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Playing the Tortoise Reading Symbols of an Ancient Folk Game

ANDROMACHE KARANIKA

While the entrance of children into the world of adults has captured attention as a rite of passage with a more formalized conception of ritual, children's lore per se in antiquity is still a largely unexplored topic. While classical scholars often discuss how poems and rituals passed from one generation to another, the tendency has been to neglect the role of children in the transmission of traditional activities and poems, and the interconnections between adult and children's performances.¹ In this paper, I analyze the poetics of one particular game that presents important themes for the study of gender in antiquity: the tortoise game. Specifically, I suggest that by looking at the use of this game in the poetry of Erinna, and by following traces of similar poetic imagery in other parts of the Greek tradition that focus on the female voice, we can form a new approach to the interrelation of different generations and the transition from girlhood to womanhood.² As I argue, the tortoise is a marked and evocative reference that bestows greater meaning to performances that highlight this animal figure in their poetics. My aim is to analyze aspects of the processes of oral transmission and to recognize the diachronic context in which variation and re-creation of performances take place.³ It is only when we see what kind of communication is established among different generations, and how memories of childhood or adolescence are evoked in their literary representations, that we can fully evaluate how a collective voice is formed and becomes a steering force in poetic memory. In both the representation of the tortoise game and Erinna's fragments, there are clear and direct references to female work and death—important aspects of adult daily life. Through games and innocent songs, children are exposed to social norms and expectations; at the same time, the narrative in the songs alludes to cultural practices and beliefs that are perpetuated in time.

I. The *Chelichelônê* Game

Let us first consider the ancient *testimonia* for the tortoise game (*chelichelônê*). Julius Pollux, the second-century CE lexicographer and rhetorician,

describes the game, to which Erinna and Eustathius also refer.⁴ The game presents an antiphonal structure, a dialogue enacted by a group of girls, one pretending to be the tortoise, in a crystallized version of real game activity which links skillfully the themes of death and traditional female wool-working.

ἡ δὲ χελιχελώνη, παρθένων ἐστὶν ἡ παιδιά, παρόμοιόν τι ἔχουσα τῆ
 χύτρα· ἡ μὲν
 γὰρ κάθηται, καὶ καλεῖται χελώνη, αἱ δὲ περιτρέχουσιν ἀνερωτῶσαι
 χελιχελώνη, τί ποιεῖς ἐν τῷ μέσῳ;
 ἡ δὲ ἀποκρίνεται
 ἔρια μαρύομαι καὶ κρόκην Μιλησίαν.
 εἶτ' ἐκείναι πάλιν ἐκβοῶσιν
 ὁ δ' ἔκγονός σου τί ποιῶν ἀπώλετο;
 ἡ δὲ φησι
 λευκῶν ἀφ' ἵππων εἰς θάλασσαν ἄλατο. (Campbell 1993, frag. 876)

The 'tortoise' is a girls' game, similar to the 'pot.' One girl sits and is called the 'tortoise' whereas the others run around her asking her:
 "Tortoise, what are you doing in the middle?
 I'm weaving wool and Milesian thread."⁵
 Then they shout back:
 "What was your son doing when he died?
 From white horses into the sea he was—jumping."⁶

At the very utterance of the word ἄλατο (jumped), the girl playing the tortoise jumps up and tries to tag another girl, who then becomes the tortoise, ensuring the game's circularity and continuation. Unlike other ancient games' rules, it is not difficult to reconstruct those of this game. They are highly reminiscent of the *ephedrismos* or *ephedriasmos*, derived from the verb *ephedrizô* (to sit upon), referring to a game in which the players try to throw balls or pebbles on a stone placed upright on the ground. If they fail, one player has to carry another while her eyes are covered by the rider's hands until she touches the stone.⁷ The iconography of the *ephedrismos* game clearly reveals it a children's game. The tortoise game, however, according to Pollux, is a game for *parthenoi*, a word that can refer to girls of marriageable age (Levaniouk 2008, 209). In my reading here, I treat the tortoise game as one of the most common little girls' games in antiquity performed as a 'ring' game; but because of its evocative poetics, it seems to influence, and be a locus of reference for,

older girls as well. Its appearance in Erinna's poetry, as we shall see, attests to its importance not merely as a game but as the earliest choral instruction in female repertoire, with the game's action coordinated with a short song.⁸

The tortoise song has received much scholarly attention, not least for the imagery it uses. Some scholars argue that the image of a leap has strong sexual connotations and support their views by a parallel reading with Anacreon's fragments: ἀρθεῖς δηῖτ' ἀπὸ Λευκάδος / πέτρης ἐς πολὺν κῆμα κολυμβῶ μεθύων ἔρωσι (Once again taking off from the rock of Leucas, I dive into the white wave drunk in love, *PMG* 376). Several elements here allude to eroticism. First, the image of riding a horse is an image of intercourse in Anacreon's poetry (frag. 417). Horses are an important image in Greek poetry, often connected with notions of winning as well as wedding and pre-wedding activities associated with young women;⁹ Gregory Nagy (1996, 57) cites the "dream horses" of Alcman's frag. 1.¹⁰ The white horses of the tortoise song, then, may be taken as highly symbolic.¹¹ Second, other games, like the tortoise game, with actions of leaping have been viewed in the light of female sexuality.¹² The game of *ephedrismos* in particular has been interpreted as having strong sexual connotations, especially in light of vase iconography that presents girls (possibly maenads) and satyrs performing this game.¹³ Thus, that the images in this short poem of white horses and leaping in this short poem are evocative of sexual imagery is quite likely.¹⁴

