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WHOSE BABY? A NOTE ON P. OXY. 744

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WHOSE BABY? A NOTE ON P. OXY. 744

For Reinhold Merkelbach
on his 80th birthday

In June 1 B.C. Hilarion in Alexandria sent to his wife Alis¹ a letter (P.Oxy. 744)² which has gained an unenviable notoriety by reason of what the editors call “a rather curious injunction” in ll. 8–10. I suspect that what seems the obvious interpretation of this sentence is wrong, and that though the letter cannot escape its status as unique documentary testimony to the prejudice against girls encapsulated in a famous fragment of Posidippus’ Hermaphroditus (F 12),³ Hilarion was not as callous as he has generally been thought to be.

Ἰλαρίων(α) Ἄλιτι τῆι ἀδελφῆι πλεῖστα χαί-
ρειν καὶ Βεροῦτι τῆι κυρίαί μου καὶ Ἀπολλω-
νάριν. γίνωσκε ὡς ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἐν Ἀλεξαν-
δρέαι ἴσμεν· μὴ ἀγωνιάις ἐὰν ὅλως εἰσ-
πορεύονται, ἐγὼ ἐν Ἀλεξανδρέαι μένω. 5
ἔρωτῶ σε καὶ παρακαλῶ σε ἐπιμελή-
θι τῶι παιδίωι καὶ ἐὰν εὐθὺς ὀψώνι-
ον λάβωμεν ἀποστελῶ σε ἄνω. ἐὰν
πολλαπολλων τέκης, ἐὰν ἦν ἄρσε-
νον ἄφες, ἐὰν ἦν θήλεα ἔκβαλε. 10
εἴρηκας δὲ Ἀφροδισιᾶτι ὅτι μὴ με
ἐπιλάθης· πῶς δύναμαί σε ἐπι-
λαθεῖν; ἐρωτῶ σε οὖν ἵνα μὴ ἀγω-
νιάσης.

(ἔτους) κθ Καίσαρος Παῦνι κγ
(Verso) Ἰλαρίων Ἄλιτι ἀπόδος

Hilarion’s mistake as to the case of his first word demonstrates that he was somewhat careless, and there are several points where we might be inclined to correct what he wrote. Certainly the inconsistency between μὴ ἀγωνιάις (4) and μὴ ἀγωνιάσης (13 f.) is hard to understand, and Wilamowitz (GGA 166 (1904), 662) was perhaps right to restore the aorist in 4, and to insert δ’ after ἐγὼ in 5.⁴

I would suggest that a further correction, merely the deletion of one letter, is required in his instructions (8–10) regarding an expected addition to his household. These are strikingly out of keeping with the otherwise affectionate tone of his letter, and his apparent indifference to his wife’s welfare in facing the uncertainties of childbirth makes his other expressions of concern ring rather hollow.

¹ It seems to be generally accepted that Hilarion and Alis are husband and wife, whether or not they are also brother and sister.

² Ed. pr. B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 4 (1904), 243 f.; for a good photograph see *Greece and Rome* 21 (1952), Plate cxxiv.

³ υἱὸν τρέφει πᾶς κἂν πένης τις ὦν τύχηι, θυγατέρα δ’ ἐκτίθησι κἂν ἦι πλούσιος.

⁴ Some prefer a different punctuation, with a stop after μὴ ἀγωνιάις, then μενῶ, not μένω, in 5 (so A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar, *Select Papyri* 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1932), 294 f., No. 105. On ἐπιμελήθι for ἐπιμελήθητι see F. T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* 2 (Milan, 1981), 357; he suggests that such forms developed by analogy with ἴσθι, βῆθι, γνῶθι, etc.

