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SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL PRACTICES IN GREEK FICTIONAL EPISTOLOGRAPHY

Abstract. – Greek fictional epistolography as a subgenre represents an ideal corpus for any kind of synoptic and comparative study: all we have left are four late-antique collections of erotic letters (written by Alciphron, Aelian, Philostratus and Aristaenetus) and a Byzantine one (by Theophylact). The conventions of the subgenre prohibited both obscene language and explicit pornography. However, once they chose erotica as the theme of some of their letters, the authors had to include at least some “spicy” descriptions of sexual contacts.

The focus of my research is on the overall representation of lovers’ sexuality in the collections; the letters of each one will be approached from different aspects and the results will be consequently compared. The areas of my interest are: male and female means of seduction / display of sexual interest; male and female initiative concerning the foreplay; descriptions of “side-effects” of physical contact (arousal and erection) and of sexual act itself (sounds, sweat, ejaculation, the (avoidance of) pregnancy, abortion); variations in marital and extra-marital sexual liaisons; asexuality and avoidance of marital duties, adultery, threesome, sex in a public place, voyeurism, masochism, fetishism, objectophilia and same-sex relations.

The final goal of the paper is to point to (potential) differences in the representation of (both male and female) sexuality in general throughout the literary subgenre from Alciphron to Theophylact and to answer the question which of the authors offers the most detailed and explicit picture of the lovers’ sexual activities.

1. Introduction

Greek erotic fictional epistolography appeared relatively late: in the second century AD. This literary subgenre was very popular at the time but only four Late-Antiquity collections were preserved: Alciphron’s, Aelian’s, Philostratus’ – all probably dating from 2nd or 3rd ct., and Aristaenetus’, dating from the 6th.¹ The only one who continued the tradition in the Byzantine times was Theophylact Simocatta in the 7th ct.

¹ This paper will not be dealing with the collections in detail. See Benner and Fobes, 1949 for more details on Alciphron’s, Aelian’s and Philostratus’ collections, see Drago, 2007 for Aristaenetus’ and Zanetto, 1985 for Theophylact’s.

Since the complete subgenre comprises five collections with the total of 351 letters,² it seems to be an ideal corpus for different kinds of comparative studies. Synoptic research of the subgenre, conducted from various points of view,³ has so far shown that considering the partly similar topics, this literary sub-genre is much more varied than claimed, in spite of the expected. Although considerable differences have been noticed not only in the formal epistolary characteristics but also in the authors' choices of gender and appellation of their letters' correspondents, the sub-genre displays the greatest heterogeneity in the field of erotica; it explicitly ranges from innocent contact to the intimations of spicier character.⁴

The erotica of this literary sub-genre will be researched in two separate analyses. The means and types of seduction of both sexes, including the clarification of the initiative of the sexual contact will be dealt with in detail,⁵ not forgetting to note the changes in the levels of explicitness in the description both of the foreplay and the sexual act itself. In the latter and by far more extensive analysis, a special attention will be devoted to a) "side-effects" of physical contacts between the lovers (sexual arousal of a man or a woman, erection, sounds, sweat, ejaculation, pregnancy, abortion, etc.), b) a spectrum of variations in the status of the protagonists (marital and extra-marital sex, same-sex relationships,⁶ relationships with *hetairai*, slaves etc.) and c) deviant/amoral sexual behaviour (adultery, threesome, sex in a public place, voyeurism, masochism, fetishism, objectophilia, asexuality).

The final goal of the research is threefold and can be summed up as follows:

1. analysis of the overall sexuality of the couples in the subgenre,
2. selection of the common characteristics, i.e. those discovered in all or almost all collections, and
3. precise definition of the individual characteristics, particular for each of the collections.

² Alciphron's comprises 123 letters, Aelian's 20, Philostratus' 73, Aristaenetus' 50 and Theophylact's 85.

³ See dissertations written by Hodkinson, 2009 and Hajdarević, 2013.

⁴ The variations have been noticed between the collections but also within each of them.

⁵ I am using the terms from Hajdarević, 2018 and by "sexual initiative of the genders" I consider the analysis of both male and female ways and means of seduction, as well as the display of sexual interest and activities connected with foreplay, e.g. finding an opportunity, time or excuse for physical contacts etc.

⁶ I try to avoid using the term "homosexuality" altogether because most types of relationships between men (same sex relationships between women are very rarely described) displayed in Greek literature are not homosexual in today's meaning of the word: once they have had relationships with older men, young Greek men would get married and start a family. In other words, "...their "homosexuality" is a time limited occurrence of an initiative nature. " (Hajdarević, 2018, 3-4, footnote 4). For more information on the nature of Greek "homosexuality", I suggest Dover, 1978, Dover, 2002, 25-29, Hubbard, 2003 (especially 1-20) and Skinner, 2005 (especially 10-20).

The first phase of the research consists of individual analyses of all five collections,⁷ while the second consists of detailed and careful comparison of the data obtained. Taking into consideration the goal of the research, the analysis will be conducted concentrating on erotic letters only, i.e. on 25 by Alciphron,⁸ 6 by Aelian,⁹ 56 by Philostratus,¹⁰ all by Aristaenatus and 28 by Theophylact.¹¹

2. Means of seduction in Greek fictional epistolography

In many examples men seduce “from a far” – by sending different presents. In Alc. 4.9 and Phil. 1, 2, 9, 46, 54 and 63 they send roses, in Ael. 7 figs, grapes and wine (and roses are promised too), while in Ar. 1.23 the present is not specified. Some recipients are most likely to be *hetairai* or male prostitutes so the present could in fact be seen as a payment for (future) sexual favours;¹² this is so in Alc. 4.9, Ael. 7 and Ar. 1.23, and most probably in all examples by Philostratus.¹³ Therefore, the common “seduction technique” within the literary subgenre is in fact a mere non-monetary transaction, strictly speaking.¹⁴ As expected, the cheap ones and presents begot rarely, usually lead to rejection and subsequent choice of another partner.¹⁵ For men it is sometimes common to send a letter as a mean of seduction; this is the type that Philostratus has in all of his erotic letters.¹⁶ Similar are Alc. 3.26 and 4.15, Ael. 7, and Ar. 2.17. Persistence is another common seduction technique (compare Phil. 13 and Ar. 1.17, 2.17 and 2.20).

Women most commonly seduce by playing hard to get and provoking (un)called for jealousy (compare Alc. 4.10, Ael. 9, Ar. 1.17, 1.22, 1.27, 1.28, 2.1 and 2.18) or denying sex (Alc. 4.16, 4.17, Ar. 1.21,

⁷ For Alciphron’s, Aelian’s and Philostratus’ collections I am using the edition and numeration by Benner and Fobes 1949, for Aristaenatus’ the one by Otto Mazal, 1971 and for the Theophylact’s the one by Zanetto 1985. For more detailed information on the editions, please consult the bibliography at the end of the paper. All translations from ancient Greek into English in this paper are my own.

⁸ These are: 1.11, 1.16, 1.22, 2.6, 2.31, 4.1-19 and fragment 5.

⁹ These are: 1, 7, 8, 9, to some extent also 15 and 16.

¹⁰ These are: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 43, 44, 46, 47, 48, 50, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63 and 64.

¹¹ These are: 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24, 26, 30, 33, 36, 39, 42, 45, 48, 51, 54, 57, 60, 63, 66, 69, 72, 75, 78, 81 and 84.

¹² *Hetairai* were usually paid with presents and prostitutes with money. Due to the limited space, this paper will not be dealing with the way of life of the *hetairai* and their money-making. See Cohen, 2006, Funke, 2008, 29-36, Glazebrook, 2006, Kurke, 1997 and Whitley, 2000 (especially 9-28) for more detail.

¹³ The status of his recipients is hard to fully confirm.

¹⁴ This is in view with the fact that the most relationships described in the collections include *hetairai* or prostitutes.

¹⁵ The subgenre contains no letters where men are seduced by women using presents and there is no mention of male prostitutes (*gigolos*).

¹⁶ In all of his letters he tries to persuade women or men into sex or a relationship.

1.28, 2.1, 2.16, 2.18 and 2.20); this type of behaviour is typical of *hetairai*. Other types of female seduction techniques are seductive glances/gazes (cf. Phil. 50, Ar. 1.1, 1.4, 1.16 and 2.21), as well as singing or playing an instrument (see Alc. 4.16 or Theoph. 12 and 36¹⁷). Only in Alc. 4.10 do we find an example of a woman who skips the seduction part completely and tries to procure a man by using a magic potion instead.

