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Elegy for an *erōmenos*: Paul Silentiarios, Queer Desire, and Funerary Epigram (*AP* 7.560)

Abstract: This essay advances a queer interpretation of a single funerary epigram by the early Byzantine poet Paul Silentiarios (*Anthologia Palatina* 7.560). The poem commemorates the life of Leontios, a young man from a faraway homeland whose premature death while living abroad (presumably in Constantinople) meant that his parents could not bury him; instead, Leontios' grave is surrounded by the men who loved him in his adopted city. The essay draws on the insights of queer theorists Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and José Esteban Muñoz while also applying a rigorous philological approach to uncover how the poet uses the poetic conventions of funerary epigram to express joy in a shared carnality that affirms the intimacy of homosocial relations.

Key words: Greek poetry, epigram, Byzantium, Paul Silentiarios, queer theory, death, Christianity

Queer desire had a powerful association with death in the early Byzantine period.¹ This essay takes that premise as the basis for a close reading of a single funerary epigram that was composed by Paul Silentiarios sometime in the mid-sixth century CE:

Εἰ καὶ ἐπὶ ξείνης σε, Λεόντιε, γαῖα καλύπτει,
εἰ καὶ ἐρικλαύτων τῆλε θάνες γονέων,
πολλὰ σοι ἐκ βλεφάρων ἐχύθη περιτύμβια φωτῶν
δάκρυα δυστλήτω πένθει δαπτομένων.
Πᾶσι γὰρ ἦσθα λήην πεφιλημένος οἷά τε πάντων
ξυνὸς ἐὼν κοῦρος, ξυνὸς ἐὼν ἑταρος.
Αἰαῖ, λευγαλέη καὶ ἀμείλιχος ἔπλετο Μοῖρα,
μηδὲ τεῆς ἥβης, δύσμορε, φεισαμένη. (*AP* 7.560 Paul Silentiarios)²

¹ Within Byzantine contexts, the phrase “queer desire” could in theory encompass all forms of sexual desire that were deemed contrary to nature (*παρὰ φύσιν*), but for the purposes of this essay I have in mind specifically same-sex sexual desire between males.

² The text is that printed in Waltz ([1941] 2002, 93). All translations from Greek are my own. The Loeb Classical Library contains all the works by classical authors that I

Even if the earth conceals you in a foreign land, Leontios, even if you died far from your much-weeping parents, many tombside tears were shed for you from the eyes of men being consumed by a grief hard to bear. For you were exceedingly beloved by all, because you were everyone's boy in common, everyone's companion in common. Alas, Fate was baneful and implacable, sparing not even your youth, ill-fated boy.

As a sophisticated expression of queer desire, the epigram inters a love that can only barely speak its name. The epigram purports to be a funerary inscription for a boy or a young man named Leontios who died in a country not his own.³ The poet says nothing about where the youth is buried, only that the tomb is in a land foreign to Leontios, nor does the poet provide details about the circumstances of the youth's sojourn abroad. Because of the distance from his homeland, his parents couldn't attend the burial, but their vacancy was filled by a crowd of men who loved the boy. As much as the boy was beloved by mortal men, however, Fate herself did not spare his youth.

We have no way of knowing for sure if Paul composed these verses to commemorate a real youth named Leontios whom he knew in Constantinople, or if this is a poetic fiction. The conventional language and imagery are entirely appropriate for a real funerary inscription. But even if this poem does commemorate a real person, and even if it was really inscribed at the youth's grave, certain details nevertheless stand out that invite a queer interpretation. The surface narrative tells a tragic story: a youth's untimely death far from home prevents his parents from seeing his body one last time, while his friends in his adopted city grieve deeply for their lost companion. But beneath the sentimental façade, Paul hints at a life of deeply felt homosocial bonds that included joyful carnality: the men who surround his tomb were not just friends, but romantic lovers who shared the boy in common, and Leontios' sexual promiscuity brings him close to the status of a *pornos*.

My close reading will trace the sophisticated network of intertextual relations that anchor a queer interpretation of the poem. But before delving into the philological details, I wish to offer some preliminary background, both to contextualize Paul and his epigram within early Byzantine culture and also to

cite in this essay. Abbreviations of the names of ancient works are those used by Liddell, Scott, and Jones (1996).

³ The later Byzantine lemmatist explains that the epigram is "for a certain Leontios who died in a foreign land, a man being eulogized" (εἰς Λεόντιόν τινα ἐπὶ ξένης τελευτήσαντα ἐπαινούμενον ἄνδρα). It is most curious that the lemmatist insists on Leontios' status as a man (ἄνδρα), despite all the evidence to the contrary in the poem. For commentary on this poem, see Veniero (1916, 168–169); Viansino (1963, 17–19); and Gullo (2022, 1334–1336).

position my interpretation of the epigram within the field of queer theory. Paul was a member of a circle of poets who lived during the reign of the Emperor Justinian; their epigrams now survive throughout the *Greek Anthology*, though they were originally collected by Paul's friend, the lawyer, poet, and historian Agathias of Myrina, who published his anthology, now known as the *Cycle* of Agathias, shortly after 567. As a Christian, as a highly placed servant within the Imperial Palace, and as a learned poet, Paul Silentiarios offers an interesting case study in how queer desire found expression in Byzantium in the sixth century, and a brief overview of these three intersecting aspects of Paul's identity shed light on the different ways that queer desire was linked with death in early Byzantine thought.

