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Myrsilus of Methymna and the Dreadful
Smell of the Lemnian Women

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Myrsilus of Methymna was a Hellenistic *paradoxographos* who flourished c. 250 B. C. He wrote a series of books under the general title *Lesbiaka* which recounted the origins and causes of contemporary *mirabilia*. His practice was to visit the area concerned and to question the inhabitants themselves.¹ In the first of these books he refers to the infamous episode of the massacre of their husbands by the women of Lemnos. But interestingly, he appears to cite as the instigator of this terrible tragedy, not Aphrodite, as was the general view, but Medea. The report we have of him, preserved in the scholia to Apollonius Rhodius,² is as follows: τὴν Μήδειαν παραπλέουσαν διὰ ζηλοτυπίαν ῥίψαι εἰς τὴν Λήμνον φάρμακον καὶ δυσσομίαν γενέσθαι ταῖς γυναῖξιν, εἶναι τε μέχρι τοῦ νῦν κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν ἡμέραν τινά, ἐν ἣ διατὴν δυσσομίαν ἀπέχειν τὰς γυναῖκας ἄνδρα τε καὶ υἱεῖς. One can easily understand Medea's feeling of jealousy, and we may safely assume that the events of which Myrsilus speaks occurred on the return journey from Colchis, since Medea was with the Argonauts. But Myrsilus' version *prima facie* presents us with a major difficulty in interpreting the reason for the male population's rejection of the female on Lemnos and the resultant massacre by the Lemnian women of their menfolk. For, apparently, Myrsilus is saying that on Argo's return voyage Medea created a situation which the Argonauts had already found to be in existence when they called at the island on their way to Colchis!³ How, then, can we account for Myrsilus' words?

It has been suggested by W. Burkert⁴ that Myrsilus was influenced by Pindar's fourth *Pythian* (252–58). Burkert makes the somewhat surprising statement (p. 7) that “in accordance with the older version ousted by

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¹ *F. Gr. Hist.* 477 T 1–2 Jacoby.

² Sch. Ap. Rh. 609e, p. 54 Wendel = 477 Fr. 1a Jacoby.

³ Ap. Rh. *Arg.* 1. 609 ff.; Apollod. *Bibl.* 1. 9. 17; Hyg. *Fab.* 15; Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 2. 77 f. See also Sch. Pind. *Pyth.* 4. 448, p. 159 Drachmann.

⁴ “Jason, Hypsipyle, and New Fire at Lemnos. A Study in Myth and Ritual,” *CQ* 20 (1970) 1–16.

Apollonius (Pi. P. 4. 252-7), Myrsilus made the Argonauts come to Lemnos on their return from Kolchis, though the presence of Medea brought some complications for Jason and Hypsipyle." Burkert omits to recognise that Pindar is the *sole* authority for the transfer of the Argonauts' visit to Lemnos from the outward journey to the return. This alteration is due to a literary device which the poet is using to emphasise the close link between the Argonauts' union with the Lemnian women and the foundation of Cyrene.⁵ The "complications for Jason and Hypsipyle," referred to by Burkert, would not have troubled Pindar in his over-all composition, although they cannot readily be explained when taken *outside* the context of the Pindaric ode. It takes too much imagination, surely, to see Medea standing aside and allowing Jason and Hypsipyle to have their affair. But the Pindaric transfer of the Lemnian episode has no relevance to the original version of the saga in which the Argonauts probably returned by the same route as they sailed out, and did *not* call at Lemnos on their way home.⁶ Contrary to Burkert's words, it is Apollonius of Rhodes (*Arg.* 1. 609 ff.) who follows the traditional version of the tale in his making the Argonauts call at Lemnos on the outward voyage.

One must also consider the word *παραπλεύουσιν*, which is used by the scholiast to describe one of Medea's actions in Myrsilus' version. *Παραπλεύουσιν* can only mean, in any context, "passing by" or "passing along the coast." This consideration, coupled with the knowledge that Medea travelled with the Argonauts only on the return leg of the voyage to Colchis, already shows us that for Myrsilus Argo sailed close by the island of Lemnos on her way home but did *not* call there.⁷ Myrsilus, therefore, did not follow Pindar, as Burkert suggests.