Even though seduction as a motif is omnipresent in the erotic letters of Philostratus, his means of seduction are dully repetitive. A sender is usually sending an *encomium* of a sort, trying to persuade the objects of his attention by praising the attribute/property they possess,¹⁸ regardless of the obvious contradictions from one letter to another.¹⁹

Aristaenetus, on the other hand, went out of his way to provide us with different approaches to seduction-motif and so offered a spectrum of variations and sometimes also features particular for his letters only. His men, for example, seduce not only by singing and dancing (see Ar. 1.2, 2.5 and 2.19 and also unsuccessful attempts in Ar. 1.14 and 1.27) but also by carefully attending to their hair and clothes (Ar. 1.27) or by a gaze (compare Ar. 2.2 or 2.5). His women when seducing, on the other hand, can sometimes be surprisingly blunt and direct in a verbal approach – something not noticed in other collections (see e.g. Ar. 1.2 or 2.7: two women are seducing the same man).²⁰ Furthermore, they seduce by smiling (Ar. 1.1 and 1.2), by being chatty and pleasant in conversation (Ar. 1.16 or 2.1), by dancing (Ar. 1.26), by decorating their hair, putting their make-up or perfume on,²¹ and by trying to attract attention to body parts (cleavage in Ar. 1.4, part of a leg and undressing of “other body parts” in 1.27). Only in Aristaenetus’ and Philostratus’ collections is the female gaze an important means of seduction. Compare e.g. Phil. 51.2-3: ἔλκεῖς με ἀπὸ τῶν ὀμμάτων καὶ σύρεις μὴ θέλοντα (You draw me with your eyes and you hale me, against my will).²² However, Aristaenetus offers more examples; he describes the potential of the gaze in four letters (Ar. 1.1, 1.4, 1.16 and

¹⁷ These are the only two letters which include description of seduction in the whole collection of Theophylact.

¹⁸ Compare Marlog, 2009, 72: “Philostratus writes in order to seduce” (originally: “Filostrat piše da bi zaveo”).

¹⁹ E.g. the sender finds the decency of a woman irresistible in Phil. 27, but also the constant nudity of a male prostitute in Phil. 19.

²⁰ What is interesting is that both these approaches are successful.

²¹ In all collections this behaviour is the most certain trait of *hetairai*, so knowing this, men are more encouraged to talk and negotiate with them as their chances of a success increase.

²² The act of seeing is extremely important in Philostratus’ collection: the eyes are regularly seen as “the portals” for sexual desire and emotions (see more in Walker, 1992). However, the gaze itself as a means of seduction is rarely employed, which is a surprise; we might say that the main seductive force in his collection is the beauty itself.

2.21) whereupon the gazes of the *hetaira* from Ar. 1.4 have several completely different yet important functions (e.g. looking back is the complete equivalent of a verbal acceptance of a sexual offer). What is also interesting is that women in all collections are far more successful in seduction than men. This outcome should however be put into context: it was fully expected, as seduction is a part of the profession for most women portrayed (*hetairai*), and depending on how good they are can make all the difference in their subsistence.

3. Descriptions of physical contacts in Greek fictional epistolography

Greek fictional epistolography as a subgenre has always been portrayed as “decent” be it in the description of naked bodies or in the way it portrays foreplay and sexual relationships.²³ However, even at their first reading, one cannot help but notice the parts in the letters which do not fit in the above mentioned decency and offer more than expected, yet the depictions which could be considered pornographic are completely excluded.²⁴ Also, it is clear that the authors choose to portray sexuality of the couples somewhat differently.

It is my intention to extract and list all the common characteristics of the subgenre but the focus of this part of my research will be placed on the analysis of the differences noticed and the particularities found in each collection. The characteristics will be dealt with ranging from the common ones – those noticed in all the collections – to those noticed in most or at least two and ending with not so common ones, i.e. with those particular to one collection only. At the same time, all the features will be listed from “innocent” contacts towards the more explicit (in order: display of desire and taking sexual initiative, touches, kisses, passionate foreplay, sexual acts and their variations, as well as deviations).

3.1. Display of desire and taking sexual initiative

It comes as no surprise that erotic letters of the collections often contain descriptions of sexual desire and/or falling in love;²⁵ compare e.g. Alc. 1.11, 4.7 and 4.13, Ael. 1 and 9, Phil. 17, 29 and 30²⁶ and Ar. 1.22, 1.24, 2.3,²⁷ 2.5, 2.10 or 2.11.

²³ Compare e.g. Arnott, 1982, 298.

²⁴ Consequently, the collections abound with metaphors, euphemisms and erotic allusions. For more on this, see Hajdarević, 2017a and Hajdarević, 2017b.

²⁵ Manifestations can be a part of “actual” love letters (by which the sender directly shows their feelings to the recipient) or sent to third parties in confidence.

²⁶ All the letters by Philostratus can be seen as display of desire: the sender is trying to persuade the receiver to start a sexual act or a relationship. However, these three stand out among the bunch.

²⁷ A young wife complaining about the lack of sex in her marriage as well as her threat she will find a lover can be considered a proof that she in fact wishes there was sex.

With the exception of Aristaenetus, desire and infatuation in the letters is usually shown by men, while “the voices” of women are silenced. When they are heard however, they almost always belong to the *hetairai* (compare e.g. Alc. 4.7 or 4.13) or it is obvious that their desire cannot and will not be gratified.²⁸ The tendency in the collection of Aristaenetus is however completely different; not only is the interest and desire shown by both sexes, but the women in question, who are considerably more expressive in showing it, are not necessarily *hetairai*.²⁹ What can also be seen from the context is the fact their desire might be quenched. Corresponding findings were obtained by analysing sexual initiative between the sexes in the collections: men are those who predominantly take initiative, which is typical of the subgenre, while Alciphron and Aristaenetus allow their women to take initiative too. Aristaenetus goes a step further and gives even more “freedom” to his women: in his collection even women who are not *hetairai* initiate (sexual) relationships and sexual acts.³⁰

3.2. Foreplay

Touching and caressing of hands plays no great part in the subgenre. Important examples with erotic connotations can be found in two collections only; the ones by Alciphron and Aristaenetus. Compare τὰς τῶν ἐραστῶν χειρᾶς ἐμαλάττομεν τοὺς δακτύλους ἐκ τῶν ἀρμῶν ἡρέμα πῶς χαλῶσαι (We stroked our lover’s hands, unbending their flexed fingers) in Alc. 4.13.13.1-3 or the passage from Aristaenetus’ collection (Ar. 1.16.23-24), which is probably created with this Alciphron’s scene in mind as a model: καὶ τῆς ἐμῆς αὐτῆ λαβομένη χειρὸς ἐμάλαττε τοὺς δακτύλους ἐκ τῶν ἀρμῶν ἡρέμα χαλῶσα (She took my hand and stroke my fingers). The most interesting example is the passionate intertwining of hands in Ar. 1.9.6-10: ὁ δὲ μοιχὸς... λαβόμενος τῆς δεξιᾶς καὶ τοῖς ἐκείνης δακτύλοις τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ περιπλέξας, καὶ ὡς οἶμαι πρὸς τοῦ ἔρωτος ὑπέτρεμον ἀμφοτέρων αἱ χεῖρες. (The adulterer... took the woman’s right hand and flexed his fingers with hers. I think that their hands shook from passion.).

More detailed depictions of embraces can be found in the letters of the same (compare Alc. 4.16.3.1-2 and 4.18.9.1-3 or Ar. 1.1.39-42 and 1.21.5-6) as well as more passionate ones (see Alc. 4.18.14.2-4 and Ar. 2.4.22-23, 2.7.6-7, 2.10.26³¹ and 2.16.19), while in Alc. 3.19.8.1-2 a protagonist sits an instrument player in his lap.

²⁸ A fisherman’s daughter in love writes a letter to her mother in confidence (Alc. 1.11), and her answer shatters her hope (see Alc. 1.12).

²⁹ See e.g. of a girl in love, who feels the sexual desire for the first time in Ar. 2.5.

³⁰ Compare the analysis of the sexual initiative in the collection of Aristaenetus in Hajdarević, 2018: my research of who of the sexes takes initiative in the subgenre is methodologically based on the paper mentioned.

³¹ A man passionately embraces a painting, i.e. a person thereon painted.

Touching and caressing of female breasts is a frequent motif in three collections (Alc. 4.13.13.5, Phil. 20.15-16,³² 59.21-22 and Ar. 1.21.4-5) while more passionate descriptions of foreplay can be found in Ar. 2.7.21-22 and 2.16.19-20.³³ In Ar. 2.19.20 the lovers are tightly embraced (cf. ἄμφω οὐ μόνον στέρνω στέρνον ἀρμύζοντες). A detailed description of caressing of a belly, thighs and bottom are in this sub-genre nowhere to be found.