First, early Christian doctrine: the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans famously proclaims that unnatural lust is the outward sign of rejecting God, proof that sinners worship creation and not the Creator. Accordingly, "God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to the impurity of having their bodies suffer dishonor in each other" (Romans 1:24). Same-sex sexual activity between males gets singled out: "males, having surrendered the natural use of the female, became enflamed in their yearning for each other, males in males plowing obscenity and receiving in themselves the recompense required for going astray" (1:27). In my intentionally provocative translation, the agricultural metaphor of the phrase "males in males plowing obscenity" (ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι)⁴ reveals the Apostle Paul's vivid imagining of sex between males as manly, sweat-inducing labor. But the excitement in the Apostle's language gives way at the end of the passage to the sobering conclusion of his argument, that males who engage in sexual activity with other males belong to a class of sinners who are "worthy of death" (ἄξιοι θανάτου εἶσιν, 1:32).

Second, Imperial law: in 528, only the second year in his reign, the Emperor Justinian began persecuting bishops and other men accused of engaging in sexual activity with other males. Punishment of these men was a public spectacle: their penises were cut off (καυλοτομεῖσθαι), they were paraded throughout the streets of the city, and killed; the cutting off of their penises may have been the cause of death (Smith 2015, 501–503, with citations). Justinian expanded the *Lex Iulia de Adulteriis Coercendis* to punish with death also those men "who dare to exercise their unspeakable lust with males" (4.18.4), and two new im-

⁴ According to Liddell, Scott, and Jones (1996), the primary meaning of the verb κατεργάζομαι is to "effect by labour, achieve," but the verb also has additional meanings pertaining to agriculture ("till, cultivate land") and the production, consumption, and digestion of food ("work up for use, freq. of food, by chewing or digestion"). I will return to this point below.

perial regulations on “unnatural” sex between men appeared later in his reign: *Novellae Constitutiones* 77 (538) and 141 (559). These regulations sought to assuage God’s wrath, which was inflicting famines, earthquakes, and plagues on the cities of the empire. In both regulations, the Emperor demonstrates mercy by offering opportunity for repentance, but men who lapse and persist in committing such crimes he commands the City Prefect to arrest and submit to capital punishment (ταῖς ἐσχάταις ὑποβάλλειν τιμωρίας, *Nov.* 77, Schöll and Kroll [1895] 1968, 382.36; Miller and Sarris 2018, I.540). Justinian promises that he will be relentless in eliminating such impious acts from the city, and those who continue to sin in this way can be sure that “they will bring upon themselves more bitter punishments, since they are deserving of no forgiveness in the future” (πικροτέρας ἑαυτοῖς ἐπάξουσιν τιμωρίας ὥς οὐδεμιᾶς τοῦ λοιποῦ συγγνώμης ἄξιοι, *Nov.* 141, Schöll and Kroll [1895] 1968, 704.21–22; Miller and Sarris 2018, II.930). Justinian’s legislation against same-sex sexual activity between males was fully informed by early Christian doctrine, and he even quotes the Apostle Paul’s Letter to the Romans.⁵ For Paul Silentiarios, Justinian’s legal pronouncements were not just vague abstractions. His function as chief *silentiarios* in the Imperial palace meant close physical proximity to the Emperor during court ceremonial; Paul was, therefore, a firsthand witness to Imperial power.

Third, the classical literary tradition: Achilles’ passionate attachment to his doomed companion Patroklos represents the archetypal same-sex union in the Greek literary imagination, but the most impassioned scene between the two warriors in the *Iliad* takes place after Patroklos has already died: his ghost visits the grieving Achilles and requests that their ashes be buried together in the same golden urn. At the end of his encounter with the ghost, Achilles’ longing to embrace his beloved remains tragically unsatisfied (Homer, *Il.* 23.1–101). Readers in the classical period and afterward interpreted the relationship between Achilles and Patroklos according to the pederastic model, which in turn created a template for the doomed loves of later male couples in the Greek literary tradition (Dover 1978, 96–99, 197; Davidson 2007, 90). Apollonios of Rhodes and Theokritos extended the pattern in their depictions of the death of the *erōmenos* Hylas and the intense grief of his *erastēs* Herakles.⁶ In the Imperial era, the Greek romances offered sub-narratives of doomed pederastic couples to give a more central position to a symmetrical, heterosexual love enshrined in marriage (Konstan 1994, Goldhill 1995, and Gaca 2003). Nonnos’ *Dionysiaka*, the greatest Greek epic of late antiquity, offered Paul Silentiarios a more recent development on the same theme: the young Dionysos falls in love with the satyr

⁵ *Nov.* 141, Schöll and Kroll [1895] 1968, 704.4 = Romans 1:27: ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι.