Another set of associations, besides eroticized imagery, is embedded in this poem. Scholars have interpreted the game as representing a rite of passage in the life of girls by reiterating the importance of female work like weaving, a task that young girls would soon undertake. Marilyn Arthur Katz (1980) has suggested that the 'tortoise' represents a "boundary figure, a locus of oppositions." She further reads the tortoise in the song as the representation of mature womanhood, as she is a motherly figure who has 'lost' her child. As Arthur Katz points out, the tortoise is well suited to symbolize a mother since it carries on itself a house.¹⁵ One then could regard this song as presenting a scenario of codified initiation into adulthood, given that the performative dialogue is between a mature woman and a group of young girls.¹⁶

While the tortoise song has been discussed mostly from a feminist approach, I wish to build upon this with an anthropological reading that emphasizes how the key elements in the song's poetics interacts with salient beliefs around the tortoise and known performance types in the ancient Greek world. As I will argue, children's songs operate within a poetics that give added coloring and nuances to otherwise innocent

performances. While literary representation contextualizes the use of the tortoise around the female social roles, it springs from a nexus of beliefs and practices about the protection of children.

As mentioned above, the tortoise game presents an interweaving of two main motifs, work and death. The kind of work is characteristic of female wool-working. The presence of such serious themes may seem strange, given that the song is performed in a playful atmosphere, but it is no coincidence, as allusions to work, death, and destruction are pervasive in children's rhymes. Examples are popular songs, such as "Ring around the Rosie" with its origins in the plague in medieval England, or rhymes such as "Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home! Your house is on fire and your children all gone" (Grider 1980, 163). A historical disaster may be referenced in a line without any immediate conscience, context, or even allusion to the actual event behind the text. Instead, the very utterance of such small lines in playful manner places them in a new context where any catharsis of earlier misfortunes has already occurred. In this interpretation, the performance of these lines vaguely recalls earlier tragic moments and the game itself adds to the exorcizing of any misfortune and its firm repositioning.

Scholars heretofore have not noticed that the tortoise game is not merely a rhyme alluding to death, but is also performed in a way that imitates adult practices. The reference to the shroud connects the song more closely to lamentation. Lament and funeral ritual are not a matter for individuals only, but as Margaret Alexiou (2002, 134) remarks, are in some sense collective, "never exclusively solo performances." Involving communication between a chorus of women and their leader, their antiphonic structure is what validates lamentation and makes it a social construction.¹⁷ Likewise, the tortoise game consists of a dialogue between a group of girls and the leader, in the figure of the tortoise, in a setting that resembles a collective performance. The second part of the dialogue could be considered disturbing for a children's song, as it raises the image of death. Pretending to be the tortoise, the chorus 'leader' talks about the loss of her son.¹⁸ The lone female speaker, surrounded by a chorus of girls, resembles a lament leader, who was usually an older woman with marked authority in the performance of lament.

But if this particular song echoes through its imagery and choral mode the tradition of the female lament performance, why does it appear in connection with girls' activities? It would seem that its implicit resemblances to lament, and its explicit references to death and the weaving of

the shroud, show the affinities between this game and adult social roles. This is not just a game, but choral training centered, at least in a playful manner, on an act women most often performed in ancient Greek society—the lament. We may see, then, a specific interaction between children’s lore and the adult repertoire of performance.

From this perspective it is important to note that the tortoise game operates like a ring game, which consists of the constant alternation of two phases, one diastolic and one systolic. In the diastolic phase, the focus is on slower movement, wherein the team of the players assembles and chants and the tension builds through the song’s lyrics, with the call to and response of the tortoise. This is immediately followed by the systolic phase during which there are abrupt role-changes and rapid movements; a formal chanting is replaced by laughing and squealing, and the movements and sounds are no longer dictated by a traditional template. Such an alternation ensures a constant changing of roles so that no single person acts as a ‘tortoise’ but takes a share in each role. When the ‘mother tortoise’ jumps up, she gets out of her prescribed role and takes the role of the ‘son’ who is, in fact, the character who jumps. Thus, the ‘mother’ becomes the ‘son,’ and the ‘son’ in turn becomes the ‘mother.’ The constant change of roles adds to the dynamics of movement, not only from female to male, but also from old to young and static to dynamic. In a way, the game also alludes to the motif of the capture of the bride, and so girls through this game are also prepared to be pursued and caught to become wives. But through this constant alternation of roles, they also get to play the role of the pursuing male, a role that they will not really play as adults. The male role is coded as aggressive and acquisitive, whereas the female role, though seemingly static, signals the creation of a new beginning with more movement to follow. We have a complex mimicry of adult social relations and, at the same time, a creative undermining of them.

