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AN ERRANT HUSBAND AND A RARE IDIOM (P.OXY. 744)

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In a recent article in this Journal,² Stephanie West favours acceptance of the first editors' interpretation of the 'curious injunction' to infanticide in P.Oxy. 744.³ She supports their suggested emendation of τέκης to τέκη in line 9, reading πολλαπολλων as a nickname for the Apollonarian named in lines 2-3.⁴ She argues that the usual reading of this sentence, understanding the writer as instructing his wife to expose the child she may bear, if it is female, is 'strikingly out of keeping with the otherwise affectionate tone of his letter', so that 'his apparent indifference to his wife's welfare in facing the uncertainties of childbirth makes his other expressions of concern ring rather hollow'.⁵ West argues that the instruction is more plausible if Apollonarian, probably a lower-status member of the household, is the expectant mother. In this article I will reassert the usual interpretation of the injunction to infanticide, holding that there are contextual issues and linguistic arguments to which West has not given enough weight.

- Ἰλαρίων {α} Ἦλιτι τῆι ἀδελφῆι πλείστα χαί-
 ρειν καὶ Βεροῦτι τῆι κυρίαι μου καὶ Ἀπολλω-
 νάρι(ο)ν. γίνωσκε ὡς ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἐν Ἀλεξαν-
 δρέαι ἴσμεν· μὴ ἀγωνιάις ἐὰν ὄλωσ εἰσ-
 5 πορεύονται, ἐγὼ ἐν Ἀλεξανδρέαι μένω.
 ἐρωτῶ σε καὶ παρακαλῶ σε ἐπιμελή-
 θ(η)τι τῶι παιδίῳ καὶ ἐὰν εὐθύς ὀψώνι-
 ον λάβωμεν ἀποστελῶ σε ἄνω. ἐὰν
 10 πολλὰ πολλῶν τέκης, ἐὰν ἦν ἄρσε-
 νον ἄφες, ἐὰν ἦν θήλεα ἔκβαλε.
 εἴρηκας δὲ Ἀφροδισιάτι ὅτι μή με
 ἐπιλάθῃς· πῶς δύναμαί σε ἐπι-
 λαθεῖν; ἐρωτῶ σε οὖν ἵνα μὴ ἀγω-
 νιάσης.
- 15 (ἔτους) κθ Καίσαρος Παῦνι κγ.
 (Verso) Ἰλαρίων Ἦλιτι ἀπόδος.

Front:

Hilarion to Alis his sister, hearty greetings, and to my lady Berous, and Apollonari<ο>n. Know that at present we are [= I am] still in Alexandria. Don't worry if they all come back, and I stay in Alexandria. I ask you, I urge you - care for the child, and if we [= I] soon get pay, I will send it up to you. If perhaps

¹ This article was given as a conference paper at the 30th Congress of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association, held at the University of Auckland in February 1999. I wish to thank those present on that occasion, and graduate students in my 1998 Ptolemaic Egypt class in the Department of Classics and Ancient History of the University of Auckland, for useful discussion.

² Stephanie West 'Whose Baby? A Note on P.Oxy. 744' *ZPE* 121 (1998), 167-172 (hereinafter West).

³ B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 4 (London, 1904), 243-4.

⁴ West, 169-70; cf. Grenfell and Hunt's translation of the sentence (*The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* [as in n.3], 244): 'If (Apollonarian?) bears offspring, if it is a male let it be, if a female expose it.'

⁵ West, 167.

you give birth, then if it is male, let it be; if it is female, throw it out. You told Aphrodisias ‘Don’t forget me.’ How can I forget you? So I ask you not to worry.

(Year) 29 of Caesar, Pauni 23 [= June 1 BC]

Back:

Hilarion. Deliver to Alis.

West’s reference to the tone of the letter is important, but the issue is more complex than she seems to allow. Before dealing with linguistic questions, I will go through the text of the letter and consider whether ‘affectionate’ is the best possible epithet to apply to its tone.

