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## Sexual initiative in Aristaenetus' *Erotic Letters*

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### ABSTRACT

The epistolary collection entitled *Erotic Letters* attributed to Aristaenetus was probably written in the 6th century A.D. The letters depict various sexual liaisons; the protagonists are single, married, engaged in extra-marital affairs, in relationships with slaves or courtesans etc.

The focus of the research is on the overall representation of lovers' sexuality. The author investigates which sex is more likely to show sexual interest, to seduce, to initiate foreplay or sexual activities and to create the opportunity for their achievement. The results are placed into a wider context by the comparison with gender relations in Alciphron's, Aelian's and Philostratus' collections. The final goal of the paper is to point to (potential) differences in the representation of male and female sexual agency and sexuality in general throughout the literary subgenre from Alciphron to Aristaenetus.

*Key words: Aristaenetus, Greek sexuality, sexual initiative, Greek fictional epistolography*

## 1. Introduction

Aristaenetus' *Erotic Letters* belong to Greek fictional epistolography, a literary subgenre which fully blossomed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., during the times of Alciphron – its most successful representative – and Aelian and Philostratus. There is very little substantial evidence when and where all of the collections originated. In the case of Aristaenetus even the authorship is debatable,<sup>1</sup> and the input from the text places it in the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Drago 2007, 25-36). The collection consists of 50 letters of erotic topics, divided into two books. The first consists of 28 and the second of 22 letters, with the last letter incomplete. Correspondents are sometimes actual persons known to us (e.g. Alciphron, Aelian and Philostratus) or literary characters (mostly courtesans from New Comedy) but most are fictional characters with portmanteau, so called speaking names.<sup>2</sup>

By choosing erotica as the subject – as the title illustrates – the author was forced to vary in his approach to it and has hence provided us with almost all the imaginable variations of the protagonists involved.<sup>3</sup> We therefore come across young men having relationships

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1 The name of the author of the collection is the same as the sender's of the first letter, which leaves space for reasonable doubt that the name was replaced once the identity of the author got lost. For a quick guide into "Aristaenetus' question", cf. Drago (2007) 16-24 or Arnott (1982) 293-294.

2 The usual foreign language translation: *i nomi parlanti, noms parlants, sprechende (or redende) Namen*.

3 Relationships are mostly between unmarried protagonists, with 13 letters as exceptions. In I.10, I.15 and I.19 the marriage takes place under strange circumstances: in I.10 there is deceit, I.15 could be about manipulation, and the married woman in I.19 is a former courtesan who probably planned to get pregnant with her rich lover (for details see below in the categorisation of the letters). In other examples the marriages are in danger: women are adulterers in I.5, I.9, I.20, II.15 and II.22, the one in II.3 is planning an adultery; in II.8 and II.11 men are in love with two women (the wife and her mother, i.e. the wife and the lover) and the woman in II.12 is extremely insolent and there is a hint of divorce in the air. The only "positive" example is II.17, where a married woman declines an offer from a determined man. Thus, the only possible explanation for the regular besmirch of marriages depicted is the following: a harmonious

with courtesans (I.1, I.3 and I.4), young men who are in love with girls (II.2) or slaves (II.4) or their own father's lover (I.13) or their own mother-in-law (II.8). Sometimes the men are being taken advantage of (I.14 and I.23) or declined (I.17) by those they desire. Those who show desire toward young men are girls (I.2), courtesans (I.22 and I.25) and women whose relationship status cannot be guessed at from the letters (e.g. I.11). Adultery is a common topic (I.5, I.9, I.20 and II.22) and there is even a case of a "cross-adultery", which refers to two women, both of whom desire one another's husband/lover (II.15). It is often difficult to manage the desired relationship long-term: in II.11 a married man loves both his wife and his lover, and in II.7 there is a *ménage à trois* between two lovers and a female slave. Sometimes the relationship is completely impossible (cf. objectophilia in II.10; a painter falls in love with the portrait of a girl he painted himself). The motif of I.19 is a happy end for a *hetaira* – her lover decides to marry her as she is bearing his child. A girl losing her virginity before marrying someone else is a problem in I.6. Letter I.16 possibly depicts incest. Also, it is evident from the context of some of the letters that young men being seduced are merely boys at the onset of puberty. Actually, the only erotic context not allowed in Aristaenetus' collection is same-sex, either male or female.<sup>4</sup>

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marriage as a topic in the context of a fictional work of art would not interest a reader very much.

4 I refrain from using the term "homosexual" for a sexual relationship between two men, on purpose. Although some male homosexuals surely existed, not all same-sex relations between men in Greece were in fact homosexual. Friendly-sexual and widely acceptable sexual relationships of adult men and young boys (pederasty) have little in common with today's meaning of the term "homosexual" and the construct it implies. After the sexual relationship erastes: eromenos, the young men would regularly merry and have heterosexual relationships and would then go on to become erastes to someone else. In other words, their "homosexuality" is often a time limited occurrence of partly initiative nature. For more details see Skinner (2005) 1-20 or Dover (1978). However, what is characteristic of Greek literature as a whole is its avoidance to describe and its refusal to acknowledge existence of female homosexual relationships. Preserved exceptions are rare (cf. Lucian, *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 5 and Plato, *Symposium* 189c2-d6). Besides, their very mention often has a derogative implication (e.g. in Aristophanes' comedies, Plato's works and the mimes of Hero(n)das). On the other hand, because Aristaenetus relies on

Obviously the sexuality of literary characters,<sup>5</sup> “a set of actions and emotions connected with erotic desire of an individual”, as defined by Funke (2002) 38, is an important construct in the work of Aristaeetus (as well as in Greek fictional erotic epistolography as a literary subgenre in general).

