ENGL 115: Antiquity in Pieces
Professor Anna Grant

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Hannah Rubin

The Role of Music, Women, and Wine at Symposia

by Hannah Rubin ’27

The Greek symposia mediated class and gender roles by establishing a space where men could interact with women and musicians, drinking wine all the while. My paper will focus on the intersecting role of women and music by examining a kylix (a wide, shallow bowl used to drink wine) from the Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG) (Matheson, 42). Just one of myriad

references to various aspects of symposia in art and literature, the kylix features a male symposia guest engaging in sexual activity with a female musician. Such a scene was by no means unusual at symposia. In fact, it would not be a stretch to say that the male guest who used this kylix engaged in the same behaviors he saw represented on his drinkware. An intricate web of relationships thus emerges between art about symposia and the symposia itself, art that

elaborates and commentates upon yet another layer of relationships between elite male symposia guests and lower class musicians and women. The YUAG kylix to some extent mirrors sympotic ideals by depicting an unequal power dynamic between men and female musicians. However, upon further examination, it becomes clear that elite Greek men feared that the influential power of wine, women, and music might threaten “appropriate” behavioral conventions.

References to symposia, which abound in genres as diverse as lyric poetry and comedy to biographies, were not only made in reminiscence. (Hobden, 5). In fact, the symposia often

referenced itself in real-time, allowing us to better understand how the symposiasts propagated elite values. As I mentioned above, men drunk wine from kylixes depicting symposia. In a similar vein, poems about symposia were sung at symposia. Scholar Fiona Hobden uses the term "metasymptotic" to describe how the symposia "talked about itself," offering an example by the poet Xenophon (Hobden, 22):

> Now the floor is clean and everyone's hands and the cups too; someone distributes woven garlands, and another offers sweet-smelling perfume in a dish; a krater stands full of merriment; other wine stands ready, which promises never to run out
> … It is necessary for men of sound mind first to hymn the gods with auspicious words and pure stories, pouring libations and praying to be able to act justly, for this is what we try our hands at, not insolence; to drink so much as one can hold and arrive home without a servant, unless very old… (Hobden, 26).

The first part of the poetic excerpt is observations, while the second is a list of recommendations. Immediately, the word "now" draws a thread between the fictional world of the poem with the reality of the symposia. As the poem continues and the setting develops, the singer weaves both real and imagined symposia into a living tapestry. In other words, "the performance shapes [the guests'] awareness of the present and gives that present definition, as it collapses into the imagined symposion" (Hobden, 26 and 27). Xenophon's poem demonstrates the power of song to facilitate a fusion between real and imaginary worlds, and furthermore, of an imaginary world to shape real human perspectives. I would like to suggest the same real-imaginary fusion existed for other symposia-themed art, such as the YUAG kylix. As art historian Francis Lissarrague puts it "the time for poetic performance and the place for the privileged reception of images

coincide, putting into symmetry the reflective properties of song and imagery, both of which take their audience as their subject" (135). Sympotic song had the power to perpetuate the status quo or provoke thought, shaping the real-time experience of symposia guests.

Let's consider how one such "metasymptotic" experience might affect a male symposium guest around the turn of the sixth century B.C. He takes a sip of wine, then peers at the kylix for a closer look. Immediately, two concentric circles draw his gaze to the image which they enclose. One figure, a man just like himself (and almost as handsome – what a coincidence!) reclines bare-chested on a patterned chair, sharing an enraptured glance with a naked female. His leg is wrapped over hers, while his arm encircles her neck. One of the female's arms seems to caress his hair, while in her other arm she brandishes an aulos (double pipe) high above her head. Without doubt, such a provocative image would prompt the man to reflect on his relationship with his female and musician companions at the symposia.

