that the audiences were expected to follow not only the lyrics, but also the intricate musical (metrical) and dance patterns.

To conclude, without rejecting Verdenius’ opinion outright, it would yet seem to me that the upshot of this whole study of oral poetry and its nature, as well as the thorough grasp the audience of early times would appear to have had of the performances should serve as a warning against underestimating the powers of comprehension of the ancient Greek audience.

NOTES

1. W.J. Verdenius, Pindar’s Seventh Olympian Ode: A Commentary, Amsterdam 1972 = Verdenius I.
2. W.J. Verdenius, Pindar’s Seventh Olympian Ode: Supplementary Comments, Mnemosyne xxix, 3, 1976, 243–253 = Verdenius II.
5. Cf. Ol. viii, 10; Isth. vii, 29; Ol. i, 56; Nem. vii, 25; Pyth. ii, 89; Pyth. iv, 278; Ol. viii, 5/6.

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PARADOX IN THE GREEK SEPULCHRAL EPIGRAM

To stroll through a mediterranean cemetery reading the inscriptions may be a heart-rending experience, but a perusal of the more than 700 sepulchral epigrams in the seventh book of The Greek Anthology is likely to leave one strangely unaffected. Only a small proportion of them are genuine epitaphs, and there is but an occasional note of true pathos in these and in a few others. The vast majority fail to communicate any deep emotion. It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the writers were in many cases interested primarily in composing display pieces. Nowhere is the striving for effect more evident than in the quest for the paradoxical. The final result is interesting and varied reading, the tone at times more convivial than funereal.

The kind of paradox to be examined here is distinct from that inherent in some sepulchral clichés, e.g. the very denial of death in order to seek consolation in

σος δ’ ἐπέων, Ἡριννα, καλὸς πόνος οὗ σε γεγωνεῖ
φθίσαι, ἐχεῖν δὲ χοροῦ άμμια Πιερίσιν

(12, anon.),¹

110
or in Simonides’ oxymoron

ουδὲ τεινάσι θανόντες, ἐπεὶ σφ’ ἀρετὴ κατύπερθε
κυδαινουσ’ ἀνάγει δώματος ἐξ ’Αιδεω

(251).²

And a common assumption is reversed in order to magnify the dead in
Οὐ σὸν μνήμα τὸδ’ ἔστι, Ἐὐριπίδη, ἄλλα σὺ τοῦδε:
τῇ σῇ γάρ δόξῃ μνήμα τὸδ’ ἀμπέχεται

(46, anon.).³

The emphasis here will be on more striking and original conceits.

The familiar prayer that the dust lie light on the deceased is amusingly varied
by Agathias Scholasticus (6th century A.D.) in an apparent elaboration of a
possibly serious epigram on a dead partridge by Simias (4th century B.C.)—
cf. 203 and 204. In the later poem the partridge has had its head bitten off by a
cat, and Agathias hopes that the dust will lie heavy on the buried remains lest
the cat succeed in exhuming them (7–8). The style of the whole is incongruously
grandiloquent:

ουδὲ ὑπὸ μαρμαρογῇ δαλερόπιδος ’Ηριγενείς
ἀκρα παραιδύσσεις θαλημένων περάγων

(3–4),⁴

and Agathias’ sequel owes its humorous effect to mythological burlesque: just
as Pyrrhus sacrificed Polyxena on the tomb of Achilles, so Agathias will appease
the partridge’s chafing spirit by sacrificing the cat on its grave. Agathias’ pupil,
the grammarian Damocharis, took up the same incident, likening the cat to the
hounds of Actaeon and adding the paradox that while the cat is intent on killing
partridges, the mice are dancing and running off with its dainties (206). A very
different variation from that in 204 of the ‘lie light’ theme occurs in epigram 394,
by Philippus of Thessalonica (possibly 2nd century A.D.). The ‘speaker’ is the
stove with which the buried miller had crushed wheat in his lifetime. Now set
upon his grave to proclaim his calling, it is as heavy for him in death as it was in
life (5–6).⁵ In this connection it may be added that the practice of designating a
person’s occupation through sepulchral motifs inspires a ‘protest poem’ by
Archias (2nd century A.D.): the ghost of a shipwrecked sailor pleads that oars
and the beaks of ships be not painted on his tomb, as he does not wish to be
reminded of the cause of his death (279).

