# Who Seduced Whom? Ἔρως, Ἀπουσία and Epistolary Performance

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**Abstract**

This article offers a philological and literary reassessment of Epistle 2.23a, a fragment traditionally linked to the Aristaenetus *corpus*. It presents the Greek text with English translation and traces its editorial history, focusing on the interventions of Kontos, Bast, and Boissonade. The study situates the fragment within the tradition of fictional epistolography and explores its potential inclusion in Aristaenetus's literary output. It examines the role of pseudonymous letter-writing across classical and Byzantine genres, highlighting its performative and affective dimensions. Through a detailed analysis of narrative structure, lexical texture, and thematic ambiguity, the story of Theocles, Myron, and Chorine is interpreted as a stylised lament probing ἔρως, φιλία, and ξενία. Particular attention is given to onomastic symbolism, rhetorical strategies, and female agency, all framed within late antique cultural codes. The article concludes by reflecting on the fragment's transmission and authenticity, arguing that its interpretive value lies less in authorial certainty than in its aesthetic resonance and ethical complexity. Ultimately, the epistle is read as a performative space where intimacy, betrayal, and literary memory converge, inviting reconsideration of the boundaries between fiction and confession, and of how epistolary form can encode emotional rupture, moral ambiguity, and cultural nostalgia within a deceptively simple narrative frame.

**Keywords**

Fictional Authorship; Pseudepigraphy; Epistolary Eroticism; Philological Analysis; Onomastics.

## مَن؟ الإيروس، ἀπουσία، والأداء الرسائلي

**الملخص**

تقدّم هذه الدراسة إعادة تقييم فقهية وأدبية للرسالة ٢،٢٣أ، وهي مقطع يُنسب تقليديًا إلى مجموعة أريستانيتوس. يتضمّن المقال النصّ اليوناني مع ترجمته إلى الإنجليزية، ويتتبّع تاريخه التحريري، مع التركيز على تدخلات كونتوس وباست وبواسوناد. تضع الدراسة هذا المقطع ضمن تقاليد الكتابة الرسائلية الخيالية، وتستكشف احتمالية إدراجه في الإنتاج الأدبي لأريستانيتوس. كما تبحث في دور الكتابة تحت أسماء مستعارة في الأجناس الأدبية الكلاسيكية والبيزنطية، مع إبراز أبعادها الأدائية والعاطفية. ومن خلال تحليل دقيق للبنية السردية، والنسيج المعجمي، والغموض الموضوعي، تُفسَّر قصة ثيوكليس وميرون وكورين على أنها مرثية مُصاغة بأسلوب أدبي، وتستكشف مفاهيم ἔρως، φιλία، وξενία. يُولى اهتمام خاص للرمزية الاسمية، والاستراتيجيات البلاغية، وفاعلية المرأة، ضمن رموز ثقافية من العصور القديمة المتأخرة. ويختتم المقال بالتأمل في انتقال المقطع ومدى أصالته، مشيرًا إلى أن قيمته التفسيرية تكمن في صداها الجمالي وتعقيدها الأخلاقي أكثر من يقين نسبتها إلى مؤلف معين. في النهاية، تُقرأ الرسالة كفضاء أدائي تتقاطع فيه الحميمية والخيانة والذاكرة الأدبية، مما يدعو إلى إعادة النظر في الحدود بين الخيال والاعتراف، وفي كيفية تجسيد النموذج الرسائلي للانكسار العاطفي، والغموض الأخلاقي، والحنين الثقافي ضمن إطار سردي بسيط ظاهريًا.

**الكلمات المفتاحية**

التأليف التخييلي – الكتابة بالاسم المستعار – الإيروس الرسائلي – التحليل الفقهي اللغوي – الأسماء والرموز.

## 1. Unsent and Unauthorised: The Enigma of Epistle 2.23a

As if unearthed from a discreet literary excavation, fragments of Attic prose are given renewed voice, forming a curious and incomplete epistolary artefact.