After the publication of highly influential monographs by Kenneth Dover (1978) and Michel Foucault (in three volumes, published in 1978, 1985 and 1986), the Greek sexuality started to be regarded through the paradigm of active and passive role. The role of an active partner in the sexual relationship itself, as well as the expression of desire and the initiation of its fulfilment, would belong to adult males (*erastes*) exclusively, while the passive role was “reserved” for women (and sexually passive young men too).<sup>6</sup> As a direct consequence, the focus of

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sources where same-sex male relationships are depicted as more natural and sometimes even comparatively of better quality (cf. Plutarch’s *Moralia* 750 or Achilles Tatius’ *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon* II. 35-38), the absence of such erotic encounters in the collection is quite surprising. This phenomenon has not been explained so far. However, once we take into account when the collection originated, the presumption of influence of Christianity on author’s self-censorship (see Arnott 1982, 314) seems plausible to me; pederasty was outlawed some time before him.

5 The ancient Greeks did not have a term equivalent to “sexuality”. The closest we can come to is a collective term *ta aphrodisia*, defined by Skinner (2005) 3 as “an ensemble of separate, but closely related physical phenomena – sexual acts, urges, and pleasures”.

6 Similar in Halperin (1990) 130: “Sexual roles... are isomorphs with status and gender roles; “masculinity” is an aggregate combining the congruent functions of penetration, activity, dominance and social precedence whereas “femininity” signifies penetrability, passivity, submission and social subordination”. Both Dover’s and Foucault’s analysis of Greek sexuality have their followers (such as Halperin and Goldhill) as well as their fierce antagonists in the Academia (e.g. Amy Richlin accuses Foucault of misogyny). However, this paper will not deal with that: cf. summary in Funke (2002) 38-59. The simplified (in my opinion) concept active: passive still can be successfully applied in the analysis of sexuality in Greek epic poetry, tragedies (with some exceptions such as Euripides’ first version of *Hippolytus*), Old Comedy (exception: Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*) and a major part of lyric poetry (but with an obvious exception of Sappho’s poetry, also Theocritus’ *Sorceress* and so on).

attention was completely shifted from the exploration of female sexuality (both actual and literary) for a long time,<sup>7</sup> but the situation is slowly beginning to change in this area as well. With her concept of sexuality, Froma Zeitlin disputes the simplified depiction; she argues that a person with an awakened sexual desire is at the same time both active towards the object of his/her interest but also passive, since Eros reigns over him/her (see Zeitlin, 1999). David Konstan has proved that the simple paradigm active man (*erastes*): passive woman cannot be applied to Greek love romances (i.e. novels) and New Comedy, where relationships between partners, as well as their sexuality, are both reciprocal and “symmetrical”, as noted in the title of his monograph *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Konstan, 1994). Adopting a theory initially applied to male sexuality, Melissa Funke in her detailed exploration of female sexuality (see Funke, both 2002 and 2012), proved that besides active men, Alciphron's epistolary collection also boasts “actively desiring women” (cf. Funke 2002, 38), in all cases – courtesans.<sup>8</sup>

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7 More attention is given to Sapphos' poetry and Euripides' action composition and the character of Phaedra in *Hippolytus*. Ancient Greek literary sources are often taciturn when it comes to female sexuality; authors, always men, depict it as a reaction to a male initiative, and the voices of female authors (and female protagonists as well) are not there to be heard (with an exception, again, of some of Sappho's poetry). In fictional epistolography and Lucian's dialogues the situation is quite different however: the authors regularly “give voice” to their fictional female characters (a kind of literary ventriloquism).

8 Even though the result obtained was expected, since her research focused on book IV exclusively (*Letters of Courtesans*), it could have ended differently as correspondents do not necessarily have to be the protagonists of the letters. This means that the courtesans could be writing about erotic adventures of third persons (non-courtesans). However, an analysis of Aristaenetus' correspondents (Hajdarević, 2013) has shown that there are no letters which have the courtesans as completely external correspondents.

Encouraged by her interesting outcome, I decided to conduct my own research of (active and passive) roles in sexuality in Aristaenetus' collection.<sup>9</sup> The questions I hope to answer are the following:

- who and in what measure is the one who shows the sexual desire first (by employing an erotic gaze, a smile, etc.) and who is the seducer (by means of looks, gestures or skills), either explicitly or implicitly?
- who creates opportunities for physical contact?
- who, in what measure and how openly initiates the foreplay and sexual activities and
- who creates opportunities for their realisation (by finding the right spot, time, excuse etc.).<sup>10</sup>

The results obtained will be put into a wider context by being compared with the state of affairs in Alciphron's, Aelian's and Philostratus' collections.<sup>11</sup> In examples where the initiators are predominantly female, I intend to check if the females in question are courtesans and if Aristaenetus' depiction is in accordance with the one in other collections. My research focuses on the description of foreplay and the sexual act itself, but also on examples where the desire is present and expressed, as well as on those in which an erotic context of a gaze or its return is clear as the sign of acceptance and reciprocity of sexual interest.<sup>12</sup>

My final goal is to select and outline (possible) differences in the depiction of male and female sexual initiative (i.e. agency) and sexuality

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<sup>9</sup> Because of the similarity of the research topics, I take over Funke's terminology completely, including the paradigm active: passive (for want of a better solution).