Can anything be drawn from the salutation? The phrase *πλείστα χαίρειν* (‘hearty greetings’) is conventional. It is perhaps as much warmer than plain *χαίρειν* (‘greetings’) as in English ‘My dear Alis’ is warmer than ‘Dear Alis’. Little can be deduced from it, even if Hilarion penned the letter himself; if he went to a scribe, one could not assume that any distinction had been made. ‘Sister’ is an appropriate term of address to one’s Egyptian wife, whether a blood relative or not, and Berous’s *τῆι κυρίαί μου* could have been used to any high-status female member of the household older than the writer. The greeting, then, shows only that Hilarion (or the scribe) knew how to write a letter properly.

The letter’s first substantive point is that Hilarion is going to stay in Alexandria after all his companions, whoever they are, come back to Oxyrhynchus.⁶ He does not volunteer any reason for this (in particular, he does not say he has to stay *until* he gets paid), nor does he say how long he now expects to be away. It might be fair to guess that one of his returning companions brought the letter to Alis, and perhaps the letter-carrier explained the situation; but if not, then the message to Alis was in effect ‘I’m still in Alexandria, and I’m staying for an indefinite time, and I’m not telling you why.’ She might not be pleased at this.

The next issue in the letter is the (already existing) child. It must, I suppose, be assumed that Hilarion is his/her father and Alis his/her mother. Discussing the infanticide sentence, West argues that ‘absentee husbands could hardly be confident that their wishes would prevail’ when they gave instructions for a new-born baby to be exposed - and she may have a point;⁷ but she might usefully also have considered the previous sentence and asked in what circumstances a mother needed to be told (by her absentee husband) to continue caring for her child (i.e. not expose him/her, as well as the future baby). Certainly circumstances of poverty are in question, since Hilarion promises to send money if he gets some: but it is ‘if’, not ‘when’, which may imply that he is looking for gainful employment (i.e. actually unemployed and without income) rather than counting the days until some expected wages fall due.⁸ Meanwhile, as well as giving instructions about a possible new-born, he is probably in effect

⁶ With West (implicitly, cf. 167 n.4), I assume *ὅλως* to be equivalent to *ὅλοι*, meaning ‘all’. Grenfell and Hunt seem more or less inclined to take *ὅλως* in that sense in the *editio princeps* (cf. n.3 above), giving ‘do not worry if they come back altogether (?), but I remain at Alexandria.’ Twenty-eight years later Hunt and C.C. Edgar gave a different translation in the Loeb *Select Papyri* vol.1 (London and New York, 1932), no.105 at p.295: ‘Do not be anxious; if they really go home, I will remain in Alexandria.’ For parallels to *ὅλως* as ‘really’/‘actually’ see LSJ s.v. *ὅλος* III.4. It seems unnatural to me to posit a sentence end after *μη ἀγωνιάις*, and the absence of *δὲ* in *ἐγὼ ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείαι μένω* does not strike me as significant. Note that *δὲ* in line 11 is written in above the line as an afterthought: Hilarion or the scribe was not scrupulous about using this connective.

⁷ West, 168.

⁸ Sarah B. Pomeroy (‘Infanticide in Hellenistic Greece’ in Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt [eds.] *Images of Women in Antiquity* [London, 1983], 207-219 at 208) refers to Hilarion as ‘a soldier’. She would presumably think he was in a Roman auxiliary unit. She does not explain her reason for calling him a soldier, but I take her to have drawn an inference from the use of *ὀψώνιον*, a word whose original or etymological meaning is ‘[a soldier’s] ration-money’. But Hilarion is not very likely to have been a soldier. Since at least the third century BC *ὀψώνιον* had been in use as a general word for wages or salary paid to any kind of worker. LSJ s.v. *ὀψώνιον* cites a variety of references from the Zenon papyri onwards.

telling Alis not to expose an existing baby. Not that there was any certainty that he would get his way: perhaps Alis was in fact more inclined to drastic family limitation measures than Hilarion?

