged by this sexual encounter.

With respect to Neoboule, however, the poem conforms both precisely and vigorously to ancient norms. The tirade against her combines several familiar stereotypes and prejudices—precisely those sexual ideologies that threaten the female speaker. Neoboule is over-ripe, oversexed, too old, he says—even though the female speaker has called her young and lovely. (Here I exclude extra-poetic evidence, although Archilochus' readers, who had far more of his poetry than we have, would not have done so.) Since the girl has effectively offered Neoboule to the male speaker in marriage, he rejects Neoboule on just those grounds, saying that he would be a laughingstock with her as a wife and would prefer to have his female interlocutor instead. As in Hesiod, a wife's sexuality can damage her husband's reputation and standing among men.

When the male speaker says that Neoboule is so oversexed that her children would be born defective, like blind puppies, he invokes the ancient belief that excessive sexual activity in women will produce faulty children. By implication, the female speaker's children would not be defective—but the male speaker's decision not to continue articulating that point may mean that he does not want to remind the girl that sex with him puts her at risk of pregnancy or a damaged reputation (like Neoboule's).

The remainder of the poem is narrative and retrospective, and relates a sexual experience that brought pleasure to the man and indeed did not involve coitus. This fragmentary poem suggests that these two people found a way to engage in extramarital sexual activity without putting the citizen girl's reputation and future at risk—a prospect anomalous in our ancient evidence. The motivating factor is the male speaker's desire; the girl is, at the very least, hesitant. Modern students tend to read this poem, instinctively, as a rape text, and to find it disturbing. It certainly depicts a man pressing himself sexually, for his own gratification, upon a hesitant, worried girl, whose own pleasure is not merely irrelevant but proscribed. His persuasion is disingenuous, from his praise of her mother to the violent

rejection of Neoboule, and until the end it is not clear that he will keep his promise of not committing penetration.

Because the poem is part of the ancient iambic tradition, it may have elements of invective that would disgrace the girl simply because she appears in a poem about illicit sex. Scholars have conjectured that the girl is related to Neoboule, but there is no proof either way; if she and Neoboule are kin (perhaps sisters), then the poem depicts an emotionally perverse situation, in which a man praises a girl and her mother (a rather odd detail in itself) while denouncing her sister for the very activity he is trying to coax the girl into. Further, the poem would then be part of what is described in ancient sources as an attack on the entire family of Neoboule, including her father Lycambes. I am inclined to agree with the scholars who do not consider this poetic girl to be related to the equally poetic Neoboule: the extant text does not give us sure evidence on this point. In this iambic tradition, the male speaker too is subject to the effects of insult and satiric moral criticism.

In any case, the poem keeps the reader, both ancient and modern, in suspense until the last line. Thus it plays with standard sexual ideologies while dramatizing a startling violation of standard sexual norms—and it proposes, very surprisingly, that premarital sexual activity might not destroy the reputation and life of a citizen girl. How we are to interpret that suggestion remains a matter of debate, and keeps scholars returning to this disconcerting fragmentary poem.