Folklore is an integral part of culture that has forms, like songs or games, with symbolic significance reaching beyond the explicit content of the particular performance.¹⁹ As such, folklore is a “definite realistic, artistic and communicative process” (Ben-Amos 1971, 10), universal and unique. Games are especially interesting in their cross-generational communicative functions. Pierre Bourdieu, who in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* studied the Kabyle society in Algeria, draws attention to the dialectic of objectification and embodiment as a way of mediation between children and adults. As he writes (2002, 87–8),

The child imitates not ‘models’ but other people’s actions . . . in all societies children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult—a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and (how could it be otherwise?) a certain subjective experience.

As Bourdieu further points out, the process is by no means mechanical; rather, the child masters and internalizes practices by imitating easy structures such as songs or games, and so the child grasps the rationale of what is clearly a series or parts of a deeper structure. Bourdieu, interestingly, quotes Albert Lord’s analysis of the acquisition of structured formulaic diction in oral tradition, a process that takes place without the learner learning through sheer familiarization.²⁰ Similarly, the young girl of our study adapted adult performances (such as the lamentation mentioned earlier) to her own routine play, while keeping the choral performance framework of adult events. A complex set of associations can be found at work even as the song evokes several instances and processes of Greek poetics. The weaving of the shroud, an activity charged with symbolism in ancient literature as the epitome of female activity at home, is abandoned as the roles change and resumed with the characters internalizing adult modes and roles of social behavior.

Children’s songs as a mode of imitation play an important role as an instructional point of view, reiterating traditional values and roles,²¹ and at the same time as a reference point in shaping the repertoire of women’s songs.²² In other words, the process works both ways—children imitate adults, and adult poetics can recall or allude to their childhood predecessors. Earlier scholars (e.g., Newell 1903, 9) regarded ring games as a children’s habit that “has preserved” choral traditions at the local level of the past. While indeed it is possible that they draw from a stock of stories, ballads, or choral traditions, children’s songs are in a dynamic relationship with the adult repertoire. References to adult work are common in songs. Such poems resonate mythic material drawn from sources that present supernatural, fantastic, dreamlike elements and articulate ideologies and social values.²³ The mythic realm remains in constant movement, larger than any possible expression with the potential of transformation into multidimensional narratives.²⁴

II. Remembering the Tortoise Song

The tortoise game, while a folk practice, also appears in literary representation. Erinna’s poem, conventionally titled *Distaff*, incorporates the tortoise song and suggestively draws out the themes we have discussed, traditional female textile work and death.²⁵ Erinna was well known to the Alexandrians, as several epigrams attest, and the *Distaff* is mentioned in a variety of sources as the epitome of her poetic production.²⁶ A papyrus found in 1928 sheds more light on her poetry.²⁷ A section of the papyrus contains 54 verses of what, according to the ancient *testimonia*, was part of a longer hexameter poem (approximately 300 verses). Since the discovery of the papyrus, scholars have viewed the verses as being most likely a lament for Baucis, a recently married friend of the poem’s first-person speaker.²⁸ More recently, Olga Levaniouk (2008) has argued that this poem offers wedding-related diction and dialect staged as a response in hexameters to earlier occasional poetry, and thus Erinna reflects generic interlacing from lament to wedding performances.²⁹

Three childhood memories pervade Erinna’s *Distaff*, as the first-person speaker recalls the time she spent with her friend. Despite its fragmentary condition, the poem clearly incorporates the tortoise song, as the speaker remembers how she and her friend used to play it. The speaker mentions how her mother supervised the household’s woolworkers and used the bogey-figure of Mormo to frighten her children into obedience.³⁰ There is also reference to the dolls with which the girls were playing, a word attested elsewhere only in the second *Idyll* of Theocritus (2.110), where a wax doll appears in a clearly magical context.³¹ Aphrodite is also mentioned, in the same line when Baucis is addressed to as “dear” (*fila*, 30) and in juxtaposition to the previous address to her as “wretched” (*talaina*). The reference to Aphrodite, as Levaniouk (2008) has rightly suggested, makes connection with the tortoise, with which Aphrodite was associated.

Two passages are relevant for our purposes here:

ἐς β]α[θ]ὸν κῦμα[
 λευ]κᾶν μαινομέν[οισιν ἐσάλαο π]όσσιν ἀφ’ ἴ[π]πω[ν
 αἰ]γῆ ἐγώ, μέγ’ αὔσα· φ[.] χελύνα
 ἀλ]λομένα μεγάλας [κατὰ] χορτίον αὐλᾶς· (Erinna, 15–7)³²

[Into the deep] wave
 from white horses [you leapt] with maddened feet.

