

## Witchcraft in Fourth Century Athens?

### The Case of Theoris

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At last Theoris has come out of the shadows. For a long time she was out of sight because the major prosopographical compilations on which we depend for our knowledge about ancient Athenians (Kirchner 1901, and Osborne and Byrne 1994) left her out of the lists. They include other women of that name but not the most controversial Theoris, the one from Lemnos. When scholars such as L. Ziehen (1934) and F. Jacoby mentioned her it was to chip away at what the ancient sources had to say about her. Then Theoris entered the scholarly spotlight, along with Ninon and Phryne, fourth century women brought to trial in Athens. Esther Eidolon (2010 and 2015) has summarized the lively recent scholarship on Theoris, and herself skillfully explored the analog to witchcraft trial in Europe and America. It is a slippery analogy, but there can be little doubt that suspicions about magic surrounded Theoris.

But magic was not the whole story. In fact, accusations of practicing magic may have surfaced only after her condemnation and execution, for it is mentioned only in a speech that must be dated after her death, when the target was a contemporary politician, Aristogeiton, not Theoris herself. The invective in section 79f. of that speech (Against Aristogeiton I, speech 25 in the Demosthenic corpus) is carefully constructed to turn the idea that Theoris meddled in charms and potions (pharmaka) into a word play marking Aristogeiton as a pharmakos, a scape goat, who deserved to be put to death for the well being of the city. Since charms and potions were a legitimate part of traditional Greek medicine, as Lain Entralgo (1970) and others have shown, the suspicion aroused by the speaker needs to be treated with caution. The ambiguity in phrasing – Was Theoris practicing traditional medicine or black magic? - may not point to the charges against her, but simply be a way to exacerbate prejudice against her alleged lover, Aristogeiton. He, the male, is the one who is explicitly charged with magic. The author of the speech (perhaps not Demosthenes himself) alleges that his brother

*... - I pass over the other facts - got possession of the drugs (pharmaka) and charms (epōidai) from the servant of Theoris, that Lemnian woman, that polluted (miarān) potion purveyor (pharnakis). Under those circumstances you put her to death with all her family. She [the servant] gave information against her mistress; [Aristogeiton,] this man with the evil eye (baskanos,) who bewitches (magqaneuei) and is a scam artist (phenakizei), has had children by her, and professes to cure seizures, being himself seized by wickedness of every kind. So this is the man who will beg himself off, this scapegoat (pharakos), this pestilence.*

The passage, whether by Demosthenes or not, is brilliant invective, but tells us little about what Theoris actually did or the issues raised at her trial. To be sure, it creates the suspicion, even among otherwise careful scholars, that Theoris dealt in drugs that could be used on magic or prove poisons, but what exactly did her servant testify against her (presumably under torture) and what are the facts that the speaker so blithely passes over at the beginning of the section just quoted? His invective will not simply call her a foreigner: she is a Lemnian woman, that is, from a place with a proverbial reputation not for magic or witchcraft but, as Burkert (1970) has shown, for licentious women who murdered their husbands, killed off all the males, and later admitted the Argonauts only on the condition that the sailors swore they would have sex with them. Without stating that Theoris was put to death *because of* her use of pharmaka and charms, the speech evokes these as the *circumstances under which* (eph' hois) she was condemned. And she was not just found guilty by some unspecified judges: *you*, the Athenian citizenry, condemned her. And the punishment was not a fine or exile, but execution – of her, and of her whole family, presumably including the children. The implication is that she must have been guilty of exceptionally heinous crimes, sine Athenians, who liked to think of themselves as lenient, imposed such an extreme penalty. But the focus of the invective is not on Theoris – it is on Aristogeiton, who chose to associate himself with such a woman.

The Theoris who emerges from the other sources is significantly different from the one depicted in this speech. Plutarch's mention of Theoris is tame by comparison. It comes in a portion of his life of Demosthenes describing the orator's 'aristocratic' tendency, that is, his willingness to bring capital cases before the council of the Areopagus. Even though one Antiphon had been acquitted by the Athenian assembly (ekklēsia), Demosthenes prosecuted him before the Areopagus and won a death sentence. Plutarch continues:

*He also denounced the priestess Theoris who lived loosely (rhaidiourgousēs) in many other ways and also taught deception (exapatān) to slaves. He demanded the death penalty; she was executed.*

Plutarch Demosthenes 14.6

The context strongly suggests that Demosthenes brought this case, like that of Antiphon, before the Areopagus, a tribunal which sometimes felt it could punish offences even if they were not defined in written law. But what exactly was the alleged offence? There is no mention of magic. "Loose living," is loose language: it may entail prostitution or running a house of ill repute. If Plutarch had stopped to explain, he might have linked it to his comment that she was a priestess. Of which goddess? For a Lemnian woman that would most likely be Aphrodite, as the evidence in Burkert (1970) p.3, n. 5 suggests. "Loose living," of whatever sort, seems insufficient to merit a death sentence.

