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Aristaenetus' Collection: "Male" and "Female" Letters?

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ABSTRACT

The collection entitled *Erotic Letters*, attributed to Aristaenetus, was probably written in the 6th century AD. In concordance with the title of the Collection, the theme of all its 50 letters is erotica: the relationships between men and women of various statuses (maidens, married women, widows, slaves and *hetairai*) are depicted.

Since the senders, addressees and protagonists in the Collection are both male and female, it is important to investigate if the choice of the sex of the correspondents of any given letter impacts the a) formal characteristics of the letter, b) the plot depicted and especially c) the letter's gender construction. While some letters depict men and women behaving in an expected manner, in some the usual gender roles are severely questioned or even inverted. Therefore, I intend to scrutinise the letters and examine if any of the sexes is more likely to send letters depicting relationships that question/invert the expected gender roles, e.g. the repeated (successful) female adulteries, the oversexualised wives, the objectification of men etc.

The final goal of my research is to investigate if Aristaenetus already had the particular formal characteristics, the plot and the gender construction of his letters in mind while he was choosing the correspondents' sex or if their choice was a random one.

Key words: Aristaenetus, sex and gender, gender construction

1. Introduction; gender roles in Greek society and literature

Only rarely we hear female voices from Greek antiquity. With the exception of several religious festivals, such as Thesmophoria or Haloa, respectable women – maidens or wives – were pretty much absent from the social life of most Greek cities. They were uneducated, confined to their homes and family duties, the most important one being bearing children and taking care of their households.¹ Pericles allegedly said that the best wife is the one about whom no one has anything to say.² It was the husband's duty to ensure that all the children of his household are his own. Therefore, the maidens' virginity before marriage and the wives' fidelity during marriage were obsessively guarded and the offenders were faced with severe punishments.³ Double standards were applied; while female adultery was prohibited, men had affairs with *hetairai*, occasionally visited brothels and/or practiced pederasty.⁴

It comes as no surprise that (almost exclusively male) Greek authors rarely focus on sexuality of respectable women as a literary motif, especially from a female point of view.⁵ The occasional exceptions usually contain derogative representations of female sexuality; women are depicted as weak slaves to their sexual drive and promiscuous by nature.⁶ On the other hand, *hetairai* were ubiquitous in literature and their sexuality was well represented, especially during the Hellenistic period.

¹ The majority of extant data concerns Athenian women. Unlike them, Spartan women enjoyed significant social freedom and they were even involved in politics and warfare (Pomeroy, 2002). Also, women from Lesbos were educated in music and writing poetry (e. g. in Sappho's literary circle, thiasos). On literacy of women in Greece cf. Cole (1981). On their segregation cf. a summary in Dover (2002), 21–23. More comprehensive studies on women's life in antiquity can be found in: Gomme (1925), Pomeroy (1975), Foley (1981), Fantham et al. (1994) or Lefkowitz and Fant (2005).

² Cf.: εἰ δέ με δεῖ καὶ γυναικείας τι ἀρετῆς, ὅσαι νῦν ἐν χηρείᾳ ἔσονται, μνησθῆναι, βραχεία παραινέσει ἅπαν σημανῶ. τῆς τε γὰρ ὑπαρχούσης φύσεως μὴ χεῖροσι γενέσθαι ὑμῖν μεγάλη ἢ δόξα καὶ ἥς ἂν ἐπ' ἐλάχιστον ἀρετῆς πέρι ἢ φόγου ἐν τοῖς ἄρσεσι κλέος ἦ (Thuc. II.45.2). See the detailed analysis of this passage in Tyrrell and Bennett (1999).

³ A man guilty of rape or *moihia* could be punished by a fine, physically tortured or publicly humiliated, and apparently even murder was allowed if he was caught in the act. Cf. Skinner (2005), 167–170.

⁴ The most successful *hetairai* socialized with aristocrats as their girlfriends; some of these relationships were even monogamous and lasted for years. The less fortunate *pornai* were mostly poor slaves used for short and impersonal sexual encounters. The institution of pederasty involved socially acceptable liaisons (of limited duration) between adult men and youths. On ancient prostitution cf. esp. Glazebrook and Henry (2011). On pederasty cf. (somewhat dated) Licht (1932), also Dover (1978) and Skinner (2005), 13–25 with an excellent bibliography on ancient sexuality in general (see 25–28).

⁵ The authors depict female sexuality “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... 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...” (Hajdarević 2018, 5)

⁶ E.g. Old comedy, mime and epigrams abound with over-sexualised women and insatiable adulteresses, while Euripides' Phaedra is governed and eventually destroyed by her passion towards her son-in-law.

Although that was not always the case, *hetairai* are often depicted as greedy, manipulative and dangerous to men.

So, pretty much entire Greek literature could be considered misogynistic and the fact that only several literary works written by female authors are preserved probably contributes to that.⁷ When it comes to the literary representation of female sexuality in antiquity, almost everything that came down to us is a *gender ventriloquism* of a sort:⁸ a male attempt on granting a voice to female protagonists of various statuses, an attempt necessarily distorted by ignorance and gender stereotypes.

2. Aristaenetus' collection

The collection entitled *Erotic Letters*, usually attributed to Aristaenetus, was probably written in the 6th century AD.⁹ It consists of 50 erotic letters divided into two books, Book I containing 28 and Book II containing 22 of them. It belonged to a subgenre of Greek fictional epistolography, which flourished within the cultural atmosphere of the Second Sophistic.¹⁰ Besides Aristaenetus', only four collections of this type survived to this day: Alciphron's, Aelian's and Philostratus' (written during the 2nd or 3rd century AD), and Theophylact's (written in the 7th century).¹¹ The letters

⁷ Surviving poems/fragments written by Sappho, Anyte, Erinna, Nossis, Corinna, Sotira etc. (translated into English) can be found in Plant (2004).

⁸ The term "ventriloquism" in literary criticism denotes the situation when an author appropriates a textual voice that belongs to another race, age, gender, economic status etc., different from his or her own. See Davis (1998), 133 on literary ventriloquism in general and Funke (2008), 87–102 about Alciphron's and 102–108 about Lucian's ventriloquism.