⁶ Apollonios of Rhodes, *Argonautika* 1.1207–1363 and Theokritos *Idyll* 13.

Ampelos, the cherished companion whose metamorphosis into the vine provides the god with wine, his gift to mortals. But that metamorphosis depends upon Ampelos' death, and the story of his fatal riding accident and Dionysos' overwhelming grief, modeled in part on a parallel episode in Achilles Tatios' *Leukippe and Kleitophon* (1.7–14), receive elaborate treatment over the space of three whole books in the epic (Kröll 2016). This brief literary history traces the dominant narrative pattern for same-sex desire between males: pederastic romance that ends with the demise of one of the lovers, usually the *erōmenos*.

The connection between homoerotic desire and death has preoccupied some modern queer theorists, too, and with good reason. Leo Bersani's provocatively titled essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" offers a trenchant political critique of gay men's supposed obsession with sex and the associative links within the dominant culture between anal sex, self-annihilation, and insatiable forms of desire identified as feminine. The political value of gay sex, according to Bersani, is that it always conveys the potential for the symbolic sacrifice of phallic masculinity. But when the essay was published in 1987, AIDS had made that symbolic potential literal, as a diagnosis brought with it the "certainty of biological death" (Bersani 1987, 222). That reification of the link between queer desire and death intensified homophobia within the dominant culture in the 1980s, even as it opened a promising window of critical reflection on the mechanisms of homophobia's social construction.

Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to advance a polemical rejection of what he calls "reproductive futurism," that is, a heteronormative ideology whose fixation on the "Imaginary form of the Child" (Edelman 2004, 14) seeks to perpetuate and secure existing social structures that marginalize queer lives. Edelman calls for a radical queer politics that claims with delight the fatality imposed upon it by the dominant culture. To reject the ideology of the Child is to "bury the subject in the tomb-like hollow of the signifier" and to embrace the excess implied by the "negativity that pierces the fantasy screen of futurity, shattering narrative temporality with irony's always explosive force" (31).

José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, acknowledges the value of Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism, but he also argues that to take up Edelman's polemic uncritically is to perpetuate the false notion that queerness is a "singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger social matrix" (Muñoz 2009, 94). Muñoz's intersectional approach to queerness, by contrast, seeks a relationality with the potential of exhuming the queer subject from burial in the abject and charting instead a map of the future that is not fixated on the Child.⁷

⁷ For a productive application of Muñoz's queer utopic thought to Byzantine literature and art, see Betancourt (2020, 129–131).

Putting Paul Silentiarios in dialogue with these modern queer theorists requires caution. The politics that motivate Bersani, Edelman, and Muñoz were alien to Constantinople in the sixth century, and the historically contingent nature of modern queer identities makes it anachronistic to claim queerness for the Byzantine poet. But Paul knew the constraints imposed on transgressive desire, and his own poetry gives expression to forms of desire and gendered embodiment that press up against the limits of Byzantine respectability.⁸ Blending erotic motifs within the somber subgenre of funerary epigram, Paul strikes an ironic posture that disrupts the perceived inevitability that equates homoerotic desire with death. Christian doctrine, Imperial law, and the Greek literary tradition all scripted homoerotic desire as a doomed narrative, and Paul's poem for the tomb of a beloved youth acknowledges that cultural predetermination while at the same time expressing astonishment at desire's transcendent power. That astonishment signals the value that Paul assigns to homoerotic relationality within a cultural context that consigns same-sex sexual desire to the realm of the abject. Muñoz reaffirms Ernst Bloch's assertion that astonishment can be a "philosophical mode of contemplation" (Muñoz 2009, 5), and I take up this premise in my approach to Paul's poem. What better place than graveside for the Byzantine poet to reimagine what the world can be? The emotional intimacy shared between the *erōmenos* and his lovers inspires the poet to fantasize a homosocial utopia founded upon queer desire.⁹

With the historical background and theoretical framework in place, I now turn to the richly allusive poetic language with which Paul eulogizes the dead youth. The epigram begins with a couplet that expresses two unfortunate circumstances of Leontios' death, (a) that he is buried in a foreign land and (b) that he died far away from his parents, each verse consisting of a concessive conditional clause beginning with "even if" (εἰ καί):

Εἰ καὶ ἐπὶ ξείνης σε, Λεόντιε, γαῖα καλύπτει,
εἰ καὶ ἐρικλαύτων τῆλε θάνες γονέων ... (AP 7.560.1–2 Paul Silentiarios)

Even if the earth conceals you in a foreign land, Leontios, even if you died far from your much-weeping parents ...