Quite simply, with the exception of Medea's olfactory drug, Myrsilus was following the original version of the Argonautic tale. *Ipso facto* he knew and understood the original details of the Lemnian episode. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that Myrsilus' account of Medea and her spell-casting act was an addition or rider to the myth, and not part of the original myth at all. As so often happens in instances of this kind, a coalescence of the two stories was evolved by later authors, and this in turn has confused scholars over the years, particularly with regard to the element of the infamous *dysosmia*. Myrsilus, in fact, does not cite Medea as the instigator of the Lemnian tragedy but rather as a type of avenging fury⁸

⁵ See R. W. B. Burton, *Pindar's Pythian Odes. Essays in interpretation* (Oxford 1962) 150-52 and 164.

⁶ Sch. Pind. *Pyth.* 4. 448, p. 159 Drach. Λημνιᾶν τ' ἔθνει γυναικῶν· οὐκ ἀκολούθως, οὐ γὰρ ὑποστρέφοντες προσέβαλον τῇ Λήμνῳ, ἀλλ' ἀπιόντες.

⁷ The fact that Medea only passed along the coast of Lemnos and did not put in there makes her feeling of jealousy no less understandable. She was, after all, a priestess and sorceress with special powers, and would have had at least some inkling about Jason and Hypsipyle. But Jason himself may have told her.

⁸ Compare the distressing and rather monstrous picture of Medea as painted by Euripides.

who, because of jealousy, reconstitutes and revives an earlier situation, thus recreating all its painful memories, to gain her revenge. In sum, Medea did not create a situation on the return voyage which the Argonauts had already discovered to be in existence on the outward leg of the journey, but she recreated it, or, more accurately, part of it. Once this idea is realised, the major difficulty produced by Myrsilus' words begins to be alleviated.

Was the *dysosmia*, though, an integral part of original Lemnian mythology? Two post-Myrsilan authors, Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1. 9. 17) and Hyginus (*Fab.* 15), mention the *dysosmia* as part of the Lemnian myth, but by this time the coalescence of the two separate stories had evolved. The *dysosmia* is also referred to in three scholia (on the *Iliad*, the fourth *Pythian*, and Apollonius' *Argonautica*),⁹ but there is no reason to say that the scholiasts did not use Myrsilus of Methymna as the source for this element of the story. Certainly, no extant pre-Myrsilan source speaks of a *dysosmia*, although this fact *per se* proves nothing in the light of so much literature lost to us. We should, perhaps, at this point refer to the works of two of Myrsilus' contemporaries, Apollonius of Rhodes and Antigonus of Carystus.

In his *Argonautica* (1. 609 ff.) Apollonius gives us a full exposition of the reasons for the Lemnian massacre. This is a detailed account; Apollonius had before him most of the authors who had referred to the Lemnian myth; and yet, he does not mention a *dysosmia*. But Apollonius was a very deliberate poet and applied a method of creative selectivity in the composition of his work.¹⁰ If the *dysosmia* was an integral element of the story, either in its original form or in that of Apollonius' day, Apollonius decided to reject it for his own dramatic purpose. For Apollonius, the emphasis in the Lemnian visit must rest on desire, lust and sexual attraction. Any hint of an unpleasant odour emanating from the women who were providing the allurements would have been most inappropriate. Not only must Jason discover the physical attraction he had for most women, but he also had to discover sex itself and how to use it to his advantage. The fact that the women's smell might have disappeared by the time of the Argonauts' arrival would not have been sufficient for Apollonius' purpose (Apollonius tells us that the Lemnian massacre occurred one year before the heroes' visit: 1. 610). Even the slightest reference to the *dysosmia* would have detracted from the Apollonian depiction of love's attractions, so important in this context.

