

The Queen's Speech: Callimachus's Pieria, Aphrodite, and the Political Power of  
Hellenistic Queens

Brett Evans ([bce3@georgetown.edu](mailto:bce3@georgetown.edu))

*Script of paper given on 26 November 2021*

I'd like to start with a definition of power Sheila Ager offered us from the consummate courtier of *Game of Thrones*, Lord Varys: "Power resides where men believe it resides. It's a trick, a shadow on the wall. And a very small man can cast a very large shadow." This is a useful definition for our study of Hellenistic royal women for two reasons: these women's power, whatever it was, was neither formally stipulated nor unchangeable; moreover, these women were highly inaccessible to the vast majority of people. In a very real sense these women were who people believed them to be, and that could be anything. But what is the value of a shadow to the woman who casts it? How could a shadow be converted into more tangible forms of political and social capital?

In this paper I will examine a fascinating shadow of a woman's extraordinary sexual and political power fashioned by the Ptolemaic court poet Callimachus for queen Berenice the Second. This shadow is the portrait of a lady from the Archaic past, named Pieria, who unified two cities in Ionia long at war by sleeping with the king. Only a fragment of Callimachus's poem remains, but we can reconstruct the story in broad outline thanks to three later sources. The most valuable is a letter by the little-known Byzantine writer, Aristaenetus. Where Callimachus is extant, Aristaenetus follows it extremely closely in diction and style, making him our most valuable source for reconstructing Callimachus's story. We cannot, however, trust Aristaenetus too much where Callimachus is absent, for he does have a demonstrated tendency to expand on

some details. The other two witnesses to the story, Plutarch and Polyaeus, are considered less valuable for discerning what Callimachus wrote: for instance, both authors give Pieria a noble parentage and omit sex from the narrative. These divergences from Aristaenetus's version seem owed more to the moralizing purpose of a Plutarch than to Callimachus.

Now the story goes as follows: the kindred cities of Miletus and Myus in Ionia had long been in conflict, with only temporary truces for festivals. One year Aphrodite granted special beauty to Pieria of Myus, who then went to celebrate the festival of Artemis in Miletus. There the king of Miletus, named Phrygius, saw Pieria, desired her, and the two immediately went to bed. After making love, Phrygius promised to give Pieria whatever she wanted. Here the fragment begins. Instead of asking for fancy gifts, Pieria blushed with shame, looked away, and asked that she be allowed to return with more people of Myus. Phrygius understood her request as one for peace. Callimachus then tells us that Pieria forged a peace more trustworthy than one accompanied by sacrifices, proving that Aphrodite makes speakers more powerful than Nestor.

Now, the Pieria elegy belongs to the *Aetia*'s second half, which begins and ends with poems addressed to Berenice the Second. Recently Dee Clayman has observed that Pieria's unification of Myus and Miletus strikingly resembles Berenice's life. Berenice, who was princess of Cyrene, married her cousin Ptolemy the Third in 246 B.C., following, according to Justin, her dead father Magas's wishes. By marrying Ptolemy Berenice brought the decades-long political estrangement of Cyrene from Alexandria to a close, adding the Cyrenaica to the Ptolemaic empire as if her dowry. Pieria's story within the *Aetia* effects a *mise-en-abyme*, making Pieria legible as an analogy for Berenice, or in Lord Varys's terms a shadow. The question follows, then: what kinds of power does Pieria possess, and how does Callimachus make her power legible to his audiences? I argue that Callimachus consistently alludes to purple passages about

kingship in Archaic epic in order to present Pieria as a queen more powerful in the king's bedroom than those men ever were.

Archaic though it was, Callimachus's story about a woman made persuasive by Aphrodite and getting what she wanted by sleeping with a king would have felt remarkably contemporary to his audiences. Starting in the late fourth century, both kings' wives and courtesans received cult as Aphrodite. Elizabeth Carney has argued that these women's identification with Aphrodite expressed their shared power of "erotic persuasion" over divine kings. In Archaic poetry Aphrodite is proverbially deceptive: Homer describes her famous girdle, the *kestos himas*, in *Iliad* 14 – handout 2 – as having in it "love, desire, sweet talk, and persuasion which cheats the minds even of clever men." Hellenistic kings' courtesans were regularly associated with such deception: in September, for instance, Alex McAuley drew our attention to Polybius's portrait of Apollonis, wife of Attalus the First (handout 3); he praises her "not exhibiting a *hetaera*'s persuasiveness, although she was a commoner". Persuasion is the courtesan's art; yet many queens themselves were accused of this very same use of influence.