<sup>10</sup> The terms "sexual initiative", "sexual activity" and "sexual agency" used in this paper denote the combination of the factors (i.e. activities) listed here.

<sup>11</sup> I intend to check and add to Funke's results by doing my own research, since she disregards erotic letters out of Alciphron's book IV. Because of the limited space, the results of the research conducted on other collections besides Aristaenetus' will be outlined briefly.

<sup>12</sup> Funke (2002) 58 argues: "Desire is often shaped by the act of looking, both genders can desire, and therefore both can be the subject of the gaze".

as a whole in the subgenre from Alciphron to Aristaenetus. All the divergences observed will be adequately explained.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Sexual initiative in Aristaenetus' collection

I exclude 15 letters from my research because a detailed analysis of their text revealed that they do not contain any erotic actions or the ratio between activity and passivity of the lovers is not clear enough: I.5, I.6,<sup>14</sup> I.8, I.14, I.20, I.21, I.23, I.26, I.28,<sup>15</sup> II.1, II.6, II.8,<sup>16</sup> II.9, II.12 and II.16. The remaining letters are divided into four categories:

- a) Letters with prevailing male sexual initiative
- b) Letters with equal sexual initiative
- c) Letters with prevailing female sexual initiative
- d) Special cases.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.1. An overview of letters according to the categories proposed

a) There are 13 letters with prevailing male sexual initiative: I.1, I.3, I.7, I.10, I.12, I.13, I.17, II.2, II.10, II.11, II.17, II.20 and II.21. In two of them, the initiative of seduction and achievement of the sexual act is in the hands of the man in such a measure that women are merely treated as objects. In I.13 a father lets his son have his mistress,<sup>18</sup> while she has

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13 Throughout the paper the edition of Benner and Fobes (1949) is followed regarding the arrangement of Alciphron's, Aelian's and Philostratus' letters. All quotations of Aristaenetus are taken from Otto Mazal's edition (1971).

14 The letter contains description of the fulfilled sexual desire, but does not state the wish to repeat the act with the same young man.

15 The stress is on the sender's withdrawal from the fight for courtesan's affection.

16 Sexual desire towards the mother-in-law is probably undisclosed and the sender wishes it to go away (cf. the situation in II.11 where the desire is also inappropriate but the sender desires the opposite).

17 The other collections will be later analysed by the use of the same methodology used on Aristaenetus' (and outlined here).

18 A young man is infatuated with his father's mistress. The doctor called upon for help recognises the symptoms, which seem to appear in female

no say whatsoever in this; she is speechless throughout the letter and even her physical description is absent. Another such example is I.10; Acontius leads Cydippe into promising to marry him. Unlike the previous example, the woman is given an opportunity to speak, but the very words that are spoken caused her mysterious diseases in the later part of the letter.<sup>19</sup> We do not therefore know what she thinks of the trick played to ensure the relationship happens. The impression of the girl's objectification is further reinforced by words Aristaenetus chooses to describe the success of this sly act: he stresses that she said the words "inadvertently" and the oath was thus produced under dubious circumstances. It is therefore spurious and illegitimate (cf. I.10.38-39: ἔτι διερχομένη τὸν ὄρκον εἰ καὶ ἀκούσιόν τε καὶ νόθον). An impression that Cydippe is an innocent victim of a ruse is further reinforced by the monologue of Acontius: although it was Artemis who brings the disease upon the girl as a punishment for an unfulfilled oath, the young man repents for "bringing her into such danger" (cf. I.10.64-65: τί δέ σοι τοῦτον ἐπήγον τὸν φόβον;).

Four letters contain offers of men, bluntly refused in as many as three of them: in I.7 a bather angrily refuses advances of a fisherman, who is looking after her clothes while she is swimming; a married woman refuses a determined pursuer in II.17 and a *hetaira* refuses a man in II.20. The fourth offer is in the letter II.2 and the chance of its

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presence only, and slyly makes up a story of the young man being in love with his own wife. Determined to help, the young man's father persuades the doctor to allow a single "treatment" of the boy, by having sex with his (the doctor's) wife. This is later used as an indisputable argument by the doctor – when he uncovers the actual truth – that the father should do the same. The letter ends with the father's decision: "the treatment" should happen.

19 Aristaenetus' readers were probably aware of Callimachus' and Ovid's versions of this love story (in *Aetia* and *Epistulae Heroidum* 20 and 21). The young man in love carves the words of an oath into an apple ("By Artemis, I will marry Acontius!") and throws it under her feet. The confused girl inadvertently reads the words aloud and thus makes a commitment to the goddess, who causes her to break out in disease on her wedding day to someone else three times. Unlike Aristaenetus', Ovid's Cydippe shares her version of the events in the letter (cf. Ep. Her. 21). We can only guess at Callimachus' version though; the text has reached us badly damaged.



fulfilment is minimal; the man states that the woman did not return his gaze.<sup>20</sup>

We find out about erotic plans of men and their fulfilment in two letters: the one in I.17 expects that the desired woman will accept him if he is persistent enough and the one in II.11 hopes to continue the sexual relationship with both his newly-wedded wife and a former lover. In both cases success is unlikely.