“Aiai,” I cried loudly; . . . tortoise
[leap]ing . . . [down] the enclosure of the great yard.³³

μάτηρ αε[.]οισιν ἐρείθεις
τηνασθ[.]να ἄμφ' ἀλίπαστον
μικραῖσ.[.]ν φοβον ἄγαγε Μορ[μ]ῶ. (23–5)

mother [] wool-workers
??? (in the kitchen?) sprinkled with salt
. . . to the little ones [] fear brought Mormo.

Erinna recalls the daily delights of the girls, their games (especially the tortoise game), their dolls, and the frightening stories they would hear from their mothers about Mormo. Eva Stehle, in her 2001 discussion of the tortoise game in Erinna's *Distaff*, believes that the chant (tortoise game) maps the complex of gender roles onto mobility and immobility, the game eliciting the pleasure of freedom of action for girls—a pleasure foreign to women.³⁴ While on the surface there seems to be an equation between older woman and immobility, the game deconstructs this by alternation of roles. If anything, games instruct, but they also present a process of undermining and rewriting adult roles. As Stehle argues, the distaff represents Erinna's acceptance of the female role, whereas the “leap” via weaving/poetry represents bold defiance of a value system that imposed women's conformity with narrow ideals.³⁵ The opposition between mobility and immobility is an important thread of the poem, and is in contrast with similar boys' games such as the *eiresiônê*, also preserved in Pollux; the game is presented as an ancient version of trick-or-treat, where the boys' mobility marks a contrast with the seated woman in the house they visit. In ring games, though, the constant alternation of roles allows the performers to construct and claim an identity. In Erinna's poem, the first-person speaker seems to be a voice of adherence to traditional ideals, as she speaks with an authoritative tone and reproaches Baucis, the one who *forgot*. Erinna, or the ‘I’ of the poem, remembers, whereas Baucis, the addressee of the poem, fades away in forgetfulness. As authoritative speaker Erinna might even be compared to the voice of the tortoise in the song. Although the reason for Baucis's leaving is not clear (whether death or marriage) the ‘I’ of the poem remembers the game they played together as children; the game becomes a locus of reference for the common memories that the two people had shared. Erinna's ‘I’ leads the poem just as the tortoise defines the action

around the game by positing a situation of death and appropriate activity, such as the weaving of the shroud for the dead (the person who leaped and left). Although Erinna most likely did not in her poem reproduce the exact same verbal/musical cadences and ritual actions, still the resonances of her song are especially forceful and empowering.

III. The Tortoise as a Figure in Ancient Greece

The tortoise game alluded to by Erinna seems in Pollux's version complete and a genuine reflection of actual game practice. However, even if we have the full context, the entire text of a traditional song is always incomplete, as there are associations or symbols behind formulaic clusters whose meaning will escape us,³⁶ and so it is worth exploring how the game came to being through traditional channels. Above I have emphasized performance and the literary allusions of and to the game's chant. The very term *χελιχελώνη*, which presents the germination in the first part of the word, could in one scenario reflect the game's song, when the 'tortoise' is asked to 'tag' another girl, as if the girl is shouting 'έλε, χελώνη' or "Catch me, tortoise." But why is the mother figure a 'tortoise'? By looking at the central figure as a 'tortoise,' we can investigate further symbolism and meanings hidden in the tortoise game and song.

In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, the tortoise appears in an episode from Hermes' childhood:

Έρμῆς τοι πρότιστα χέλυν τεκτήνατ' αἰδόν,
 ἢ ῥά οἱ ἀντεβόλησεν ἐπ' αὐλείησι θύρῃσι
 βοσκομένη προπάροιθε δόμων ἐριθιλέα ποίην,
 σαῦλα ποσὶν βαίνουσα· Διὸς δ' ἐριούνιος υἱὸς
 ἄθρησας ἐγέλασσε καὶ αὐτίκα μῦθον ἔειπε·
 σύμβολον ἦδη μοι μέγ' ὀνήσιμον, οὐκ ὀνοτάζω.
 χαῖρε φυὴν ἐρόεσσα χοροϊτύπε δαιτὸς ἐταίρῃ,
 ἀσπασίη προφανεῖσα· πόθεν τόδε καλὸν ἄθυρμα
 αἰόλον ὄστρακον ἔσσο χέλυσ ὄρεσι ζώουσα;
 ἀλλ' οἴσω σ' εἰς δῶμα λαβῶν· ὄφελός τί μοι ἔσση,
 οὐδ' ἀποτιμήσω· σὺ δέ με πρότιστον ὀνήσεις.
 οἴκοι βέλτερον εἶναι, ἐπεὶ βλαβερὸν τὸ θύρῃφιν·
 ἦ γὰρ ἐπηλυσίης πολυπήμονος ἔσσειαι ἔχμα
 ζώουσ'· ἦν δὲ θάνης τότε κεν μάλα καλὸν αἰείδοις.