To consider where his reflections might lead him, we must first explore what certain aforementioned details of the image convey. As mentioned above, the figures in the kylix are located at its center and surrounded by two circles, focusing our attention on the people. The man and woman are the main subjects of this image. The fact that the man is reclining suggests he is a member of the wealthy elite, while the woman is likely a lower-class entertainer: a musician and possibly a courtesan. The man's body position with respect to the woman suggests he has physical power over her, as she would not be able to easily move her legs nor her head. However, the woman does have one hand physically free for her aulos which she holds higher than both figures. On a more abstract level, this image suggests that despite the power imbalance between men and women due to class and gender, the female musician retains some level of agency, in spite of – or perhaps because of – her lower position in society. Male elite

were no doubt attracted to the female musician because of her ability to elicit sensual pleasure through her body and her song. But as we will see, precisely *because* of that sensual pleasure, they did not want to be associated with her.

Before exploring how the kylix represents Greek music it will be helpful to consider varying attitudes on the social role of music. As soloists and accompanists for poetry, musicians often performed at symposia. Paid or enslaved pipers such as the woman on the kylix were especially common, though most pipers were male. As implied by the kylix, there was a sharp divide between banquet guests and entertainers. Writing around a century after this kylix's creation, Aristotle said "we reject [professional] education and practice in [musical] instruments, and we assign technical music-making to the contests, for the performer does not participate in that for the sake of virtue but for the pleasure of listeners, and it is a coarse pleasure. Hence, we do not regard it as an [appropriate] activity for free men… it causes [its practitioners] to become vulgar people." In other words, by provoking unrefined pleasure in listeners (as opposed to advancing some sort of greater good) musicians themselves would become unrefined. The word "become" indicates that musicians were not unrefined people from birth; rather, frequent engagement with music caused that change. Around the same time, Xenophon wrote in his socratic dialogue, *The Symposium,* that "[musicians], gentlemen, appear quite able to entertain us. Yet I know we regard ourselves as much superior to them." Those two accounts of musicians at symposia portray an almost paradoxical dynamic: while musicians were necessary for guests' entertainment, the guests thought of musicians as lesser, even vulgar.

Nonetheless, being knowledgeable about music was not without honor among the Greek public. Aristotle noticed that musicians referred to themselves by the Greek term

technitai, which had a positive connotation. Musical contests and festivals provided opportunities for musicians and even some aristocrats to showcase their expertise, with public honors and admiration for the winners. Competitions were held across Greece for the aulos – the instrument

the women on the YUAG kylix holds. In fact, an elite banquet provided opportunity for its guests to demonstrate their education in the field of mousike. After the opening libation melody and hymn, each symposiast would have been expected to perform by either reciting from memory or singing something original. Those who did not participate, Bundrick notes, "were shown to be uncultured" (81). A cup described by Lissarrague provides further evidence of group singing at symposia by showing a singing youth who holds a bough of myrtle. Lissarrague explains how the singing unfolded like a relay: "'as a myrtle branch is passed from left to right'... each guest would sing in turn on a given topic or continue a song begun by his neighbor" (Lissarrague,

128-129). I established earlier that symposia guests saw some musicians as uncultured. However, we can now see that these same symposia guests, if they chose not to participate in drinking songs, paradoxically took on this "uncultured" role for themselves.

A similar situation of simultaneous rejection and participation arises with the aulos, the instrument the women holds in the YUAG kylix. Present at symposia, raucous parties, and series occasions alike, Greeks viewed the aulos with ambivalence. One one side, we have Aristotle, who believed "training in aulos-playing contributes nothing to the intelligence, knowledge, and skill being things that we attribute to Athena" (Bundrick, 36). Uncomfortable with the range of emotions aulos music could express, such as "fear, grief, ecstacy [and] delight," Aristotle thought the aulos belonged more to "wild revelry" than "edification"

(Klavan, 25-26). Bundrick confirms there are indeed numerous vase paintings which present the aulos “in raucous or erotic circumstances” and cites the YUAG kylix as an example (38). However, she clarifies that the aulos also featured in scenes with “muses, schoolboys, and other ‘respectable’ characters” and, at least in the fifth century BC., was used in education (Bundrick, 38-39). Numerous aulos playing contests across Greece further point to the instrument’s popularity (Klavan). Zooming out, we can see that Greeks played the aulos in a variety of settings, some labeled indecent and others respectable. Aulos music played during the libation melody and hymn at symposia represents a respectable form of music. Aulos music at wild drinking parties, in contrast, was not considered respectable. Greek elite might have argued a similar divide existed between the respectable symposium guests and people present at inappropriate wild drinking parties.