Paul's suggestive language invokes the epic tradition and initially invites readers to think about Leontios as a Byzantine Odysseus. The *Greek Anthology* is full of epigrams commemorating individuals who died in a foreign land (Gullo 2022, 309–310), but the motif extends back to Homer: the swineherd Eumaios identifies the dog Argos for Odysseus in disguise, explaining that the

⁸ To cite just two examples, see AP 5.232 (on a Byzantine harlot) and AP 7.563 (on the pantomime dancer Chryseomallos).

⁹ On the role of fantasy in epigrams from the *Cycle* of Agathias, see Smith (2019, 12–15).

dog's master "died far away" (τῆλε θανόντος, *Od.* 17.312) and "perished in a place other than his fatherland" (ἄλλοθι πάτρης | ὤλετο, 318–319). Paul's use of the phrase γαῖα καλύπτει at the end of the first verse secures the epigram's connection with epic. The expression became conventional for funerary inscriptions, but the precise phrase appears only once more in the *Greek Anthology*, in an anonymous epitaph for Homer: "Here the earth conceals (γαῖα καλύπτει) a holy head, the commander of heroes, divine Homer" (*AP* 7.3). Within a poetic context about one who has wandered far from home, the verb καλύπτει furthermore evokes Kalypso ("she who conceals"), the nymph who held Odysseus in erotic captivity and delayed his departure home for years; I will return to this poetic allusion later.

The absence of Leontios' parents also marks the youth's death as a deviation from the classical ideal. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Cassandra gives succinct expression to this ideal within a sophistic argument that exposes the costs of Achaean victory. The Greeks who died at Troy, she says, "didn't see their children, they weren't wrapped in cloaks by the hands of a wife, but they lie in a foreign land (ἐν ξένη δὲ γῇ | κεῖνται)," while Greek parents are "childless in their homes, having reared children in vain, nor at their graves is there any one of them who will offer blood to the earth" (*Tr.* 376–379, 380–382). The bodies of Trojan warriors, however, were conveyed into their homes "by their loved ones" (φίλων ὕπο, 388) and received tombs "in their fatherland" (ἐν γῇ πατρώα, 389). Cassandra gives special emphasis to the intimacy of the family's final contact with the body: the Trojan dead were "wrapped in burial shrouds by the hands of those who should have done so" (χερσὶν περισταλέντες ὧν ἐχρῆν ὕπο, 390). From this classical perspective, dying "far from your much-weeping parents" (ἐρικλαύτων τῆλε ... γονέων) intensifies the tragedy of Leontios' fate, even as it throws into relief what was gained from a life surrounded by men who loved him.

A queer interpretation really takes hold in the second verse of Paul's poem. The detail about his parents being far-away draws Leontios away from the sphere of what Edelman calls "reproductive futurity": in life, the youth traded biological kinship at home for homosocial companionship abroad. Paul describes Leontios' parents as "much-weeping" (ἐρικλαύτων, 2), a rare adjective with only four other known instances in Greek literature,¹⁰ and one of those instances confirms the homoerotic subtext of Paul's epigram. In the *Dionysiaka*, Nonnos tells of the god Dionysos' first erotic experience, a romance with the youthful satyr Ampelos that ends tragically when Ampelos dies while riding a bull. As the mount rampages, Ampelos pleads with the animal not to kill him "upon a

¹⁰ Oppian, *Halieutika* 2.668, along with a gloss by a scholiast; Nonnos, *Dionysiaka* 11.206; and the anonymous *Laudatio professoris Smyrnaei in universitate Beryti docentis* (P. Berol. 10559 A & B), line 51; see also Vian ([1995] 2003, 166).

desolate rock, so that Bakkhos does not hear about my unperceived death” (*D.* 11.198–199). He wishes instead for the bull to carry him back to the satyrs, “so that after my death I might obtain dust receiving many tears” (ἐρικλαύτοιο, 206). Paul appropriates Ampelos’ desperate wish not to die far from his loved ones and reworks it in such a way that emphasizes not the distance from his parents but the presence of a crowd of Byzantine men at Leontios’ tomb:

πολλά σοι ἐκ βλεφάρων ἐχύθη περιτύμβια φωτῶν
δάκρυα δυστήλῳ πένθει δαπτομένων. (*AP* 7.560.3–4 Paul Silentiarios)

Many tombside tears were shed for you from the eyes of men being consumed by a grief hard to bear.

Leontios’ parents may indeed be ἐρικλαντοί, shedding many tears for the son they lost, but they are absent from the scene of ritual mourning. The dust of Leontios’ grave receives the tears not of his kin, but of the men who loved him.¹¹ The epic intertext furthermore creates a Dionysian double-vision: the men who surround Leontios’ tomb are Byzantine mourners one moment, and ithyphallic satyrs the next.