However, Apollonius may have been prompted to omit the *dysosmia* for another reason, which cannot entirely be divorced from the one just

⁹ Sch. *Il.* 7. 468; Sch. Pind. *Pyth.* 4. 88b, p. 109 Drach.; Sch. Ap. Rh. 1. 609, p. 53 Wendel. But it is interesting to note that a second scholion on the fourth *Pythian* (449, p. 159 Drach.) does *not* mention the *dysosmia*, although in every other respect it gives us the most detailed account of the Lemnian massacre to appear in the scholia.

¹⁰ A more detailed discussion of this thesis can be found in my monograph, *Creative Selectivity in Apollonius' Argonautica* (forthcoming).

discussed. According to the scholiast:¹¹ Αἰσχύλος δὲ ἐν Ὑψιπύλῃ ἐν ὄπλοις φησὶν αὐτὰς ἐπελθούσας χειμαζομένοις ἀπείργειν, μέχρι λαβεῖν ὄρκον παρ' αὐτῶν ἀποβάντας μιγήσεσθαι αὐταῖς. Σοφοκλῆς δὲ ἐν ταῖς Λημνίαις καὶ μάχην ἰσχυρὰν αὐτοῖς συνάσαι φησὶν. Certainly, both tragedians paint a picture here of some very unattractive women. Aeschylus' *Hypsipyle* presents a more intriguing scenario. Were the Lemnian women still malodorous by the time of the Argonauts' arrival? They were obviously desperate to have sexual intercourse with the heroes, threatening recourse to violence if they failed to oblige. But why was this threat of arms necessary? They could not *all* have been ugly. They could, however, *all* have been stinking. Clearly, the women had a good reason for believing that the Argonauts would not have had sex with them unless forced. A *dysosmia* seems more than a plausible explanation. If this was the case, Apollonius would have had to omit the smell element from his version straightaway. Hypsipyle may have been able to conceal the massacre of the Lemnian male population in her address to Jason,

... ἐπεὶ οὐ μὲν ὑπ' ἀνδράσι ναίεται ἄστυ,
ἀλλὰ Θρηκτικῆς ἐπινάστιοι ἠπειροιο
πυροφόρους ἀρόωσι γύας, (1.794-96)

but she could not possibly have dissimulated a prevailing body odour. Not only was the *dysosmia* story inappropriate to the Apollonian scenario, but also one can well imagine its embarrassing effect on the Lemnians whom Myrsilus met.

Antigonus wrote his single paradoxographic treatise after Myrsilus' account of the Lemnian incident.¹² We know that Antigonus followed Myrsilus very closely,¹³ and at *Hist. Mir.* 118¹⁴ he writes: τὰς δὲ Λημνίας δυσόσμους γενέσθαι Μηδείας ἀφικομένης μετ' Ἰάσονος καὶ φάρμακα ἐμβαλλούσης εἰς τὴν νῆσον κατὰ δὴ τινα χρόνον καὶ μάλιστα ἐν ταύταις ταῖς ἡμέραις, ἐν αἷς ἱστοροῦσιν τὴν Μῆδειαν παραγενέσθαι, δυσώδεις αὐτὰς οὕτως γίνεσθαι ὥστε μηδένα προσιέναι. In his preceding chapter¹⁵ Antigonus says: Μυρσίλος δὲ ὁ Λέσβιος Λοκροὺς τοὺς Ὀζόλας τῆς ἐπωνυμίας τετυχηκένας, ὅτι τῆς χώρας τῆς αὐτῶν (τὸ ὕδωρ) ὄζει, καὶ μάλιστα τοῦ Ταφίου καλουμένου ὄρους· καὶ ρεῖν αὐτόθεν εἰς θάλασσαν ὥσπερ πύον, τετάφθαι δ' ἐν τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ Νέσσον τὸν Κένταυρον, ὃν Ἡρακλῆς ἀπέκτεινεν. Clearly Antigonus at this point of his treatise is discussing Myrsilus' comments on the origins and causes of contemporary smells. We know of three versions of the

¹¹ Sch. Ap. Rh. 1. 769-73, p. 68 Wendel. Cp. F. Vian, *Apollonios de Rhodes. Argonautiques*, Budé trans. (Paris 1974), I 20-21 and 26-28.