Descriptions of lip kissing can be found only in Alciphron and Aristaenetus (comp. Alc. 4.11.7.2-3, 4.13.13.4, 4.16.3.1-2, 4.18.14.2-3 and 4.19.1.9 as well as Ar.1.16.28-30, 1.21.5, 2.7.22, 2.10.22-23,³⁴ 2.16.18 and 2.19.21). The most passionate kiss in the subgenre can be found in Ar. 1.16.28-30; the sender talks about how his lips were almost bitten off and how his lips still ache from the kiss of a woman (καὶ πεφίληκεν οὕτω προσφῦσα μανικῶς, ὥστε μόλις ἀποσπάσαι τὰ χεῖλη καὶ κατατέτριφέ μου τὸ στόμα). Desire for a kiss is the most prominent in Ar. 1.24.33-35. An example of a cleavage kiss can be found in the collection of Aristaenetus. It is however not clear if the woman is dressed or not (see Ar. 1.12.22-23).

Depictions of imaginary exchange of contacts between the lovers can be found in Alciphron's, Philostratus' and Aristaenetus' collections - touches/kisses of body parts, previously touched by a loved one, or consequent caressing/kissing of a certain object (e.g. a glass, an apple, etc.) serve as direct intermediaries. Thirteen such examples have been detected. In only two cases, both of which come from Aristaenetus' collection, immediate kisses were achieved without help from any object: in Ar. 1.9.13-14 a woman kisses her own hand because it had been earlier touched by her lover, in Ar. 1.22.41-42 another one does the same, but because she had touched her lover's face earlier. The first woman obviously substitutes the kiss of the lover's hand and the second one – his face.

Both touches and kisses are far more commonly substituted by objects, such as glasses, apples, roses and in one case – a letter. Alciphron offers one such example, Philostratus six of them and Aristaenetus four of them (they have been located in one letter by Alciphron, four by Philostratus and two by Aristaenetus). Two examples deal with the power of using the same glass – it serves as a fictitious kiss on the lips. Let us examine the following: in Phil. 33.14-15, the sender asks the woman not to waste wine, but to fill the glass with water only and to “fill it with kisses and give it to the one who is thirsty” (τοῖς χεῖλεσι προσφέρουσα πλήρου φιλημάτων τὸ ἔκπωμα καὶ οὕτως δίδου τοῖς

³² A sender imagines roses caressing his loved one instead of him.

³³ An unsuccessful grabbing of breast can be found in Ar. 1.3.28-30: lovers are floating in water and a man says that “there was an apple floating between them and he grabbed it, confusing it for his darling's breast” (μήλου γὰρ ἀμποῖν μεταξύ ἐν τοῖς ὕδασι διανηχομένου τῇ χειρὶ κατεδραξάμην, τοῦτο εἶναι νομίσας τὸν... τῆς ποθομένης μαστόν.).

³⁴ A painter kisses the lips of the girl painted.

δεομένοις), and in Ar. 1.25.15-16 a *hetaira* and her future client take turns to drink from the same glass, touching the same spot with lips. An equivalent to a kiss is passing/sending of bitten apples: in Alc. 3.26.2.8-9 a married woman encloses them as presents with her letters, and in Ar. 1.25.21-22 a woman kisses the same spot on the apple previously bitten by a man. I find the example in Ar. 1.25.22-23 most interesting: a woman places an apple, previously bitten by a man, into her bosom and by doing so, transfers his kiss into her cleavage (compare: ἡ δὲ φιλήσασα μεταξὺ τῶν μαστῶν ὑπὸ τῷ περιδέσμῳ... παρέβυσσε).³⁵ A similar example can be found in Ar. 2.13.10-12, in which a woman places her lover's letter into her bosom, but this probably has to do with an indirect touch and not with a kiss. Philostratus is the only one who uses roses as a prop and their (intended) role seems to be quite delicate. In Phil. 20.15-16 the sender imagines them to cover the breasts of his beloved, in Phil. 46.5-6 he fears they will rape the addressee in bed, and in his 54th letter he suggests to a woman to take them and let them abuse her: he has instructed them to kiss her on her neck (cf. Phil. 54.8-9), caress her breasts (Phil. 54.9), and even "to do what a man's job/role is" (Phil. 54.9). It seems that the roses of Philostratus' collection serve as a prop used to transmit hugs and caress breasts, in the same manner as apples and letters are used in other collections, but the roses can also play the role of an intermediary, used to "perform" even the sexual act itself! It is important to point out that the roses from Phil. 54 are the only prop detected in the subgenre, used in one letter as a multi-functional purposeful tool to: kiss the neck, caress the breasts and finally perform the sexual act itself.³⁶

The context analysis for the substitutions of this kind in the noticed examples could have three possible reasons: a) the actual caresses and kisses are not possible due to particular circumstances (a public space e.g.) and/or the nature of the relationship between the lovers (an affair, e.g.), b) the lovers are physically distant and the direct contact is therefore impossible and c) these types of caresses and kisses function as any other foreplay; they lead to sexual acts which may but do not have to be described in the letter itself (however, it is often insinuated that sex is what happens next).³⁷

³⁵ Can we consider placing of a previously-bitten apple into a cleavage in this situation an anticipation of a sensual bite of female breasts or at least a mutual desire of lovers for this to happen?

³⁶ In Ar. 1.25 an object (an apple) changes the spot where the kiss is transmitted (first the lips of the *hetaira*, then her breasts, i.e. cleavage, but unlike the roses of Philostratus, the action it replaces stays the same – we are still talking about a kiss.

³⁷ Sometimes these examples must be adapted to suit the circumstances. Let us take an example of kissing a glass and placing an apple into the bosom in Ar.1.25; this is clearly a signal as the future lovers leave the party together, but also a way to avoid indecent / ill-suited behaviour. A kiss on the lips would probably not fit into this category but an "actual" kiss of a cleavage zone maybe would.

It is clear that all the examples above are closely connected with the sphere of erotica; they can serve as an obvious proof to the reader that the couple depicted in the letter is in a relationship or is about to be. They also confirm the mutual or at least one-sided passion between the lovers or they can be a mere sexual game in situations where serious foreplay is not appropriate. I conclude that the erotic potential of these types of touches and kisses is almost equal to physical contact between the lovers. The *hetaira* in Ar. 1.25.18-19 considers it a proper kiss and a prologue to future sexual relationship when her sister and her lover share the same glass: τοῦτον δὴ τὸν τρόπον ὡσπερ ἐκ στομάτων ὑπεφίλουν ἀλλήλους καταπίνοντες τὰ φιλήματα (Thus they exchanged liquid kisses as if they were kissing with lips). The conclusion of this fictional character is a reason good enough for me to interpret indirect touches and kisses in the same manner as well.

A more passionate foreplay is rarely described. Full body contact can be found described in Ar. 2.10.26-27³⁸ and Ar. 2.19.20.³⁹ A scene from Alc. 4.13.13.6 goes a step further; a pelvic rub is mentioned. Let us look at the quotation: ἀποστραφεῖσα ἀτεχνῶς τοῖς βουβῶσι τὸ κατόπιν τῆς ὀσφύος προσαπέθλιβε (As she turned, she pressed her thighs on his crotch). As a result, the letter (see Alc. 4.13.14.1-3) continues as follows: “excitement grew among the women and among men grew *their thing*” (διανίστατο δὲ ἤδη ἡμῶν μὲν τῶν γυναικῶν τὰ πάθη, τῶν ἀνδρῶν δὲ ἐκεῖνα). It is important to emphasize that this allusion is the only mention of sexual excitement of women and male erection in the whole sub-genre.

3.3. Sexual relationships and sexual acts

An analysis has shown that only three collections contain descriptions of accomplished sexual acts and those are Alciphron’s (two examples), Aelian’s (one example) and Aristaenetos’ (12 examples).⁴⁰ Along with rape described in Alc. 2.35, the collection of Alciphron contains only one letter describing a sexual act between two mutually consented adults, and that is Alc. 4.13. However, this letter, which serves as an exception, offers much: several couples, after being initially coy, start having sex in front of each other in a public place. The combination of three factors explains this unhindered behaviour of the protagonists: all women involved are *hetairai*, the atmosphere is merry, and the couples have been drinking (which the author specifies in Alc. 4.13.12.5). Among few of Aelian’s erotic letters only the first depicts a

³⁸ A painter is trying to make love to a painted girl.

³⁹ The description goes no further but only mentions rubbing chest to chest.