⁹ It is quite possible that the author's name is not Aristaenetus at all and that the name was copied from the first letter (its sender is also named Aristaenetus) when a scribe got the manuscript lacking the author's name. Cf. Arnott (1982), 293. On the contrary, some scholars are confident that this was indeed the author's name (Zanetto 1987, 197). On the authorship and dating of the Collection, cf. Mazal (1971), I–VIII, Gallé Cejudo (1999), 13–22, Burri (2004) and Drago (2007), 16–36.

¹⁰ About the Second Sophistic and its influence on fictional epistolography cf. Schmid and Stählin (1924), 688–828. Information about the lost collections can be found in Lesky (2001), 844–845, Hajdarević (2020), 1 and Hajdarević (2013), 25–27.

¹¹ A concise overview of these collections can be found in Rosenmeyer (2001), 255–340 or Hajdarević (2013), 25–36. Meticulous analyses of Alciphron's, Aelian's and Philostratus' collection are the topic of the doctoral dissertation of Hodkinson (see Hodkinson, 2009), while Aristaenetus' was the focus of the dissertation written by Hajdarević (see Hajdarević, 2013). The text, the English translation and the commentary of Alciphron's, Aelian's and Philostratus' letters can be found in Benner and Fobes (1949), of Aristaenetus' in Bing and Höschele (2014). See also the commentary and the Italian translation of Aristaenetus' letters in Drago (2007), and of Theophylact's in Zanetto (1985). Throughout this paper Mazal's critical edition of Aristaenetus' *Erotic Letters* was used (Mazal, 1971). The translations from Ancient Greek into English are offered in the footnotes. All translations are my own, as well as the italics used for emphasising within quotations or translations of Greek text of the *Letters* and elsewhere in this paper.

within all these collections, although fictional,¹² “imitate” the formal characteristics of “real” letters, the *tituli*, containing the names of the fictional correspondents, being the most obvious one.¹³ The correspondents’ names are given in the form “X (sc. writes/sends this letter) to Y”; X is the name of the sender and it is in the nominative case, while the addressee’s name is in the dative case.¹⁴ With the exception of Philostratus’, all collections feature both male and female senders and addressees.¹⁵ All three Aristaenetus’ predecessors prefer male correspondents.¹⁶

Since Aristaenetus’ letters are fictional, all his “female” letters, just as their “male” counterparts, are in fact written by the same person – the male author of the collection, attempting the appropriation of female perspective.¹⁷ So, *gender ventriloquism* applies here as well. We must assume that the sex of the correspondents was not chosen randomly and that it served some kind of literary purpose.¹⁸ It has been noted before that a certain correlation between the theme of the letters and the preferred sex of the correspondents in Alciphron’s collection exists: he tends to connect erotic contents with female senders.¹⁹ If we focus on his 25 erotic letters

¹² Fictional letters do not represent a written account of somebody’s real epistolary communication.

¹³ Epistolary elements and conventions connect the sender to its addressee and to the letter itself. These are: the use of the 1st person narrative, 2nd person indicative/imperative/optative/conjunctive and pronouns in the 2nd person, vocatives (of personal names, pronouns or adjectives), allusions to writing and sending letters or to the past/future epistolary communication etc. Cf. Trapp (2003), 34–38.

¹⁴ In Philostratus’ collection the *titulus* never indicates the sender (which is Philostratus himself). The addressees are often left unnamed as well; only their gender, age or marriage status is defined.

¹⁵ The sender of all Philostratus’ letters is male, the author himself. His addressees are male and female.

¹⁶ In Aelian’s collection both the senders and the addressees are male in all letters but two (i.e. in 90% of the letters), while in Alciphron’s men send 77% of the letters and they receive ca 71% of them. The nature of the letters explains this tendency: Aelian’s depict the correspondence between farmers and Alciphron’s Books I–III between fishermen, farmers and parasites; these occupations do not have their female members. Also, the fishermen and farmers reveal their world mostly through the correspondence among themselves, rarely communicating with their wives, daughters or lovers (*hetairai*), while parasites exchange the letters among themselves exclusively. In Philostratus’ collection the sender is male in all cases (Philostratus himself). Only in his collection the addressees are almost equally often male (52% of the letters) and female (48%), which can be partly explained by the fact that only his letters depict erotic inclination towards both men and women.

¹⁷ Although it cannot be proven that the author was male, the scholars do not consider the possibility of the collection’s female authorship.

¹⁸ The analysis of correspondents’ names revealed that none was chosen randomly. When famous authors are presented as senders/addressees, the text of the letter is infused by quotations of that author’s passages. Also, when *Redende Namen* are used, they are firmly connected with the contents of the letter: they anticipate the plot or its outcome, they point to protagonists’ character features or occupations or they are intertextually related to the text of the letter. Cf. esp. Hajdarević (2017). So, if the correspondents’ names are not at all random, why would their sex be?

¹⁹ Rosenmeyer notices: “In book 4... (sc. Alciphron) focuses almost exclusively on the female voice, this time represented by a group of famous courtesans. This last book also, not surprisingly, is focused primarily on amatory themes”. She continues, offering an explanation: “Love letters seem to have been connected in antiquity with female authorship...” (Rosenmeyer 2001, 277).

only,²⁰ the ratio of his male and female correspondents changes significantly: the senders are male in only 28% of the letters and they are the addressees of 48% of the letters (see Hajdarević 2013, 114–116). Since Alciphron was Aristaenetus' role model and since all of Aristaenetus' letters share the same erotic theme and content, the similar increase of the frequency of female correspondents was expected in his collection. Hence the idea for this paper; the intention is to check if there is a correlation between the choice of the correspondents' sex and a) formal characteristics of the letters, b) the plot depicted and especially c) the letters' gender construction.²¹ The initial assumption is that he did not make that choice randomly; e.g. the letters written by men might be in concordance with the expected gender roles (e.g. bragging to a male friend), while the ones sent by women, especially courtesans, might display the inversion of gender roles (or vice versa). If "male" letters differ from "female" letters in terms of their form, plot and/or gender construction, that would imply that the author already had these features in mind while he was choosing the sex of his correspondents.²² On the other hand, if the letters prove to be similar in terms of all these features, that would imply that the choice of the correspondents' sex was random and insignificant.