The most unusual case is the one in II.10: the letter depicts a huge sexual desire and a considerable seduction initiative on the side of the man. Unfortunately for him, the realisation of the physical relationship is quite impossible since the woman in question is not real; the letter actually depicts an artist in love with his own portrait of a woman (cf. II.10.1-2: Καλήν γέγραφα κόρην, καὶ τῆς ἐμῆς ἠράσθην γραφῆς.).

Only I.1, I.3, I.12 and II.21 give an impression that their protagonists have actually fulfilled their sexual desires; the first two tell about (erotic) adventures with courtesans in the countryside in a type of *ekphrasis*, while the senders of the third and the fourth provide details of their happy relationships.

b) There is reciprocity in both the expression of desire and effort undertaken to realise it in 6 letters. Those are: I.4, I.9, I.22, II.4, II.14 and II.19.

In I.4 a man sends a gaze which expresses his sexual desire towards a woman and decides to make the first move. Although acknowledging him only briefly, the woman (obviously a *hetaira*) communicates non-verbally – she draws attention to herself by sensually touching her cleavage and gazes back. Each of her gazes plays a different role. To begin with, she turns back, which clearly states she is interested, what the man rightfully sees and interprets (cf. I.4.21: ἡ δὲ καὶ αὐτὴ ἀντεστράφη). With her second gaze, “pleasant and willing”, she reveals that she is ready to negotiate the price (cf. I.4.32-33: ἡ δὲ τὴν σύννευσιν ἐνδοτικοῖς καὶ θέλουσιν ὀφθαλμοῖς ἐπιχαρίτως ἐδήλου), while her third is openly “sweet and seductive”, obviously an introduction to

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<sup>20</sup> The gaze not being returned could in this instance signify coyness or inexperience, as the woman is chaste, i.e. non-courtesan. Therefore, I do not consider it a definite sign of a complete lack of interest.

foreplay (see I.4.34-35: *καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ἐπαγωγόν τινα καὶ γλυκεῖαν αὐγήν*). Therefore, the man initiates, but the woman takes the hint readily and puts the whole thing into motion.

I.9 has a similar situation, but the roles are different: it is a woman who is the initiator of the plan which ensures her contact with a lover in a public place. She pretends to stumble, he sees through this, approaches her, touches her and speaks to her. The reaction to a seemingly innocent hand contact shows its erotic potential; I see it either as a foreplay or evocation of some previous adulterous encounter. Let us see this: in I.9.10 Aristaenetus' sender says that "their hands quivered with passion", i.e. *πρὸς τοῦ ἔρωτος ὑπέτρεμον ἀμφοτέρων αἱ χεῖρες*.

A young man in II.4 shows initiative by arriving at an arranged spot and patiently waiting but once the woman arrives, she excels: she advises "not to miss the opportunity"; cf. *μὴ παραναλώσωμεν... ἐξουσίαν* in II.4, 21-22. Namely, the sexual act in a somewhat public place has been enabled by the man, while he has arrived and waited for the woman. However, it is the woman who is its prompt initiator. The roles are reverse in II.14: a woman goes to see a man in order to make up with him, enters his house while he is sleeping, but it is the man who invites her into his bed. In II.19 a man sings tirelessly under a woman's window, while she accepts the offer and invites him inside.

The woman in I.22 concocts an elaborate plan in order to entice a greater love in the man, and he is the one who suffers when he falls for the sham (false news that she no longer loves him). I conclude: the effort she puts into concoction of the plan and execution of the sham in the first place show that she is in love or at least craving more attention, while the man's reaction confirms his emotional engagement.

c) There are 13 letters with prevailing female sexual initiative: I.2, I.11, I.16, I.18, I.24, I.25, I.27, II.3, II.5, II.7, II.13, II.15 and II.22.

Five letters are similar as they contain wishes and plans for future sex realisation: I.11, II.3, II.5, II.15 and II.22. In I.11 two women observe a man lasciviously commenting, and II.5, a letter of a virgin in love, reveals a great desire and a plan for its quenching. In II.3 a woman expresses her sexual desire openly, the husband declines and offers excuses, she threatens (using the legal vocabulary appropriately and comically) and says that if he continues to neglect her "another lawyer

will take care of her case" (see II.3.13-14: ἕτερος ῥήτωρ τῆς ἐμῆς ἐπιμελήσεται δίκης). The letter II.15 contains detailed plans for the fulfilment of sexual desires (a neighbour's slave is to become a lover to another woman, while a husband of the other is to become a lover to the first one); this letter is the equivalent to letters I.10 and I.13, for voices and opinions not acknowledged here are those of men. In II.22 a husband returns home earlier to find his wife with a lover. The sly woman manages to tie up her lover and pass him on as a burglar she caught. The letter is damaged and the ending thus unknown, but the woman's offer to stay up and look after the burglar until the morning (cf. ἐγὼ συναγρυπνοῦσα τοῦτον φυλάξω in II.22.14-15) could be interpreted as a deftly devised opportunity for the repetition of the adultery.