⁴⁰ As already mentioned, the subgenre frequently portrays relationships with *hetairai* and the physical component of such relationships is by default implied. However, the focus of this paper is description of events that actually took place and not the logical assumptions about the lives and relationships of the protagonists that go beyond information described in letters.

performed sexual act.⁴¹ When compared with other collections, the sexual act in the Aristaenetus' is performed relatively often – in as many as 12 letters: Ar. 1.2, 1.3, 1.19, 1.15, 1.16, 1.20, 1.22,⁴² 2.4, 2.7, 2.11,⁴³ 2.19 and 2.22. Of course, narration varies from allusion and complete avoidance of saucy details to somewhat vulgar descriptions; the opening sentence of the letter Ar. 2.22 could be considered as the most linguistically explicit.

To the above-mentioned letters could also be added those from whose context it is clear that the sex followed after the description of the negotiation/foreplay (without ever the act itself being described): Ar. 1.13,⁴⁴ 2.14, 2.15⁴⁵ and 2.19.⁴⁶ Letters Ar. 2.7 and 2.22 can be put in both categories.⁴⁷ In several examples the sexual act had taken place before the actions described in the letter (compare e.g. a girl admitting that she lost her virginity as the main motif in Ar. 1.6).

In the collection of Aristaenetus we find phrases the author uses to explain that the sexual act was performed and lures the reader to read further and wait for the description. However, his delivery suddenly stops,⁴⁸ and the readers' voyeuristic interest is never satisfied.⁴⁹ Such phrases were discovered in as many as five of his letters (Ar. 1.2, 1.12, 1.16, 2.4 and 2.7) and there are seven in total (Ar. 1.16 contains three phrases in a row). The senders (i.e. the author himself, using their voice) often offer explanations why they use them. In two such examples, the reasons are of (quasi) moral nature; in Ar. 1.2.22-23 we find μέγρι μὲν οὖν δεῦρο τοῦ λόγου καλῶς ἂν ἔχοι καὶ πρὸς ὄντιναοῦν,

⁴¹ In Ael. 9 a man goes into surprising detail to describe the lifting of *hetaira's* legs and then "a quicky". However, this is an imaginary sexual act.

⁴² I consider the phrase "she made up/united with a youth" a euphemism for the sexual act performed, mostly because we are dealing with a *hetaira*, but also because the text of the letter mentions the passion that the woman experienced.

⁴³ Like the previous example, this one also deals with euphemisms. Although "to be together/spend time with someone" can also mean just hanging out, the problem of the sender of this letter is that he is "hanging out" both with his wife and with the *hetaira* (and I think it is perfectly clear what type of "hanging out" with the latter he has in mind).

⁴⁴ The letter ends with the father's consent to "loan" his lover to his son so that he could "get better".

⁴⁵ The woman's plan to offer her own husband, so that she could get a younger slave instead, looks pretty cunning and detailed, so we have every reason to believe it will be successful.

⁴⁶ The letter ends with a man coming to the woman's home and their subsequent soft foreplay.

⁴⁷ In Ar. 2.7 the reasons the older woman puts forward to persuade her lover to get back to her, having cheated on her (with a slave), sound convincing: the woman cites her own sexual experience as an advantage and the letter ends with her unambiguous offer. Aristaenetus' letter 2.22 is damaged, but we have reason to believe that the woman's plan of "guarding" the burglar (who is in fact her lover and with whom she was almost caught in flagrante) has enabled her to repeat the adultery.

⁴⁸ The phrases are used to avoid the description of the sexual act but not the foreplay.

⁴⁹ The contextual analysis of the phrases of this kind is based on Hajdarević, 2013, 215-217, but it is more detailed.

τὸ δὲ ἐντεῦθεν... (Up to this point, everyone could hear this but from now on...), and in Ar. 1.12.17-18 the quotation says that “the joys of Aphrodite should be kept secret” (τὰ τερπνὰ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης ἀπόρρητα). The sender also sometimes tends to be concise and concludes that “no big words should be wasted about it” (see οὐδὲν περιττοῦ δεόμενος λόγου in 1.16.34) so he considers the further exposition redundant if the reader can guess what follows: compare οἶδας γὰρ ὅποια τὰ λοιπὰ (you know what follows next) in Ar. 1.16.33, τὰ δ’ ἄλλα... νόει μοι κατὰ σαυτὸν (the other... well, you know anyway) and τὰ ἐπὶ τούτοις ἐδρῶμεν (we did what follows) in Ar. 2.4.22-23. The phrase in Ar. 2.7.29-30 infers the described and introduces a new event: ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἐκείνοι· ἡ δὲ κεκτημένη... ἐπέστητοῖς τελουμένοις (So, they were doing it and the landlady walked in while it was going on). I find it interesting that the circumstances in which the acts take place are sometimes more shocking than the very description of the sexual acts would be (adultery, sex in a public place, sex with more partners, etc.) and the phrases are often not the final words of the author on the sexual act, but the description can be followed by an extra detail. See e.g. a phrase λεκτέον, ὥς οὐδεμίαν λελύπηκα (It must be said that not one of them was left disappointed.) in Ar. 1.2.24 or λέξω μέντοι τοιοῦτον, ὥς... ἐφιλονεικοῦμεν δι’ ὅλης τῆς νυκτός (Nevertheless, I can say that... we made love all night long.) in Ar. 1.16.34-35. In both examples the assumed meaning of the phrase – the avoidance of the description of the scene – is actually disrupted with the introduction to what is coming next, and which can only be said to be more explicit than the information to which the said phrase alludes. A curious reader, in want of more saucy details, could perhaps find a kind of satisfaction in these examples. All of the afore mentioned leads me to conclude that the phrases seem to be a kind of intermission on the author introduces in order to avoid the monotony of the expression,⁵⁰ but it is also possible he uses them to provoke readers, to make them more interested in what is coming next, but in the end decides to leave their “dirty mind” unsatisfied. In Ar. 1.2 and 2.4 the phrases are used at the end of the letter as the sexual act is the culmination, while in Ar. 1.12, 1.16 and 2.7 they are placed in the middle and the story continues after them.⁵¹

Two phrases somewhat similar to the above could be found only in Alciphron’s collection. In Alc. 4.17.5.3 the sender describes how she was close to her neighbour, who she lost her virginity to long time ago. She mentions his opulent and diverse presents and concludes: τὰλλα σιωπῶ (I won’t mention the rest); it is clear what type of “service” she is

⁵⁰ Along with erotic metaphors, the phrases are there to make the descriptions more varied.

⁵¹ In his *Dialogues of the Gods* 19 and *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 5 Lucian uses phrases quite similar to Aristaenetus’ and it is possible that Aristaenetus used these examples as models/sources for his phrases. However, the way Lucian uses them is completely different; his phrases actually interrupt the telling of the saucy details.

offering in return. The party in Alc. 4.13 has gotten out of hand; alcohol, joy and erotic dances of *hetairai* are the reasons why the party guests turn their minds to sex (as seen in the phrase “you know what I mean”, i.e. οἶδας ὃ τι λέγω in Alc. 4.13.1). There are however obvious differences between these and the phrases used by Aristaenetus: Alciphron’s are fewer in number and the information the phrase stands for (a sexual adventure) is in no way a central motif of the letter. Quite opposite, the one from Alc. 4.17 is casual and delivered as a minor remark.

The side-effects of sexual acts are described only in the collection of Aristaenetus. In Ar. 2.7 a girl eavesdrops on pillow talk of a couple engaged in a sexual act, and in Ar. 2.7.25-27 there are mentions of bodily fluids deriving from a passionate kiss, as well as sweat and hot breath (Μέμικται... ἰδρῶτι, θερμῶ δὲ... τῷ τοῦ πνεύματος ρεύματι). The only time that sperm is mentioned (with awareness of how it is related to pregnancy being included) is in Ar. 1.19.21-23.

The consequences of sexual relationships are mostly perceived as a problem. Abortion is mentioned twice. In Ar. 1.19.25-28, advice is sought on how to procure one and there is an allusion to repeated abortions of a *hetaira* in Theoph. 30. In neither are the details of the procedure mentioned. The loss of virginity is a problem in Alc. 4.17.4-5 and Ar. 1.6, and further down in the text of Ar. 1.6 advice on how to fake the loss of virginity during the first wedding night is promised.⁵²

3.4. Variations and deviations in sexual relationships and sexual acts

The collection of Philostratus is unique in that it is the only one which contains sexual desire expressed towards both sexes and in almost equal measure. The other authors do not show neither female nor male same-sex relationships:⁵³ they are not even mentioned as an option in their collections.⁵⁴ It must, however, be taken into account

⁵² Faking it in bed is a motif in Ar. 2.13 also, but the context is completely different – the *hetaira* there isn’t faking the loss of virginity but orgasm.