The first step of the research must be the analysis of the distribution of letters according to their correspondents' sex. The results will enable the comparison of the letters' gender construction (in step two). Of special interest will be the letters containing atypical gender roles, as well as morally dubious sexual encounters, such as adulteries, sex in a public place, threesomes, exchange of partners etc. The final goal is to point to (potential) generalities regarding the relation between the senders' or addressees' sex and the contexts of their respective letters, especially the letters' gender construction.

3. The distribution of Aristaenetus' correspondents according to their sex

In all cases where the *tituli* are preserved, the correspondents' sex is easily determined. However, letters I.2 and II.6 lack their *tituli* in the manuscript; it is assumed

²⁰ These are the 19 letters of Book IV, the fragment 5, and the following letters scattered through Books I–III: I.11, I.16, I.22, II.6 and III.31.

²¹ Gender and gender roles must be differentiated from the division into two biological sexes. The gender is a result of the totality of an individual's actions, i.e. in Greek society "... 'masculinity' is an aggregate combining the congruent functions of penetration, activity, dominance and social precedence whereas 'femininity' signifies penetrability, passivity, submission and social subordination" (Halperin 1990, 130). Halperin's work was strongly influenced by volumes II and III of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (published in English in 1984). The same can be claimed about the collection of essays edited by Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin (1990), while e.g. Richlin (1992) and Larmour, Miller and Platter (1998), 25–26 find Foucault's methodology flawed. A summary of scholars' stances on gender roles in Greece exceeds the scope and the page limitations of this paper. A helpful overview can be found in Funke (2008), 38–59 and McClure (2002), 1–15, the latter one containing a still valuable bibliography on the topic. The term "gender construction" is used here to denote the author's overall representation of male/female sex and gender, gender roles and the behavioural patterns of the letters' protagonists.

²² The opposite process is also possible.

that they got lost because of the scribe's blunder.²³ In Mazal's edition both letters are accompanied by the editor's commentary (in the footnotes): "[N]omina eorum, qui scripsit et qui accepit epistolam, desunt".²⁴ However, the same editor reconstructs the addressee of II.6, includes him into the *titulus* (as <Φορμίῳνι>), but explains that it is an interpolation: "... nomen autem Phormionis ex ipsa epistola suppleri potest".²⁵ The solution here was an obvious one, since the addressee's name is mentioned in the text. The sender's sex is evident from the participle in II.6.11-12: νενίκηκάς με τήν ἐμὴν ἐρωμένην λαβών...²⁶ Since same-sex relationships are excluded from this collection,²⁷ it is clear that this man's rival cannot be a woman – so both correspondents are male here. The sex of the sender of I.2 is clear from the opening sentence of the letter; the participle reveals that the sender must be male: Ἐσπέρα τῆ προτεραία μελωδοῦντί μοι κατά τινα στενωπὸν...²⁸ The addressee's sex cannot be reconstructed by this method.²⁹ The only help we can get comes from the tone of the letter and from the nature of the relationship described. Hajdarević argues that this addressee must be male too, offering parallels between the narration of this letter and I.16, which contains a similar boasting to a *male* friend (Hajdarević 2013, 113). So, the sex of all four correspondents reconstructed in this manner is male.

Male senders appear in 76% of all the letters, i.e. in 38 of them: I.1, I.2, I.3, I.4, I.5, I.6, I.7, I.8, I.9, I.11, I.12, I.13, I.15, I.16, I.17, I.20, I.21, I.22, I.23, I.26, I.27, I.28, II.1, II.2, II.4, II.6, II.7, II.8, II.9, II.10, II.11, II.12, II.17, II.18, II.19, II.20, II.21 and II.22. Male addressees are to be found in 74 % of all the letters, i.e. in 37 of them: I.1, I.2, I.3, I.4, I.5, I.6, I.7, I.8, I.9, I.11, I.12, I.13, I.14, I.15, I.16, I.17, I.20, I.21, I.22, I.23, I.24, I.27, I.28, II.4, II.6, II.7, II.8, II.10, II.11, II.12, II.13, II.14, II.16, II.18, II.19, II.20 and II.22. Senders are female in only 24% of all the letters, i.e. in 12 of them: I.10, I.14, I.18, I.19, I.24, I.25, II.3, II.5, II.13, II.14, II.15 and II.16. Female addressees are to be found in only 26% of all the letters, i.e. in 13 of them: I.10, I.18, I.19, I.25, I.26, II.1, II.2, II.3, II.5, II.9, II.15, II.17 and II.21. Both correspondents are male in 64% of the letters (32 of them): I.1, I.2, I.3, I.4, I.5, I.6, I.7, I.8, I.9, I.11, I.12, I.13, I.15, I.16, I.17, I.20, I.21, I.22, I.23, I.27, I.28,

²³ Drago (2001), 112 and 475.

²⁴ Mazal (1971), 4 and 76.

²⁵ Mazal (1971), 76.

²⁶ "You defeated me when you took my lover from me..."

²⁷ It is not known why Aristaenetos excluded all same-sex erotic encounters, while he regularly used sources that depict them, esp. Plato, Lucian and even his colleague-epistolographer Philostratus. Arnott believes that "... his own private inclinations may have provided part of the answer" and that "... the age in which he wrote may have added its influence", accentuating further that by Aristaenetos' time "... Christianity was firmly established as the state religion..." and that pederasty was banned by law approximately at the same time (Arnott 1982, 314–315).

²⁸ "Last night, while I was singing to myself in a narrow alley..."

²⁹ Hercher omitted the *tituli* for both letters and for I.1 also in his edition; see Hercher (1873). Obviously, he believes that the sender's name "Aristaenetos" in I.1 represents the scribe's blunder as well.

II.4, II.6, II.7, II.8, II.10, II.11, II.12, II.18, II.19, II.20 and II.22. Both correspondents are female in 14% of the letters (i.e. in seven letters): I.10, I.18, I.19, I.25, II.3, II.5 and II.15.