We may accept the exposure of unwanted infants as a well established method of family limitation in the Graeco-Roman world, but New Comedy and the novel show that, as we should expect, this expedient was only adopted with some reluctance, and we might feel some surprise that Hilarion deals with the issue so briskly. We might have expected him to support his sentence of infanticide against a baby daughter with further argument, referring perhaps to the interests of the child they already have and the problems arising from their restricted income, or reminding Alis of a decision previously agreed. It might have been wise for him to suggest who might be asked to dispose of the infant, a highly ungenial task likely to be beyond the capacity of a newly delivered mother.⁵

Absentee husbands in such circumstances could hardly be confident that their wishes would prevail against that *miser cordia* and *animus maternus* which led Sostrata, in Terence's *Hautontimorumenos* (627 ff.), to evade her husband's orders that if her child was a girl, she should not be allowed to live.⁶ A young mother succeeds in outwitting similar infanticidal instructions in Apuleius (*Met.* 10. 23).⁷ In a reversal of this type of subterfuge Chrysis in Menander's *Samia*, masterminding a strategem to assist the cause of young love, judges that there is no undue risk to her position as Demeas' concubine in pretending that she has allowed the child of which she was delivered in his absence to live against his wishes (*Sam.* 77–85, 129–136, 353–355, etc.); her situation is precarious, but she does not envisage that her (apparent) failure to co-operate will have serious consequences.⁸

⁵ "It is a regular feature of exposure-tales that the mother makes use of an agent" (K. H. Lee on Eur. *Ion* 956–7).

⁶ It may be inaccurate to term Chremes an "absentee husband"; but it is difficult to imagine that Sostrata could have made her arrangements for the baby (628 f., 649–652) if that quintessential busybody had not been away from home when she gave birth.

⁷ A further case of this sort might well be the background of Menander's *Phasma*.

⁸ Demeas' reasons are not revealed in what survives, nor is it clear whether we should think of a general understanding that he did not want to have any children by Chrysis (as seems to be generally assumed) or instructions relating to the particular circumstances (the text in 132 is much too uncertain to allow the inference that Demeas had not known she was expecting a child before he returned home). From Moschion's account of earlier events we learn of competition for her company before she joined Demeas' household (*Sam.* 21 ff.); I wonder whether she had not been long enough under Demeas' control to remove reasonable doubt about her child's paternity. This speculation was suggested in the first place by 135 f., ἄλλωι με θρέψειν ἔνδον ὑὸν προσδοκᾶις / νόθον; where I find unconvincing Turner's defence of ἄλλωι (Scrittini in onore di Orsolina Montevicchi, ed. E. Bresciani et al. (Bologna, 1980), 413–8) against Austin's conjecture ἀλλ' ἦ (CGFP; see also R. Kassel, *ZPE* 12 (1973), 8 f. = *Kl. Schr.* 297 f.; rather surprisingly not mentioned in the OCT, though adopted by Bain in his edition (1983)). On this interpretation, when Demeas says (130 f.) γαμετῆν ἐταίραν, ὡς ἔοικ' ἐλάνθανον | ἔχων, he should be taken to refer to Chrysis' failure to comply with his wishes (a concubine might be expected to be more amenable than a wife), not to a general principle that only a married woman enjoyed the right to rear her child. This approach suggests an answer to the question why Menander made Moschion Demeas' adopted son, not his son by birth: like Aeschinus in Terence's *Adelphoe*, he has benefited from a wealthy man's wish to combine the satisfaction of having a son with the liberty of a single life (*Ad.* 42 ff.; contrast a widower's testimony (867): *duxī uxorem quam ibi miseriam vidi*; for a detailed catalogue of a nagging wife's demands see Plautus, *Mil.* 679 ff.). – Before the confusion is set straight, the baby is threatened with a worse hazard than exposure or anything Demeas envisaged, from his other grandfather, Niceratus (553–5): πῦρ βοῶν· τὸ παιδίον | φησὶν ἐμπρήσειν ἀπειλῶν. ὑἱδοῦν ὀπτῶμενον | ὄψομαι. Niceratus' reaction to a situation which he finds increasingly baffling should be interpreted in the light of his readiness to cite mythological exempla (495 ff.), combined with Euripides' pervasive and variform influence on Menander. Here a precedent is offered by the Melanippe Sophe, in which, as we learn from the hypothesis (F 665a M; see also W. Luppe, *ZPE* 89 (1991), 15–17), Melanippe's twins, deposited in a cowshed in accordance with the instructions of their father Poseidon, are found by cowherds who φυλαττόμενα μὲν ὑπὸ τοῦ ταύρου, θηλαζόμενα δὲ ὑπὸ μιᾶς τῶν βοῶν ἰδόντες, ὡς βουγενῆ τέρατα τῶι βασιλεῖ προσήνεγκαν. ὁ δὲ τῆι τοῦ πατρὸς Ἑλληνος γνώμη πεισθεὶς ὀλοκαυτοῦν τὰ βρέφη κρίνας Μελανίππη τῆι θυγατρὶ προσέταξεν ἐνταφίους αὐτὰ κοσμήσαι. ἡ δὲ καὶ τὸν κόσμον αὐτοῖς ἐπέθηκε καὶ λόγον εἰς παραίτησιν ἐξέθηκε φιλότιμον. The cruel method of disposal, ὀλοκαυτοῦν, is to be interpreted as an extraordinary expedient against a monstrous birth and the pollution arising from it (see further R. Parker, *Miasma* (Oxford, 1983), 221); Niceratus' melodramatic interpretation of what he has observed is in keeping with his earlier ideas of what Demeas' reaction to Moschion's conduct should be (506 ff.). We might see an affinity with the famous tragedy earlier in the play, where Moschion finds himself, like Melanippe, forced to intercede with his father on his child's behalf without revealing the relationship (137 ff.). (It is probably no more than an odd coincidence that one of the Melanippe plays referred (somewhat surprisingly) to Ἀδώνιδος κῆποι (F 514), and Moschion's baby was conceived at the Adonia.)