In 1803, M. Polyzois Kontos (Πολύζωης Κοντός), a figure of the Neo-Hellenic Enlightenment from Ioannina,[1] published Ἀρισταινέτου Ἐπιστολαὶ τανῦν ἑλληνιστὶ μόνον ἐκδίδονται, under the patronage of several distinguished individuals (K.R., T.R., Z.K., and P.S.), with Georgios Vendotis overseeing its release in Vienna. In this edition, Kontos comments on the peculiar status of a final letter, which he designates as a νόθος θυγάτηρ—a "spurious daughter"—omitted from previous publications yet bearing clear stylistic and syntactic affinities with its companion texts. Due to the deterioration of the parchment, the fragment could not be fully transcribed; faded ink and fractured syllables necessitated a philological reconstruction requiring interpretative precision and sensitivity to epistolary cohesion.

Bast, writing in 1805 and corresponding with Boissonade, attributes to Kontos the recovery of the epistle from an ancient *codex*, unnamed yet allegedly overlooked by dominant Western editorial traditions. [2] In Bast's account, Kontos emerges as a meticulous philologist, committed to presenting the Greek text with minimal intervention and without stylistic embellishment. His preface (p. XIII) briefly notes the discovery of a manuscript containing four letters attributed to Aristaenetus (1.1, 2. 9, and 2.23a),[3] the last of which had not previously appeared in print.

Kontos's edition contains one particularly enigmatic reference, situating the manuscript within the holdings of a certain Alexios Spanos, allegedly discovered on the island of Ioannina called Acherousia. The figure of Spanos remains

[1] Soare offers a concise overview of the editorial challenges surrounding the fragment, highlighting its ambiguous status and the interpretative demands it places on modern scholarship: Lucian Soare, *Aspecte ale influenței neogreceşti asupra limbii române. Învățături de multe științe 1811,* in *Omagiu profesorlui Grigore Brâncuș,* edited by Gheorghe Chivu and CorneliaVătășescu (București, 2019), 443–451.

[2] Bast discusses Kontos's editorial intervention and the manuscript's provenance, noting the inclusion of four letters, one of which had not previously appeared in print: Friedrich Bast, *Lettre Critique*, 227–232.

[3] The designation "Epistle 2.23a" is used to distinguish the extended version cited by – from the truncated form found in Jean Boissonade, *Aristaeneti Epistolae* (Paris, 1822), 195–199; cf. Bast, *Lettre Critique,* 229 n. 85.

undocumented, casting an editorial haze over the provenance of the text and suggesting a possible gesture of romanticised invention. Bast provides a full transcription of the fragment alongside a detailed linguistic commentary.[1] Boissonade, although publishing only an abridged version in 1822, preserves the substantive core of the epistle.[2]

The version presented here is based on Kontos's transcription and is accompanied by an English translation rendered in a formal academic register.

**Greek Text**

Ἐραστὴς ὑπὸ φίλου τῆς ἐρωμένης ἐπιβούλως αὐτῷ ἁρπαγείσης γέγραφε ταῦτα.

ΘΕΟΚΛΗΣ ΜΕΙΡΩΝΙ ΜΕΙΡΟΝΙ

Ὣς σου τὸ εὔτολμον, Μύρων, ἐξείπω; τίσι δὲ λόγοις τὴν πρὸς ἀλλήλους φιλίαν οὕτω παρὰ σοῦ καπηλευθεῖσαν θρηνήσομαι; σὺ μὲν γὰρ καὶ τὴν καλὴν Χορίνην ἔχεις λαβὼν, καὐτόν σε τῆς ἐμῆς ὀργῆς, καὶ τοῦ τῆς κόρης πατρὸς προφανῶς ὑβρισθέντος, διέσωσας, ἁλιέων τινὶ σκαφιδίῳ νυκτὶ διαπλεύσας, τὴν μὲν ἔρωτι δελεάσας, τοὺς δὲ φιλίας ἐξαπατήσας προσχήματι. ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ σὲ τὸν ἐμὸν φίλον ἀπώλεσα, καὶ τῆς ἐρωμένης παιδίσκης καθυστεροῦμαι. Τί δ' ἂν ἁλιεῖς ἐκεῖνοι μετὰ νεάνιδος κόρης, ξένον ὄντα τῆς πόλεως διὰ νυκτὸς ἐξιόντα, παρ' αὐτοῖς σε δεξάμενοι διενοοῦντος ἧπου καὶ σὲ ἁλιέα δοκοῦντες, ἀντὶ ἰχθύων ἐκ τῆς χέρσου παρθένους ζωγροῦντα· ὡς Ἀφροδίτη, καὶ Ποσειδῶν ταλαντεύονται· ἀλλ' ἐμαυτὸν αἰτιῶμαι τῷ πατρὶ τῆς εὐμόρφου κόρης, οἷά γε φίλον ἐμὸν σὲ, γνωρίσαντα. ἐφ' οἷς ἄρα ξενίας καὶ συμποσίου, οἷα εἰκός, παρ' αὐτῷ μετασχόντα, τοιαῦτα με, καὶ τὸν φίλόξενον Διοκλέοντα σὲ προελόμενον ἀνταμείψασθαι. Οὐκ ἔλαθέ δέ με καὶ τὰ παρὰ τὸ συμπόσιον πρὸς τὴν μητέρα ἐρωτικὰ ῥήματα, οἷς οὐ διελείπες ἐπ' ἀρετῇ τε καὶ κάλλει ταύτην ἐπιεικῶς ἐκθειάζων (οὐ πρὸ πολλοῦ ἑταῖραν οὖσαν, ὡς οἶσθα)· ἥτις τὴν χεῖρα τῆς θυγατρὸς, καί τοι ἐρυθριώσης, λίαν ἐπιτηδείως ἁρμοσαμένη τῇ σῇ, δίς σοι πρὸς τὸ οὖς ἐψιθύριζεν *** *Reliqua desunt.*