So, when it comes to both senders and addressees, Aristaenetus follows in the footsteps of his predecessors; in concordance with the general tendency of the subgenre, his typical correspondent is male (sender in 76%, addressee in 74% cases). Surprisingly, the firm correlation between the erotic theme and the choice of female correspondents, observed in Alciphron's collection, is *not* a feature of Aristaenetus'.³⁰

4. The distribution of letters according to their gender construction

Even a superficial reading of Aristaenetus' collection reveals that it contains letters that are disparate in terms of their motifs, plots and gender roles presented in them. Alongside those depicting men and women behaving in an expected manner, we find some displaying atypical gender roles,³¹ i.e. emasculated men and assertive women. In this step of the research the letters of the collection are scrutinized and divided into separate categories/groups, marked as a), b), and c), according to the gender construction in them.

a) In eight letters gender roles could not be determined, so these letters had to be excluded from the analysis. These are: I.1, I.3, I.8, I.11, I.12, I.23, I.26 and II.19.³²

b) There are 11 letters presenting usual and expected gender roles, predominantly male (sexual) activity and the male masculinity unthreatened: I.10, I.13, I.15, II.2, II.6, II.8, II.9, II.10, II.11, II.17 and II.21. Among these, the female behaviour is *completely* in accordance with female social roles in letters II.2 and II.17. In II.2 a maiden, upon noticing a youth's gaze, covers her face with a veil and turns her head in another direction, while in II.17 a married woman, continuously courted by a seducer, clearly shows that she is not interested, demands that he finally leaves her alone, and warns him that his perseverance might get him in trouble if her husband finds out. Interestingly, these are the only examples of female chastity in the collection; in most cases maidens and wives transgress their gender roles.³³

³⁰ The dissertation of Hajdarević (2013) revealed that Aristaenetus' debt to Alciphron is generally far lesser than previously claimed.

³¹ Female literacy is ubiquitous within the Collection (*hetairai*, maidens and wives assume the role of the letters' senders and addressees). However, it should not be considered a breach of gender roles but a literary convention, comparable to the literacy of fishermen, farmers, parasites and *hetairai* in Alciphron's collection or in the letters of Aelian's farmers. (Only the finale of Aelian's 20th letter offers an improbable explanation of the correspondents' literacy; they are "not Libyan nor Lydian, but *Athenian* farmers".)

³² The present analysis is built upon the analysis of the protagonists' sexual behaviour, conducted by Hajdarević (Hajdarević, 2018). She also excluded some letters because they "do not contain any erotic actions or the ratio between activity and passivity of the lovers is not clear enough" (see Hajdarević 2018, 7). The analysis of gender construction, however, involves a wider scope, so *different* letters proved to be not applicable here.

³³ Cf. maidens in I.6 and II.5, and wives in I.9, I.20, II.3, II.7, II.12, II.15 and II.22. Curiously, there is a case of a *hetaira* with monogamous tendencies in I.24; we are under the impression that she is more "chaste" than the majority of chaste women of the collection!

c) Finally, we are left with as much as 31 letters displaying atypical gender construction and severely questioned or even inverted gender roles. These are: I.2, I.4, I.5, I.6, I.7, I.9, I.14, I.16, I.17, I.18, I.19, I.20, I.21, I.22, I.24, I.25, I.27, I.28, II.1, II.3, II.4, II.5, II.7, II.12, II.13, II.14, II.15, II.16, II.18, II.20 and II.22. In these letters Aristaenetus' females are portrayed as surprisingly (sexually) assertive; they actively seduce, often create opportunities for sexual contacts (incl. adulteries) and even initiate them. Furthermore, they are manipulative, smart and cunning. Therefore, their attempts at seduction or adultery are usually successful. Many of the women portrayed are courtesans; their assertive behaviour is expected, so the 20 letters portraying them (I.2, I.4, I.7, I.14, I.16, I.17, I.18, I.19, I.21, I.22, I.24, I.25, I.27, I.28, II.1, II.13, II.14, II.16, II.18, II.20) will be given less attention in this paper. However, there are numerous examples of over-sexualized bad *wives*, mischievous *maidens* or female *slaves*, such as the ones portrayed in the remaining 11 letters from this group: I.6 and II.5 (maidens), II.4 (a female slave), I.5, I.9, I.20, II.3, II.12, II.15 and II.22 (married women), and II.7 (a married woman and a female slave). In majority of these depictions females' behaviour not only transgresses the usual roles of their gender but partly emasculates the men also: a manipulative adulteress cunningly plots with her slave/friend, successfully concealing her deed from her naïve husband (cf. I.5), a bad tempered wife mistreats her husband (II.12), a wife, demanding more sexual activity than she gets in her marriage, is considering finding a lover to satisfy her sexual appetite (II.3), two neighbours arrange a swap: the one will get the other ones' husband, giving her male slave in exchange (II.15).³⁴ So, we find the masculinity of Aristaenetus' men endangered in various ways; they are sexually inadequate, often cheated on *and* bamboozled into thinking that they misunderstood the situation, they are not respected in their households, they seem naïve, even borderline stupid.³⁵

Given the focus of my paper, the latter group of letters must be given special attention; Aristaenetus' inversion of gender roles – especially if *hetairai* are not involved – represents an innovation within the subgenre.³⁶ The following question needs to be addressed: is there a tendency towards connecting *questioned gender roles* with either male or female senders?

5. The correlation between the correspondents' sex and gender construction?

What must follow is the cross-reference between the results of the previous two analyses. Out of 31 letters of Category c men send 20 letters (I.2, I.4, I.5, I.6, I.7, I.9, I.16, I.17, I.20, I.21, I.22, I.27, I.28, II.1, II.4, II.7, II.12, II.18, II.20 and II.22), while the remaining 11 letters are sent by women (I.14, I.18, I.19, I.24, I.25, II.3, II.5, II.13,

³⁴ Both men are not given a say in this plan; they seem objectified.

³⁵ E.g. the behaviour of husbands in I.5 or II.22. The cuckold husband in I.5 even ends up apologising to his cheating wife for his "false" accusations!

³⁶ Cf. a detailed analysis of the protagonists' sexual behaviour in Hajdarević (2018) and Hajdarević (2019).