The infanticide sentence follows, and I shall return to it below. Afterwards, Hilarion replies to Alis's plaintive 'Don't forget me'. The class with whom I discussed this agreed that 'How can I forget you?' was the only clearly affectionate-sounding moment in the letter, but added two riders to their assessment: first, that Hilarion says it in response to a reproach (i.e. it looked to Alis as if he had forgotten her and was acting as if she did not exist), and second, that as a reply it is only minimally reassuring - it describes Hilarion's feelings but does not propose any practical application of his affection (such as 'I'm coming back to you').

In summary, the tone of the text is not so much affectionate, in the love letter sense, as simply upbeat. Its content gives Alis little to be happy about. Hilarion's companions are coming home, but he, apparently out of work and certainly at present unable to send money, is staying in Alexandria indefinitely in the hope, it seems, of something turning up. Meanwhile he wants her to keep on feeding his child (he does not say how), and keep the next one too, unless it is a girl. His total contribution to her achieving all this is to tell her twice not to worry. She had plenty to worry about.

This is the background against which the 'curious injunction' must be interpreted. Hilarion is approaching a stressful situation with dubiously justifiable confidence. It is in a sense regrettable - though perhaps unavoidable - that the infanticide sentence catches the modern reader's attention so powerfully. If it did not, it might appear less out of keeping with the letter as a whole. But 'if it is female, throw it out' was an unusual thing to say, at least in writing. Comedies and novels were full of foundling stories, but, as Sarah B. Pomeroy notes,⁹ infanticide was a literary topos of social criticism.

The reality and frequency of child-exposure in the Roman Empire has been vindicated against counter-arguments recently by W.V. Harris, who realistically points to poverty as an important factor in the decisions parents reached to expose their children.¹⁰ 'No economic historian of antiquity would doubt,' he says, 'that many children were born into subsistence conditions in which simply feeding another child would mean taking food from members of the family who were already hungry.'¹¹

West argues that if Hilarion had really been instructing Alis to expose a baby daughter, 'we might have expected him to support his sentence of infanticide ... with further argument.' She goes on to say that his prospect of getting his way would be better if he suggested someone other than the mother to commit the actual murder, 'a highly uncongenial task likely to be beyond the capacity of a newly delivered mother.'¹²

These two *a priori* arguments are not compelling. The unusual nature of the instruction (to which West refers as 'unique testimony to ... prejudice against girls'¹³), together with the fact that infanticide in principle attracted moral opprobrium, supplies adequate reason why Hilarion might have decided not to argue a case for his decision. These things are not spoken of. As far as the second argument is concerned, I acknowledge that in many circumstances the point about the (emotional) capacity of a newly delivered mother would be persuasive (and accordingly I think Pomeroy pushes Hellenistic rationality further than it will necessarily go when she infers that to Greeks and Romans 'infanticide is

⁹ Pomeroy (as in n.8), 207.

¹⁰ W.V. Harris 'Child-exposure in the Roman Empire' *JRS* 84 (1994), 1-22. On the other side: D. Engels 'The Problem of Female Infanticide in the Roman World' *CPhil* 75 (1980), 112-20, and id., 'The Use of Historical Demography in Ancient History' *CQ* n.s. 34 (1984), 386-97.

¹¹ Harris (as in n.10), 13.

¹² West, 168.

¹³ West, 167. On the higher incidence of exposure of girls, see Roger Bagnall 'Missing Females in Roman Egypt' *Scripta Classica Israelica* 16 (1977), 121-38, arguing that the difference in sex ratios between the populations of metropoleis and villages, as shown in census records, suggests that more girls were exposed in the metropoleis, and that some of these exposed girls were rescued and brought up in villages for later sale as slaves.

simply late abortion'¹⁴); sometimes, however, needs must. Note the recent find, from five hundred years later than this letter, of the bones of a hundred new-born infants which had blocked a sewer at a bath-house in Ashkelon.¹⁵ The prostitutes who were at the bath-house had disposed of unwanted babies by dropping them down the drain. Distressing as it must have been, they managed to do it.