[1] In his *Lettre Critique,* 228, Bast reflects on discrepancies between the printed edition and the manuscript (*apographum*), ultimately privileging the latter in his critical apparatus.

[2] Boissonade follows Bast's editorial judgement, incorporating expressions he deemed emblematic, though he questions the decision to leave the epistle incomplete: Boissonade, *Epistolae,* 739.

**English Translation**

The Lover, Betrayed by a Friend Who Treacherously Abducted His Beloved

Epistle 2.23a —

From Theocles to Myron

How shall I speak of your boldness, Myron, without recoiling? And with what words shall I lament the friendship once shared between us, now so cheaply bartered by your hand? You have taken the fair Chorine, and in doing so, eluded not only my wrath but also the rightful indignation of her father, whose honour you so openly violated. You crossed the waters by night in a humble fisherman's skiff, having seduced the maiden with desire and deceived your friends under the guise of innocence.

As for me, I have lost both you, whom I once called friend, and the young servant of my beloved. What were those fishermen to think, encountering a maiden departing the city under cover of darkness, accompanied by a stranger? They welcomed you without suspicion, mistaking you for one of their own, believing you sought fish at sea, unaware that you were instead capturing virgins on land.

It seems that Aphrodite and Poseidon now weigh your fate. Yet I hold myself accountable, as well as the father of that beautiful girl, for having recognised you as a companion. We had shared hospitality, wine, and conversation at his table, as propriety demanded. In return for such generosity, you chose to repay Diocleon, our gracious host, with betrayal.

Nor did I fail to observe the amorous words you addressed to her mother during the banquet, words you did not restrain, extolling her with praise for virtue and beauty — though not long ago she was, as you well know, a courtesan. She, placing her daughter's blushing hand so deftly into yours, leaned in twice and whispered softly into your ear*** *The remainder is missing.*

Bast records an extended ending, purportedly derived from Polyzois's edition. In a footnote, he attributes the additional passage to Polyzois's version, although it is absent from the manuscript he consulted.[1] The text presented as follows:

[1] See Bast, *Lettre Critique,* 229 n. 85.

Ὁ δὲ πατὴρ ἐπιβὰς νεὼς ἐπανήχθη ζητήσων τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παῖδα καὶ σέ· ὡς τὴν μὲν οἴκοι καὶ μὴ θέλουσαν ἀποκομίσοιτο, σὲ δε… ᾽Αλλ᾽ εἴσοι φίλον, ὅποι ἂν τάδε γνοίης, τὴν κόρην ἐάσας τὸν κίνδυνον φυγῇ ἀποδίδρασκε…

**English Translation:**

Her father boarded a ship and set sail to search for his daughter and for you. His intention was to bring the girl home, even if unwilling, and to find you… Yet you shall know, my friend, wherever you may come to understand these things, that the maiden was left behind and you escaped, fleeing from danger…

The tone of the epistle resonates with lamentation and betrayal, steeped in erotic *pathos* and emotional rupture. Its philological attributes — vocabulary, phraseology, and narrative motifs — broadly align with Aristaenetus's stylistic palette, although its transmission history casts doubt on its authenticity. Bast notes the inclusion of a postscript omission from the transmitted version, thereby raising legitimate concerns regarding editorial interpolation and manuscript integrity.