II.14, II.15, II.16). If we focus on the sub-group of 11 letters depicting non-*hetairai* only (maidens, wives and female slaves), the male senders still dominate; they send eight letters (I.5, I.6, I.9, I.20, II.4, II.7, II.12 and II.22), while women send only three (II.3, II.5, and II.15). Additionally, an interesting tendency was observed: among the 31 "male" letters men send all letters except one (II.1) to men, while women write almost equally often to men (I.14, I.24, II.13, II.14 and II.16) and to women (I.18, I.19, I.25, II.3, II.5 and II.15).³⁷ Within the sub-group the situation is as follows: men receive 8 letters (I.5, I.6, I.9, I.20, II.4, II.7, II.12 and II.22), while women receive three (II.3, II.5 and II.15).

It is obvious that the appearance of questioned/inverted gender roles is not directly related to the author's choice of either sex of his correspondents – it is not the case that the letters that are unusual in terms of their gender construction are e.g. always sent by male correspondents (or vice versa). True, the unusual gender construction is found more often in the letters sent by men (the ratio is 20: 11), and the prevalence of male senders is discovered in the sub-group of the letters where the protagonists are not *hetairai* also (men send eight and the women send only three of these). However, caution is needed regarding drawing any conclusions from that; we have to mind the overall frequency of male correspondents in the Collection. In the majority of the letters containing questioned gender roles relationships with *hetairai* are depicted; the portrayal is in concordance with their usual portrayal as manipulative, cruel or "dominating" over men.³⁸

Among the 20 "male" letters of Category c there are 11 "eye witness accounts" describing events unrelated to either of the correspondents whatsoever. These are gossip-letters in 3rd person narrative; the senders and the addressees *are not* the protagonists of the events retold in the letters:³⁹ see I.5, I.6, I.9, I.21, I.22, I.27, II.1,⁴⁰

³⁷ *Hetairai* send their letters to their lovers or their female friends. Among the latter there are no addressees besides other *hetairai*; we are kept firmly within their narrow erotic world. It might be expected that *hetairai* would send letters to chaste women as well, e.g. their lovers' wives – an apology letter comes to mind, for example. Equally plausible would be an angry wife's letter filled with insults towards the *hetaira* involved with her husband. However, there are no such examples within the collection, nor within the subgenre as a whole; *hetairai* are depicted as having contacts only among themselves and with their present, ex or future lovers. Wives usually send letters to their female friends or female cousins (as Aristaenetus' letter II.3), sometimes to their husbands or other members of their family (the motivation for writing letters to someone living inside the same household seems questionable, but cf. Hodkinson (2007).

³⁸ *Hetairai* could be referred to as a 3rd gender of a sort: obviously, their sex is female, but their lives differ from the lives of Athenian wives significantly, since they have their income, a social life, sometimes even their own homes and slaves (see Introduction of this paper).

³⁹ These features are not expected in epistolary literature, which favours 1st person narrative and retelling of the events related to the sender, the addressee, or both. Cf. Hajdarević (2013), 45–70, esp. 69–70, and Zanetto, (1987), 196–197.

⁴⁰ The sender acts as a mediator for an estranged couple. Although that fact makes the letter somewhat different from the other examples (the sender seems partially involved), the central motifs revolve around the lovers (the conflict, the youth's admittance of guilt for the potential reconciliation), not the sender.

II.7, II.18, II.20 and II.22. These gossips are introduced by *improbable* witnesses; the letters usually do not offer plausible explanations of these senders' presence while the events retold were happening.⁴¹ We could believe that the sender saw the lovers touch (in I.9) or that he overheard *hetairai* taunting youths (as in I.27, II.18 and II.20), since these events happen in a semi-public place. However, it is hard to imagine that someone could attend a party and get inside a married couple's home a little bit later, as in I.5; the sender saw the adulteress fleeing from her lover's party and in the next moment he comments on her quick return home: ...ἀνέζευσεν οἴκαδε, καὶ τὸν σύνοικον ἔφθη, οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἐκφυγοῦσα.⁴² (I.5.17–19) Also unlikely is that someone could witness two consecutive sexual encounters happening inside (see II.7 and II.22), or overhear a maiden and her nurse in the maiden's bedroom (in I.6), or see a *hetaira* making love to her lover in the privacy of her own home (I.22). In any case, none of these kinky peeping Toms was caught during their voyeuristic endeavours. In the remaining nine "male" letters the gossip is also an element, but a less prominent one; the senders, who are partly involved in the plot, do their best to paint the *other protagonist* in a bad light: lascivious *hetairai* (I.4, I.7 and I.16, maybe also girls in I.2), a slave (II.4), bad tempered *hetairai* (I.17 and I.28) and wives behaving scandalously (I.20 and II.12).

Out of the 11 "female" letters in Category c none is a gossip-letter related to 3^d parties only; that is the major difference between "male" and "female" letters discovered by this research. Women write letters to their lovers or to their female friends/cousins/neighbours, and the events in most cases include or concern both correspondents or *at least* the letter's sender.⁴³ The connection of gossip-letters with male senders only is interesting per se, since gossip is in fact "...a form of speech commonly associated with *women* in the ancient Greek imagination" (Funke 2008, 96).⁴⁴ So, from the point of gender construction, gossiping is a quality that emasculates these male senders; their behaviour resembles the behaviour which was "reserved" for women in the minds of Aristaenetos and his readers.

⁴¹ An exception: the sender of II.1 was informed about the situation by the friend on behalf whom the letter was written. Also, the sender of I.21 might overhear about the curious *hetaira's* sexual restrictions given to her lover if he himself "leaked" them.

⁴² "...she returned home before her husband. How she managed to escape, I do not know."

⁴³ In I.19 the life story of a *hetaira* is retold, several elements portraying her in a negative light (it seems that she got pregnant on purpose, manipulating her lover to make her his *pallakē*). However, the story circulates among her friends/colleagues, one of which recently visited "the wife", and the accent is on the *hetaira's* current family bliss rather than on the circumstances leading to it. It is hard to believe that these *hetairai* consider their ex colleague's manipulative behaviour a character flaw. On the contrary, it should be understood as a praise of her abilities, maybe even a good model to follow. Similarly, in I.25 a sender (again a *hetaira*) gossips about her sister's inappropriate behaviour and the consequent theft of her own lover, but the events retold and those anticipated in the letter clearly concern the sender.