Such double-vision also invites an alternative interpretation of γονέων, the genitive form of γονεῖς, the word that Paul uses to refer to Leontios’ weeping parents. Properly understood, the word γονεύς (singular) means “begetter” or “father,” and in the plural γονεῖς regularly denotes “parents.” But the form of the word that Paul uses, γονέων, is also an epic/Ionic genitive plural of a related word, γονή, which means “offspring” and even the male “seed” or “semen.”¹² The linguistic ambiguity suggests that the shedding of parental tears has been displaced by the seminal emissions of surrogate fathers that Leontios collected around him in the land he chose as home. The suggestion is not simply prurient, for, as I have argued elsewhere, the epigrammatic poets of sixth century Byzantium were preoccupied with the imagery of sowing and insemination because it offered them a medium for grappling with themes of literary (re)production, poetic authority, and paternity (Smith 2019, 24–27). Sex and *sophia* were linked in the early Byzantine poetic imagination.

Consider, too, that the men beside Leontios’ tomb are being “consumed” by grief (δαπτομένων, 4). The detail connects this poem with one of Paul’s erotic epigrams, which describes the flirtations of a certain Chariklo at a drinking party, and the poet declares that in his desire for the woman, “a lethal fire consumes (δάπτει) me” (*AP* 5.288.3). Death, desire, and consumption commingle in both of these epigrams,¹³ and Agathias reinforces this thematic triad in his preface to

¹¹ On tears in the poetry of Paul Silentiarios and Agathias, see Herrin (2017).

¹² I thank the anonymous referee for this suggestion.

¹³ On the blending of different *topoi* from various literary traditions within the *Cycle* epigrams, see Cameron (1970, 26–29).

the *Cycle*, where he stages a scene that transforms the poets of his collection into voracious banqueters, consumers with greedy stomachs that are full to bursting; the scene even includes an Aristophanic joke about anal sex between men.¹⁴ We find the same themes also in the Christian condemnation of supposedly unnatural sex. As referenced earlier, the Apostle Paul describes males having sex together as “plowing obscenity” (ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι, Romans 1:27). But the agricultural associations of the verb κατεργάζομαι also extend to the chewing and digestion of food.¹⁵ Sex and eating both satisfy the appetites of the body, and the associative link between them ran deep in Byzantine thought.¹⁶

In Paul’s epigram on Leontios the lovers are themselves the ones being consumed. The thematic slippage between active and passive pervades the corpus of the sixth century poets and corresponds to a series of further contrasting thematic pairs – domination/submission, constraint/release, men/women – that likewise obsess the early Byzantine poetic imagination (Smith 2019, 240–246). If in life Leontios was the *erōmenos* on whom his Byzantine *erastai* greedily fed, then in death his lovers become themselves passive, devoured in turn by the impossible grief for the one they have lost. The epigram’s homoeroticism and its exposure of the emotional passivity of Leontios’ lovers recalls Leo Bersani’s characterization of male same-sex sexual desire as always “re-presenting [*sic*] the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice” (Bersani 1987, 222). Bersani’s political critique of gay sex was a response to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, but the internalized phallocentrism of which he speaks transcends that specific cultural and historical moment, tracing its genealogy back to classical Greek *paidēraistia* (Bersani 1987, 212), which remained the dominant model for thinking about male homoeroticism even in the sixth century CE. The imagery of consumption, already established as a powerful metaphor for male homosociality and eroticism in the *Cycle*, thus becomes for Paul a way of expressing what it means for a male body to be penetrated, literally and figuratively, by another male. Who, the poem asks, is devouring whom? In its fusion of erotic and funerary motifs, Paul’s epigram dramatizes how the outpouring of grief over the death of an *erōmenos* occasions the sacrifice of the lover’s phallic masculinity.

The queer subtext becomes even more pronounced in the poem’s third couplet, where the poet explains to the dead Leontios why men crowded around his tomb:

Πᾶσι γὰρ ἦσθα λίην πεφιλημένος οἷά τε πάντων
 ξυνὸς ἐὼν κοῦρος, ξυνὸς ἐὼν ἕταρος. (AP 7.560.5–6 Paul Silentiarios)

For you were exceedingly beloved by all, because you were everyone’s boy in common, everyone’s companion in common.

¹⁴ AP 4.3.29–31; Smith 2019, 61–63

¹⁵ Liddell, Scott, and Jones (1996) κατεργάζομαι II.1.

¹⁶ Cf. also Romanos’ hymn *On the Harlot*, and see Smith (2019, 7–8).