¹² F. Jacoby *F. Gr. Hist., Komm. zu 477* (text) p. 378; see also Westermann's *Paradoxographi Graeci* (Braunschweig and London 1839) 61-102.

¹³ Cp. 477 Fr. 1b, 2, 5, 6 Jacoby.

¹⁴ 477 Fr. 1b Jacoby.

¹⁵ 477 Fr. 6 Jacoby.

Heracles/Nessus story,¹⁶ but Myrsilus is the first extant source to introduce the Locrians and their dreadful smell into the tale. Later, Ovid (*Met.* 9. 101 ff.), Pausanias (10. 38. 1), and Strabo (9. 4. 8) interpolate Myrsilus' account into the original myth. A scholiast, too, mentions the Locrian smell element.¹⁷ Here, surely, we have a parallel case to our present one. On both counts, Myrsilus is explaining the origins of a contemporary smell, one of the Locrians, and the other of the Lemnian women. This he does by clouding the origins in the mist of myth, and, in effect, by adding a rider to the original myth. On both counts, too, Myrsilus' rider later coalesced with the original tale and so led to the confusion of scholiasts and scholars alike. The original Heracles/Nessus story ended with the killing of Nessus by Heracles, but in his rider Myrsilus introduces Nessus' flight to a neighbouring tribe of Locrians where, on his death, his body rots at the foot of Mt. Taphiassus, and taints the countryside with a loathsome smell. Similarly, Medea and her olfactory drug were elements introduced as a rider to an already well-established myth; the only difference between the Locrian tale and that of the Lemnian women is that the events recounted in the rider occurred on the return leg of the journey and not immediately following the events of the original legend.

In the case of the Lemnian women Myrsilus is attempting to explain a contemporary annual event wherein the women on the island of Lemnos, on the pretext of a smell, keep apart from their menfolk for a day. This would appear to exclude the possibility of this particular phenomenon having anything to do with fire-ritual on the island.¹⁸ The much more likely reason for the emphasis on the smell of the women is to be found in the menstrual cycle of the human female, something incomprehensible to the ancients, and, subsequently, a taboo subject. This is not to say, of course, that all the Lemnian women menstruated malodorously on one and the same day each year, but, simply, that this annual ceremony was concerned with menstruation-ritual. Menstruation, indeed, has been very much a taboo topic until comparatively recent times. Pliny the Elder (*NH* 7. 15. 63–67) epitomises the attitude in the ancient world:

¹⁶ Sch. Soph. *Trach.* 39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ As suggested by G. Dumézil, *Le Crime des Lémniennes* (Paris 1924) and Burkert (above, note 4).

Sed nihil facile reperiatur mulierum profluvio magis monstrificum. Aescunt superventu musta, sterilescent contactae fruges, moriuntur insita, exuruntur hortorum germina, fructus arborum decidunt, speculorum fulgor adspectu ipso hebetatur,¹⁹ acies ferri praestringitur, eboris nitor, alvi apium moriuntur, aes etiam ac ferrum robigo protinus corripit odorque dirus aera, in rabiem aguntur gustato eo canes atque insanabili veneno morsus inficitur . . .

The sentiments expressed in this short passage speak for themselves, and Pliny continues the chapter in very much the same vein. Myrsilus was writing, let us remember, just over three hundred years *before* Pliny. So one can easily imagine the difficulty people had in having to explain the origins of such a malodorous stink, especially when one also considers the taboo surrounding it. Wary of this taboo, they disguised and shrouded the details of the ritual in the mists of pre-historic myth, a common and perfectly acceptable practice. The *dysosmia* which Myrsilus reported, therefore, had only a tenuous connection with original Lemnian mythology. Note that, according to Myrsilus, it is the *women* who are active in keeping away from the males, not the other way around; τὰς γυναῖκας is clearly the subject of ἀπέχειν. This fact is incongruous with the original Lemnian story wherein the men reject their women, but it does aptly accommodate the contemporary notion of the human female enduring her period and having to refrain from sexual intercourse.

