

A Poem to a Mosquito

by R.A. Faber

Not all classical poetry concerns serious themes and heroic subjects. Whereas Homer, Vergil, and other great poets broach universal issues and write in the high style, there are numerous other Greek and Latin poets who write in a humbler mode and deal with light and frivolous subjects. The so-called *Greek Anthology*, a tenth-century AD collection of numerous short poems by various authors of different times, is one source for poetry of this lighter sort. In addition to real epitaphs, dedications and celebratory inscriptions, the Anthology contains non-real, literary epigrams. These epigrams provide humorous twists on otherwise worn-out topics, parodies of well-known poems or motifs, or pointed reworkings of traditional subjects.

While many of the poems in the Anthology are of the later classical period or even post-classical, some are as old as the early Hellenistic age. Meleager of Gadara, who was active between 110 and 90 BC, had compiled about forty short poems by authors of the Hellenistic

period in an anthology he entitled "Garland"; the "Garland" in turn became part of the much larger and later collection of the *Greek Anthology*. Meleager himself was no mean epigrammatist, and among the "flowers" that comprise his collection he inserted poems of his own composition. It is one of Meleager's poems we shall consider here.

Deemed by one of the modern editors of the Anthology to be among the best epigrammatists, Meleager writes in a style that is concise, fresh and witty. The wide range of subjects and themes treated by Meleager reveal the author's skills: epitaphs, autobiography, riddles and love poems are the subjects of his epigrams. Ranging in tone from bitter to playful, Meleager's poems show that he is indeed a master of the short poem. Able to make learned allusions and obscure references, Meleager also composed simple and direct poetry. The artifice of one poem is balanced with the apparently real circumstance of another. And by involving real persons in his epigrams, Meleager lends this literary genre a life-like quality not seen in other works. Consider, for example, the following epigram, addressed to a mosquito:

- 1 *Mosquito, you swift messenger, please fly as my speedy courier
And just touching the ears of Zenophila whisper these words:
"Restless, he is waiting for you, while you, forgetful of your love,
lie sleeping."
Then, singer beloved of the Muses, fly away. Speak softly to her, lest*
- 5 *You wake her partner so that he cause her pain out of jealousy for
me.
And if you lead the girl to me, I'll clothe you with the lion's skin,
Mosquito, and give you a club to carry in your hand.*

Written to a most unlikely addressee, this little poem begins with a striking opening. Rather than addressing Eros, the god of love, or Hermes, the messenger god, the poet beseeches the lowliest of creatures, a mosquito, to perform the important duty of summoning his (supposed) girlfriend, Zenophila. What is more, the poet describes the insect with Homeric epic language: "swift messenger". Such words are normally seen in the *Iliad* in the context of divine signs and favourable portents! But the poet goes even further in the abnormal

praise of the normally pesky critter, calling it “beloved of the Muses”. Anyone who has listened to the monotonous hum of the mosquito would beg to differ with Meleager on the quality of the mosquito’s music. Surely the poet is flattering the mosquito so that it will comply with his wishes.

The message the winged courier must bring is at the heart of the poem. The poet asks the insect to whisper into Zenophila’s ear: “Restless, he is waiting for you, while you, forgetful of your love, lie sleeping.” This message reveals an important fact about the relationship between the poet and his girlfriend: while he lies awake in passion, she sleeps deeply. It appears that the man’s feelings are not exactly reciprocated by Zenophila! That the feelings of love are not mutual is revealed more sharply in the line which follows the message: Zenophila has another friend. It now becomes clear that the mosquito’s task is not an easy one. Not only must it rouse Zenophila from sleep, but it must convince her to come to the poet.

In the final couplet the poet subtly confesses that a herculean task awaits the mosquito. It is like a labour of Heracles to bring Zenophila to Meleager. Noted for his physical prowess, Heracles performed seemingly impossible deeds. Bringing Cerberus, the triple-headed hound of the Underworld, to his master Eurystheus, was one of the twelve labours. Another deed of Heracles was to prevent Thanatos, the god of death, from carrying off Alcestis, the young bride of king Admetus. In what may be an allusion to this deed, Meleager challenges the mosquito to lead the young woman Zenophila from the embrace of the rival to the poet.

The poem ends with an incongruous and humorous point. Should the mosquito be successful in bringing Zenophila to the poet, it will be rewarded handsomely. Indeed, the poet promises to decorate the mosquito with the attributes of Heracles himself: the skin of the Nemean lion, and the over-sized wooden club. The picture that emerges underscores Meleager’s ability to take a common subject and present it in an uncommon way: a sweetly humming courier-mosquito, dressed in a lion’s pelt and carrying a mighty club!