Is this letter truly Aristaenetan, or rather an erudite invention? Bast claims to have received the text directly from Kontos, offering corrections that range from misprinted words to interpretative inconsistencies. He also criticizes the absence of any scholarly apparatus in Kontos's edition. Despite these limitations, his analysis persuaded Boissonade to include the letter in part, in his 1822 edition. Scholarly responses, however, have been marked by controversy and scepticism, reflecting a backdrop of unverified claims and conjectural editorial practice

Recent studies, including those of Mazal, reinforce the hypothesis that the composition may in fact originate with the editor himself.[1] Drago's critical edition deliberately excludes Epistle 2.23a, citing the lack of manuscript testimony.[2]

[1] Mazal reinforces the hypothesis that the letter may be a modern editorial construction rather than a genuine Aristaenetan composition: Otto Mazal, *Aristaeneti Epistularum Libri II* (Stuttgart, 1971), vii; William Arnott, "Review of O. Mazal, Aristaeneti Epistularum Libri II," *Gnomon* 46 (1974): 353–361

[2] Drago omits Epstle 2.23a from his critical edition, citing the absence of manuscript evidence. Pagès similarly questions the editorial foundation of Kontos's version: Antonio Drago, *Aristeneto. Lettere d'amore* (Lecce, 2007), 112–115; Josep Pagès, review of Drago, *Aristeneto, Faventia* 32–33 (2010): 347–350.

Likewise, Cejudo's stylistic analysis identifies a marked deviation in tone and structural composition, arguing that the letter diverges from the thematic and rhetorical norms of Aristaenetus's *corpus*.[1] He regards Kontos's testimony as fragile and uncorroborated, thereby reinforcing doubts about the letter's authenticity.

The case invites further scrutiny within the broader context of pseudepigraphic and interpolated texts in the Greek epistolary tradition. Editorial authority alone cannot confer legitimacy, particularly in the dearth of corroborating manuscript evidence. While the lexical and stylistic traits broadly mirror fifth- to sixth-century Greek and Aristaenetan rhetoric, the semantic focus remains on erotic themes within the conventional bounds of Hellenistic epistolography.

It is therefore fitting to conclude with broader reflections on the cultivation of Hellenistic letters in general, and Aristaenetus's contribution in particular.

## 2. 'I Write, Therefore I Am': Aristaenetus and the Fiction of Presence

Epistolary writing in classical antiquity developed into a complex literary modality, navigating the porous boundaries between factual documentation and imaginative construction, private intimacy and public discourse, and spontaneous expression and rhetorical artifice. From the pragmatic exchanges recorded by Herodotus to the stylised compositions embedded in the literary canon, the letter form reveals a remarkable capacity for adaptation.

Herodotus recounts how King Proetus sends Bellerophon to Lycia with a tablet containing secret instructions for his execution.[2] This episode has been interpreted as a proto-literary instance of the epistle: a written artefact charged with narrative tension and communicative ambiguity, anticipating the fictional letter's dramatic potential.

[1] Cejudo's stylistic analysis identifies significant deviations from Aristaenetus's rhetorical norms, casting doubt on the letter's authenticity: Rafael Gallé Cejudo, "El amor en la literatura epistolar griega," in Juan López Férez (ed.), *Eros en la literatura griega* (Madrid, 2020), 749–766.

[2] Hdt. 3.40–43 recounts how King Proetus sends Bellerophon to Lycia with a folded tablet (*δελτοῖσι πυκτοῖσι*) containing secret instructions—often cited as a proto-epistolary narrative. Cf. *Il.* 6.167–170 for mythic parallels in the transmission of covert messages.

Traces of epistolary consciousness already surface in the *Iliad*, where certain passages evoke mediated communication.[1] From the fifth century BCE onwards, the genre acquires material and thematic recurrence, inscribed on diverse media such as leather, lead, and papyrus. Its functions resist rigid categorisation, encompassing diplomatic, philosophical, apologetic, consolatory, propagandistic, and aesthetic dimensions.