The word exapatān, though, suggests something much more serious. True, the word can mean nothing more than *deceive* or *trick* (as in Herodotus 1.90.2 and elsewhere). In this passage of Plutarch it is sometimes translated *practice deceit*, as if Theoris had been encouraging petty thefts or other servile flummery/ The term, however, has a wider range, including a much more serious offence. In 1829

Christian Lobeck called attention to a list of crimes in Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics. All these serious offences have the common denominator of being committed not by open force but in some secret way:

*Of non-consensual transgressions some involve secrecy, for instance, theft, adultery, poisoning, procuring, doulapatia, assassination, false witness. Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 5.2.1, 1131a7.*

The emphasis on secrecy brackets doulapatia with other crimes not committed in the open, the most revealing being the next term in the series, dolophonia, *assassination*. This is not just the act of killing, but plotting and then carrying out an assassination. (Dolos, *trickery* and apatē, *deception*, are sometimes closely associated, as in Herodotus 1.69.2) “Slave-deception,” then, should invoke ideas of secret meetings, conspiracy, or even plotting a slave rebellion. If so, it is easy to see why the charge against Theoris could result in a severe penalty.

But how would a woman, a foreigner at that, contribute to such a plot? The participle *teaching* in Plutarch’s phrase doulous didaskomenē exapatān does not help much, since we want to know what was she was teaching them. How and where? A third passage helps answer that question, for the Attic chronicler Philochorus, cited in Harpocration’s Lexicon s.v. Theoris, provides a clue:

*Theoris: Demosthenes in the speech against Aristogeiton, if authentic. Theoris was a mantis and when condemned on a charge of impiety was put to death, as Philochorus (EGrHist 328 F 60) also writes in the sixth book [sc. of his Atthis].*

Philochorus is a well-respected source, but Jacoby in his commentary on the passage cautions that we cannot be certain that Philochorus said anything more than that she was put to death on a charge of impiety. Jacoby doubted that Philochorus, himself a manti, would have admitted that such an (allegedly) disreputable woman was a member of that profession. It seems unlikely, however, that Harpocration would himself invent that detail or draw it from some unmentioned source.

The possibility that Theoris was a mantis, may help answer the question how she might have contributed to a conspiracy of slaves. Manteis did not predict the future, or guarantee a successful outcome to actions, but they did indicate whether the circumstances were encouraging. They could thereby boost the morale of those engaged in an action, whether citizens, soldiers or conspirators. Was such encouragement of potentially dissident slaves part of the accusation against Theoris? In any event the passage in Harpocration reminds us, as Michael Flower (2008) has also done, that being a mantis was not exclusively a man’s prerogative. Nor did the practice of magic belong exclusively to women. Gender boundaries, even in Athens, could sometimes prove permeable.

Drawing these scattered accounts together one can see a skillful hand at work against Theoris, the hand of Demosthenes, if Plutarch is correct. Demosthenes prosecution of Theoris probably had less to do

with objections to magic, fear of the flight or insurrection of slaves or risk to public morals than with his animosity to Aristogeiton, a man of some prominence in Athenian politics of the 330s (Osborne and Byrne (1994) no. 4 s.n, Aristogeitōn). An effective attack on him could build on his associate with Theoris. So, the obvious strategy was to go first after Theoris, try her on the wide-ranging charge of asebeia, *impiety*, then use her blackened reputation as ammunition against Aristogeiton.

The practice of attacking an opponent by bringing up his sexual relationships was well established by the mid fifth century, as the story that Cimon had had sex with his half-sister, Elpinike, reminds us. Pericles' association with Aspasia provides an even closer parallel to the case of Theoris. Not only was she an immigrant (from Miletus), and an *hetaera* rather than a legitimate spouse, she could be tied to Pericles' less popular policies, including the origin of the Peloponnesian war. There is no evidence that either she or Elpinike were suspected of magic, or anything resembling 'witchcraft.'

Aristogeiton, to be sure, was no Pericles, and Theoris no Aspasia, but the parallel is revealing nonetheless, since both Aspasia (Plutarch Pericles 32.1 and Atheneaeus 13.589 e) and Theoris, as we have seen, were said to have been indicted on charge of asebeia, *impiety*. In Aspasia's case, as P. Stadter suggests in his commentary on Pericles 32.1 (p. 297), " ... the additional charge of procuring free women suggests that Aspasia was accused of entering sanctuaries or participating in sacred rites although as a prostitute or procuress she was excluded (cf. [Dem.] 59,113-14.)." The accusation against Theoris of "loose living" reported by Plutarch may have worked in a similar, compounded by the charge way. The case against Theoris may have added to the accusation of impiety the charge that she introduced a new, unauthorized religious practice, perhaps an association that included slaves, or a foreign, perhaps licentious cult. Greek impiety trials were not constrained by narrow definitions of the offence. Not observing the established rites or introducing new ones could be combined with other charges and suspicions to result, as the condemnation of Socrates reminds us, in severe punishment.

The result was the condemnation of Theoris, and of her family, children and all - an atrocity for which it appears Demosthenes was much to blame. The success of the prosecution, as best we can make out, depended primarily not on evidence of her practice of magic, but on, hostility to immigrants and foreign ways, fear of trouble with slaves, and tolerance of wide ranging prosecutions under a loosely drafted impiety law. Theoris may have lived a deplorable life, even left herself open to suspicions of practicing magic, but she seems more a victim of the crossfire of political attacks in her adopted city than a anything resembling a 'witch.'

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