What we witness, then, at the Hellenistic courts is a taming of Aphrodite when associated with the queen. Kathryn Gutzwiller has examined this phenomenon well in Ptolemaic court poetry, in which the queenly Aphrodite is not the goddess of destructive desire, but of harmonious marriage and the production of legitimate children. Last month Sheila Ager mentioned a key text in royal Aphrodite's domestication, Theocritus's praise of Berenice the First, handout 4: in lines 51-2 you see that the loves she gives are gentle, and her cares or longing are easy to bear. But what happened to Aphrodite's cheating words? Most poetry about queens as Aphrodite ignores the goddess's faculties of speech. Callimachus, however, recuperates this most

dangerous power. As we shall see, his Pieria seems to be as deceptive as Aphrodite ever was, but in the service of her country, peace, and the public good.

When the fragment begins, Phrygius and Pieria have already slept together. In the first tattered lines Phrygius asks Pieria to tell him what she wants from him in return. This moment is crucial for understanding Pieria's power. Their sexual relationship is figured as a gift-exchange, in which Pieria has given the king divine pleasure, *charis*; her gift obliges Phrygius to offer her a counter-gift of commensurate value; and so great is Aphrodite's charm that he can only offer whatever she wants: a blank checks. Pieria's power is thus bargaining power. What is more, she knows how to use it. After listing in lines 5-8 the gifts she could have asked for, Callimachus says in line 9: "these things did not cast you from your clever plan (πυκκινού γνώματος)." Shrewd Pieria is an expert in working the royal economy of favors in her favor.

Pieria's sexual exchange raises a crucial question about her status: are we to regard her as Phrygius's bride, or as a courtesan on a one night stand? Scholars have noted that the gifts Pieria rejects in lines 5-8 – a headband, earrings, cloths, and slave women, are especially appropriate for a bride; yet I would add that all of them are attested as gifts for *hetaerae* as well. What kind of woman is Pieria? I would suggest that Callimachus may be fostering an intentional ambiguity here. In fact, such uncertainty about the woman's status is central to Aphrodite's canonical seduction of the mortal Anchises in the Homeric hymn to Aphrodite, handout 5. There Aphrodite disguises herself as a marriageable virgin so that the mortal Anchises will not fear sleeping with her; she tells him she has been taken away to him from a festival of Artemis. So too Phrygius took Pieria, blessed by Aphrodite, from a festival of Artemis. Is Pieria a bride or a courtesan?

Pieria's rejection of these gifts, I argue, serves to clarify her status. In Callimachus's day, anecdotes about pillow talk between kings and courtesans circulated widely. Many revolved

around a courtesan's witty extraction of gifts. Consider for example in handout 6 a poem by Callimachus's contemporary Machon which narrates a conversation between Demetrius Poliorcetes and the *hetaera* Mania, who agrees to give him her ass in exchange for a royal estate. Callimachus's catalogue of the gifts that Pieria implicitly rejects serves, I argue, to differentiate herself from a selfish *hetaera* looking to enrich herself.

As it turns out, Pieria already possesses an adornment far more precious. In line 9 Pieria blushes with *aidos*, "shame," and Callimachus compares her *aidos* to purple dye. Peter Bing has recently observed that Pieria's purple blush, following as it does the catalogue of fineries, is figured as a luxury itself, one indicating her noble character. More specifically I would argue that it represents her royal character. Purple, like gold, was a status symbol prized by the Hellenistic royalty; and the . Callimachus thus identifies Pieria's shame as a royal virtue. Shame, moreover, was expected of brides, and lacking in courtesans. Pieria's blush seems further to distinguish her from a *hetaera* and paint her a royal bride.

Next, in lines 11 Pieria looks away, then utters a brief request in lines 12-13 that she be able to return with more people. In line 14, we learn that Phrygius (quote) understood your intention". Lacunose though the text is, it seems that Pieria has veiled her request for peace so that it seem something small; Phrygius, though, understands it for what it is. A key detail from Pieria's speech seems to support this inference: Pieria averts her gaze. Pieria's demurring speech recalls the famous oratorical performance of Odysseus described by Helen in the third book of the *Iliad* 3, handout 8. Odysseus was sent on an embassy to Troy to seek Helen's return and secure peace. He fixed his eyes on the ground and didn't move his staff so that you'd think he was rancorous and ignorant; but when he spoke, it was like a winter storm. Pieria similarly seems

to trick Phrygius into thinking her inexperienced. Yet she is; and where Odysseus failed to secure Helen's return and peace, Pieria has given herself and succeeds in ending war.