Female seduction can be seen in letters I.18, I.25 and I.27. *Hetaira* in I.18 seduces only very young and inexperienced lovers, which is probably why her endeavours are shown as objectification of them; the metaphors used originate from hunting terminology. Let us have a look at μεταθεῖς τε καὶ ἰχνεύεις ὅπη δ' ἂν αἰσθητινὸς τῆς σῆς... θήρας ἀξίου in I.18, 8-9 for example ("You run after them, sniffing out someone worth ... your chase"). Another *hetaira* in I.25 seduces a young man at a party, who she seems to be objectifying because the text goes: "he easily accepts because he is *an inexperienced lover*" (I.25,16: ὁ δὲ ῥαδίως ἠνείχετο, ἅτε νέος ἐρωτικός). The woman in I.27 openly provokes a young man and her goal (his arousal) is clearly stated (cf. I.27, 27-29: ὅπως ἂν... τὸ μειράκιον ἐρεθίσῃ).

Three letters describe sexual relationships all of which are provoked by women, and two of them show a relationship between one man and two women. In I.2 a passer-by is approached by two girls with obvious seductive intentions (cf. I.2.2: δύο κόραι προσῆλθον ἀναβλέπουσαι χάριν Ἔρωτος). The terminology of violence used to show agreement to engage in a sexual act seems like an act of capitulation by the man – "they grabbed me and I was forced in a sweet way" (I.2. 21-22: ...προσεῖλκον, ἐγὼ δὲ πῶς ἠδέως ἠναγκαζόμεν). In II.7 it is the female slave who offers herself to the man and after the completion of the sexual act an older woman (who is also the man's lover) is trying to win him back and thus supplies her own sexual experience to serve as an advantage over her inexperienced rival. The active role undertaken is

actually a crucial argument in her own favour: “a woman loves but a girl is there to be loved” (II.7.47: γυνή μὲν καταφιλεῖ, παρθένος δὲ καταφιλεῖται.). Hesitation of a man is obvious in I.16; he completely hands the initiative over to the woman and begs Eros “for her to take over and lead him into bed” (I.16, 19-21: ὁ Ἔρως... παρασκεύασον πρώτην αἰτῆσαι ... καὶ καθηγήσασθαι πρὸς εὐνήν).<sup>21</sup> The woman is the one who touches him first and by interlocking fingers with him, shows desire (cf. τῆς ἐμῆς αὐτῆ λαβομένη χειρὸς ἐμάλαττε τοὺς δακτύλους in I.16, 23-25), continues to hold the active role throughout the letter and finally, by kissing him passionately, initiates the act itself; the sender claims to “have been kissed so passionately that he could hardly unlock his lips from hers” (I.16.28-39: καὶ πεφίληκεν οὕτω προσφῦσα μανικῶς, ὥστε μόλις ἀποσπάσαι τὰ χεῖλη).

I.24 is a *hetaira's* love letter. While she confesses great sexual desire and affection for the sender, we also find out she completely declines other men.

Both former lovers in II.13 have new partners but the woman's wish to renew the relationship puts the letter into this category. We know nothing of the man, his wishes or his feelings.

#### d) Special cases

Circumstances and background make letters I.15, I.19 and II.18 special so I find it necessary to put them into a separate category.

I.15 is similar to I.10 and somewhat to I.13: there is no confirmation of the reciprocity of the feelings by the woman, and the protagonist Pieria speaks only once, just like Cydippe in I.10. This is what is considerably different: it is what Cydippe says that turns her into a tool in Artemis' and Acontius' hands.<sup>22</sup> The content of what she says is

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21 One possible reason for hesitation might be - incest. In the introductory sentence, the sender claims to have experienced “forbidden love” (cf. Ἔρωτι περιπεσὼν ἀπορρήτῳ). This adjective is never used elsewhere in the collection to depict any of various types of forbidden or morally unacceptable relationships such as adultery, having several sexual partners (sometimes in public places) or even for the depiction of objectophilia.

22 It is the inscription on the apple that Acontius has thrown under her feet: “By Artemis, I will marry Acontius”.

*somebody else's* (Acontius') wish, while Pieria, seemingly a woman the king picks and takes as a mere sexual object he likes, is also a possible manipulator. Obviously, she is the object of the king's desire, but he could also at the same time be the object of her elaborate plan of a political nature! By choosing – possibly deliberately – these words, Aristaenetus leads us to believe so; the king “has granted his dearest the thing she *worked so hard to get/ she cared about*” (τὸ σπουδασθὲν ἐκύρωσε τῇ φιλτάτῃ, I.15, 54-55).

The situation in II.18 is similar: the man is happy to have taken a woman into his bed, but is at the same time an object of a plot, put into action by the woman and her lover in order to get his money.

In I.19 seemingly lucky circumstances lead to retirement and marriage of a *hetaira*. A more careful examination of the text provides another possibility: she wanted to marry a rich client so she uses intentional pregnancy as an entrapment to reach her goal? Namely, Aristaenetus says she was “sick of performing” (θεάτρον μεστῆ, I.19, 9-10), further on describes her care not to get pregnant with somebody else, abortion of an unwanted child and a subsequent happiness for being pregnant with the chosen one.

## **2.2. Aristaenetus' collection – interpretation of results**

There are as many letters where the woman takes the active role and those where the man is the initiator, 13 each. The result took me by surprise, as superficial reading makes one believe that when it comes to seduction, love offers and sexual act initiation, men are more active.