(*Hymn. Hom. Herm.* 25–38)

Hermes, first of all, made a singer out of the tortoise. For she came his way at the courtyard gate, where she was feeding on the rich grass right in front of his home, waddling along. When the luck-bringing son of Zeus saw her, he laughed and said:

Such a beneficial omen for me! I do not scorn you.

Hail, lovely in shape, sounding at dance, companion at the feast,
Delightful you appear to me. Where did you get that beautiful toy,
That spangled shell, a tortoise living in the mountains?

But I will take you and bring you inside: you shall be useful to me,
And I will honor you, for you will be of benefit to me.

It's better to be at home, for harm may come to you outdoors;
Truly you shall be a spell against malicious witchcraft.

But if you die, then you shall produce the most beautiful songs.

Boundary oppositions of inside and outside are here associated with a female tortoise. Hermes has to take the living tortoise inside, since, he proclaims, harm comes from outside. These words reflect the concept of the evil eye and the underlying notion of an aggressive gaze, an undefined external force. The construction of the outside world as a generator of harm puts the exposure of the tortoise in a specific context, that is, in a magical frame.³⁷ We have many later examples of the tortoise's effectiveness against witchcraft and illness³⁸ and its own use in magic spells.³⁹

A second association of tortoises with young girls comes from vase depictions. A fourth-century Apulian vase (*khous*), now in the British Museum, is illuminating.⁴⁰ While Alexander Cambitoglou and Arthur D. Trendall (1978–1982) have noted a possible connection of the vase with the tortoise song, this association needs further exploration.

On this vase a young girl is portrayed wearing a long-sleeved jacket, teasing a Maltese dog, and swinging a tortoise tied to a string. Above her are eggs and dots; below, waves. This *khous* has been associated with the festival of the *Khoes*, which was celebrated on the second day of the early spring feast *Anthesteria*, in which Dionysus was worshiped as the god of vegetation.⁴¹ Most of the vases associated with this festival depict children involved in games. Besides being a festival of wine, the *Anthesteria* was a feast for the dead;⁴² the ghosts of the dead were banished to their grave-pithoi at the feast's conclusion: θύραζε Κῆρες, οὐκέτ' Ἄνθεςτήρια.⁴³ In looking at the *khoes* pots, archaeologists observe that "scarcely one of the children is figured without a string of amulets on the body, the wrist or the ankle. Children, more than adults, needed talismans on those ominous days."⁴⁴ While the eggs on the Apulian vase symbolize new life,



Apulian Red-Figured *Kous*. British Museum No. 1856.05612.12. Height 20.32 centimeters. © Trustees of the British Museum

the dog and the kantharos on the column are signifiers of a ritual centered around death.⁴⁵ The Maltese dog in particular was a common companion of the young on grave stelae, emphasizing the playful, gregarious nature of these pets and alluding to the child's previous life.⁴⁶ Just as on gravestones children are the companions of adults, so dogs and other pets are of children.⁴⁷ In light of iconographic archaeological evidence associated with the *Anthesteria*, the tortoise game might be more than a mere game; it may be a paraphrase of death ritual.⁴⁸

Tortoises are connected with females elsewhere in Greek culture, as they appear in representations of Aphrodite stepping on a tortoise. Many copies of the sculpture exist, although the original goes back to Pheidias;⁴⁹ however, the association of tortoises with Aphrodite is earlier.⁵⁰

The reason, presumably, is that the tortoise, being a voiceless creature that carries its house, lent itself to recognizable gender applications on women's social roles.⁵¹ Passages from later Greek authors like Pausanias and Plutarch reflect the appropriateness of the tortoise as a signifier in this context.⁵²

Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece* (6.25.1), first gives a description of this statue when describing the area of Elis:

ἔστι δὲ τῆς στοᾶς ὀπίσω τῆς ἀπὸ τῶν λαφύρων τῶν ἐκ Κορκύρας Ἀφροδίτης ναός, τὸ δὲ ἐν ὑπαίθρῳ τέμενος οὐ πολὺ ἀφαστηκὸς ἀπὸ τοῦ ναοῦ, καὶ τὴν μὲν ἐν τῷ ναῷ καλοῦσιν Οὐρανίαν, ἐλέφαντος δὲ ἔστι καὶ χρυσοῦ, τέχνη Φειδίου, τῷ δὲ ἐτέρῳ ποδὶ ἐπὶ χελώνης βέβηκε· τῆς δὲ περιέχεται μὲν τὸ τέμενος θριγκῶ, κρηπίς δὲ ἐντὸς τοῦ τεμένους πεποιήται καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ κρηπίδι ἄγαλμα Ἀφροδίτης χαλκοῦν ἐπὶ τράγῳ κάθηται χαλκῶ· Σκόπα τοῦτο ἔργον, Ἀφροδίτην δὲ Πάνδημον ὀνομάζουσι. τὰ δὲ ἐπὶ τῇ χελώνῃ τε καὶ ἐς τὸν τράγον παρίημι τοῖς θέλουσιν εἰκάζειν.