We can further explicate vacillating elite views on music by considering the relationship between music and wine. Lissarrague writes that at symposia “each can become a metaphor for the other” and cites a line from the poet Pindar, describing the performer of a choral poem “You are a true messenger… sweet mixing bowl of vociferous song” (123). Here, the singer represents the vessel in which the wine is mixed, while the poetry, and hence the song, represents the wine (Lissarrague, 123). Perhaps Aristotle’s rejection of music as a virtuous activity owed itself to the equation between wine and music in many vase paintings and poetry. As historian Sheramy Bundrick suggests, "[like wine,] music could be an uplifting force, but could also bring its own form of madness” (106). Elite society, as seen above with the aulos, approved of music and wine when enjoyed in an appropriate manner. Ultimately, symposia-goers and musicians existed in a kind of symbiotic relationship, each relying on the other. The musicians were proud of their craft; symposia gave them numerous opportunities to

perform. Symposium guests might have thought themselves superior to the pipers and singers, but without doubt, music they produced served as a welcome source of pleasure. Like wine, music served as a well for symposiasts to dip their toes into, beneficial in moderation yet repulsive in excess.

Wine and music were not the only pleasures available to men at symposia. Equally sought after were women. When the host of an elite banquet hired a piper and a dancer, he intended not only to provide musical entertainment, but also "an exhibit of royal wealth" and "a sexually alluring spectacle, especially when the piper or dancer was female" (Cosgrove, chapter 4). Bundrick sums it up well when she writes female entertainers "were often welcomed for their erotic skills as much as their musical ones" (82). While female entertainers may have been welcomed by male guests, they were certainly not regarded as equal. Sometimes subject to guest's sexual whims, violence, and orders, female entertainers were even lumped together with food, wine, and physical amenities by writers. According to a list by the philosopher Polemon, female pipers – like the one painted on the YUAG kylix – were the lowest of the low (Cosgrove, chapter 4). As was the case with music and wine, males embraced (often literally) the female presence at symposia. However, outside the symposia, boundaries were put in place to prevent transgressions of appropriate elite behavior.

Like music and wine, men's relationships with women were subject to subtle regulations with moral consequences. As urbanization continued in classical Greece, men had easier access to one another's female kin, causing male sexual urges to "constitute a public danger" (Henry and James, 88). Consequently, many laws were enacted to regulate female sexuality and prostitution. Classicists Madeleine Henry and Sharon James describe how "the

slave prostitute was a civic necessity for peaceable relations among citizen men" (88). The sympotic hetaira, or female companion, was the aristocratic equivalent of a slave prostitute (88). While males were the ones experiencing the dangerous sexual urges, the urges themselves were provoked by women, implying that laws were put in place because males perceived women as dangerous. By being "available" for male enjoyment at the symposia, hetaira thus reduced the likelihood of dangerous male sexual urges outside of the symposia in regular life.

Classics professor Kathryn Topper notes that representing events of a symposium was not necessarily the primary purpose of scenes on Greek pottery (135). Rather, scenes of symposia gave painters the chance to explore ideas such as gender and class relations. Such is the case for the YUAG kylix. While drinking from this kylix, a male symposium guest would no doubt see the woman and her instrument and reflect on his relationship to music, women, and wine. On the surface, men had power over women and musicians, as well as the ability to drink however much they chose. However, the boundaries elite society created to divide appropriate and inappropriate enjoyment of symposial pleasures existed because women, musicians, and drink each had their own power over men. Consequently, the symposia functioned as a specific setting where men could enjoy song, females, and drink without soiling their status as members of the elite.

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