Ceccarelli (2013) explores the evolution of epistolary practice from archaic inscriptions to its literary deployment in historiography, with particular attention to Herodotean examples.[2] The folded tablet motif (δελτοῖσι πυκτοῖσι) exemplifies the letter's dual role as both narrative device and communicative tool.

In rhetorical theory, notably in the treatise Περὶ ἑρμηνείας attributed to Demetrius of Alexandria (sections 223–235), the epistle is recognised as a distinct stylistic register. It is characterised by clarity, spontaneity, and expressiveness — features that align it with conversational immediacy and dialogic exchange.

Within the erotic domain, the fictional letter attains exceptional literary resonance. Compositions attributed to mythological or invented figures serve as vehicles for desire, lamentation, and fantasy, articulating affect in ways that transcend conventional genres

Ovid's *Heroides* inaugurate a tradition of intimate epistolary voice, foregrounding female perspectives and emotional nuance. This influence permeates the late antique Greek *corpus*, where authors such as Alciphron, Philostratus, and Aristaenetus employ the letter form to simulate passion and rhetorical finesse.[3]

[1] Cf. *Il.* 6.167–170.

[2] On the evolution of epistolary practices from archaic inscriptions to literary historiography, see Paola Ceccarelli, *Ancient Greek Letter Writing: A Cultural History (600 BC–150 AD)* (Oxford, 2013), 1–45, 112–135.

[3] For broader studies of epistolary rhetoric and literary culture, see Owen Hodkinson, Patricia Rosenmeyer, and Evelien Bracke, *Epistolary Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature* (Cambridge, 2013), 1–20, 85–102; Antonio Drago, "The Letters of Aristaenetus: Attribution, Dating, Cultural Background," in Émeline Marquis (ed.), *Epistolary Fiction in Ancient Greek Literature* (Berlin. Boston 2023), 105–122.

These compositions, particularly during the Roman Imperial period, function as miniature literary performances, blending dramatic staging with rhetorical sophistication. [1]

Aristaenetus's fifty fictional letters exemplify this intertextual and stylised tradition. [2] Rather than conveying genuine sentiment, they enact a literary aesthetic of love, interweaving allusions to Sappho, Euripides, Plato, Isocrates, and Menander.

Although Sappho did not compose formal letters, her lyric poetry often adopts an epistolary posture — marked by vocative immediacy, imagined interlocutors, and heightened subjectivity. [3]

Euripides incorporates letters as dramatic catalysts in plays such as *Hippolytus* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, where written messages shape plot development and character motivation. [4]

Philosophical and rhetorical uses of the letter are evident in Plato's *Seventh Letter*, Isocrates' correspondence, [5] and Menander's dramaturgy. [6] These texts

[1] See Eric Bowie, "The Greeks and Their Past in the Second Sophistic," *Past & Present* 46 (1970): 3–41, esp. 5; Donald Russell, *Greek Declamation* (Cambridge, 1983), 1–20.

[2] On rhetorical stylisation and intertextual borrowing, see Rudolf Hercher, *Epistolographi Graeci* (Paris, 1873), viii, who observes that Aristaenetus "appears to have merely selected elegant passages from earlier writers and recast them in the form of letters" (*nihil aliud fecisse videtur quam ex scriptoribus antiquioribus locos elegantes excerpere et eos in epistolarum formam redigere*). See also Ruth Morello and Andrew Morrison, *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography* (Oxford, 2007), 1–28, 105–122.

[3] Sappho's lyric voice often adopts an epistolary posture through apostrophe and imagined interlocutors. See Ellen Greene, *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* (Berkeley, 1996), 31–50, 233–247; Patrick Finglass and Adrian Kelly, *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho* (Cambridge, 2021), 96–112, on the convergence between lyric intimacy and epistolary form.

[4] On the dramatic use of letters in Euripides' tragedies, see James Diggle, *Euripidea: Collected Essays* (Oxford, 1994), 112–135; Andreas Markantonatos, *Brill's Companion to Euripides,* Vol. 1 (Leiden, 2020), 421–560; Nancy Rabinowitz, *Greek Tragedy and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 2023), 112–135.