These contextual considerations are enough, I think, to show that Hilarion could have asked Alis to expose her own daughter, that such a request would not have been out of keeping with the stressed circumstance which his letter was apparently aimed at addressing, and that Alis's reaction would not necessarily have been to refuse (or feel unable) to comply: in fact, that judging from the injunction to look after the existing child, Alis might herself have contemplated even more drastic action.

But the question of *πολλὰ πολλῶν* remains. West considers the rendering of this phrase adopted by LSJ and first suggested by Einar Heikel,¹⁶ as a 'strengthened *πολλάκις*' - *πολλάκις* in its rare but sufficiently attested meaning of 'perhaps' - but concludes that 'apart from a lack of true parallels, the phrase is remarkably pointless'.¹⁷ Her, and Grenfell and Hunt's, solution, namely the supposition that 'perhaps *πολλαπολλῶν* conceals 'Απολλωνάριον',¹⁸ however, I think unattractive in itself because, first, it requires the emendation of *τέκητις* to *τέκητι* to allow it to make sense (which seems to be throwing good readings after bad), and second, it supposes a kind of punning nickname to which I cannot think of anything similar in the Greek context. West offers nothing comparable, which is disappointing in view of her comment that *πολλὰ πολλῶν* = *πολλάκις* lacks a true parallel. Greek speakers could give offbeat or barbed nicknames (I think of Alexander Peloplaton, for instance, or the epigrammatist's 'Plango'¹⁹ for Ptolemy II's girlfriend Bilistiche), but *Πολλαπολλῶν* for 'Απολλωνάριον seems to me to have more the whiff of Oxford in Lewis Carroll's generation ('we called him Tortoise because he taught us') than of any Greek usage.

I suggest, on the other hand, that a true parallel for *πολλὰ πολλῶν* = 'perhaps' lies closer to hand than West realised. She cites David Tabachovitz's discussion of *πολλὰ πολλῶν*,²⁰ but she seems not to have engaged fully with Tabachovitz's main point. While Heikel had argued his case from examples in Attic drama, not all of which are persuasive,²¹ Tabachovitz offers in addition Plato *Timaeus* 29c4-7. In the majority of mss, this sentence reads:²²

ἐὰν οὖν, ὃ Σώκρατες, πολλὰ πολλῶν περὶ θεῶν καὶ τῆς τοῦ παντὸς γενέσεως μὴ δυνατοὶ
γιγνώμεθα πάντη πάντως αὐτοὺς ἑαυτοῖς ὁμολογουμένους λόγους καὶ ἀπηκριβωμένους
ἀποδοῦναι, μὴ θαυμάσης.

¹⁴ Pomeroy (as in n.8), 207.

¹⁵ Lawrence E. Stager 'Eroticism and Infanticide at Ashkelon' *Biblical Archaeology Review* 17 (July-August 1991), 34-53, and Patricia Smith and Gila Kahila 'Bones of a Hundred Infants Found in Ashkelon Sewer' *Biblical Archaeology Review* 17 (July-August 1991), 47.

¹⁶ LSJ s.v. *πολύς* III e; Einar Heikel *Eranos* 17 (1917), 91-96.

¹⁷ West, 169, referring also to other suggestions, which she rightly dismisses. 'Pointless' is unjustified: if the meaning is 'perhaps', the point is that Hilarion had gone away not sure if his wife was pregnant or not.

¹⁸ Same page, quoting Grenfell and Hunt at *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 4 (as in n.3), 244.

¹⁹ *Anth. Pal.* V.202, cf. Alan Cameron *Callimachus and his Critics* (Princeton, 1995), 239-246.

²⁰ David Tabachovitz 'Πολλὰ πολλῶν' *Eranos* 59 (1961), 45-48: cited at West, 169 n.13, but without comment.