⁵³ There is no explanation as to why this is so. When it comes to later collections, the ones by Aristaenetus and Theophylact, Christianity and the changes to moral and ethical norms it brought could very well have a significant influence (e.g. this is how Arnott, 1982, 314-315 explains the lack of same-sex relationships in the collection of Aristaenetus). However, there are no plausible explanations as to why Philostratus is the only one among the three authors living at the same time (i.e. him, Alciphron and Aelian) who includes the same-sex variation.

⁵⁴ Only two potential exceptions were found, both coming from the collection of Aristaenetus. In Ar. 1.10.14-1 it says: ἔδει γὰρ τὸν καλὸν τοσοῦτους τετοξευκότα... γινῶναι σαφῶς, οἷα πεπόνθασιν οἱ δι’ αὐτὸν τραυματίαι (It was about time that he, who wounded so many... realises how much they whom he wounded suffered). *Masculinum* of the article (see οἱ) can possibly mean that men were in love with a youth or at least that “the victims” are of both sexes, but the problem comes from the fact that the noun is derived from the terminology of hunting and war, so its *femininum* has never been confirmed.

that all relationships (including same-sex ones) remain only in the sphere of a wish in the collection of Philostratus, and in the end we are none the wiser if they actually took place. Nor indeed if they could ever take place at all.

This means that all the relationships accomplished in the sub-genre uniformly remain within the heterosexual sphere. A major proportion of letters deals with relationships with *hetairai*,⁵⁵ and a good number of men having relationships with them are either married or in another relationship. It would be logical therefore to conclude that collections mostly contain relationships born of adultery, but infidelity is an important motif only in Alciphron's and Aristaenetus' collections, where it is given more attention. It is used six times as a motif in Alciphron's (in letters Alc. 1.16, 3.16,⁵⁶ 3.26, 3.27, 3.33 and 3.36), where infidelity is committed twice by men and four times by women.⁵⁷ In the letters of Aristaenetus, both sexes can be infidel (see Ar. 1.2, 1.5,⁵⁸ 1.9,⁵⁹ 1.20, 2.7, 2.11 and 2.22) but women also cheat more often. The most detailed and the ugliest description of adultery is most definitely Ar. 2.22.⁶⁰ Additionally, the careful planning of adultery is the motif in four Aristaenetus' letters (see Ar. 1.9, 2.3, 2.15 and 2.22). What is interesting is that women do all the planning and the plans concocted are all likely to succeed. Four letters of Philostratus are in fact persuasions into adultery (Phil. 30, 31, 32 and 33) and Ar. 2.17 contains a description of a failed attempt at it.

Liddell and Scott, 1940 offer only one option: “the wounded one” (s.v. τραυματίας, ου, ό, a wounded man, οί τρ. the wounded of an army), and something similar is offered by Senc, 1910, s.v. τραυματίας. In other words, the expression here could be used generally and not refer to the sexes of the people mentioned. It is somewhat easier to correctly interpret the sentence *ἔχε με... τὸν πᾶσι καὶ πάσαις ἀνάλωτον* (take me... the one who was elusive to all men and women) from Ar. 2.20.5-6; by mentioning both genders of the adjective, the author shows an awareness of the existence of both sexual preferences.

⁵⁵ Those are: Alc. 1.6, 1.21, 1.22, 2.14, 2.23, 2.31, 3.14, 3.28, 4.1-4.19 and fragment 5, El. 7, 8 and 9, Phil. 23, 35 and 38, Ar. 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 1.12, 1.14, 1.17, 1.18, 1.22, 1.23, 1.24, 1.25, 1.28, 2.1, 2.13, 2.14, 2.16, 2.18, 2.20 and 2.21 and also probably all erotic letters in the collection of Theophylact, with the exception of 54. We could also add Phil. 19 to the list as it shows (a desired) relationship with a male prostitute.

⁵⁶ I take the example into consideration even though the protagonist is a concubine and not the wife.

⁵⁷ Moreover: the woman in Alc. 3.16 has two lovers.

⁵⁸ The act itself is not shown in the letter but from the reaction of the lovers when meeting in a public place one can see that the adultery took place and is very likely to happen again.

⁵⁹ It is clear from the context that the woman is prone to infidelity and this is also why she came to the party without her husband.

⁶⁰ It is always trying to read the author's moral attitudes from the text of letters, but if there was a letter which could be said to show Aristaenetus' own disapproval of adultery, then it must be Ar. 2.22: compare the vulgar verb used for the act itself and resourcefulness of a shameless woman, evoking antipathy in a reader but also pity for the naive husband.

Besides adultery, the marriages depicted also need to fear problems coming from elsewhere. In Ar. 2.3.2-4 the speaker “neglects his marital duties:”⁶¹ οὗτος γὰρ ἐκάστοτε παρὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς εὐνῆς πόρρω τῶν νυκτῶν πλάττεται περὶ πραγμάτων σκοπεῖσθαι (Every night when it’s time for bed he excuses himself by saying he has to work on law cases). As a consequence the woman, using the legal vocabulary, threatens with finding a lover; in Ar. 2.3.13-14 we find: ἕτερος ῥήτωρ τῆς ἐμῆς ἐπιμελήσεται δίκης (some other lawyer will take care of my case).⁶² This marriage, however, could be suffering from more problems than the husband’s temporary disinterest in sex – the text never obviously states if the marriage had been consumed or not so this might be a depiction of an asexual man. A problem in another marriage is a woman: she is a spendthrift and her nature is difficult. Compare: ἔστι δὲ καὶ τὸν τρόπον καὶ τοῦνομα Δεινομάχη, καὶ τὸ χεῖρε μόγισ ἀπέχεται, καὶ ὥσπερ δέσποινα δεινὴ κεκράτηκέ μου (She was rightfully called Deinomache;⁶³ she raises her hands up to the air often and reigns over me as a fearful mistress) in Ar. 2.12.10-12.⁶⁴ It is not thus surprising that the man in question is thinking about divorce (see the end of the letter). The man in Alc. 1.4 and the woman in Alc. 1.6 are thinking about it as well.⁶⁵ Dissatisfaction or at least boredom in a marriage is shown in Ar. 2.15: a woman concocts a cunning plan to get her husband into her neighbour’s bed and get her slave instead (compare Ar. 2.15.7-17). There is an opportunity for a double adultery here therefore; both she and her husband will commit it.

There are also cases of happy marriages, such as Ar. 1.10, 1.15 and 1.19, but I noticed that they also contain a share of amorality and / or inappropriateness. Let us look at the following: Acontius, the youth in Ar. 1.10, manages to find a bride using duplicity,⁶⁶ the woman in Ar. 1.15 might have lead the king into marrying her only so she could bring peace to her town, and the wife in Ar. 1.19 is a retired *hetaira*. It is obvious why the mention of marital problems or weird circumstances in which a marriage occurs; descriptions of harmonious or indeed usual/nondescript marriages would not be interesting to read.

⁶¹ I do not take into account cases from Alciphron’s collection when husbands are besotted by *hetairai*. Namely, their wives complain and threaten and cite existential reasons (farms are being ruined because their husbands are never there or they spend money like maniacs) or moral ones (shame and gossip), while the mention of sexual neglect, like the one in Aristaeetus, is completely disregarded. Compare e.g. Alc. 1.6.

⁶² Still, I consider that the ending of the letter reveals that she is more interested in saving the marriage than persisting in adultery.

⁶³ The name translates literally as “Fierce in battle.”

⁶⁴ The man obviously fears such a wife. However, I renounce my initial idea that the “raising of hands up to the air” is an allusion to physical abuse in marriage.

⁶⁵ In Alc. 1.4 a fisherman is not happy that his wife loves spending her time in the city in the company of rich women, and in Alc. 1.6 a husband spends too much money on a *hetaira*, bringing shame to his wife and potentially leading her into poverty.

⁶⁶ He throws an apple which binds a girl to marry him in front of Artemis, having read it aloud.

Sexual encounters in public places can be found in three collections. Alciphron offers two such examples. In Alc. 4.13 the sexual encounter (including several couples) takes place in the country farm and the situation is more delicate in that the couples, after being initially coy, have sex in front of each other (as given in Alc. 4.13.19-22). In Alc. 2.35 an actual rape is taking place in nature, on a meadow. A sexual act in Ael. 1 is probably taking place in a vineyard. In Ar. 1.2 two girls see a young man walking down the street and persuade him to have sex with them, so the sex occurs in a “hideout well-suited to the need” (compare *θάλαμον αὐτοσχέδιον εὐρὼν ἀρκοῦντα τῇ χρείᾳ* in Ar. 1.2.24-25). A pastoral idyll of a farm house with a lake is the stage set for the caresses and sex of a couple in Ar. 1.3, with the other couples, serving as potential witnesses of the encounters, mentioned. In the last example, Ar. 2.4, a man is waiting for his lover (somebody else’s slave), who needs to sneak out, and once she appears they engage in passion in a dark street.