The Lemnians needed a link with the past for their explanation of the contemporary Lemnian *dysosmia* which would, in turn, conceal the original version of the *dysosmia* story, understandably abhorrent to them.²⁰ Lemnos already had its place in the epic cycle, i. e. in the Argonautic saga. Who more suitable for their link than the passionate Medea, and the desirable Hypsipyle, with the emphasis on female sexuality? Who better than Medea, the sorceress, to conjure up the offending *dysosmia* with an olfactory drug?²¹

Any reconstruction of the development of the legend must remain conjectural, but one can construct a scenario which will accord with the known facts. One thing we do know: there was a women's festival on Lemnos which involved staying away from men for a day, even in Myrsilus' time. There was one myth attached to this ritual, known to the

¹⁹ Cp. Aristotle, *De Somniis* 459b ἐν γὰρ τοῖς ἐνόπτοις τοῖς σφόδρα καθαροῖς, ὅταν τῶν καταμηνίων ταῖς γυναῖξι γινομένων ἐμβλέψωσιν εἰς τὸ κάτωτρον, γίνεται τὸ ἐπιπολῆς τοῦ ἐνόπτρου οἶον νεφέλη αἱματώδης.

²⁰ Lemnos, indeed, seems to have been all too readily identified with smells by the ancients: sc. the story of Philoctetes' poisoned foot (see G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and other Cultures* [Berkeley 1970]).

²¹ Doubtless, one could argue rationally that by the time the Argonauts passed Lemnos on the return voyage, the women on the island had found new mates, and Medea could then recreate an old situation out of her jealousy. But her drug's effects would, of course, be of a temporary nature, and the original massacre was not repeated. The idea of the temporary effect of the olfactory drug assimilates well with the equally temporary effects of the menstrual period of the human female. However, such rationalisation would hardly have bothered the Lemnians.

outside world, which involved *Aphrodite's* imposing a curse of a *dysosmia* upon the Lemnian women because of their failure to pay her due homage. This version of the myth is plainly known to Aeschylus and Sophocles, and so, no doubt, to earlier epic sources.²²

The possibility we may entertain is that Myrsilus, visiting Lemnos, was told by *the women of Lemnos* a version of the myth more favourable to their self-esteem: that Aphrodite's curse had involved, not the imposition of a smell,²³ but simply alienation of the affections of their husbands, who had subsequently deserted them and taken up with Thracian concubines.²⁴ Their claim would be that they consorted voluntarily with the Argonauts when they dropped by *en route* to Colchis, and in revenge for *that act* Medea put the smell-curse on them on the way back, a curse from which they finally freed themselves by establishing the festival. This, then, could well have been the version of the tale which the Lemnians related to Myrsilus, and which Myrsilus has recorded for us.

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²² Also a most appropriate and, I would think, favourite version for the comedy writers—*Lemniai* were written by Aristophanes (Frr. 356–75 K), Nikocharēs (Frr. 11–14 K), and Antiphanes (Frr. 144–45 K). See, too, Alexis (Fr. 134 K), Diphilus (Fr. 54 K) and Turpilius (Frr. 90–99 K).

²³ There was no need, after all, for Aphrodite to use the agency of a smell to cause enmity between the sexes on Lemnos. Surely the males' return from war in Thrace with Thracian women as their concubines would have been reason enough? Cp. Apollonius' version with those of Valerius Flaccus (*Arg.* 2. 78 ff.) and of Statius (*Theb.* 6. 34) on this point.

²⁴ They may or may not have denied the mass murder. In anthropological terms the slaughter of the men *may* have been a transformation of memory of a male puberty ritual which involved the young men absenting themselves for a period and symbolically "dying" (cp. Paul Radin, *Primitive Religion* [New York 1957], Ch. 5 "The Crises of Life and Transition Rites," pp. 78–104).