Calling Leontios “beloved by all” (πᾶσι ... πεφιλημένος, 5), Paul employs a formulaic expression that appears frequently in real funerary inscriptions and in funerary epigrams known only from literary anthologies. Arianna Gullo has catalogued many instances of this formula, which accommodates numerous variations (e.g. πᾶσι φίλος/φιλητότατος/ποθεινός/ποθητός; Gullo 2022, 1334–1336). But Paul’s introduction of the adverb “excessively” (λίην) into this formula appears unique; suddenly the formulaic becomes unconventional, as the adverb pushes the men’s love for Leontios into the realm of the immoderate. Paul further emphasizes the excessiveness of their desire as well as Leontios’ excessive desirability by reminding the youth that he was “everyone’s boy in common, everyone’s companion in common”; the repetition of the adjective ξυνός (“common, public”) highlights that Leontios circulated among Byzantine men as a shared object of desire.¹⁷

The nouns, too, are charged with eroticism. Calling Leontios a “boy” (κοῦρος, 6) reinforces his youth and the untimeliness of his death, but the word has markedly erotic associations within the epigrammatic tradition and within late antique epic. The κοῦρος is a favorite term for *erōmenoi* in the pederastic Book 12 of the *Greek Anthology*,¹⁸ and among the erotic epigrams of Book 5, the only two instances of the word κοῦρος appear within homoerotic contexts.¹⁹ Nonnos, too, repeatedly refers to Ampelos as the κοῦρος of Dionysos.²⁰ That Leontios was everyone’s “companion” (ἑταρος) also suggests that the youth was a sort of male *hetaira* or courtesan, and indeed a funerary epigram by Pompey the Younger commemorates the infamous *hetaira* Laïs with a variation on the same formula that Paul uses to commemorate Leontios: just as Leontios is “beloved by all” (πᾶσι ... πεφιλημένος), so too is Laïs “lovely to all” (πᾶσιν ἐράσμιον, *AP* 7.219; Gullo 2022, 492, 1026). As objects of desire, Leontios and Laïs were both exceedingly popular.

Leontios’ suggestive promiscuity also associates him with the nameless harlot of another epigram by Paul Silentiarios, a woman who flagrantly celebrates her multiple loves and rejects both Christian chastity and the romantic ideal of monogamy (*AP*. 5.232; Viansino 1963, 129–131; Smith 2019, 8–11). Beneath the avowedly heterosexual façade of that epigram lie pederastic epigrams from Book 12 of the *Greek Anthology* that depict a male lover extolling the charms of

¹⁷ See also *AP* 7.444.6 (Theaitetos).

¹⁸ *AP* 12.54.3–4 (ὁ κοῦρος ... Ἐρως, Meleager), 93.10 (κοῦρος, Rhianos), 101.5 (φίλε κοῦρε, Meleager), 121 (κοῦρε, Rhianos), 159.3 (κοῦρε, Meleager), 170.4 (κοῦρος, Dioscorides), 221.5 (κοῦρον, Strato).

¹⁹ *AP* 5.122.2 (Diodoros) and 303.3 (*adesp.*); see also *AP* 9.784.2 (*adesp.*) and 11.24.3 (Strato).

²⁰ Nonnos, *D.* 10.220, 225, 229, 236; 11.105; 12.195, *inter alia*.

the multiple boys whom he desires.²¹ Paul seems to have this tradition in mind again in the funeral epigram for Leontios, but his poetic manipulation in the funeral epigram for the youth queers the scenario even more. Epigrams depicting a male lover's celebration of multiple *erōmenoi* in Book 12 of the *Greek Anthology* reinforce the hierarchy of pederastic desire, insofar as such poems prop up the lover's status as desiring subject. Paul's displacement of that desire in *AP* 5.232 gives transgressive expression to a harlot's unapologetic promiscuity, while at the same time preserving a misogynistic gender politics that denigrates women as subjects of desire: the defiance of Paul's harlot thrills because she speaks out from within a cultural context that sought to constrain a woman's erotic excesses. Within such a restrictive ideology, the boy who speaks out and celebrates his own promiscuity as both subject and object of men's desire risks being tainted with labels like *pornos* and *kinaidos*. But Paul ingeniously saves Leontios with death: the conventions of funeral epigram solemnize the boy's queer desire. The dead can and do speak in funeral epigram, even ironically,²² and so Paul could in theory have given Leontios a voice, but denying him speech prevents the boy from incriminating himself as a *kinaidos*, even as the poet devilishly suggests that Leontios' life was like that of a harlot, anything but respectable.²³

In the epigram's final couplet, Paul returns to the untimeliness of Leontios' death:

Αἰᾶ, λευγαλή καὶ ἀμείλιχος ἔπλετο Μοῖρα,
μηδὲ τεῆς ἥβης, δόσμορε, φεισαμένη. (*AP* 7.560.7–8 Paul Silentarios)

Alas, Fate was baneful and implacable, sparing not even your youth, ill-fated boy.

