γύναικες μιαρώταται and the Ritual of Agriculture

The issue of summertime heat and its effects on humans has interested writers from Archaic Greece to the Roman Republic. The early Greek poets Hesiod and Alcaeus both describe the typical lifestyle of summertime Greece: the cicadas are chirping, the artichoke is flowering, and, as the heat is nearly unbearable, cool wine is imbibed to refresh overheated bodies. Both poets also mention the dual effects the heat of summer has on men and women. Alcaeus mentions in 347 Voigt that while the heat from Sirius the Dog Star weakens the limbs and minds of men, it at the same time awakens intense depravity in women (μιαρώταται). Hesiod (*WD* 582-88) reflects a similar sentiment about the effect of heat on men, but his women become intensely lustfull (μαχλόταται).

For Greek and Roman males the female body was a mysterious object, and it is no surprise that they believe that in similar situations their bodies act differently than those of males. Plutarch (*Quaest. Conv.* 3.3.650, 3.4.650-1) also discusses the different effects heat has on the male and female body, and Pliny (*NH* 22.86) even reports that wine mixed with artichoke acts as an aphrodisiac in women. Although these two later writers are probably alluding to the passages of Hesiod and Alcaeus for attestation, Page (1955, 305) is right to point out that Hesiod and Alcaeus refer to heat, artichoke, and wine simply as seasonal indicators, and that there is no connection between these and an increase in sexual desire. By studying modern Greek farming songs, Petropoulos (1994, 81) also contends that the idea that women act differently during the summer actually has little to do with sexuality, but more to do with agrarian poetic tradition. Through analysis of Greek agrarian rituals, this paper will show that Alcaeus’ μιαρώταται should not be read in the same way as Hesiod’s μαχλόταται, that is, Alcaeus is not referring to any heightened sexual depravity of women during the summer, but is instead alluding to a completely different type of summertime female behavior*.*

The exact meaning of Alcaeus’ μιαρώταται has confused scholars for some time. Powell’s (1926, 185) emendation of μιαρώταται to φιαρώταται (plumpest) is a creative effort, but Bowra, Lattimore and Page are correct to dispute it. However, their own analyses do nothing more than equate μιαρώταται and μαχλόταται, making Alcaeus’ word an unusual choice for the context. The base meaning of μιαρός (defiled, polluted) has strong ritualistic undertones, and the term μιαρὰ ἡμέρα is directly applied by Hesychius to the Anthesteria festival that occurs in the spring. This festival celebrated the symbolic opening of wine jugs that have been fermenting since autumn and was a time of frivolity, in stark contrast to the solemnity of the other major agrarian festival, the Thesmophoria (Brumfield, 1981). Considering wine has a strong association with blood and ritual sacrifice and the unsanctioned female behavior the Anthesteria encouraged, it is no surprise why Hesychius and others label the festival μιαρός (Burkert, 1985).

Another festival that heavily involves the ritualistic drinking of wine and includes female behavior male poets might term μιαρός is the Adonia. The celebrants, primarily women, mourn the death of Adonis with ritualistic plant sacrifices and abundant drinking on rooftops. Although Aristophanes (*Lysistrata,* 395) and others describe this festival in its Attic context, there is evidence that the cult was fully developed in Sappho’s circle on Lesbos around 600 (Sappho 140, 168 LP), and if so then the festival would almost certainly have been familiar to Alcaeus. Since the Adonia occurs at the exact time of the rising of Sirius, Alcaeus was perhaps not trying to imitate the sentiment of Hesiod’s μαχλόταται (most depraved, lustful) at all, but was instead referencing a common tradition relating to the characteristics of female summertime ritual and perhaps the Adonia in particular. Thus the attempts to read the Hesiodic μαχλόταται as a synonym of the Alcaic μιαρώταται, or to try to explain a secondary meaning to μιαρός that only seems to occur here, are unnecessary. For Alcaeus, μιαρώταται serves the same purpose as the artichoke, cicada, wine, and the Dog Star Sirius, simply as a temporal indicator of the season in which the Adonia took place.

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