Sometimes there are more participants in the sexual act; in before mentioned letters, Alc. 4.13 and Ar. 1.3, several couples are making love, but there is no information whether the partners are swapped so we can never really talk about an orgy in the actual meaning of the word. Another thing that needs to be mentioned is that even though the sex took place in front of somebody else’s eyes we can never talk about voyeurism here, since we find no mention of anyone being sexually excited watching other people “do it”.

In several letters of the subgenre there are descriptions of repeated sex with the same person: compare Alc. 4.13 or Ar. 1.16, as well as supposedly Ar. 22 (the lost part of the text).⁶⁷ Partner swap is found only in the collection of Aristaenetus; a man in Ar. 1.2.24 who comments “not one of them was left in tears” (*οὐδεμίαν λελύπηκα*) obviously says that he had sex with both girls,⁶⁸ but we do not find out if it happened consecutively or at once. If taken for granted that the three of them go to a hidden location together and this to be a case which verifies the latter, than this letter is the only example of a sexual act between three people (a *threesome*) in the whole subgenre. In Ar. 2.11 a man, in love with both his wife and his *hetaira* mistress, wishes they could all live peacefully together so that he could have sexual relationships with both

⁶⁷ Greek law was very strict to men who were caught having sex with somebody else’s wife; he could be subjected to money fines, captivity, physical violence or even death by the man scorned (compare e.g. Dover, 2002, 21-23). A lover in Ar. 2.22 is saved by the wife lying that he is an intruder, but her plan to “watch over him during the night” presupposes the adultery being repeated, so the lover’s life is in danger again.

⁶⁸ In Ar. 2.7 a lover was passed from the mistress to her slave, who has sex with him. At the end of the letter the mistress offers the man “a reminder of what she has to offer” and we can rightfully suppose that the man accepts the offer. However, there is a difference between this example and the one from Ar. 1.2, since it states clearly that the man had sex with both women.

(a *menage a trois*), but the chances of this happening are actually quite poor. The very mention of this option, even though it may well forever stay in the area of the imaginary, cannot be found in any other collection.

Promiscuous behaviour has been noticed in all the collections: see e.g. Alc. 1.6.2.2 and 4.2.3.3-4, Ael. 10.1, Phil. 19 and 38 or Ar. 1.18; in the last three examples promiscuity is the main motif of the letter. There are often connections with the *hetairai*, when a man is either crazy about them and accused of priapism or they themselves have been accused of nymphomania.⁶⁹ Exceptionally promiscuous however is a concubine in Alc. 3.16, who has two lovers.⁷⁰ Exaggeration of this kind is often portrayed as a negative character trait, but there are also counter examples. E.g. in Ar. 2.7.45-47, sexual experience of an older woman over a younger one is used as a comparative advantage, while in Phil. 19 and 38 promiscuity is regarded as the right type of behaviour (we are dealing with a male prostitute in 19 and a *hetaira* in 38).

A rape (of a woman) that actually happened was described only in Alc. 2.35. It seems likely that a *hetaira* in Alc. 3.5 was abducted for the same purpose, and a failed rape attempt can be found in Ael. 9 also.

An act of voyeurism, by which sexual pleasure is derived from watching a couple having sex and listening to the sounds they make can only be found in Ar. 2.7: a female slave is watching and listening to her mistress with her lover, which makes her horny so she offers herself to him too.⁷¹

Fetish and masochistic tendencies are typically found in the collection of Philostratus.⁷² Special attention is given to feet. Their role in the sexual excitement in any of the partners is not mentioned and neither

⁶⁹ Going too far in the accusations of this kind can sometimes be assigned to a *hetaira* being jealous of another *hetaira* for being successful (e.g. Ar. 18) and sometimes we are dealing with a cheated wife who feels existentially threatened by a *hetaira* (see Alc. 1.6 e.g.).

⁷⁰ A potential connection with the world of *hetairai* can be found in this example as well – concubines were never rightful wives, and they were often migrants, freed slaves and former *hetairai*.

⁷¹ Compare Ar. 2.7.6-8: καὶ που καὶ συμπλεχθέντας αὐτοὺς εἶδεν ἢ κόρη, καὶ δι' ἄκοῆς τε καὶ θέας ὤλισθεν Ἔρως ἐπὶ τὴν ἐκείνης ψυχὴν αὐτῆ (The girl saw them intertwined and because of what she saw and heard Eros entering her soul).

⁷² Since there are no direct and clear connections between the sexual excitement accomplished *via* a body part or by inflicting pain, it is partly questionable whether the terms such as “fetish” or “masochism” (in their erotic sense) could be used here. However, all erotic letters portray attempts of seduction and accomplishment of a sexual act/relationship with the addressees, so excessive and unusual attention given to body parts, as well as desire for pleasure derived from pain, seem to be a constituting part of the sexuality of the sender and not merely his obsessive behaviour. Hodkinson thinks in the same line; cf. Hodkinson, 2009, 197-208.

is present in the sexual act itself (e.g. imagining that feet touch a body part or kissing feet etc.), but in letters 18, 36 and 37 their descriptions are surprisingly detailed and spread throughout the letters. In 18.25 a sender wishes to kiss a footprint and there is also another combination with a hint of masochism in 37.14-16: ὃ ἄδετοι πόδες... ὃ τρισευδαίων ἐγὼ καὶ μακάριος, ἐὰν πατῆ με (Oh bare feet... I will be three times as happy and blessed should you step on me!). Several letters which include sending of roses (see Phil. 20, 46 and 54) are examples of proper fetishism; the context clearly shows their (imagined) potential in the roles of sexual partners (objectophilia). The sender also wishes to: be trodden on by their partner's feet (see quotation from the letter 37 above) and be inflicted with mortal wound (see Phil. 5.16-18 and 47.30-32). He also offers to suffer instead of their lover (Phil. 23.11-13) or even die (Phil. 7.53-56 and 23.12) and then suggests he is "happy and takes pleasure in the fact that he is being tortured by a man with a cruel behaviour" (Phil. 48.3). Even though none of the examples describe a sexual adventure where infliction of pain pays a direct role, the connection with a sender was established; attention seeking, which could also be the pain-inflicting itself (in Phil. 48) and explicitly taking pleasure in (physical) torture; Phil. 5, 37, 47 and 48 are examples of "genuine" masochism.⁷³

The only example of objectophilia described in detail (or more precisely, iconophilia) in the subgenre is Ar. 2.10: the sender (a painter in love) describes his unsuccessful attempts at making love to an image of a girl on his own painting.⁷⁴

I agree with Arnott in that Ar. 1.16 is most probably depicting an incestuous relationship.⁷⁵ Namely, the protagonist is quite indecisive in his approach to a woman and is waiting for her to initiate foreplay and sex, and the first sentence of the letter states: Ἐρωτῶ περιπεσῶν

⁷³ Even though the sender of all the letters in this collection is a non-fictional person, i.e. the author himself, fetish and masochism are surely not his *personal* sexual preferences; besides, various contradictions encountered in letters themselves lead us to believe that they *should not* be seen as autobiographical at all! Hodkinson, 2009, 202 concludes similarly: "Of course, I am not trying to argue that Philostratus was a foot-fetishist and a masochist; but the persona he adopts in the letters certainly is". Besides contradictory taste regarding both men and women, in Phil. 7 he presents himself as a poor man as well, and we know that he was certainly not since he belonged to an intellectual circle of the Roman empress Julia Domna (compare Phil. 73). Therefore, while reading his *Letters* we do not meet *him*, but his different fictional personas, *aliases* that prove his sophistic education. Hodkinson analyses Philostratus' fetishism (in Phil 18, 26 and 37) and masochism (found in Phil. 5, 23 and 47) and argues that it "could be connected with the (Roman) elegiac idea of *servitium amoris*" (Hodkinson, 2017, 514). Obviously, the same idea influenced the other epistolographers less.

⁷⁴ An objectophilia of a kind is also present in Phil. 20, 46 and 54 – roses are used to imagine the man's role in a sexual act. However, unlike Aristaenetos' examples, these situations are purely imaginary.

⁷⁵ Compare Arnott, 1982, 297.