²¹ Aristophanes *Ecclesiazusae* 1105 ὅμως δ' ἐάν τι πολλὰ πολλάκις πάθω: and as parallels to the nominative-genitive phrase *πολλὰ πολλῶν*, Sophocles *Oedipus Coloneus* 1238 πρόπαντα κακὰ κακῶν, *Oedipus Rex* 465 ἄρρητ' ἄρρητων, *Philoctetes* 65 ἔσχατ' ἐσχάτων κακὰ, Aeschylus *Persae* 681 πιστὰ πιστῶν. The *Ecclesiazusae* usage seems relevant: the rest do not.

²² In Tabachovitz's German translation ('Πολλὰ πολλῶν' [as in n.20], 48): 'Wenn ich *vielleicht* nicht imstande sein sollte, hinsichtlich der Götter und der Entstehung des Alls eine in jeder Beziehung (πάντη πάντως) folgerichtige und genaue Darstellung zu geben, sollst du dich darüber nicht wundern.'

‘So, Socrates, don’t be surprised if *perhaps* we remain unable to develop an account of the gods, and the origin of everything, which is in every way self-consistent and perfectly precise.’

Three other readings are available, all hinging on the difficulty of *πολλὰ πολλῶν*. Codex Vindobonensis 22 (ms. Y)²³ adds *εἰπόντων* between *πολλῶν* and *περί*, creating a genitive absolute and changing the meaning to ‘So, Socrates, since many people say many things about the gods and the origin of everything, don’t be surprised if ... (etc.)’. The addition seems to be the result of difficulty a medieval scribe found in construing: and on the basis of the majority reading and the *lectio difficilior* principle, *εἰπόντων* must be rejected. But this scribe was not the first to have trouble making sense of the text: in the fifth century AD Proclus, in his commentary on the *Timaeus*,²⁴ had said about the sentence:

‘since this whole expression has a degree of awkwardness in relation to the syntax, it should be corrected internally with a brief addition: *ἐάν, ὦ Σώκρατες, πολλὰ λέγοντες περὶ πολλῶν* ["If, Socrates, saying many things about the many ..."]. Then, specifying about many *what*, he [Plato] added *θεῶν καὶ τῆς τοῦ παντὸς γενέσεως* ["...gods, and the origin of everything"] ...’.

Proclus’ attempt to get the meaning is contorted and implausible, and modern editors of Plato have remained unconvinced by his addition. Most economical of the three ways round *πολλὰ πολλῶν*, however, is Ernst Diehl’s change in accentuation to *πολλὰ πολλῶν πέρι*, making *πέρι* govern *πολλῶν*. Tabachovitz’s objection that this change makes things no clearer has force, even though translators have tried to make the best of the result.²⁵ The best attempt is perhaps R.G. Bury’s ‘in our treatment of a whole host of matters’;²⁶ but all three emended texts and all the versions to which they give rise are problematic: none is plausible if the majority text makes sense.

By collating *Timaeus* 29c4 with P.Oxy. 744, Tabachovitz made sense of both. Most likely *πολλὰ πολλῶν* was a colloquial and rare phrase for ‘perhaps’,²⁷ and the usage is by no means self-explanatory. No one should be surprised that Proclus, reading more than eight hundred years after Plato composed the *Timaeus* (and almost five hundred years after Hilarion wrote to Alis), failed to understand it. In P.Oxy. 744 it is not hiding anything, nor is the phrase the real crux of the text’s meaning. In a letter which she may well have found both bumptious and in several respects unhelpful, Hilarion quite simply told his wife to throw her new baby out if it was a girl.

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²³ See John Burnet *Platonis Opera* vol.4 (Oxford, Oxford Classical Texts, 1902), *ad loc.*

²⁴ Proclus *Commentary on the Timaeus* II.106 a and e (ed. Ernst Diehl, Leipzig, 1903).

²⁵ Tabachovitz ‘Πολλὰ πολλῶν’ (as in n.20), 47, citing three versions.

²⁶ R.G. Bury (transl.) *Plato* vol. 7 (London, and New York, Loeb Classical Library, 1929).

²⁷ I would speculate that Plato’s reason for choosing it in the *Timaeus* was to go with the following double phrases *πάντη πάντως* and *αὐτοῦς ἑαυτοῖς*.