Hilarion's businesslike instructions for the disposal of his child strike us as heartless; he takes too much for granted, we might think, his wife's compliance in a matter where it would be reasonable to expect some resistance on her part.

In this, it might be said, we see the difference between literature (in a highly respectable middle-class setting) and life (in a household where three women and a child depend on one wage-earner); comparison is naive. But it seems not to have been noted that Hilarion's positive recommendation is oddly expressed, the long-term commitment of child-rearing being presented in terms of non-interference. ἄφεσ, "let it be", "let it go" (aor. imperat.) is not easily equated with τρέφε. It is significant that many scholars cite this text as if the latter were the term used, often, indeed, giving the impression that they offer a translation rather than a paraphrase.⁹ Verb and tense should make us suspect that Alis is not in fact the mother-to-be; the predominance of the second person singular would have made it easy to write τέκης instead of τέκηι.

This suggestion goes back to the editors and is incorporated in their translation, but has been virtually ignored in subsequent discussions. It is a modest proposal, since Hilarion was clearly a careless writer, and in turn opens up a promising approach to the mysterious (and much discussed) πολλαπολλων. "An der Interpretation dieser Worte . . . hat eine ganze Gelehrten generation ihren Scharfsinn erprobt", wrote Gerd Schäfer in 1973.¹⁰ Wilamowitz confessed himself baffled: "Ich wage es nicht zu analysieren, aber man verlangt ein 'was Gott verhüte' oder allenfalls 'Gott schütze dich'."¹¹ Certainly we feel that this is what Hilarion ought to have said, but parallels remain elusive. Few will find attractive Pfister's interpretation (BPhW 1913 i 926): "Wenn du, was zu viel ist unter dem vielen, mehr als viel ist, oder wovon es schon genug gibt, gebierst, nämlich ein Mädchen"; it was, however, adopted by Sir Eric Turner ("If, as a last straw, you have a baby and it is a girl, expose it").¹² The most generally favoured explanation was suggested by E. Heikel (Eranos 17 (1917) 91–6) and independently by W. B. Sedgwick (CR 46 (1932) 12); comparing Arph. Eccl. 1105, ὅμως δ' ἐάν τι πολλαπολλάκις πάθω, they argued that πολλαπολλῶν expressed probability, being equivalent to a strengthened πολλάκις.¹³ This interpretation enjoys the cautious support of LSJ (s.v. πολὺς III e), and is adopted by Hunt and Edgar in the Loeb ("if by chance"). But, apart from a lack of true parallels, the phrase is remarkably pointless.