There are 6 letters where men try hard to realise the sexual act. In four of them, their verbal attempts are rejected straight away: a girl does not care for a fisherman in I.7, a married woman (II.17) and a *hetaira* (II.20) do not care for young men, and the determined painter in II.10 is ignored by a painted woman, which is only logical as she is not real. Therefore, it seems that Aristaenetus' men usually do not get what they want. Acontius (I.10) manages to get the girl he desired but only after much waiting and suffering. So does probably a young man in love from I.13 (however, this does not happen in the letter itself). The latter example shows a considerable male activity when it comes to realisation of the sexual act. In this case, however, the activity is not the young

man's but of other protagonists (of a doctor and later of the young man's father).

Female activity is quite evident in I.2, I.16, I.27 and II.7, with the first two examples being the most obvious. In I.16 a man has willingly let the woman take control, and I.2 seems like an act of sexual violence.<sup>23</sup> Descriptions of female determination when it comes to accomplishing their goals contain gradation in both cases: in I.2 women approach, smile, talk to the man, persuade him and finally physically grab him, while in I.16 the man is reluctant, the woman touches, caresses and hugs him, and is the first to show sexual arousal by passionately kissing him. In I.27 teasing does not go that far but the gradation is present, since the woman seduces the man by undressing her foot, shin, "other" respectively.<sup>24</sup> Both protagonists in II.7 are determined to get the man for themselves.

Women plan adultery in three letters while the most elaborate is the plan of the woman in II.22. Men have no say in II.15: the wife of one of them has come up with an ingenious and detailed plan how both of them can gratify their impulses, each in the intimacy of their own home. Wife of a *rhetor* in II.3 is less determined: her desire for a sexual relationship is more prominent than her decision to cheat on her husband. The end of the letter shows her making an effort to save her marriage rather than seek gratification outside of it.

Women manage to get what they want in as many as four cases: the girls from I.2 have managed to persuade a professedly determined young man, the woman in I.16 likewise and the slave in II.7 wins the man over and has sex with him (and so does probably her mistress, who offers herself to him later), while an adulteress in II.22 does not leave the caught young man much of a choice – he has to cooperate (and probably repeat the sexual act with her) or his life will be in danger, if she reveals who he is. In I.27 a woman's seduction is a false provocation: her goal is to actually humiliate the man, which she manages to achieve. We can presume that the plans of the women from II.3 and II.15 were also

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<sup>23</sup> It is not the case of an actual rape; terminology of violence was chosen to produce a comical effect.

<sup>24</sup> We never find out what the author means exactly but it is logically implied that he neglects to mention naked breasts or thigh.

successful. This leads me to conclude that unlike men, determined women usually succeed in their plans!

Out of 13 letters where women are more active, only five of them definitely depict courtesans: I.18, I.24, I.25, I.27 and II.13. The status of women in I.2 and I.11 cannot be determined but the courtesans are probably not the protagonists. The courtesans are most definitely not the protagonists of II.3, II.15 and II.22 (the women are all married) nor in II.5, where the protagonist is an unmarried girl. Only one out of the four letters, in which activity of a woman in seduction and open initiative is exceptional, portrays a courtesan (I.27). When it comes to plans of sexual nature, none of the four exceptionally determined women are courtesans; they are all married women (cf. letters II.3, II.15 and II.22).

### 3. Sexual initiative in Alciphron's collection

The collection consists of 123 letters, thematically divided into four parts i.e. books: *Letters of Fishermen*, *Letters of Farmers*, *Letters of Parasites* and *Letters of Courtesans*. In accordance with the expected, all the letters from book IV (20 of them) thematically fit the research planned. However, I have also added five erotic letters found in books I-III (I.11, I.16, I.22, II.6 and III.31).

Detailed reading of the chosen letters shows that when it comes to initiating physical contact, the activity of sexes is mostly equal. The courtesans are often active in expressing their desire towards their lovers (or the lack of it, as in IV.17, in which a *hetaira* declines an offer from an old man) and plan to engage in a sexual relationship with them. My results corroborate the results of Melissa Funke. I have, however, noticed that the courtesans are not the only ones given the active role in sexuality by Alciphron. Namely, Funke took into consideration book IV only so her result was limited to courtesans. In the letters I added to the *Letters of Courtesans* for the purposes of my research, I found an example in which a non-*hetaira* desires a man and expresses her desire clearly; she tries to accomplish her goal by writing a letter (not to him, however, but to her mother) and threatens to kill herself unless the arranged marriage to another is cancelled (cf. I.11).<sup>25</sup> Therefore, Alciphron's female

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<sup>25</sup> The fact that her wish is unlikely to be granted is irrelevant for this analysis (see the reply (I.12); her mother destroys all her hopes).

protagonists can be active and try to get what they want and they do not have to be the courtesans in order for the author to allow them to do so, even though the example of a non-*hetaira* is rare.

#### 4. Sexual initiative in Aelian's collection

The collection entitled *Letters of Farmers* consists of mere 20 letters and it is impossible to determine if this was its original volume or if a part was lost in the transcription phase. The thematic parallel with Alciphron's book II is evident from the title. The reviewers usually say that one cannot talk merely about Alciphron's influence, but of the unsuccessful imitation of him by Aelian.<sup>26</sup> Erotic letters are few: only 1, 7 (which is a love letter), 8 (a reply to the previous one; rejection), 9 and 10. In all the letters sexual activity falls on the males.

