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GREEK VERSES FROM STABIAE

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Excavations of the ‘Villa of Ariadne’ in Stabiae in 1965 brought to light, on the wall of one of its rooms, a Greek graffito of the 1st century A.D., which L. d’Orsi published in 1968¹:

- 1 Εἴ τις καλὸς γενόμενος
 2 οὐκ ἔδωκε πυγίσαι· ἐκίνος καλῆς
 3 ἔρασθεῖς μὴ τύχοι βεινήμα-
 4 τος

The words καλῆς ἔρασθεῖς and what follows form an acceptable iambic trimeter. What precedes, as it stands in the graffito, is not perfectly iambic. It is close enough, though, to suggest that it may be a misquotation of a trimeter.² For example, ἐκκίνος is unnecessary for the sense and looks like an intrusion that would have the effect of converting into the looser, possibly more conversational, scheme of protasis and apodosis (‘if someone did not give, let him not get’) a simple, more concise, perhaps more ‘literary’, model (‘let whoever did not give, not get’).³ Let us dismiss ἐκκίνος. What prevents the rest, εἴ τις . . . πυγίσαι, from scanning as a trimeter is the prosaic γενόμενος. The word is no doubt our scribbler’s variation on what stood in an original that he half-knew; it could easily be a corruption of γ’ ὦν.⁴

I would reconstruct the scribbler’s ‘model’:

Εἴ τις καλὸς γ’ ὦν οὐκ ἔδωκε πυγίσαι
 καλῆς ἔρασθεῖς μὴ τύχοι βινήματος.

As poetry, if the proposed reconstruction is correct, the two-liner is hardly even middling, but its almost mechanical parallelisms, καλὸς / καλῆς followed by participles before the caesurae, the ‘not giving’ versus the ‘not getting’ of οὐκ ἔδωκε / μὴ τύχοι, and the pair πυγίσαι / βινήματος, no doubt would have made it easy to quote. ‘The most familiar quotations’, Carl van Doren reminds us (*Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* [Oxford 1941] vii), ‘are the most likely to be misquoted’. May we assume that the two lines were quoted and familiar in 1st-century Stabiae?

Athens

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¹ ‘Un graffito greco di Stabia’, *Parola del Passato* 23 (1968) 228–30, with photographs. Instead of πυγίσαι, d’Orsi printed πυγίσαι, but the penult is short: cf. *AP* 9.317.2 ἔπυγισσά. The graffito has the punctuation after πυγίσαι. Βίνημα, spelled here βείν-, is a new word, as d’Orsi remarked.

² C. Gallavotti, ‘P. Oxy. 3070 e un graffito di Stabia’, *Museum Criticum* 13–14 (1978–79) 363–39, prefers to recognize lyric meter in the lines as they stand.

³ It may seem natural to assume that meter, especially a familiar one, would be the most memorable feature of any verse passage, and that any misquotation would preserve the metrical shape if nothing else; it is enough to cite one instance *contra*, from nearby Pompeii, of corruption of verse into prose. There the jingle *Quisquis amat valeat, pereat qui nescit amare; bis tanto pereat quisquis amare vetat* seems to have been popular, for it occurs in three graffiti (Ernst Diehl, *Pompeianische Wandinschriften und Verwandtes* [Bonn 1910], nos. 593ff.) more or less intact. A fourth Pompeian graffito, whose writer obviously had the jingle in the back of his mind, runs *Siquis amat valeat, quisquis vetat male pereat* (*CIL* IV [Suppl. 3] 9202, with notes by M. Della Corte, *Atti R. Accad. Nap.* 13 (1933–34) 325–31); in *quisquis . . . pereat*, which no doubt shows the influence of everyday speech, he spoils the meter.

⁴ I owe the conjecture to Professor R. Merkelbach.