With τέκηι the problem takes on a rather different aspect; we now ask who (or what) is the subject, and while we should bear in mind that in a family letter the most vital details may be simply taken for granted, it is an economical hypothesis that the information we seek lurks in πολλαπολλων. "We might suppose", wrote Grenfell and Hunt, "that an animal was the subject and divide πολλαπολλ(ῶν) Ἀπόλλων; but Ἀπόλλων is not a likely name for an animal. Perhaps πολλαπολλων conceals Ἀπολλωνάριον (cf. I.2)." It is certainly not plausible to interpret Hilarion's instructions as guidelines for the reduction of an

⁹ Thus E. Weiss, RE s.v. Kinderaussetzung 465 f.; Iza Biezuńska-Małowist, L' esclavage dans l'Égypte gréco-romaine 2: Période romaine (Archivum Filologiczne 35, Wrocław/Warsaw/Kraków/Gdańsk, 1977), 22; S. B. Pomeroy in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (edd.), Images of Women in Antiquity (London, 1983), 208; ead. in R. S. Bagnall and W. V. Harris (edd.), Studies in Roman Law in Memory of A. Arthur Schiller (London, 1986), 162; C. Patterson, TAPhA 115 (1985), 120; D. Ogden, Greek Bastardy in the Classical and Hellenistic Periods (Oxford, 1996), 65 n. 140; Dale Martin, JRS 86 (1996) 54 n. 53.

¹⁰ "König der Könige" – "Lied der Lieder": Studien zum paronomastischen Intensitätsgenitiv (AHAW 1973. 2 (1974) 115), where a convenient survey of suggestions may be found.

¹¹ GGA 1904, 662; the interpretation which he desiderated was adopted by, among others, S. Witkowski (Epistulae privatae Graecae quae in papyris aetatis Lagidarum servantur (Leipzig, 1906), No. 58).

¹² Greece and Rome 21 (1952) 133. His rendering is obviously rather free, and should probably be taken primarily as indicative of dissatisfaction with other interpretations.

¹³ See also D. Tabachovitz, Eranos 59 (1961), 45–48.

unmanageably numerous litter;¹⁴ but Apollonarion is an attractive candidate for the role of mother-to-be. I suggest that *πολλαπολλων* is not a further mistake but a nickname, based perhaps on childish mispronunciation combined with imputations of greed. Though the hypothesis of a nickname should not lightly be invoked, a family letter provides an entirely appropriate context.

Alis, with this scenario, is expected to dispose of Apollinarion's baby if it is a girl. Apollinarion, apparently, lacks a husband of whose wishes some account will need to be taken; we may think it more likely that she is an unmarried mother than a widow. It is pointless to speculate about her status in Hilarion's family, but she might have found his reaction more favourable than she expected: if her child is a boy, she will be able to keep him.

But if it is a girl, the baby is to be thrown out: *ἐκβαλε*. The verb shocks us:¹⁵ in the context of exposure we are used to *ἐκτίθημι*. In literature, of course, exposed children are picked up and survive; otherwise there is no story. Aristophanes' use of an unmarried girl's exposure of her baby as a metaphor for his own decision to hand over his Banqueters for production by another (*Clouds* 530 f.) reassuringly suggests that in real life the prospects for an apparently healthy child were not bad;¹⁶ we have no means of assessing the soundness of this inference, though the passage casts valuable light on Athenian attitudes. In literature much is made of material tokens of a parent's hope that an exposeling will be rescued. Menander's development of the *γνωρίσματα* motif, and in particular his use of the term in the *Epitrepontes* (303, 331, 341), may easily create the impression that the whole purpose of leaving small keepsakes with an exposed baby was to settle doubts about identity in the event of a subsequent reunion.¹⁷ But primarily such objects have a religious meaning, being intended to protect the child in some way, and, indeed, in New Comedy their effectiveness as amulets or talismans is demonstrated when, against all reasonable expectation, the exposelings are restored to their parents.¹⁸ Hilarion's choice of verb does not encourage the hope that anything will be done to improve the prospects of a female infant.

