

One of the minor poets of the so-called Hellenistic period was Simias of Rhodes. Very little is known of this writer and only a few of his works survive. Active between 290 and 270 BC, Simias was both a poet and a scholar. Like his better-known contemporaries Callimachus and Apollonius, Simias was a grammarian who studied the details of the Greek language and literature. We know that he published four books on "rare words" (*Glossai*) to explain the etymology and usage of rare or outdated words. He also wrote four books of diverse poetry, which included poems with titles such as "Apollo" and "Gorgo", the latter perhaps addressed to or about his mistress. The collection also included epigrams and poems in novel meters.

Simias' extant works display features of style and subject matter common to Hellenistic poetry. Novel and learned treatment of myth and the reworking of well-known topics are features of the verse of this time. Moreover, poets strove to place their works in the long tradition of Greek literature by alluding to earlier writers in their genres. The poems are self-conscious in that they invite the reader to observe the influence of poetic tradition as well as the originality of each new creation. The originality often lay in ostensibly unpretentious topics. One topic poets of the time favoured was love: more than the preceding generations of Greek poets, the writers of the third and second centuries BC were fascinated with the power of Eros. Poets explored every aspect of the emotions of affection, love, and lust, and depicted them in all the colours with which the mythical and real worlds presented them. Poets also experimented with writing in different dialects, with using innovative meters, and with blurring the distinctions between genres. Though Hellenistic poems are sometimes pedantic, they are more often witty and humorous.

Simias' claim to fame is that he is the first known Greek writer to compose "pattern poetry" (*Technopaegnia*). Pattern poetry, also called "concrete" or "emblem" poetry by literary critics, consists of verses of various lengths which together form a particular shape on the page. Thus the visual form of the text on the page enhances the meaning of the poem. Though scholars differ on the origins of Greek pattern poems, it appears plausible that this contrived but playful presentation of poetry may derive from prose texts inscribed on irregularly shaped objects which were dedicated or erected for commemorative reasons. Only three poems of this sort written by Simias are extant: *Wings*, *Axe*, and *Egg*.

Pattern poems were not the specialty of Simias alone; the pastoral poet Theocritus composed *Syrinx* in the form of a Pan-pipe and a certain

Dosiadas wrote *Bomos* in the shape of an altar. Readers of English literature recall that George Herbert wrote *Easter Wings* and *Altar* as pattern poems, and that the *Mouse's Tail / Tale* in *Alice in Wonderland* was also composed to produce a visual effect. In the twentieth century concrete poetry became quite common, and has moved from being frivolous poetry to a serious 'genre'.

What follows is an idiomatic translation of Simias' *Wings*. The poem consists of two 'wings', each of which is composed of six 'feathers' (lines) of decreasing length. The poem pretends to be part of a statue of Eros, who appears not like the Cupid we know from Valentine cards but as a bearded child! The poem offers an explanation for this grotesque depiction of Eros: Love is ancient, one of the oldest forces in the universe, hence bearded. At the same time Love is a winged child, a youthful emotion which alights wherever and whenever it wills. The poem reveals some influence of Orphic theology, in which Eros is the demiurge who ruled the universe after the demise of Ouranos and Gaia. Love established a new command, one not based on might, fear, and bloodshed. What Simias has done in this poem is to combine the religious, philosophical attributes of Eros with the common Hellenistic portrayal of Love as a winged little boy.

"Look at me, the lord of the deep-bosomed earth, who overthrew Ouranos,  
and let it not frighten you that I, though small, should have  
a shaggy beard. For I was born when Necessity  
ruled and kept apart by sullen laws  
all that crept or flew  
through Air  
or the Void.

I am not called the  
swift-winged child of Aphrodite and Ares,  
that god of war, for my rule wasn't by force but by  
gentle persuasion. The earth, deep sea, and bronze heaven yielded  
to me, and I held the aged sceptre and established laws for the gods."