#### 5. Sexual initiative in Philostratus' collection

The collection consists of 73 letters, 50 of which have erotica as their topic. The same amount of attention is given to heterosexual and same-sex relationships and preferences. Men are predominantly the active ones in expression of desire and attempt to initiate erotic contact. To be more precise, the continuously active male throughout the collection is the author himself,<sup>27</sup> while the voices of the addressees, regardless of their sex, remain unheard. The only letter that partially shows the activity of the addressee is 19 (the addressee is a male prostitute).

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26 Cf. e.g. the opinion of Benner and Fobes (1949) 345: "In substance the *Letters* are comparable to the poorest letters of Alciphron".

27 Unlike the other collections observed, all the letters in this one were written in the ich-Form without the definite identification of the sender. An assumption that is more or less accepted is that this is the author himself, and frequent contradictions between the letters (homo- and heterosexual interests, letters that contain praise and criticism of the same physical characteristic, etc.) are not considered as inconsistencies and implausibility of the collection, rather as proof that it was originally imagined as a demonstration of how erudite author's sophistic education is. For more details on the collection see Benner and Fobes (1949) 387-413, and for the problem of authorship 387-391.



## 6. Conclusion

In Aristaenetus' collection, both sexes are equally represented and active when it comes to expressing desire, initiating foreplay and sexual act.

Women mostly seduce with their gaze (I.25), often combined with erotic movements (I.4), in one case with undressing (I.27) while men usually do it verbally, employing skills, such as playing an instrument in I.14 and II.5 and singing in II.19 or by simply being persistent (II.17). Men are more open and verbally more direct but also pretty unsuccessful; they are refused bluntly in I.7, II.2, II.17 and II.20. On the other hand, women are more prone to games and hoaxes;<sup>28</sup> they test men's affection by rousing jealousy (I.22), they provoke (I.27) and withhold sexual contacts in order to keep the men interested (I.21 and II.20). A difficult character and behavioural inconsistencies (sometimes deliberate) mostly additionally rouse men's interest (an exception: an unsatisfied husband in II.12). Unlike men, women often get what they desire or we have a feeling their goal can be reached because of their elaborate and ingenious plan.

The gaze as a means of seduction and its significance when it comes to sexual offer on the one side, and/or its acceptance on the other, is the backbone of letter I.4.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it is interpreted as an open invitation to foreplay and to an act itself in I.16; not returning it is understood as a lack of sexual interest in II.2 and it is merely mentioned in I.2. Besides these examples, the potential of the gaze in this sense is not so prominent in the collection. On the other hand, gazing *at* someone, as expected, usually leads to infatuation, more commonly in men (e.g. I.10, I.15 and II.2) and sometimes in women (II.5). One radical example of falling in love merely visually is II.10 (a case of objectophilia, i.e. an infatuation with a two-dimensional portrait of a woman). In one instance, looking at a couple fornicating causes a woman to be sexually aroused (voyeurism) and leads to a new sexual offer (II.7).

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<sup>28</sup> There are opposite examples as well, such as I.10 or I.19, where a man gets a girl by performing a hoax.

<sup>29</sup> This is the case of several gazes that a hetaira gives, each of which has a different meaning, ranging from the one used to attract attention of the other person to an open sexual provocation.

Although foreplay is initiated by both sexes, women are more skilful when it comes to creating opportunities to touch (I.9) and finding excuses, places and time for erotic encounters (see II.4 or II.22). The letters II.14 and II.16 show extreme foreplay activities: in the first one a woman comes into a man's bedroom and is reluctant until he clearly shows that he is interested (he invites her into his bed gesturing with a finger) and in the other a man is waiting for (and welcomes) an obvious initiative from the other side.

Interestingly, Aristaenetus' women initiate far more morally dubious erotic encounters: sexual intercourse with two female partners (see I.2 and especially II.7 where the second act is provoked by voyeurism), sexual contacts in public places (I.2 and II.4), a possible incest (I.16), a switch of partners (cf. double adultery in II.15) and an adulterous act, for which we feel will happen again (II.22). Women resort to partial undressing in a public place with the intention of arousing excitement in a young man (I.27) and there is also maybe a case of nymphomania (I.18).<sup>30</sup>

In two letters women are completely objectified. In I.10 an innocent girl is entrapped by accidentally saying cleverly devised oath words carved in an apple, from whence she becomes the tool in the hands of Artemis and her future fiancé. The author does not offer her opinion on the situation or a possible return of love or desire, while the vocabulary enhances our impression of her not being treated fairly. In another example (I.13) the woman does not even speak in a letter. We do not have any information on her – three men (her lover, his son - who is in love with her and a doctor) are those who decide on her faith and her future sexual encounters as a "medicine" prescribed without her knowledge or permission obviously. However, these two letters have their direct opposites. In II.15 two female neighbours discuss an exchange of sexual partners openly and it appears that the men involved have no say in the matter. I.18 and I.25 appear to be similar. In both, the courtesans seem to be "in action" and are making an effort to get young, inexperienced lovers. Their endeavours are described by the use of the

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30 Unless we understand the mutual bickering and accusation of the hetairai for being too "ardent at work" mere as a professional jealousy because of the success of others or a good income.

terminology connected to hunting – the young men are seen as their helpless prey.