These verses bring us back to the realm of myth and epic with which the epigram began, and the interjection *aiai/aiaĩ* even provides an aural echo of *gaia/gaĩa* in the first verse. I begin with the two epithets for Moira/Fate: “baneful” (λευγαλή) and “implacable” (ἀμείλιχος). The coupling of the two epithets in this epigram is unique to Greek poetry, though both are entirely fitting for a funeral epigram. Homer uses the adjective λευγαλέος three times within the formulaic expression “baneful death” (λευγαλέω θανάτω, *Il.* 21.281; *Od.* 5.312, 15.359), while of the three instances of the adjective ἀμείλιχος in the *Iliad*, twice it appears in contexts referring to the underworld: once describing the heart of the avenging Erinyes (Ἐρινὺς ... ἀμείλχον ἦτορ ἔχουσα, 9.571–572), and once

²¹ *AP* 12.87–90 (adesp.), 91 (Polystratos), 93 (Rhianos), 94–95 (Meleager), and 173 (Philodemos).

²² See Paul's own *AP* 7.307.

²³ Cf. Bersani's vatic pronouncement about one socio-cultural effect of AIDS in the 1980s, which was to reinforce “the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation originally and primarily identified with the fantasmatic mystery of an insatiable, unstoppable female sexuality” (Bersani 1987, 222).

describing Hades himself (Αἴδης ἀμείλιχος, 9.158). The latter expression was adopted by the tradition of funerary epigram (*AP* 7.7.9 and 305.3), but Paul modifies by applying the epithet ἀμείλιχος not to Hades, but to Moira.

Personifying the agent of death as female is motivated: to be claimed by Moira assimilates the young Leontios to Hylas, the beloved of Heracles who was taken as husband by a desirous nymph (A.R. 1.1207–1239; πόσιν, 1325). Apollonios' narrative of the Hylas episode is itself a Hellenistic variation on the archetypal myth of Hades' abduction of Persephone, a story of cyclical return and rebirth (Hunter 1993, 40–41). Unlike Persephone, however, *erōmenoi* such as Hylas and Leontios are doomed within such a mythic framework, since, as Barbara Leigh Clayton aptly puts it, “the *erastēs/erōmenos* bond is time-bound, limited by the growth and maturity of the *erōmenos*” (Clayton 2017, 149). Paul's mythic imagination thus casts Leontios' untimely death as a fatal marriage to Moira, a symbolic transition from *erōmenos* to husband. Edelman's Lacanian formulation is helpful, too, for this epigram makes a poetic argument that the *jouissance* of queer desire has no reproductive future within early Byzantine culture.

Moira's domination of the final couplet also makes newly relevant the allusion to Kalypso in the first verse (γαῖα καλύπτει): the epigram is framed by feminine powers that pull Leontios into the earth. At the end of the *Odyssey*, when husband and wife are finally reunited in bed, Odysseus tells Penelope that Kalypso “held him back, longing for him to be her husband (πόσιν) in her hollow caves” (23.334–333), but Odysseus resisted her promise of immortality, preferring instead to return to Penelope. For Odysseus, concealment in the caves of Kalypso was the hero's own *jouissance*, a time of prolonged sensual indulgence that pushed against the limits of the pleasure principle. In a twist, Leontios' concealment beneath the earth (γαῖα καλύπτει) marks the end of his status as an *erōmenos* and the end of all worldly pleasures, and the poet alone can provide immortality by means of epigrammatic commemoration.

This interpretation finds corroboration in Paul's rejection of an alternative mythic tradition that put the *erōmenos* not in the grave, but at the side of a celestial father. The poet says that Moira “spared not even your youth, ill-fated boy” (μηδὲ τεῆς ἥβης, δύσμορε, φεισάμενη, 8), and the language here takes us back again to the Ampelos episode of Nonnos' *Dionysiaka*. Calling Leontios “ill-fated” (δύσμορε) creates a linguistic echo with Moira/Μοῖρα in the preceding verse and emphasizes that the youth has been claimed by Fate. The word δύσμορος is rare in Nonnos, but in one of its five instances in the *Dionysiaka* the adjective refers to Ampelos, who is “ill-fated, bordering on Hades” (Ἄιδι γείτων | δύσμορος, *D.* 11.214–215). Three times, moreover, Ampelos' fate, being trampled by a bull, is contrasted with the fate of Ganymede, snatched up to heaven by Zeus' eagle, who clutched the boy in “sparing talons” (φειδομένοις ὀνύχεσσιν, 10.258, 11.295) and in “a sparing, greedy claw” (φειδομένῳ ... ἄρπαγι ταρσῶ, 10.311). Paul's use of the participle φεισάμενη thus recalls Nonnos' insistent use of participial

forms from the same verb to describe Ganymede's translation to heaven. Though predatory, Zeus' eagle is gentle, doing no harm to Ganymede's youthful flesh, which the bird must preserve for Zeus' pleasure on Olympus. Leontios' death, by contrast, lacks tenderness: Moira is *unsparing* of his youth (μηδὲ ... φεισαμένη). Paul's sophisticated manipulation of the Nonnian poetic idiom signals his awareness that within the Greek poetic tradition the *erōmenos* was not always doomed to the grave. Leontios, however, doesn't get the celestial treatment, but is instead swallowed up by the earth. In Christian Byzantium, even the surpassingly beautiful Ganymede had been supplanted by Christ as the paradigmatic figure of bodily ascent, and Paul's epigram on Leontios serves as an emphatic reminder that in early Byzantine culture, *erōmenoi* don't go to heaven.

