

WORDPLAY IN ANCIENT GREECE

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The Greek Anthology is a collection of Greek poetry compiled by Constantine Cephalas during the 10th century, known today from the only extant copy in the Palatine Library at Heidelberg. David Singmaster recently discovered that this work contains hundreds of mathematical puzzles. His 1984 article on this topic in the Mathematical Spectrum gives an excellent overview of these; however, they are rarely challenging and often repetitive.

Intrigued, I decided to find out what other puzzles were to be found. I discovered there was a long bookshelf of translations of the Anthology into many languages; following Singmaster, I obtained the five volume dual-language edition by W.R. Paton which is one of the few complete collections.

To my taste, it is a dry work consisting of thousands of epigrams culled from the 7th century BC to the 5th century AD. However, there are a fair number of word puzzles mixed in. As might be expected, these consist principally of enigmas and riddles. From historical essays in books such as Helene Hovanec's The Puzzler's Paradise, I was well aware that the enigma and the riddle were the mainstays of ancient word puzzling. (The famous Riddle of the Sphinx appears in Book XIV, No.64.) It is interesting to find so many together; 55 word puzzles appear in Book XIV of Volume 5. (It is always embarrassing how surprised modern puzzlers are that ancient people showed any ingenuity.) The answers are typically common objects or personalities, real or mythical, of the time. As an example, consider "One wind, two ships, ten sailors rowing, and one steersman directs both." (Answer: the double flute, with the fingers acting as sailors.) In 1916 Paton found it necessary to translate lewd riddles into Latin - for those sensitive souls who knew Greek but not Latin?

I was surprised by the amount of word play used. Quite often, similar words are punned and occasionally we are tantalizingly told that some puns do not translate. Otherwise the letter deletion puzzle seems to be the most common. Consider the beheading "I am member of a man; wherefore iron cuts me. If you take away one letter the sun sets." (Answer: if you know your Greek you will see nail becomes night.) "If you put one hundred in the middle of a burning fire, you will find the son and slayer of a virgin." (Answer: Pyrrhus is formed by putting rho (= 100) into fire.) One puzzle takes sandal into scandal, which interestingly is preserved in English. Two puzzles are based on the word foot,

the first successive beheadments to ear, pig and 200, and the second two beheadments and a curtailment to where. The first of two charade puzzles is "My whole is an island; my first the lowing of a cow, and my second what a creditor says." (Answer: Rhodes is moo and give.) The second charade has the answer panther, broken into pan ("universe") and ther ("beast"). There are four puzzles for which Paton does not guess an answer. One is clearly about a Greek personality; the other three are

- No.30 My father is a ram, and a tortoise bore me to him, and
at my birth I slew my parents
- No.39 If one call me an island, he shall tell no falsehood
for of a truth he gave my name to many noises
- No.111 Childless child of childless parents, arrow-bearing, with
a child in me, a lifting up

The Anthology contains word play other than puzzles. Most of it is found in the Satirical Epigrams of Book XI. For example, "Take away, Marcus, the first two letters of Mastauron, and you deserve many of what is left," i.e., stauroi ("crosses"). Similarly, Marcos deserves arcos (a late form of "bear"), and Opianus, a hard-drinking governor, becomes pianus ("drinking"). Two other examples are

Corakes [crows] and colakes [flatterers] are only distinguished by Rho and Lambda. Therefore a crow and a lick-spittle flatterer are the same thing. So, my good sir, beware of this beast, knowing that flatterers are crows that pick the living too.

Chilon and licking have the same letters. But what does that matter? For Chilon licks whether they are the same or not.

Some of the others are even more acerbic!

Other example of word play are found in Miscellanea, Book XV. Here we find six examples of poetry written to form shapes - pan-pipes, an axe, a pair of wings, two altars, and an egg. Oddly, some of the examples are not meant to be read in the order the lines appear. One example, an altar, is also an acrostic, spelling out "Olympian, mayst thou sacrifice for many years."