⁴⁴ Also, McClure points to verses of Greek dramas (both comedy and tragedy) perpetuating the stereotype of the gossipy woman (McClure 1999, 59–60).

Several "female" letters that portray the correspondence of non-*hetairai* – II.3, II.5 and II.15 – are sent to female friends and contain future plans to be executed by the correspondents themselves: a maiden seeks advice on how to seduce her neighbour (II.5), a wife asks for help regarding marriage problems and considers adultery (II.3) and another one organises an exchange concerning her own husband and another woman's slave (II.15). All these women prepare to transgress their gender roles. They partially objectify the men, while the letters are used as the means of securing accomplices.⁴⁵ While in "male" letters the events clash the usual gender roles and emasculate men *already happened*,⁴⁶ "female" letters portray *the planned events* that are yet to happen. However, their meticulous plotting and the attention given to details (esp. in II.15) make us believe that the desired events are about to take place.

Within the collection several letters stand out because they resemble "real" letters almost completely – in them we find numerous epistolary elements and conventions one would expect to find in "real" letters.⁴⁷ There are nine of these letters: I.24, II.1, II.3, II.5, II.9, II.13, II.15, II.16 and II.17. Out of these, six are sent *by females* (I.24, II.3, II.5, II.13, II.15 and II.16). Also, six out of these nine letters are sent *to females* (II.1, II.3, II.5, II.9, II.15 and II.17).⁴⁸ If we take into account the small percentage of "female" letters in the Collection, this discrepancy seems important. The fact that all these letters concern the correspondents (i.e. the correspondents are also the protagonists) might explain the phenomenon.⁴⁹ Furthermore, while "male" letters often lack the convincing motivation for their writing and sending (besides gossiping), "female" letters seem more plausible. The three letters sent to male addressees represent the confidential communication between *hetairai* and their lovers and they concern their own private affairs: I.24 is a typical love letter,⁵⁰ II.16 is a break up letter, while II.13 serves as an apology, written by a *hetaira* and sent to her angry lover. The three let-

⁴⁵ Partially similar is I.25, where a *hetaira* reveals her plans to steal her sister's lovers as a revenge; she stole hers first. However, unlike chaste women in the previous examples, this woman is a *hetaira* and she does not ask for an accomplice.

⁴⁶ Cf. e.g. a maiden's loss of virginity (I.6), adulteries (I.5, I.9, I.20, II.7 and II.22) or disrespect and terror towards a husband in his own household (II.12).

⁴⁷ These elements and conventions are defined earlier in the paper; see footnote 13.

⁴⁸ Furthermore, out of the remaining three letters whose senders are men (II.1, II.9 and II.17) none is sent to a male addressee.

⁴⁹ The author probably decided on the protagonists first and then – since the protagonists here are the correspondents themselves – infused the letters with epistolary conventions in order to strengthen "the epistolary triangle": the sender / the addressee / the letter. (Consequently, the letters' mimesis of intimacy between the correspondents was increased also.) It is less likely that it was the other way around, i.e. that he chose to use the conventions copiously and then chose his correspondents.

⁵⁰ A *hetaira* informs one of her lovers that she decided to turn their relationship into a monogamous one: she rejects all other potential clients, professing her love towards the addressee in front of all of them and later to him in the letter. Also, she mentions the impatient anticipation of his arrival and their physical contact.

ters sent to females contain future plans of a delicate nature; wives' adulteries (in II.3 and II.15, the latter one involving a swap of men as well) and a maiden's first sexual encounter (II.5); they should be kept a secret since their revealing is potentially dangerous.⁵¹ That is why the plans are shared between close females exclusively and the motivation for sending these letters is offered – the senders seek advices or accomplices. The wife in II.3 asks her female cousin, who was also her marriage matchmaker, for help, emphasizing both the addressee's efforts in arranging the marriage and their kinship as valid reasons for the intervention: σὲ γὰρ τὴν καλὴν προμνήστριαν χροί, καὶ ἄλλως ἐμὴν ἀυτανεψιὰν οὔσαν, μὴ μόνον τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐσπουδακέναι τῷ γάμῳ, ἀλλὰ καὶ νῦν αὐτὸν σαλεύοντα διορθοῦσθαι.⁵² (II.3.19–22). Similarly, the maiden in II.5 wrote to a female friend/ neighbour because she has more experience in love matters: σὺ τοίνυν, Ἄρπεδόνη... ἤκέ μοι σύμβουλος περὶ τούτων...⁵³ (II.5.50–53) The wife and her neighbour in II.15 have a solvable problem: Τοὺς ἀλλήλων, ὧ φιλότατη, συνεπιστάμεθα πόθους. σὺ μὲν τὸν ἐμὸν ἄνδρα ποθεῖς, ἐγὼ δὲ τοῦ σοῦ θεράπωντος ἐκθύμως ἐρῶ.⁵⁴ (II.15.1-3) So, the sender proposes a swap, and her female neighbour is to become an equal partner in the plan, not only an accomplice.

The epistolary conventions, copiously used in these six "female" letters, enhance our impression of intruding into a small, secretive and intimate world of the female correspondents and occasionally their male lovers, the world similar to the one presented in Alciphron's Book IV.⁵⁵ Since Alciphron's "female" letters resemble "real" letters far more than other letters of his collection also,⁵⁶ it is probable that Aristaenetus followed his tendency. Although female authorship, as stated earlier, is not *directly* associated with erotica or love themes, as it is in Alciphron's collection (the theme of all Aristaenetus' letters is erotica, but male correspondents still prevail), it seems that Alciphron did influence the *formal characteristics* of several of Aristaenetus' "female" letters. This fact has not been emphasized enough earlier.

This research revealed that several important differences between "male" and "female" letters exist, but they became comprehensible only after a meticulous analysis of the letters' form and content was conducted; at first glance one might conclude

⁵¹ In all these cases the plans concocted involve the transgression of female gender roles. Hence the demands for secrecy e.g. in the final sentence of letter II.5.

