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Classical Mythology and Legends in Roman and Medieval Times

Critical Commentary: Deidamia Achilli

The Deidamia Achilli is a poem written in the eleventh century by an anonymous author who is yet to be properly identified. The poem is written in Latin and uses the Roman names for mentioned heroes, making clear that the author took inspiration from Roman poets and was writing from a Roman perspective rather than a Greek one. Unlike many other pieces of literature about the events and people of the Trojan war, this poem is written in the voice of a woman in the format of a letter being penned from Deidamia to Achilles. In the poem, Deidamia is writing to her husband Achilles, who is overseas fighting in the Trojan War and abandoning his duties as a father and a husband, neglecting to write home in any fashion. Deidamia's rage at her husband for his lack of communication and his infidelity is one of the most prominent aspects of the poem. The choice of perspective is outside of the usual choices of classical and medieval poets, and provides an insight into the mind and rage of a woman from the Trojan war instead of exclusively focusing on the exploits of the men, who are usually the main focus of those writing about these myths and time periods.

The poem is written in the voice of Deidamia, the wife of Achilles, and in a style meant to replicate the way that she would have spoken to Achilles when she learned of his infidelity while at war. The poem is meant to be read as if it was actually written during the Trojan war and the events of Achilles' life and military career. However, the true author of the poem is unknown,

with references to the poem speaking of an anonymous author that was writing during the eleventh century in a style similar to the Roman poets Ovid and Publius Papinius Statius. The author of the poem uses Roman terms for the names of deities and heroes, using the Latinized name “Ulysses” instead of the Greek name of Odysseus, and referring to the god Janus, who was a Roman god of beginnings with two faces and did not have a known Greek counterpart. (Taylor, 2000) These choices show that the author was influenced by Roman poets despite writing centuries after the deaths of the poets and the estimated time of the Trojan war.

The beginning of the poem lays out the timeline of the letter by stating when it is being written, roughly four years after Achilles leaves Greece for Troy. The author makes this clear by writing that “...the fifth sun renews the year which has been completed four times...” (Deidamia Achilli, 9) After establishing the time that the letter is being written, Deidamia begins to lament the absence of her husband and the lack of letters that she has been receiving. She begs her husband to write to her and their son, or to return home in person to see them. She very much plays the part of a wife that is distressed at the absence of her husband, but several lines later, near the middle of the poem, Deidamia begins cursing at Achilles for having a mistress. (Deidamia Achilli, 65-72) This mistress was Briseis, a captured woman that Achilles took as a war trophy in the Greek camp while participating in the siege of Troy.

Deidamia shames Achilles for this choice and condemns him for being unfaithful, making clear that she would never commit the same infidelity by saying “I am joined to you as my only, not my first husband!” (Deidamia Achilli, 78) Deidamia then begins talking to God, pointing out that “wicked deeds” such as her husband’s infidelity are never properly punished, even though mortals believe that God oversees mortal affairs. (Deidamia Achilli, 83-86) Several more lines are dedicated to shaming Achilles and reminding him that he could tarnish his

reputation by having an affair with someone who was not his wife, before Deidamia begins to plea to a goddess, asking her to curse Achilles and Briseis, going as far as to ask the goddess to send Briseis to her death. (Deidamia Achilli, 99-106) The end of the poem has Deidamia return to lashing out at Achilles and demanding for him to get rid of his mistress, claiming that she regrets marrying Achilles and bearing his son yet still begging for him to return to her and come home.

Using the perspective of a woman to tell a story was not very common in classical or medieval times, as most stories and epics focused on the male heroes of the text and spoke in their perspective. By choosing to write in the voice of Deidamia, the author is able to tackle issues and questions that arise concerning the wife and son of Achilles back home in Greece, while in the main body of the Iliad it speaks mostly of his relationships with Briseis and Patroclus. Giving Deidamia more of a voice also allows the author to show the rage of a woman whose husband is unfaithful, which is not an uncommon experience for the wives of heroes throughout Greek and Roman literature, with other notable examples being Medea and Clytemnestra, both of whom raged at their unfaithful husbands and sought revenge against the mistress. (Braund, 131) The rage of Deidamia is clear throughout the text, and she spends many lines expressing this rage at her husband and his mistress. She calls Briseis a plethora of unflattering names and uses crude metaphors to describe her, channeling her fury at her husband's infidelity into the letter as to make clear to him her displeasure with the situation and her husband's choices.

Another interesting feature of the text is the difference in how Deidamia speaks to a masculine God compared to the unnamed female Goddess. There are several points when she refers to a singular God with the name capitalized, a style of name typically attributed to

monotheistic religions and not the religion of the Greeks and the religion of the Romans, both of which involved a vast number of gods and goddesses with varying domains. The goddess she speaks to is possibly the goddess of love, Venus, inferred through the terms used when Deidamia prays to her and what titles are attributed to the goddess. She makes reference to “the mother of wanton Love” in line 25 of the text, a title that could be attributed to the Roman love goddess depending on the sourced myth that the author was referencing while writing the text. Some myths and stories of Venus designate her as the mother of Cupid, the Roman god of erotic love, and if this version of Venus is the one that the author was thinking of while writing, then it is likely that they were speaking of Venus when having Deidamia plead to a goddess. (Ficklin, 2021)

As a goddess of love, Venus would have been paying attention to the lament of lovers and prayers related to love, and Deidamia displays this trait by saying “Goddess, who does not disregard lovers who cry out to you...” and implying that the goddess she is invoking is one that listens to the plight of lovers and responds to their prayers in some way. (Deidamia Achilli, 99) She calls the goddess to action while disregarding the mentioned God, dismissing him due to his lack of response to her husband’s infidelity and not attempting to invoke him further. The author’s choice to have Deidamia pray to a feminine goddess rather than make pleas to God is distinct in nature and varies from the usual stylistic choices made by those writing stories about tragic heroes and scorned women. While other authors might have gone down the same route of having the raging woman disregard the gods due to their lack of response to situations, they likely would not have followed that choice with invoking a female goddess to assist with revenge and make further pleas to her. Rage is often seen as a male trait in most literature and civilizations, dismissing the rage of women as improper or masculine, which makes the author’s

choice to clearly display Deidamia's rage and have her call for the help of a feminine goddess slightly unusual. (Braund, 137) While the rage of a woman is not an alien concept, few other texts show it so clearly without demonizing the woman involved in some way.

The *Deidamia Achilli* is a fascinating text that speaks from the perspective of a woman who was repeatedly wronged by Achilles and displays her rage at his decisions. The rage of a wronged woman is not an uncommon concept to write about, though many texts will attempt to dismiss the rage or make the woman appear more masculine. The author of this text branches beyond Deidamia's rage, showing her grief at being left without any word from Achilles, referring to the son of Deidamia and Achilles, and making clear that Deidamia is still a very feminine figure, refusing to masculinize her actions or the way that she refers to herself.

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