Behind the portico built from the spoils of Corcyra is a temple of Aphrodite, the precinct being in the open, not far from the temple. The goddess in the temple they call Heavenly; she is of ivory and gold, the work of Pheidias, and she stands with one foot upon a tortoise. The precinct of the other Aphrodite is surrounded by a wall, and within the precinct has been made a basement, upon which sits a bronze image of Aphrodite upon a bronze he-goat. It is a work of Scopas, and Aphrodite is named Common. The meaning of the tortoise and of the he-goat I leave to those who care to guess. (Translation from Jones 1993)

While Pausanias refers to the tortoise, he chooses not to disclose its significance and context regarding Aphrodite and her cult. It is Plutarch who in his *Advice to Bride and Groom* refers to the tortoise as a symbol of idealized womanhood, female silence, and obedience to the husband:

τὴν Ἠλείων ὁ Φειδίας Ἀφροδίτην ἐποίησε χελώνην πατοῦσαν, οἰκουρίας σύμβολον ταῖς γυναιξὶ καὶ σιωπῆς. δεῖ γὰρ ἢ πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα λαλεῖν ἢ διὰ τοῦ ἀνδρός, μὴ δυσχεραίνουσαν εἰ δι' ἄλλοτρίας γλώττης ὥσπερ αὐλητῆς φθέγγεται σεμνότερον. (*Conj. Praecept.* 142D5–11)

Pheidias made the statue of Aphrodite of the Eleans with one foot on the tortoise as a symbol of housekeeping and silence for women. For a woman should neither speak to her husband or through her husband,

and she should not be distressed if, like a flute-player, she makes a more important sound through somebody else's tongue.

Plutarch's remarks are a reminder to young girls about the social role they are expected to play. Plutarch says the same in his *Isis and Osiris* (381E), where he distinguishes between the different animals appearing alongside god's statues and, by extension, between married and unmarried women:

οὐ δεῖ δὲ θαυμάζειν, εἰ γλίσχρας ὁμοιότητος οὕτως ἠγάπησαν Αἰγύπτιοι. καὶ (γὰρ καὶ) Ἕλληνας ἔν τε γραπτοῖς ἔν τε πλαστοῖς εἰκάσμασι θεῶν ἐχρήσαντο πολλοῖς τοιούτοις, οἷον ἐν Κρήτῃ Διὸς ἦν ἄγαλμα μὴ ἔχον ὄτα· τῷ γὰρ ἄρχοντι καὶ κυρίῳ πάντων οὐδενὸς ἀκούειν προσήκει. τῷ δὲ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς τὸν δράκοντα Φειδίας παρέθηκε, τῷ δὲ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης ἐν Ἥλιδι τὴν χελώνην, ὡς τὰς μὲν παρθένους φυλακῆς δεομένας, ταῖς δὲ γαμεταῖς οἰκουρίαν καὶ σιωπὴν πρόπευσαν.

We should not be surprised if the Egyptians were fascinated by such slight resemblances; for the Greeks in both their painted and sculptured representations of gods used many such things. For example, in Crete there was a statue of Zeus that did not have ears, for it is not fitting for the master and lord of all to listen to anyone. Beside the statue of Athena Pheidias placed the serpent, and in Elis, beside the statue of Aphrodite, the tortoise, to indicate that young girls need watching, and that for married women staying at home and silence are becoming.

In literary representations of the figure of tortoise, therefore, we see its feminization and its representation what womanhood means. Yet the tortoise as a cultural construct presents a deeper dimension of meanings about protection for children and model of behavior. For not only did the basic tortoise song draw from a repertoire of adult genres that had been translated into children's imagery, but it also instructed and initiated girls very subtly into the knowledge of adulthood and their future roles. In both Erinna's poetry and the basic form of the game (at least as we have it), much more is at play than a mere game. The song presages the work (wool-working) which will signify the good housekeepers that girls will become. But Erinna's poem, with its expansion about 'loss,' describes a bridge between the roles of girlhood and womanhood. Recollecting childhood experiences, as Erinna does, creates a voice replete

with intense symbolism and social expectations. Erinna's female-centered poem, like the shared games, draws the speaker's and the addressee's attention to changed adult roles. The tortoise song is related to everyday routines that have been transformed into a child's game and is meant to instruct girls about future roles. Performing the role of tortoise involves learning and initiates her into what Leslie Kurke has called "social alchemy" through a practice that was unassuming, innocent, yet pervasive.