Abandonment in a much frequented or sacred spot would allow some chance of rescue; but the possible futures for girls were distinctly less good than for boys, the latter being more obviously and variously useful as additions to the (slave-)labour force.¹⁹ For Terence's *Chremes* what awaits a foundling girl is a fate worse than death, and he reproaches his wife for taking half-measures (*Haut.* 634–42):

tot peccata in hac re ostendis. nam iam primum, si meum
imperium exsequi voluisses, interemptam oportuit,
non simulare mortem verbis, re ipsa spem vitae dare.
at id omitto; misericordia, animus maternus; sino.

¹⁴ I have played with the idea that *τέκης* might represent *τέκηι ὕς*; *πολλὰ πολλῶν* could then be understood as an example of the use of the genitive to express intensification (cf. perhaps *Eur. IT* 759). But (apart from any other objection) surplus piglets would naturally be eaten, not thrown out.

¹⁵ Hence its use at *Eur. Ion* 964.

¹⁶ Dover's note ad loc. rather misleadingly speaks of the baby being "left to die in open country"; any suggestion of infanticidal intention reduces the aptness of the image.

¹⁷ It is amazing (though no doubt a tribute to the rhetoric of Menander's *Syr(isc)us*) that this conception is so widely accepted, envisaging as it does a turn of events which in real life would have been wildly improbable, and (if we may judge by modern experiences with those who, having been adopted as babies, are reunited with a parent in adulthood) as likely to produce resentment and ill-feeling as manifestations of unconfined joy. Nor would the possession of appropriate tokens have sufficed to refute suspicions of impersonation.

¹⁸ See further R. Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike* (Munich/Berlin, 1962), 219 n. 3, 279 n. 1; Alfred Hähnle, *ΓΝΩΡΙΣΜΑΤΑ* (Tübingen, 1929). Terence's *Sostrata* offers an interesting commentary on a practice which she admits is not rationally justifiable when she relates how she gave a ring to be left with the daughter whom she handed over for exposure (*Haut.* 649–52): *ut stultae et misere omnes sumus / religiosae, quom exponendam do illi, de digito anulum / detraho et eum dico ut una cum puella exponeret. / si moreretur, ne expers partis esset de nostris bonis.*

¹⁹ See further P. A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower 225 B.C – A.D.14* (Oxford, 1971), 143 f.

quam bene vero abs te prospectum est quod voluisti cogita!
 nempe anui illi prodita abs te filia est planissime,
 per te vel uti quaestum faceret vel uti veniret palam.
 credo, id cogitasti: “quidvis satis est dum vivat modo.”
 quid cum illis agas qui neque ius neque bonum atque aequom sciunt?

Chremes is smug and self-important in general, rude and overbearing towards his wife in particular. But unpleasant as he is, we have to infer that his preference for infanticide over the questionable prospects which might await a female foundling²⁰ represents what might be regarded as a reasonable view for a respectable, conventional paterfamilias.²¹ Ovid could imagine a husband of “vita fidesque inculpata” giving similar instructions to his wife (Met.9. 675 –681):

‘quae voveam, duo sunt: minimo ut relevere dolore,
 utque marem parias. onerosior altera sors est,
 et vires fortuna negat: quod abominor, ergo,
 edita forte tuo fuerit si femina partu,
 (invitus mando: pietas, ignosce) necetur.’²²

Similarly in Apuleius (Met. 10. 23) the head of the family on departing leaves instructions “ut si sexus sequioris edidisset foetum, protinus quod esset editum necaretur”. “Interemptam”,²³ “necetur”, “necaretur”: the three passages admirably illustrate that omissibility of the agent widely regarded as the passive’s most important function. The speaker evades assigning responsibility for undertaking an unwelcome task; he can leave the specificities to his wife. Hilarion, we might feel, deserves credit for straightforwardness.