Among the letters with predominant female agency, only one (I.27) is almost certainly about a *hetaira*. We cannot be sure about the two girls from I.2, and in letters II.15 and II.22 it is married women who expose their elaborate sexual plans.

By observing the state of the three remaining epistolary collections of this type, namely Alciphron's, Aelian's and Philostratus', I have reached conclusions that enable me to put them into a wider context and compare them with Aristaenetus'. Two similar pairs of collections can be noted: Aelian's and Philostratus', and Alciphron's and Aristaenetus'. The former tend to show males as the ones more active in sexuality,<sup>31</sup> while the activity of sexes is equal in the collections of the latter.

Therefore, Aristaenetus' letters are most similar to Alciphron's and that is why they can be compared to them. In their collections both sexes take an equal part in expressing desire, seducing, initiating touch and the sexual act itself. The descriptions are never pornographic; vulgarity is rarely to be found. The circumstances leading up to the act itself however are more shocking. An expression of sexual desire towards the same sex is never present.<sup>32</sup>

The world of courtesans and their lovers (past, current, future) is somewhat isolated from life outside of their circle. Both collections mention former courtesans who got married and thus "get promoted" to a better life: cf. Aristaenetus' letter I.19 and Alciphron's IV.14. Nevertheless, both authors show they are still in touch with their former colleagues: in Aristaenetus' collection (I.19) an active *hetaira* visits the retired one in her new home and invites yet another to do so as well. Alciphron mentions a licentious party attended by a newly-wed *hetaira*, despite her change of status (cf. IV.14).

Besides these similarities, my detailed analysis exposed even more important differences. Aristaenetus' collection boasts far more variations

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31 In Philostratus' collection, all the activity is in the hands of the sender, probably the author himself. The results of this research cannot thus be really compared to others'.

32 Same-sex relationships between men can be found in Philostratus' collection only.

in protagonists' love/sexual statuses while in Alciphron's the most common relationships are those with courtesans (as expected, in book IV, but in other erotic letters of the collection as well). In accordance with that, a major part of his female activity is actually the activity of the *hetairai*, while there is a greater diversification in Aristaenetus' collection (married women, *hetairai*, unmarried girls). Furthermore, a high number of relationships and acts are actually realised in Alciphron's collection, while this is not so in Aristaenetus'. This is mostly the result of the fact that the relationships themselves are of a different kind: in *Letters of Courtesans*, a high number of letters are sent by the courtesans to their current lovers or vice versa, while in Aristaenetus' the number of possible variations (relationships with the courtesans but predominantly with married women and girls, which are usually by definition harder to achieve) necessarily change both the potential of the realisation and an expected success of the relationships.

The women in Aristaenetus' collection are incomparably more direct when it comes to seduction, initiation of the contact and the sexual act itself and in the letters where they are the active ones, they are rarely courtesans, which is a discovery I did not really expect.

All the letters sent by the courtesans in the Aristaenetus' collection (the total of 8: I.14, I.18, I.19, I.24, I.25, II.13, II.14 and II.16) undoubtedly remain topically related to the courtesans themselves: there are no examples of external narrators, nor attempts to separate the story from the sphere of their profession and describe some erotic adventure of a chaste woman. Similarly, the senders I discovered were not the courtesans remain within their domains; they do not meddle into the world of the courtesans and the stories of their letters deal with the situations regarding the chaste women, whether they are married or not (cf. I.10, II.3, II.5 and II.15). This is not so in Alciphron's collection: tendency of a "closed circle" is quite obvious in book IV, but also outside of it I find many letters where chaste wives are scared of the effect the courtesans could have on their husbands or describe circumstances and consequences of their relationships with them.

When painting the portrait of the courtesans, there are not many inconsistencies from the usual descriptions. Their trade, behaviour and characters are sometimes portrayed (by Aristaenetus, but also by other epistolographers) in a positive and sometimes in a negative light, as in

other genres of Greek literature. Also, the description is in a direct connection with the perspective of the protagonists, who manage to achieve (or not) the planned, or with the female protagonist threatened by the *hetaira's* success and skill (the protagonist/sender of the letter being either also a *hetaira* or a jealous married woman). Therefore, one can conclude that when it comes to this question, the power of conventions of the literary subgenre along with the genres used by the epistolographer as models have definitely gone beyond the influence of moral and ethical guidelines of the author's time (Christianity and its attitude towards sex, adultery and prostitution). The situation is perhaps opposite when it comes to his disregard of same-sex relationships, but this assumption cannot be proved and is inconsistent; the other three collections were written approximately at the same time, some three and a half centuries earlier, while the homosexual tendencies are found in only one of them – that of Philostratus.

The results of the research conducted corroborate innovation and imagination of Aristaenetus' collection and prove that claims about his following in the footsteps of his predecessors, especially Alciphron's, are rather exaggerated (cf. detailed analyses of collections from other aspects in the PhD dissertation of S. Hajdarević from 2013). With his concept of "sexual symmetry" and by granting his female fictional correspondents considerable sexual freedom, determination and initiative, this author from the later Greek antiquity produces a considerable amount of vigour and adds innovation in the literary sub-genre he belongs to.

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