Claude Calame (1997, 29–30) has argued that female choruses were divided according to age, extending through "childhood and adolescence up from the status of *παῖς* to the threshold of marriage." In this paper I have demonstrated longer processes of the interrelation of various types of female voices, from individual to collective, from games in early childhood to later choral performances. The use of the tortoise motif in ancient Greek children's songs underlines the depth of this tradition and its powerful resonances. Female imagery used even at the early stages of a woman's life was intensely symbolic and easily discernible to the original audiences. Like the tortoise itself, song became protection, as choral activities served as a constant reminder of the power of belonging to a group. At the same time, the individual voices, by citing early memories, did not simply express personal grief over separation; they aligned themselves within a rich poetic tradition that stylized and expressed young women's hopes, anxieties, and aspirations and thereby assured girls that they too would be safely incorporated into society but with one extremely significant caution, that they never forget.⁵³

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Notes

1. Most of the focus has been on ritual behavior and the role of the child as an active participant; see Brelich 1969, Sourvinou-Inwood 1988, Calame 1997, Johnston 2001, Dillon 2002, Ferrari 2002. It is often mentioned that just as children learn grammatical rules, they learn a variety of forms of oral literature as they themselves become active carriers of oral tradition; see Kellogg 1973, 57–8.

2. For the term 'individual' as opposed to 'collective' voice, I follow Calame's (1997, 256) view of archaic lyric poetry as having the ability to express the individual collectively. In this view, Sappho's expression of a personal experience that is true only for herself and one of her companions can be perceived, recited, and re-performed by all the girls in her circle as "both a lived and paradigmatic experience."

3. See Grider 1980, 162: "By closely observing and listening in on the natural, unsupervised world of the childhood underground, we can learn of the function and dynamic of folk performance in its group context as well as of proto-literacy on oral transmission. To understand the processes of tradition and transmission among children is to understand tradition in general." On a similar note see also the introduction in Opie 1959, 8 on the importance of children's lore to the student of oral communication and oral transmission.

4. Cf. Eustathius 1914, 56 ad *Od.* 21.411, and Erinna (*Papiri greci e latini* 1090 = *Supplementum Hellenisticum* frag. 401).

5. The verb μαρῶμαι (Doric for μηρῶμαι) means 'to draw up, furl' (parallels in *Od.* 12.170 for sailing, and Hesiod, *Op.* 538 for weaving). For the 'jump,' see Theocritus 3.42: ὡς ἴδειν, ὡς ἐμάνη, ὡς ἐξ βαθῶν ἄλατ' ἔρωτα.

6. The translation of the tortoise song/game is from Golden 1990, 74. The structure of the translation shows the dynamics of the movement, connecting poetics and performance with the jump being the locus at the final position (just as the Greek ἄλατο comes at the very end).

7. For erotic connotations see the bibliography in Neils and Oakley 2003, 275. On *ephedrimos* see Zazoff 1962 and Scheffer 1996; for the erotic connotations of the game, Bumbalova 1981.

8. The meter of the song appears to be an irregular iambic trimeter.

9. Levaniouk 2008, 208.

10. Nagy's arguments follow the attestations of the "Leucadian Rock" in *Odyssey* 24.11–2, where the White Rock is the "boundary delimiting the conscious and the unconscious—be it trance, stupor, sleep, or even death" (Nagy 1996, 45). Nagy proceeds to discuss the mythical figure of Phaethon, who shares several characteristics with the figures of Adonis and Phaon: all were loved by Aphrodite and all hidden by her. Phaethon is associated with Aphrodite in *Theogony* (988–91), where notions of birth and regeneration are prevalent.

11. See Nagy 1996 and Skinner 1982 for parallels and comparanda. The song also has a strong Homeric tone (Skinner 1982).

12. Such as the *astragaloi* (Apollonius of Rhodes, *Arg.* 3.154); other games have been discovered in women's tombs. See also Ferrari 2002, 14–5.

13. Brommer (1983) discusses in detail the red-figured *lekythos* attributed to the Ephedrimos Painter, 470–460 BCE.

14. Neils and Oakley 2003, 276. See Brommer 1983; *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae*, s.v. “*Mainades*,” 788, no. 67, plate 540.

15. For the association of tortoises with the home, see Redfield 2003, 322–4.

16. The tortoise is most often imagined in these contexts as female in Pollux, Erinna, and the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*; but not in Sophocles' *Ichneutai*, frag. 314.284–330, which contains a lengthy, riddling account of Hermes' adaptation of the (male) tortoise into the first lyre. This fragment emphasizes the tortoise as a mute animal that received its voice through death, an idea expressed also in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*.

17. Seremetakis 1991, 130.

18. The leaping tortoise that meets his death became a *topos* of the impossible in postclassical literature, e.g., Claudian's “*testudo volat*.”

19. Ben Amos 1971, 4.

20. Bourdieu 2002, 88, quoting Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, 1960), 26, 30–2.

21. My thanks to Carole Newlands for referring me to Scottish children's songs, which present the theme of death as overtly as do our Greek examples.

22. Calame (1997, 256–7) discusses the interaction between adults and adolescents in light of Sappho's poetry and proposes a ritualized instructional frame.

23. See Sourvinou-Inwood 2004, 141 on the complexities of mythological discourse and its relation to community ideologies.