ἀπορρήτω. So, he is in love but this love is forbidden / scandalous / should be kept secret.⁷⁶ Although the letters in the collections describe relationships with *hetairai*, adulteries, sexual relations with several partners, sometimes in a public space and in front of other people, not one of them is defined by this adjective. So let us ask ourselves – what else is there?!⁷⁷

It was mentioned earlier that the women of Aristaenetus express desire and show initiative more often when trying to foster sexual relationships. I find it important to emphasise that this initiative goes so far as that women plan, put the plan into action or lay solid ground for the realisation of almost all amoral relationships in his collection: two women encourage a sexual act with a man in a row in a public place in 1.2 (we could be talking about a threesome as well) and in a house in 2.7, one offers her own husband to a friend in exchange for her slave (see Ar. 2.15), the one in Ar. 2.3 threatens to find a lover because she is being neglected by her husband, while the adulteress in Ar. 2.22, almost caught in the act, finds a way to repeat the deed and while her husband is at home too.⁷⁸

4. Conclusion

One can certainly say that Greek fictional epistolography as a subgenre is a stranger to vulgarity and pornography. In accordance with the analogous topic, it was expected that the observed erotic letters of all collections contain a slew of common characteristics when depicting foreplay and sexual acts. This research showed however, that even though collections somewhat go along the same lines, there are actually more differences between them than similarities and some are even completely specific.

Physical details of saucy nature are more commonly to be found in the collection of Aristaenetus, in the collections of Alciphron and Philostratus they are quite rare and limited to only a few letters, while we can say that Theophylact is by far the coyest of the authors observed.⁷⁹

Protagonists having relationships with the *hetairai* can be found in all collections. However, the ratio of relationships with the *hetairai* and the others varies from one collection to another. In the collections of Theophylact and Alciphron, almost all the relationships in erotic

⁷⁶ Cf. Liddell and Scott, 1940, s.v. ἀπόρρητος.

⁷⁷ The text clearly shows that this is also not a case of being in love with a man.

⁷⁸ Cf. similar conclusions in Hajdarević, 2018.

⁷⁹ For the sake of lucidity, an overview which follows will also follow the logic of the paper: from the more innocent contacts, over foreplay and onward to sexual acts and the variations therein.

letters include them,⁸⁰ while the tendency in the Aristaenetus' is diverse; he carefully chooses to vary the status of his protagonists, which means we can find relationships with the *hetairai* but also with slaves and married women (he also devotes a lot of attention to the depiction of marriages). About half of the Aelian's very few erotic letters portray relationships with the *hetairai* (see Ael. 7, 8 and 9 e.g.) while it is really difficult to say things clearly about the collection of Philostratus; it could very well be that all his erotic letters except 30 and 31 are addressed to the *hetairai* and male prostitutes, and if the substantial evidence found in the texts is taken into consideration, then this is true for at least letters 23, 35 and 38.

The logical consequence of the topic of erotica means that the descriptions of desire and infatuation must abound and that is indeed so; this can be found in all the collections but Theophylact's. However, the collection of Aristaenetus is the only one where the desire is expressed by women and men equally, while the focus is on men in other collections. Besides, the women whose sexual adventures we follow in the collection of Aristaenetus are not necessarily the *hetairai*, which is something new.

Caressing of hands (or more precisely, palms) and embraces of lovers are things that only Alciphron (rarely) and Aristaenetus (more often) pay somewhat attention to.

Caressing of breast can be found in three collections: Alciphron's, Philostratus' and Aristaenetus'. They are given more attention to only in the last one – the examples found there are more extensive and detailed. The only one who almost regularly compares breasts and apples is also Aristaenetus; he alludes to their common features - the shape, colour and firmness.⁸¹ Caressing of belly, thighs and bottoms are nowhere to be found in the subgenre.

Only Alciphron's and Aristaenetus' couples exchange kisses on the lips somewhat more often. Desire to be kissed is emphasised in the collection of Aristaenetus, where we can find the most passionate example in the subgenre (see Ar. 1.16.28-39). The only kiss in the area of (naked?) torso also comes from Ar. 1.12.23-24, and kiss in the neck is mentioned only in Phil. 54.8-9 (the kiss however never takes place; the sender imagines roses kissing his beloved instead of him). Kisses to upper parts of arms, shoulders, belly, legs or intimate area are nowhere to be found.

The lovers in the collections of Alciphron, Philostratus and Aristaenetus sometimes cannot exchange proper kisses and touches either

⁸⁰ Relationships with the *hetairai* in the collection of Theophylact are depicted by probably all erotic letters except for 54 (the protagonists are Jason and Medea), and in Alciphron's all except 1.11, 1.16, 2.6 and 2.31.

⁸¹ A man catches an apple floating in a lake, mistaking it for his lover's breast (see Ar. 1.3.28-30), and in another example breasts of a young girl are called "unripe apples" (Ar. 2.7.21-22).

because they are physically distant from one another or the moral norms prevent them from doing so; they resort to the sphere of the imaginary instead – they use their own body parts (hands e.g.) or props as a conveyor for contacts/kisses to one another. Philostratus and Aristaenetos use such substitutes more often than Alciphron. Indirect kisses are of most importance in the collection of Aristaenetos, where we can find examples of kisses performed without props as conveyors,⁸² as well as those with props.⁸³ Somewhat similar examples can be found in other collections as well but their importance and volume in the letters is less significant, and when compared with those of Aristaenetos, quite sparse in description. The situation is however completely different when we talk about indirect touches to body parts; the examples of Aristaenetos have common features with those from the collection of Philostratus.⁸⁴ Common props vary from one collection to another: Alciphron uses apples, Aristaenetos glasses and apples, Philostratus glasses and roses. Philostratus and Aristaenetos often group their examples together: three examples by Aristaenetos come from the same letter (Ar. 1.25) and five of Philostratus come from three letters (see Phil. 20, 46 and 54). Philostratus is the only one who uses roses as a prop in as many as five examples and their role can be different, i.e. they can serve several purposes in the same letter: convey a kiss, caress breasts and even perform the sexual act itself. The action that a prop can perform in the collections of other two authors is absolutely fixed; apples and glasses convey kisses and they are limited to this performance exclusively. The only other variation allowed is that a kiss, in accordance with the wishes of the sender, can end up on different “destinations”, i.e. body parts (this is how in Ar. 1.25 a *hetaira* first lifts an apple to her lips and then puts it into her cleavage). Philostratus is the only one who uses props (roses) in an overtly sexual way: in Phil. 45 the sender is afraid the roses might rape the addressee and in Phil. 46 he instructs them to have sex with the addressee instead of him. The other two authors are more prone to the romantic usage and their props can participate in gentle foreplay only. What was observed however is that all the situations in Philostratus are imaginary while the other two authors describe the situations that actually happened.

A more passionate foreplay is rarely described within the sub-genre. In Alc. 4.13 there is only one mention of pelvic rub during the foreplay and it comes as no surprise that the consequence of the mentioned

⁸² In Ar. 1.9 a woman kisses her own hand because it had been touched by her lover and in Ar. 1.22 another one kisses her hand she had used to caress the face of a young man earlier.

⁸³ In Ar. 1.25 both the man and the woman kiss the same spot on a glass and then on an apple.

⁸⁴ In Ar. 1.25 a *hetaira* places an apple, chewed on by her lover, into her cleavage, in Ar. 2.13 a woman places her lover's letter into her bosom while in Phil. 54 and 64 the roses can/may take on the role of a man in a sexual act.

activity is an erection further in the letter and this is the only example of it in the subgenre.

When it comes to depicting sexuality, there are not many recurring motives that could be attributed to all or almost all collections. In line with the topic, one would expect sexual acts to be omnipresent in letters, both those detailed and those that are coy in their description. However, the analysis says otherwise – with an exception of Aristaenetos, sexual acts are actually performed and accomplished rarely and even more rarely described in detail. Theophylact avoids them almost completely while Philostratus as a sender merely offers them, wishes them and/or imagines them on a regular basis.

Three collections contain descriptions of sexual acts accomplished: one example can be found in both Alciphron's and Aelian's collections (see Alc. 4.13 and Ael. 1) and as many as 12 in Aristaenetos'. Sex in a public place can be found in Alciphron's, Aelian's and Aristaenetos' collections and even though it can take place in front of potential witnesses (who can also be other performing couples), there are no examples of real orgies (which would include the swap of partners) in the subgenre. Descriptions of promiscuous behaviour and/or accusations of such behaviour are to be found in all the collections, and these are almost always somehow connected to the relationships with the *hetairai*.⁸⁵

Several characteristics can be found in two of the collections observed. The senders of Alciphron's letter 1.4 and Aristaenetos' 2.3 and 2.12 have mentioned divorce as a possibility; in the former, the threat comes from the husband and in the latter both sexes threaten with it once. Allusions to infidelity and adultery as motifs are important only for the two authors mentioned, as well as "neglect of marital duties"; compare Alc. 2.25 and Ar. 2.3. Adultery is more likely to be committed by women and sex in a marriage is avoided by men. Losing virginity is also only mentioned by Alciphron and Aristaenetos (see Alc. 4.17 and Ar. 1.6) and abortion by Aristaenetos (1.19) and Theophylact (30). More sexual acts in one letter are offered only by Alciphron and Aristaenetos. However, it must be mentioned that the former merely repeats the same protagonists, and the latter sometimes repeats them (cf. Ar. 1.16 and 2.22 e.g.) and sometimes varies them (in Ar. 1.2 and 2.7).