⁵² "I need you, my pretty matchmaker, being also my cousin, to set my marriage straight again, after you had bothered to arrange it in the first place."

⁵³ "Now, Harpedone... come to me and be my advisor regarding these matters..."

⁵⁴ "My dearest, we revealed each other's desires; you desire my husband, while I am in love with your male slave."

⁵⁵ Alciphron's letters deal with the narrow world of *hetairai* and their clients, while Aristaenetus' observed letters portray woman of various statuses: three *hetairai* (I.24, II.13 and II.16), two married women (II.3, II.15), and a maiden (II.5).

⁵⁶ Almost all of Alciphron's erotic letters (Book IV + fragment 5 + five more letters in Books I–III) are sent by females and those are the letters that contain numerous vocatives, 2nd person imperatives, allusions to writing and sending letters, as well as greeting formulas.

that the sex of any given sender is not related to the (con)text of the respective letter whatsoever. On the other hand, the gender construction in the letters does not depend on the author's choice of the correspondents' sex directly; "male" and "female" letters turned out to be similar in terms of gender roles and the (sexual) behaviour of male and female protagonists portrayed. The similarity can be made evident from the examples of "male" and "female" letters that follow.

In II.22 the male sender (Χαρμίδης) sends a gossip-letter to his male friend (to Εὐδημος). An adulteress, almost caught in flagrante, convinces her husband that her lover is a burglar and that they should present him to the authorities the next morning: ... ἄνερ, ἐγὼ συναγρουπνοῦσα τοῦτον φυ<λάξω>...⁵⁷ (II.22.11–15) The end of the letter is lost, but we can assume that the offer serves a purpose and that the wife is about to commit another adultery although her husband came back home. In terms of gender construction, the wife is cunning and shameless – her actions emasculate the cuckold husband, portrayed as naive, cheated on twice and bamboozled twice.

In a "female" letter, II.3, a frustrated married woman (named Γλυκέρρα) sends her lamentation about her unhappiness in marriage to a female cousin (to Φιλίνη). Glykera is sexually neglected because her husband works too much and she is considering finding a lover: κὰν ἐπιμείνη πρὸς μὲν ἀλλότρια πράγματα κεχηνώς, μόνης δὲ τῆς κοινῆς ὑποθέσεως ἀμελῶν, ἕτερος ῥήτωρ τῆς ἐμῆς ἐπιμελήσεται δίκης.⁵⁸ (II.3.11–14) As the text reveals, her husband is quite atypical: he is obviously sexually inadequate. Furthermore, there is no indication that the marriage was ever consummated, which led some scholars to question the husband's (a)sexuality (see e.g. Hajdarević 2019, 32). So, the husband is somewhat emasculated by the fact that his counterpart is an over-sexualised wife. The masculinity of the husband is threatened further, since the wife, determined to get some sex, is planning an adultery, as the wife in the previous example.

The examples offered clearly illustrate that there is no obvious difference between "male" and "female" letters in terms of gender construction that derives from the plots and from the protagonists' character. Melissa Funke came to the opposite result after her research of Alciphron's erotic letters. She claims that Alciphron is "successful in his assumption of the female voice" (Funke 2008, 92–93). She illustrates that male and female desire, as well as masculine and feminine seductiveness (*peithō*) are carefully distinguished and *different* in Alciphron's letters, proving that his examples clearly mimic the distinction evident in the rest of earlier Greek erotic literature, such as Theocritus' or Sappho's:⁵⁹ when related to women, persuasion is

⁵⁷ "... My husband, I will stay awake and guard him!"

⁵⁸ "If he (sc. the husband) persists being busy with other things, and keeps on neglecting 'our case' alone, another *rhētōr* will take care of my case!"

⁵⁹ Sappho is an excellent reference point because in her case we are sure that both literary and gender ventriloquism are excluded; we are sure that we are hearing a real female voice since she is describing her own passion.

corporeal, implicitly connected with their body and physical seduction, even in cases when it evolves around them speaking with charm, while male *peithō* is centred around their speech in terms of *rhetorical abilities* (e.g. *peithō* on a woman's lips alludes to her seductive charms and her kisses, while *peithō* on man's is connected to his eloquence only). When it comes to being in love (*erōs*), if a woman is in question, her lover himself is the one who inflicts the "wound", while any man in love is perceived as a victim of *erōs* (or Eros) itself (himself) (Funke 2008, 90–96). Funke's results inspired an additional analysis of Aristaenetus' letters, revolving around the search for the same key words (*erōs* (or Eros) and *peithō*) and the analysis of their usage. Unlike the "uniformity" observed in Alciphron's collection, Aristaenetus uses the metaphors of love wounds in various ways. In several letters men are wounded by Eros himself (I.8, I.10, I.15, I.16, I.27, II.2, II.8 and II.21), and women by the men they are in love with (I.2,⁶⁰ I.10,⁶¹ I.17 and II.13), which is in accordance to the situation observed in Alciphron's collection. However, there are examples which are significantly different: sometimes Eros targets women (I.16, I.27, II.5 and II.6) and in some instances women are those who inflict wounds to men (II.1, II.4, II.2). Aphrodite is in some cases the angler instead of Eros (I.15 and II.10),⁶² and once she is wounded by Eros' arrow (I.8). Although the usage of *peithō* proved not to be prominent in Aristaenetus' letters, the allusions to the *seductive power* of female words are sporadically found (see I.1, II.1 and II.4⁶³). Rhetorical power of words is more often related to men (it is successful in I.5 and I.13, skilful in the carefully crafted letter of persuasion, II.1), but a *female* goddess, Aphrodite, is presented as a teacher of rhetoric (i.e. the teacher of persuasion) to a woman in I.15,⁶⁴ and several "female" letters seem rhetorically crafted as well. The heterogeneous situation might be explained as Aristaenetus' *failure* to assume the female voice regarding the use of these terms. However, the author of this paper is not inclined to do so. Other explanations come in mind: his mixture of male and female perceptions of love suffering and seductiveness might just as well be intentional, as well as reliant on various intertextual sources that maybe reflected this confusion a long time before Aristaenetus.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Girls in love are perceived as shot by a youth who used Eros' arrows.

