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The Laughter That Subverts: The "Witty Sayings" of Courtesans in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai*

This paper examines the so-called "witty sayings" of courtesans, or *chreiai*, as found in Athenaeus' quotation of Machon at *Deipnosophistai* 13. 577d-583d. A close analysis of the content and context of these remarks reveals a complex verbal dynamic in which obscene punning subverts normative class and gender categories. This analysis refutes an earlier assessment of the hetaira's speech as contributing to her subordination and objectification (Henry 1992: 263-65; and 2000: 504) and instead identifies it with sympotic discourse.

Although they do not appear as interlocutors at Athenaeus' table, women, namely prostitutes and other female entertainers, did participate in the performance culture of the symposium: hetairas tell riddles (Ath. 13. 58a-d; cf. Anaxilas fr. ii. 270 Kock; Plut. *Plut. Conv. sept. sap.* 150e; Martin 2001: 61, 71), engage in Socratic discourse (Xen. *Mem.* 3.11.10-16; Pl. *Men.*), and engage in verbal punning, or *chreiai* (Ath. 4. 162b-e; Anderson 2000: 318-19; cf. Plu. 2.218a. ib.78f.). In Athenaeus, Machon, as salaciously quoted by Myrtilus, depicts courtesans as *euthiktoi pros tas apantêseis*, "skilled at the witty come-back" (Ath. 13. 583f). The hetaira is urbane and sophisticated (*asteia* or *astikê*, cf. Lamia 577d; Mania 578f; Gnathaena, 583f), while her impressive ability to quote Greek tragedy chapter and verse marks her as educated (*paideia*) and erudite (*mathêmasi*, Ath. 13. 583f-84a), much like the dining Sophists who quote her.

These *chreiai* frequently involve obscene double meanings and often make use of the technique of comic incongruity, especially in the case of tragic allusion (Ath. 13. 577d; for other examples, cf. 13.579a; 582a). By taking a tragic phrase or statement out of context and imbuing it with obscene meaning, the hetaira creates a humorous incongruity appropriate to the mocking atmosphere of the symposium and the comic theater. More crudely obscene puns serve to diminish an interlocutor after he has made a degrading sexual request (Ath. 13. 577f; 579d; 580f-81a; 587f). Still other anecdotes involve the quick put down of lower class characters, such as parasites, pretenders, blacksmiths and athletes (579b; 580d; 581c-582bc).

The courtesan's ridicule is an example of what Winkler has identified as subversive laughter (Winkler 1990: 188-209) and thus bears a resemblance to the obscene mocking that characterized some female religious festivals in classical Athens, particularly the Thesmophoria and the Adonia. Obscene punning and witty rejoinders promote the laughter that subverts, overturning normative class and gender distinctions of king and courtesan, male and female, citizen and foreigner. This banter resembles the competitive exchanges of Athenaeus' own dining sophists whose quick retorts and clever puns turn the tables on the interlocutor and establish the superiority of the speaker (Ath. 13. 567a-b; for another male version, cf. Philostr. *VS* 541; see also Anderson 2000: 316-217).