[5] Plato, Isocrates, and Menander employ letters to explore persuasion, authenticity, and indirect communication, often blurring the boundary between authorial voice and literary persona. On Plato's *Seventh Letter* and the question of authenticity, see Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter* (Oxford, 2015), 1–45; Paolo Butti de Lima, "Plato's Seventh Letter: Composition and Incongruences," *Methexis* 33 (2021): 102–121; and James Perry, *Examining the Authenticity of Plato's Epistle VII through Deep*

interrogate authenticity, persuasion, and indirect communication, often blurring the line between authorial voice and constructed *persona*.

Historiographical authors such as Herodotus[1] and Xenophon[2] incorporate letters to enhance narrative verisimilitude and documentary realism. The epistle thereby becomes a palimpsest of stylistic memory, its meaning shaped by intertextual resonance and cultural recognition. [3]

Despite its marginalisation within traditional literary taxonomies, the genre offers a privileged space for experimenting with subjectivity, voice, and affect. The erotic epistle does not merely depict desire; it constructs it through a metatextual *mise en scène*, prefiguring literary strategies that blur the line between narrative invention and emotional verisimilitude.

The fragment under consideration may be read as the vestige of a lost letter seeking textual affiliation. If authenticated, its stylistic and semantic features would justify its inclusion within the disputed *corpus* traditionally attributed to Aristaenetus.

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*Learning* (Harvard, 2021), 20–35. For rhetorical strategies in Isocrates' letters, see Richard Sullivan, "Classical Epistolary Theory and the Letters of Isocrates," in Carol Poster and Linda Mitchell (eds.), *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present* (Leiden, 2019), 7–20; Laura Vildebaum, "Contemporary Reflections on Isocrates and His Role in Rhetoric and Philosophy," in *Creating the Ancient Rhetorical Tradition* (Cambridge, 2021), 120–128.

[6] For Menander's use of implicit epistolary structures and dramatic simulation, see André Blanchard, "Reconstructing Menander," in Michael Fontaine and Arianna Scafuro (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy* (Oxford, 2013), 239–257; Andreas Hurst, *Dans les marges de Ménandre* (Genève, 2015), 15–42. See also Niklas Holzberg, "Menander 1972–2022: Eine Bibliographie*," Logeion* 13 (2023): 297–433.

[1] For the narrative and historiographical role of letters in Herodotus, see Bowie 2013, 103–121; Rosaria Munson, *Herodotus. Vol. 1 – Herodotus and the Narrative of the Past* (Oxford, 2013), 112–135; Emily Baragwanath and Mathieu de Bakker, *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford, 2012), 89–104.

[2] On the use of letters in Xenophon's historical narratives, see Debbie Gera, "Letters in Xenophon," in Owen Hodkinson, Patricia Rosenmeyer and Evelien Bracke (Oxford, 2013), 85–103; Michael Flower, *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon* (Cambridge, 2016), 212–228. For ethical and historiographical perspectives, see Gabriel Danzig, David Johnson, and David Konstan, "Letters and Leadership," in *Xenophon: Ethical Principles and Historical Inquiry* (Leiden, 2018), 145–162.

[3] William Arnott, "Aristaenetus and the Art of Literary Imitation," *CQ* 23 (1973): 202–220.

In the early thirteenth century, a scribe compiled a set of fifty fictional *anecdota* in Attic prose, likely in Otranto, preserved in a *manuscriptum unicum* known as *cod. Vindobonensis Philologicus Graecus* 310. These texts explore motifs of desire, betrayal, and social conduct, anticipating the conventions of courtly love literature. Characters are assigned *nomina significantia*, each bearing semiotic weight.

Among Byzantine manuscripts, the *codex* preserved at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (ÖNB), entrusted to Lascaris and printed by Sambuco in Antwerp in 1566, [1] is notable for its bipartite structure (ff. 1–40; 40–64v), labelled ἄρητον Β Βιβλίον. The initial section, Βίβλιον Α′ Ἐπιστολαὶ Ἀρισταίνετου, adheres to a consistent editorial framework, naming correspondents with the exception of Ep. 1.2 and 2.6. [2] Despite paleographical deterioration, a discernible editorial logic persists.

Although the manuscript tradition offers concrete evidence, the identity and chronology of the author remain conjectural. The heading of Ep. 1.1, Ἀρισταίνετος Φιλοκάλῳ, has prompted divergent interpretations. Some regard 'Aristaenetus's as a pseudonym or a meaningful construct, while others propose a historical figure engaged in literary self-fashioning. [3] The name itself, derived from ἄριστος (best) and αἰνετός (praiseworthy), oscillates between active self-assertion and passive acclaim, underscoring its lexical ambiguity.