⁶¹ The objects of this youth's shooting are unspecified and given in the plural *masculinum*, which could imply a group of people of mixed gender – men *and* women – or a group of men *only*.

⁶² In I.16 it is mentioned that she is the one who taught Eros to become an angler.

⁶³ In the latter case we are dealing with the combination of seductive and rhetoric effect of the female slave's words.

⁶⁴ The woman seduces the man and then persuades him to arrange peace between his city and hers. In this case her charm *and* rhetoric abilities are implied.

⁶⁵ The first hypothesis cannot be proven, while a detailed analysis of the perception of love wounds (i.e. of *erōs*) in *all* Aristaenetus' sources, useful as it may be, would exceed the limits of this paper massively.

6. Conclusion

Aristaenetus follows the general tendency of the subgenre – his typical correspondent is male (sender in 76%, addressee in 74% cases); the choice of erotic theme *did not* increase the frequency of female senders, as it was the case in Alciphron's collection. However, Aristaenetus' "female" letters resemble "real" letters far more than "male", and the author of this paper explains that tendency as a probable influence of Alciphron's preference towards placing the epistolary elements/conventions into his "female" (erotic) letters only. The correspondents of these letters are regularly the letters' protagonists also (these two characteristics are mutually co-dependent) and the epistolary communication includes the intimate details of the correspondents' relationships or some future plans to be concocted by the correspondents themselves.⁶⁶ Consequently, "female" letters seem far more intimate than "male".

Although the opposite result was expected, the research conducted and the examples of "male" and "female" letters offered clearly showed that there is no *direct correlation* between the choice of male/female sender and the gender construction portrayed in the letters. Questioned gender roles are not specifically limited to male nor female senders: it is not the case of "male" letters portraying inverted gender roles only, and "female" letters offering the usual ones (or vice versa). So, regarding gender roles, "male" and "female" letters *do not* seem inherently different. However, the research revealed that the choice of correspondents' sex is *not* completely random. When it comes to letters containing unexpected gender construction, i.e. portraying questioned gender roles, men send all their letters but one to men, while women write almost equally often to men and women. Men send most of the letters depicting: a) the usual gender roles,⁶⁷ b) the relationships with *hetairai*, who are often portrayed in a negative light, c) more explicit contents – e.g. threesomes or sexual encounters in a public place, and d) the reports of *other people's* indiscretions. The last two factors are probably connected; explicit details are more expected in gossip-letters, portraying somebody else's sexual escapades. Also, in "male" letters the events that invert the gender roles usually *already happened* (esp. adulteries), while they are merely planned in "female" letters (however, the plans' achievement seems possible).

An interesting characteristic of the letters is the perception of female protagonists and female correspondents – courtesans, slaves and wives – as organisers of most "spicy" encounters between lovers, such as threesomes, sex in a public place, adulteries and a swap of men. Although this tendency is found more often in "male" letters, again their overall frequency prevents us from drawing firm conclusions regarding this matter; the total number of "female" letters in the collection is rather small, but

⁶⁶ The plans' (potential) achievement usually implicate the inversion of gender roles accompanied by the emasculation of men.

⁶⁷ But mind the frequency of "male" letters in the Collection. Paradoxically, that frequency results in men sending most of the letters portraying the *inverted gender roles* also (see below).

it has to be emphasised that most of these letters contain plans that challenge the gender roles and question the men's masculinity also.

As a result of *all* these factors, an aura of misogyny hovers over the Collection. The explanation of the phenomenon is threefold: the collection is created by a *male* author and his personal stances or even gender stereotypes of his time might have influenced his depiction. Furthermore, the letters are written mostly by male senders – so, from *their* perspective. It was emphasized earlier in this paper that men are often *objects* in the hands of their manipulative wives/lovers; men seem as naïve and weak *victims* of female schemes. Therefore, it makes sense that their male perspective is partially distorted by either personal or some other man's previous (fictional) experiences, making their accounts bias. Finally, but not least important: the collection is under a strong intertextual influence of genres that portray women as wicked and/or promiscuous, e.g. Aristophanes' comedy, mime and erotic epigrams. So, inverted gender roles are sometimes simply "borrowed" from the very passages that were used intertextually by Aristaenetus.⁶⁸

If we assume that the author's goal was to *differentiate* his "male" and "female" letters, we must consider his attempt only partially successful. However, the choice of male/female sender did influence several characteristics of the letters. E.g. Aristaenetus chose female correspondents when he wanted to present women secretly plotting among themselves, while men typically write gossip letters *about* women and send them to their *male* friends. On the other hand, the research revealed that the choice of male/female sender *did not* govern the gender construction displayed in the letter – the portrayal of gender roles is similar, regardless of the correspondents' sex.

From the point of gender construction, the rare "female" voices of the Collection proved not to be female at all. Aristaenetus effectively blurred the differences between the two genders. The naïve, cheated on gossipy men seem emasculated and they are presented as being less than "the real men". On the other hand, the behaviour of women turns them into unlikeable and somehow "unfeminine" persons (our sympathy is usually on the males' side). Two explanations are possible. The "female" letters could be considered unsuccessful rhetoric exercises in assuming female voices, i.e. *failed attempts* at gender ventriloquism. On the other hand, this "failure" might be Aristaenetus' deliberate literary choice; his awkward blurring of gender distinctions might have served a (literary) purpose unknown to us. The author of this paper finds the latter option tantalising.

⁶⁸ When it comes to Aristaenetus' gender construction, two recent conference papers given by Hajdarević (2021 and 2022) pointed to the author's partial dependence on his intertextual sources (on comedy and novel, to be precise). It has to be emphasised that there are, alongside clear imitations, some examples of Aristaenetus' witty rework of these sources (e.g. the change of the protagonist's sex, a comical twist or fine irony). However, the gender construction of some of the letters might be Aristaenetus' original contribution or it might derive from a source that is now lost. Neither of the possibilities can be proven.

In any case, the gender construction presented in the Collection was probably moulded by various Greek literary genres, as well as distorted by stereotypes and a misogynistic male perspective. The misogyny might be partially "inherited" from Aristaenetus' literary models, but possibly represents the author's personal stances as well.

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