24. Bierl (2007, 239–41, 246–7) has pointed out the importance of the dreamlike elements in metaphor, always in constant negotiation with their expression and presence in ritual. Although his discussion focuses on the shaping of the novel narrative, his theoretical perspective and articulation on the “oneiric” element (a term borrowed from film theory) is particularly applicable to my understanding of narratives that may defy coherence at first glance.

25. See Bowra 1953, 154.

26. In the context of Erinna, Cameron (1969, 287–9) alludes to the idea of the spindle of Fate and proposes that this must have been a significant motif in the poem. Skinner (2001, 214–5) sees the thematic preoccupation with textile art as symbolism for textual art, and thus spinning as a representation of the arduous effort to compose a slender literary masterpiece. Delicacy of fabric, in Skinner's view, is characteristic of feminine aesthetic refinement. I wish here to draw further attention to how Erinna's poetry is rooted in tradition and also reflects it.

27. For details see the latest edition of Neri 2003. Neri also argues against West's (1977) view that the fragment comes from a Hellenistic male forgery.

28. See Skinner 1982 for a comparison of the lament with the laments for Patroclus and Hector in the *Iliad*; Gutzweiler 1997 for the use of ‘I,’ which is reminiscent of Sapphic passages, and the interaction with the lament genre in epic; and Stehle 2001 for the comparison with fourth-century BCE epitaphs.

29. For generic interlacing between wedding and funeral diction, see also Rehm 1994.

30. Mormo was a mythical mother who ate her own children; she became the quintessential phantasy-enemy in children's stories.

31. See Faraone 1991.

32. The text is based on Lloyd-Jones et al. 1983 with supplements as suggested in West 1977.

33. Translation in Stehle 2001, 187. Emendations on Erinna's *Distaff*, lines 23–5 from Lloyd-Jones et al. 1983, 188–9.

34. Stehle 2001, 188–9.

35. Stehle 2001, esp. 197–200; she situates this as a time when women began to have more freedom of movement.

36. See Caraveli 1982, 154.

37. For the tortoise and narrative structure of the *Hymn*, see Fletcher 2008, 24. For a discussion of the tortoise in the *Hymn* as a toy and in relation with knucklebones and their meaning, see Redfield 2003, 318–31. Redfield also draws the connections with the song at p. 324 and makes brief reference to the allusions in feminine poetry (although he mistakenly writes Corinna, instead of Erinna).

38. See Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 32.4; Africanus in *Geoponica* 1.14.8.

39. See Aelian, *Nat. Anim.* 15.19. For a discussion of Aelian's tortoises and erotic spells, see Faraone 1999, 160–2. Faraone links the Aelian passage to Sappho's *Hymn to Aphrodite*, frag. 1, and uses Aelian's tortoises to discuss wider ramifications of the use of love magic in ancient Greece. Of interest to my argument here is Faraone's (1999, 171) agreement with J. J. Winkler's suggestion that the "imagined effect of erotic magic might indeed give us a faint and rare glimpse of ancient Greek women as desiring subjects." Faraone observes that "the Greeks might limit the period of such a snapshot to the brief years of optimum marriageability, to the effects of magic apples and *iunx* spells or to the few weeks each year when the Dog Star rises and brings its own brief period of female lust."

40. See Cambitoglou and Trendall 1978–1982, 2: plate 235.2; for the picture see Golden 1990, 75 (fig. 12). Cambitoglou and Trendell (1978–1982, 1: 611–2) remark that it is a *khous*. In the girls' left hand is a *khous* and around her neck and under her left arm are a circlet adorned with rings and amulets, as on a number of the Attic *khoes* used at children's festivals. Klein (1932, 7) suggests that "one might be tempted to connect the scene with the game of *χελιχελώνη*." This is a comparatively rare representation of a child at play.

41. Van Hoorn 1951.

42. The ritual had a double character. Wine played an important part, especially during the *pithoigia* that marked the opening of the wine vessels. Originally the jars used on the day of the *pithoigia* were bottomless vessels, which were placed as monuments on graves. Their placement signified an open connection between the upper-world and the underworld.

43. See the lexicographer/grammarians Pausanias's *Attikôn onomatôn synagogê*, s.v. Θ (20.3).

44. Van Hoorn 1951, 19.

45. The presence of the dog may be to another children's game in which they had races with dogcarts; see Van Hoorn 1951, 35.

46. Neils and Oakley 2003, 181. A parallel is the grave stele of Melisto (Harvard University Museum), which depicts a young girl named Melisto with a Maltese dog.

47. Johnston 2001.

48. Van Hoorn 1951, 37.

49. See Bluemel 1966; Settis 1966; Dumoulin 1994; *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae*, s.v. "Aphrodite," no. 177.

50. On this see Cumont 1923.

51. On tortoise as a mute animal and its presence with images of Aphrodite, see Llewellyn-Jones 2003, 189–213.

52. On the Pausanias and Plutarch passages, see Pirenne-Delforges 1994, 231–7. Pirenne-Delforges points out the ambiguity surrounding the tortoise and the problems with its associations with idealized womanhood alone.

53. On that note see Lardinois 2001, 92.

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