Two of Hilarion’s womenfolk have Egyptian names,²⁴ and we may be tempted to reflect on the Greek importation of a practice alien to Egypt, if we may believe Diodorus Siculus (1. 80. 3): καὶ τὰ γεννώμενα πάντα τρέφουσιν ἔξ ἀνάγκης ἔνεκα τῆς πολυανθρωπίας, ὡς ταύτης μέγιστα συμβαλλομένης πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν χώρας τε καὶ πόλεων, νόθον δ’ οὐδένα τῶν γεννηθέντων νομίζουσιν, οὐδ’ ἂν ἔξ ἀργυρωήτου μητρὸς γεννηθῆι. But (whatever we may think of Diodorus’ account of Egyptian customs in general) this happy picture should be taken with a pinch of salt (particularly in view of the rosy tints with which he depicts desperate poverty in the rest of his chapter on child-rearing). Exposed babies were publicly observable; infanticide need attract no attention. Mere neglect of a new-born infant for a few hours would often prevent its survival; its life might be cut short by simple impassivity.²⁵ It was no-one’s business in antiquity to compile statistics of neonatal mortality or to distinguish stillbirths from cases of infanticide.

Hilarion’s letter has attracted renewed attention with the increasing interest in matters relating to women and family life in antiquity. But already in 1956 it had entered on an influential literary Nachleben when the novelist Mary Renault exploited it, memorably but somewhat misleadingly, in *The*

²⁰ Cf. [Dem.] 59.18 (Neaera and others had been taken up as infants and reared for prostitution by their Corinthian “mother”).

²¹ His relationship to his Menandrian prototype is controversial; the latter may have been a decidedly more agreeable character. See further E. Lefèvre, *Terenz’ und Menanders Heautontimorumenos* (Munich, 1994), esp. 173–77.

²² Bömer’s learned note on 679 rather surprisingly fails to mention Hilarion’s letter.

²³ Brothers’ n. here displays a strange casuistry: “Chremes is not necessarily being as heartless as to suggest that Sostrata should have actually put the child to death; he merely means that she should have seen to it that it did not survive.”

²⁴ On Berous see M. W. Baldwin Bowsky, *ZPE* 118 (1997), 198 n. 3.

²⁵ Direct evidence on this topic in Graeco-Roman antiquity is obviously elusive; I have found very helpful Laura Gowing, *Secret births and infanticide in seventeenth-century England, Past and Present* 156 (1997), 87–115.

Last of the Wine, set in Athens in the latter part of the Peloponnesian War²⁶ (and often recommended to schoolchildren).

Adolf Deissmann, a conscientious pastor as well as an academic theologian, had stern words for Hilarion: “Nur Worte, kein Geld . . ., und trotz zärtlicher Zeilen für das Kind und trotz des sentimentalen *Wie könnt ich Dein vergessen?* ein roher Rat der Hauptinhalt: wenn es ein Mädchen ist, das Du zur Welt bringst, so setze es aus! Hat die Sitte den Vater abgestumpft? Hat die Not ihn gefühllos gemacht gegen sein eigenes Fleisch und Blut? Ist er, was sein Name sagt, ein Lustig, ein Taugenichts, dem alles einerlei ist, wenn er bloß in der großen Stadt sein Vergnügen findet? Oder tun wir ihm Unrecht, weil wir das rätselhafte *pollapollon* nicht verstehen?”²⁷ Whether or not my interpretation of *πολλαπολλων* is persuasive, Deissmann was surely right to emphasise that until that is satisfactorily explained, we should not be too confident that we have understood the rest of the sentence.

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²⁶ “My father wrote that Syracuse was upon the point of surrender. He advised my mother to look after her health, to eat well and keep warm. Then he wrote ‘Regarding the child, rear it, if it is a boy; if it is a girl, expose it’” (ch. 7, p. 65). The narrator destroys the letter, and pretends that it has not arrived. The theme of exposure recurs; the narrator himself had only narrowly escaped this fate, and later must expose his orphaned step-brother.

²⁷ Licht vom Osten. Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt⁴ (Tübingen, 1923) 136.