Benedictions to the passers-by or to the dead person are commonplace in
sepulchral epigrams. Hence the maledicctions occurring in the collection are quite
striking. Erycius (1st century B.C.), in 377, invites one to pour pitch over the
dead Parthenius, a grammarian known as ‘the scourge of Homer’ in Hadrian’s
reign, who had likened the Odyssey to mud and the Iliad to a bramble. His
condign punishment for being μαρογλωσσος (foul-mouthed) is imagined by
Erycius with some zest:

τοινῦρ ὑπὸ ξοφίασι ’Ερινύσιν ἄμμισον ἤπται
Κωκυτοῦ κλοῖοι λαμῖν ἄπαγχοςενος

(7–8).⁶

While this poem is venomous throughout, Julianus, Prefect of Egypt in the 6th
century A.D., achieves a more subtle effect in epigram 605 by multiplying
conventional epithets and deeds: the sweet husband of a beneficent wife honours her spirit with a fine marble sarcophagus and by giving alms to the poor. But it emerges in the last line that he is motivated by joy at having got his freedom through her premature decease! In another poem of Julianus' intense irony underlies the apparent blessing addressed to his murderer by a buried man:

'Αντὶ φόνου τάφον ἄμμι χαρίζει, ἄλλα καὶ αὐτὸς ἰσον ἀντιτύχως οὐρανόθεν χαρίτων (581).7

The murder of Hypatius at Justinian's behest and his subsequent dumping at sea is suppressed by Julianus in epigram 592, where he represents, one assumes ironically, the emperor as being angry with the sea for covering Hypatius' body and as honouring him with a cenotaph. An unusually facetious note is struck by Palladas of Alexandria (5th century A.D.) in a string of political epigrams which dwell on the shortcomings of the now dead Gessius: his superstition, credulity, feebleness, excessive vanity and ambition, even such physical defects as lameness (681–688)8.

The frequent plea to pass quietly out of respect for the dead is given a new twist in a poem by Leonidas of Tarentum (3rd century B.C.): the grave of Hipponax should be passed in silence, since he is still a malignant wasp whose fiery words may cause grief even in Hades (408). And in a similar strain is a series of epigrams by diverse authors inspired by the known characteristics of Timon the misanthrope: he withholds even his identity and curses all passers-by (313, 314, 316); he prays for rank vegetation round his grave to keep away living beings, and even in Hades he is not at home with his fellow ghosts (315, and cf. 320); darkness is more hateful than light, for the company is more numerous in Hades (317): Cerberus must be careful not to be bitten by Timon (319).9

The erudite bathos of epigram 205, with its application of the Polyxena sacrifice to the cat and partridge story, is not unique. In poem 210 by Antipater of Sidon (1st century B.C.) we have the presumably imaginary situation of a snake which falls into a hearth fire as it comes to attack a mother swallow after devouring her nestlings. These events are interpreted by the poet as the work of Hephaestus saving the race of his son Erichthonius, whose daughter Procone became a swallow. Even more strained is epigram 384 by Marcus Argentario (1st century A.D.) on Aristomache the pathological drinker. Addressing Minos, she craves condemnation for the fictitious crime of killing her young husband, since the daughters of Danaus were compelled for that crime to carry water in Hades. The mere sight of any jar will keep Aristomache happy!

Puns constitute the point of two epigrams by Diogenes Laertius (3rd century A.D.). In 107 we find Aristotle drinking hemlock (ἄκοντον) in order to escape a false charge without bother (ἄκοντι), and in 105 Dionysus' name Lyaeus, normally associated with relaxing the system, is given a more sinister etymology. In the case of the drinker Lacydes, Dionysus is represented as a destroyer, the verb λύειν allowing for both meanings.

112
Wine lies at the heart of a number of not very serious epigrams. Dioscorides (2nd century B.C.) makes Hiero bury his nurse Silenis fittingly close to the vats whose charm was so irresistible to her in life. (456); Antipater of Sidon shows the ghosts of Maronis grieving not for her destitute husband and children but over the emptiness of the carved wine cup on her tomb (353); Antipater of Thessalonica (1st century B.C.) wonders whether wine or rain is more responsible for the death of Polyxenus who, when drunk in the rain, fell from a slippery hillside (398); altogether far-fetched is the poem of Aristo (uncertain date) about the old woman whose hand slipped while she was stealthily filling a ‘Cyclopean’ cup:

νοῦς ἀθανασίας ὑποβρύχιος πλατής ἐν τῇ πέλαγος  (457.6);10

and Myrtas rejoices in a pleasant tomb which recalls happy days, as it consists not of a layer of earth, but of a wine jar (329, anon.).