The agency and authority Callimachus ascribes to Pieria is astounding. In line 19, Callimachus writes, "But you at that time made a peace treaty more trustworthy than sacrifices of bulls". The pronoun *su* most likely refers to Pieria, since Callimachus has hitherto addressed her in the second person. Pieria, then, not the king, makes the peace; and it is a peace more binding than one accompanied by sacrifice. Callimachus here alludes to the most solemn oath formula in Homeric epic, ὄρκια πιστὰ τέμνειν, which literally means "to cut oaths that are trustworthy", an extremely formal and binding procedure. Needless to say no women swear such oaths in Homer, and, what is more, no literary or epigraphic evidence attests to women swearing oaths with blood sacrifice at all. Through her sexual gift of self, Pieria effected a treaty more formal and binding than any Homeric king ever did.

In lines 20-21 Callimachus offers Pieria's peace as evidence that Aphrodite makes speakers far better than the famous Pylian, i.e. Nestor. The irony here is thick: Nestor was famed for his long speeches and prudent advice; but for all that he failed in *Iliad* 1 to reconcile Achilles and Agamemnon. Pieria, by contrast, makes peace between two cities in few words. The joke, of course, is that Aphrodite barely needs words to get her way. The irony thickens when we consider the word Callimachus uses in line 20 "speaker", ῥητήρ. This is not an inert synonym for ῥήτωρ. The occurs once in Homer in one of the *Iliad*'s most famous passages, the Embassy to Achilles, *handout* 9. Here Achilles' old teacher Phoenix reminds him of the education he gave him, to be a "speaker of words and a doer of deeds." Callimachus's use of this Homeric *hapax legomenon* underscores the translation of power from the all-male, outdoor *agora* to the royal

bedroom where women can be speakers more powerful than Odysseus, Nestor, and even Achilles.

Having reached the fragment's conclusion we can appreciate the full significance of Pieria's name. It alludes, of course, to the Pierian mountains where the Muses lived, and Peter Bing and Regina Höschele have noted the name's suitability to such a persuasive woman. Yet the reference is still more specific, I would argue Hesiod's praise of the Muses' patronage of kings. At the beginning of the *Theogony*, line 10, we learn that the kings the Muses look upon at birth enjoy their gift of sweet word, and with these they are able to calm the people and assuage even a great feud (*mega neikos*) wisely. Pieria is Phrygia's Muse of peace, but with a crucial change of means. Pieria's honeyed words have been facilitated by Aphrodite's charms. For Callimachus's audience, Pieria's conflation of Aphrodite and the Muses would have recalled no woman more than the Ptolemaic queen herself. The deceased Arsinoe the Second was worshipped as Aphrodite and also the tenth Muse; and now Berenice the Second, her dynastic daughter, was identified by Callimachus as the fourth of the *Charites*, the Graces. Thus Pieria's sexual power over the king becomes the means by which her sweet speech effects political change.

Berenice's marriage to Ptolemy the Third brought about a major political realignment by bringing Cyrene into the Ptolemaic fold. I hope to have shown how Callimachus imbues Pieria with royal powers through allusions to famous passages about kingship. How, in conclusion, might this elegy, as a shadow, generated more embodied forms of power for Berenice? It is tricky business moving from fictional to historical women, of course; but I might suggest that Callimachus himself helps us to bridge the gap through a striking narrative device which I have not yet discussed. This is his direct address to Pieria. By speaking to Pieria as if she is

immediately present, Callimachus suggests her divinity, Aphrodite's avatar as she is. But his address to her also suggests that she is a woman one can speak to: she is in this way fashioned as a divine and royal patron. Indeed, Callimachus hints at Pieria's patronage in her request for peace. She asks to be able to return to Miletus with more people of Myus. Does this not allude to a future entourage of her own *philo*, much like a Hellenistic queen? Callimachus makes Pieria a most enviable patroness to have: Through her gift of Aphrodite's grace to the king, she gets whatever she wants; if only one were her *philos*, one could, it seems, have the world. And so Berenice might have cashed in on Pieria's shadow: where belief in power goes, there new *philo* follow. Thank you.