But Paul's queer fantasy of a community of men bound together by homoerotic affection pushes back against that abjectifying framework. I return to Muñoz's theorization that poetic expressions of astonishment at what is joyful in the present can act "as a mode of utopian feeling," and hence offer up "wish-landscapes" that "extend into the territory of futurity" (Muñoz 2009, 5). Consider again the first couplet of Paul's epigram, its verses beginning forcefully with two concessive conditions: "*Even if* the earth conceals you in a foreign land, Leontios, *even if* you died far from your much-weeping parents..." That is the kind of astonishment that Muñoz has in mind. Paul wants to see past the tragedy, past the entombment, past the notionally predetermined death of the *erōmenos*, and he focuses his poetic imagination instead on the joy in worldly sensuality that has been and will continue to be felt, the shared carnality that can affirm the intimacy of homosocial relations. The constraints of Byzantine culture – Christian doctrine, Imperial law, and even the classical tradition – consigned such queer relationality to the realm of the abject. Chaste homosocial intimacy was, of course, respectable and celebrated in late antique and Byzantine culture (Krueger 2011, 58–61), but, as Roland Betancourt has cautioned, by identifying Byzantine queerness only when it has been sublimated in celibacy and negation, modern scholars risk "perpetuating the toxic respectability politics found in our primary sources" (Betancourt 2020, 129–130). Paul's epigram represents a moment of imaginative clarity that pierces through those constraints. More important than Leontios' death, more important than the sad fact that his parents never got to see him again, more important even than the supposed tragedy that Leontios never returned home to marry and have children of his own (Masterson 2014, 177–178) – more important than all of these for the poet is that Leontios enjoyed an excess of affection and companionship with men who loved him, and in a city that held for him no ties of biological kinship.²⁴ That, for Paul, is a miracle worthy of commemoration.

²⁴ Cf. Muñoz's interpretation of the "utopian function" of a poem by Frank O'Hara: there is "a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here" (Muñoz 2009: 7).

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Elegija za erōmenos-a:

Pavle Silentijarije, kvir želja i epitaf u stihu (AP 7.560)

U radu je predstavljena kvir interpretacija jednog epitafa u stihu ranovizantijskog pesnika Pavla Silentijarija (*Anthologia Palatina* 7.560). Pesma slavi život Leontija, mladića iz daleke postojbine, koga zbog prerane smrti tokom boravka u tuđini (pretpostavlja se u Carigradu) nisu mogli da sahrane roditelji, već su se oko Leontijevog groba skupili ljudi koji su ga voleli u gradu gde se bio doselio. Rad se oslanja na uvide kvir teoretičara Lea Bersanija, Lija Edelmana i Hosea Estebana Munjoza, a istovremeno koristi rigorozan filološki pristup da bi otkrio kako pesnik koristi poetske konvencije epitafa da bi izrazio radost zbog zajedničkog doživljaja putenosti koji afirmišu intimnost homosocijalnih odnosa.

Ključne reči: grčka poezija, epitaf u stihu, Vizantija, Pavle Silentijarije, kvir teorija, smrt, hrišćanstvo

Élégie de l'erōmenos:

Paulus Silentarius, désir queer et épitaphe en vers (AP 7.560)

Dans ce travail est présentée l'interprétation queer d'une épitaphe en vers du poète de l'Antiquité tardive, Paulus Silentarius (*Anthologia Palatina* 7.560). Le poème célèbre la vie de Leontios, jeune homme originaire d'un pays éloigné, qui en raison de sa mort prématurée au cours de son séjour à l'étranger (vraisemblablement à Constantinople) n'a pu être enterré par ses parents: dans la ville où il était venu habiter, autour de sa tombe s'étaient rassemblés des gens de la ville qui appréciaient. Le travail s'appuie sur les analyses des théoriciens queer Leo

Bersani, Lee Edelman et José Esteban Muñoz, tout en adoptant l'approche philologique rigoureuse pour découvrir comment le poète utilise les conventions poétiques de l'épigramme pour exprimer la joie due à l'expérience commune de la sexualité qui affirme l'intimité des rapports homosociaux.

Mots clés: poésie grecque, épigramme en vers, Byzance, Paulus Silentarius, théorie queer, mort, christianisme

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