All collections observed have features specific for them only. Theophylact rarely portrays sexuality of his protagonists and when he does, they are almost standardised descriptions of relationships with the *hetairai*. In Alciphron's collection only can we find sex between several couples in a public place, description of a passionate foreplay during which lovers rub each other's pelvic areas (Alc. 4.13.13.5-6) and successfully accomplished rape of a woman (Alc. 2.35).

⁸⁵ Accusations of nymphomania come either from colleagues or from the wives of their lovers and the man accused of priapism is in a relationship with the *hetaira*.

Ael. 9 provides us with the description of what can be reconstructed as quite accurate, however absolutely imaginary, sexual position, and the description mentioned can be said to be mildly pornographic. Similar example can be found in Ar. 2.10; it is clear that the man is trying to have sex in a missionary position,⁸⁶ but this however is not accomplished also since he is trying to do it with a painted character, and not a woman of flesh and blood. The latter example is a representation of iconophilia.

Fetishism and masochistic tendencies are omnipresent only in the collection of Philostratus, as well as possibilities of heterosexual and (always male) same-sex relationships in equal measure. However, this collection does not contain descriptions of sexual acts accomplished: letters are merely means of persuasion, and the descriptions noted are almost always related to the area of the imaginary contacts. This collection is the only one which praises promiscuity and sexual availability (of the *hetairai* and male prostitutes).

The letters of Aristaenetus are more often of explicit nature than those of other authors; seduction, foreplay and sex are often motifs for the letters and are described in more detail. His collection also offers the most quite unique elements. The realisation of the sexual act itself, sometimes with an accompanying description, is a motif appearing way more often in his than in other collections (12 letters). The author also pays sufficient attention to marriages and marital problems; adultery, avoidance of “marital duties” (asexuality of a husband?), dissatisfaction in marriage due to differences in character and desire for a divorce are quite common motifs. If we consider the woman complaining about her sexless marriage (letter Ar. 2.3) as a confirmation that the marriage had never been consumed, it may well be the only example of asexuality in the subgenre. The mention of accompanying sounds, fluids and heat emanating from the breath of lovers during foreplay and sex can also be found only in this collection (see Ar. 2.7.25-27) as well as the mention of sperm and the awareness of it being connected to a possible pregnancy (Ar. 1.19.21-23).

Great deviations were also noticed in the analysis of the sexual initiative – only in the case of Aristaenetus both men and women initiate sexual contact in equal measure. Furthermore, the research has revealed that it was actually women who organise, suggest or entice a big number of amoral and shocking sexual encounters. Another important fact is that the women who initiate are not necessarily the *hetairai*, as is the case in the collection of Alciphron.

Aristaenetus also took more trouble in describing the variations in sexual acts. The variations are: marital or social statuses of partners (single or in a relationship / marriage, *heterai*, slaves), the number of sexual encounters and/or partners, as well as locations (bedrooms, other

⁸⁶ Compare Ar. 2.10.26-27: ἐπέθηκα τῇ κλίνῃ, ἡγκαλισάμην, ἐπιβέβληκα τῷ στήθει.

people's homes, public places such as dark alleys or parks with a pond).⁸⁷ The author also shows a spectrum of amoral sexual relationships of different kind: both men and (more often) women are cheating or planning to cheat, men are in “relationships” with the *hetairai* and so on. Among the deviations within the sexual behaviour typical of this collection one can find three “saucy” ones: voyeurism (Ar. 2.7), an example of iconophilia, described in great detail (Ar. 2.10) and possibly even incest (Ar. 1.16). Several letters depict two sexual encounters in a row, also with two different women (see Ar. 1.2 and 2.7); such partner change in such a short time period is typical of this collection only. The text of letter Ar. 1.2 does not really clarify the circumstances of a sexual encounter between a man and two girls; we are informed, rather euphemistically, that “neither of them was left being sad” but we do not know if the encounters were taking place at the same time or if they were consequent. If we are dealing with the latter, this would be the only example of a *threesome* in the whole sub-genre. One sender wishes for a *ménage à trois* (a cohabitation with his wife and the *hetaira* he is in love with), but this is purely a wish (and also unlikely to happen). In Ar. 2.15 a woman offers her own husband to a friend and allows him to commit adultery because she has a hidden agenda: she herself wants another man (the friend's slave). The plan in which both women get who they want seems cunning enough for us to suppose that this double adultery actually takes place. In another example an older woman cites her own sexual experience as a comparative advantage over a young girl and uses it as an argument to get back the man who cheated on her.⁸⁸ The same author often includes direct consequences of sexual encounters as motifs in his letters,⁸⁹ as well as many examples which leave out the description of sex but the circumstances at the end of letters lead us to believe that it must have happened, as a neatly detailed plan was concocted with an allusion which could be read as a successful courtship.

The euphemistic phrases which allude to sexual acts, such as “you know what follows” or “the rest is not for everyone's ears to hear”, are used relatively often by this author – as many as seven times – and they regularly come from letters in which a sexual encounter, alluded by the phrase, represents both the main motif and the culmination of the letter, i.e. information needed to argument the very “writing and sending” of the letter.

To conclude, all collections have their own distinctions and individual contributions which could be regarded as authors' own innovations

⁸⁷ There are examples of letters with descriptions of two different sexual encounters, one of which could be a repeated encounter with the same person or with a different one.

⁸⁸ This is an interesting example as the woman in case is not a *hetaira*, as one would expect.

⁸⁹ E.g. pregnancy as a problem and advice on how to pretend you are a virgin during the first wedding night in Ar. 1.6.

to the genre. Alciphron's fourth book reveals to us a world of intriguing *hetairai* clique, which is no stranger to debauchery in a public space, bolstered by alcohol. Philostratus is the only one equally prone to both women and men and his letters contain both fetishist and masochistic tendencies. Aelian's collection boasts few erotic letters but among them is one describing an (imaginary) sexual encounter, the close reading of which construes a sexual pose of the lovers. Theophylact on the other hand stands out from the other collections as he seems to be much more respectful in his descriptions; this is also the least interesting one to the reader, however.

The author who offers the most detailed and explicit picture of the lovers' sexual activities and who is also prone to most variations is most certainly Aristaenetus. His collection also abounds with descriptions of saucy erotica, not found in any other collections or not being given enough attention to. The omnipresent descriptions of sex and almost all types of sexual variations and deviations are a logical consequence of the author's choice of erotic topic for all of the letters in his collection; he was forced to use variations in order to avoid the monotony of expression.⁹⁰ An additional explanation could be found in the implementation of the element of gossip. Namely, many letters of his collection were supposed to be gossip letters intended for "third parties", such as sender's friends or family members. Therefore, they abound with details of erotic adventures that are added to make them more interesting and to satisfy voyeuristic desire of both the fictional addressees and us readers.⁹¹

The collections of Aristaenetus and Alciphron coincide the most, which could partly be explained with the fact that Alciphron influenced the epistolographers who came after him. However, due to a large number of innovations offered by the collection of Aristaenetus, I dare to single it out as the most interesting one and claim that its author was still more imaginative and less dependent on his colleagues-predecessors than expected.⁹²

⁹⁰ In other collections, erotica is but one of the present topics: Alciphron describes daily lives of the protagonists (fishermen, peasants, parasites and *hetairai*), as does Aelian too, to a point (he describes peasants only), some letters of Philostratus are anecdotes or augmented aphorisms and Theophylact includes philosophical, moral and ethical discussions in his collection. These authors have managed to achieve variety within their collections due to the different topics they chose to write about, which could not be said for Aristaenetus, as he chose erotica as the only topic of his collection.

⁹¹ Still, there are letters in Aristaenetus' collection where physical relationships accomplished are retold to the very people with whom they were shared. In most cases the partners are reminded of the nice time spent together, often in order to make the other party feel guilty in case the relationship ends or adultery takes place.

⁹² Intertextuality is an important feature of the subgenre in totality, and this is especially so in the collection of Aristaenetus, but epistolographers are surprisingly not at the top of the list as his main models and sources, even though some topics and motifs are taken from them (compare Hajdarević, 2013, 271-298).

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