Tombs may come in other unexpected shapes. Agathias has left us a poem about a baby dead within the womb:

κόμψη μηδένας γαστρικής, τέκνος, ἀντί κοινής:
αὐτὴ γάρ σε φέρει, καὶ χθονὸς οὐ χατέεις  (583, 7–8);11

a house that collapsed through the weight of snow and killed Lyside is made to serve as a grave in an epigram by Antipater of Thessalonica (402); a moralistic tone pervades Agathias’ story of an adulterous couple on whom a roof collapses, trapping them in everlasting intercourse (572); Hegesippus (4th century B.C.) writes of a grave containing half a man togethier with the fish that ate the other half (276).

Several poems owe their point to the contrast between the elements of land and sea. Dioscorides tells of the dead Philocritus who had turned from seafaring to agriculture and whose grave was flooded by the Nile, so that he had in a sense a sailor’s grave after all (76); in a poem by Antipater of Thessalonica the land proved more dangerous than the sea for the shipwrecked Antheus, since he was eaten by a wolf after swimming ashore (289, and cf. 290); and the same author makes a dolphin remark that while it met with mercy on land from the men who buried its washed up body, the sea, its mother, destroyed it (216).

Sometimes the unusual manner of a person’s death gives a poem its raison d’être. Apollonides (1st century A.D.) describes how a slave, digging a grave for a still living master, fell victim himself to earth subsidence (180); Antiphilus (1st century A.D.) tells of an old man who ended up carrying his own bier, as he slipped while exercising his trade of pall-bearer (634); Antipater of Sidon contrasts the hazards of the sea with the apparent security of a port in which the seasoned sailor Diodorus met his death by falling off a prow after too rich a banquet (625); and in another poem of Antipater’s the ghost of Alcimenes recalls how he was looking into the air scaring birds away when a deadly snake bit his feet (172); Palladas introduces us to the not very prepossessing Psyllo who, to spite her heirs, spent all her wealth on herself and then jumped to her death, bringing her life and her spending power to a simultaneous close (607).
The poems treated above are very remote in spirit from the noble simplicity of Simonides’ famous lines

'Ω ξείν', ἀγγείλων Λακεδαιμονίοις ὅτι τῇδε κείμεθα, τοῖς κείνων ρήμασι πειθόμενοι (249).12

Indeed the glaring contrast makes it impossible to deny that, with time, the genre became debased. Yet we are able, thanks to the compilers of the collection, to trace its expansion from pure epitaph to at times light occasional poetry. A chronological arrangement of poems would have demonstrated the process more clearly, while the present arrangement helps make the collection readable in one session. Death, like any other subject, can, it seems, be a mere springboard for the display by writers of their own virtuosity or wit. A humorous anecdote, a strange twist of fate, a pun, an incongruous mythological parallel, a wry reflection on human depravity—these are the ingredients, all more or less paradoxical in their context, that lend variety and piquancy to what was once a reverend art form.

NOTES

1. All quotations and translations are from The Greek Anthology VII, Loeb Classical Library, tr. W.R. Paton.
   But the beautiful work, Erinna, of thy verse cries aloud that thou art not dead, but joinest in the dance of the Muses.
2. And having died, yet they are not dead, for their valour’s renown brings them up from the house of Hades.
3. This is not thy monument, Euripides, but thou art the memorial of it, for by thy glory is this monument encompassed.
4. No longer in the shine of the bright-eyed Dawn dost thou shake the tips of thy sun-warmed wings.
5. See epigram 563 by Paulus Silentarius (6th century A.D.) for another kind of link between a person’s calling and his death: the silence (i.e. dumb show) of Chryseomallus the mime used to give pleasure, but now his silence in death causes grief.
6. Therefore he is bound by the dark Furies in the middle of Cocytus, with a dog-collar that chokes him round his neck.
7. Thou givest me a tomb in return for murdering me, but may heaven grant thee in return the same kindness.
8. Cf. 401, where Crinogoras (1st century A.D.), with a less light touch, relies for effect on the rapid accumulation of odious traits in lieu of the customary eulogy.
9. Cf. 66 by Honestus, where Cerberus is told to fawn before Diogenes the Dog (Cynic), and 69 by Julianus, where Cerberus is told to tremble before the shade of Archilochus.
10. Like a ship submerged by the waves, (she) disappeared in the sea of wine.
11. The womb, O babe, instead of the dust rests lightly on thee, for it enwraps thee and thou hast no need of earth.
12. Stranger, bear this message to the Spartans, that we lie here obedient to their laws (commands?).

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114
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