Holstenius, writing in 1646,[4] identifies an Aristaenetus as a fourth-century orator associated with Libanius, suggesting a possible historical anchor. Alternatively, the author may have embedded himself within the narrative, assuming the role of correspondent or observer—a technique later adopted by writers and artists who appear within their own creations. Nonetheless, inferring

[1] Karl Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum,* vol. 3 (Paris, 1884), 402; Nicola Bianchi, "Appunti sulla tradizione manoscritta e la ricezione di Aristeneto," *Exemplaria Classica* 12 (2008): 135–143.

[2] Drago, *Aristeneto,* 16 n. 38.

[3] Luc. *DMeretr.* 2.4 and 10.1. For modern interpretations of this etymology, see Albin Lesky, *Aristainetos: Erotische Briefe; Eingeleitet, neu übertragen und erläutert* (Zürich, 1951), 8; Arnott, *Collected Fragments,* 293; Drago, *Aristeneto,* 17.

[4] Holstenius, *Epistolae ad Lambecium,* no. 63.

autobiographical intent from internal references such as Ep. 1.1 (τοῖς γραφεῖσι) risks conflating constructed *persona* with historical reality. [1]

To evaluate the nature of this authorial identity—whether rooted in history or shaped by literary convention—one must examine the corpus attributed to Aristaenetus. Comprising fifty texts, its integrity is compromised. Ep. 2.22 remains incomplete, and several folios are missing. Intertextual analysis suggests a sixth-century provenance, likely in Constantinople during the reign of Justinian. The author demonstrates familiarity with the liberal arts, yet the lack of Christian references[2] implies a consciously pagan aesthetic, more suggestiveof a stylised *persona* rather than a historical individual.

This impression is reinforced by the author's deliberate distancing from Christian moral frameworks, in favour of a classical literary ethos. The texts omit explicit treatment of abortion, as seen in Ep. 1.19, and refrain from direct engagement with pederasty, while symbolically exploring transgressive themes such as adultery, incest, and *aphrodisia*. Homosexuality is discreetly present in Ep. 1.8, 1.10, and 1.11, where ephebic ἔρως is evoked through linguistic nuance and metaphorical allusion. These elements collectively construct the impression of a deliberately curated pagan aesthetic, shaped by classical imagery and detached from Christian moral paradigms.[3]

Having contextualised the fragment within its epistolary and literary framework and examined its attribution to the figure of Aristaenetus—whose name and manuscript may constitute literary constructs—the inquiry now turns to a more detailed textual analysis. The following chapter continues this trajectory by undertaking a philological and semantic study of the fragment, placing it in dialogue with other texts attributed to Aristaenetus. Through this comparative approach, it

[1] On self-insertion techniques reminiscent of epistolographers who appear as characters in their own letters, see Regina Höschele, "From Hellas with Love: The Aesthetics of Imitation in Aristaenetus's 'Epistles'," *TAPhS* 142.1 (2012): 167–176; Giuseppe Zanetto, "Un epistolografo al lavoro: Le Lettere di Aristeneto," *SIFC 5* (1987): 197–199. For a historical parallel, see Syn. 133 on the Eastern consul (404), where the boundary between author and persona is similarly blurred.

[2] Lesky, *Aristainetos,* 8; Drago, *Aristeneto,* 17, 25–36.

[3] William Arnott, "Pastiche, Pleasantry, Prudish Eroticism: The Letters of 'Aristaenetus's," *YCIS* (1892): 303.

aims to elucidate thematic continuities, stylistic particularities, and interpretative tensions that further complicate the question of authorial coherence and literary identity.

### 3. Writing Love, Writing Loss: Eroticism and Philological Inquiry in 2.23a

The epistolary collection attributed to Aristaenetus exemplifies late Hellenistic Attic prose, characterised by stylised simplicity and rhythmic elegance. Its cadence recalls Platonic and Menandrian models, widely emulated in the second and third centuries CE. The prose cultivates a deliberate metric rhythm,[1] with frequent aposiopesis conveying narrative modesty and presuming the reader's cultural familiarity with erotic conventions. [2] Though sensual in theme, [3] the text remains non-obscene, favouring euphemism and rhetorical understatement.

*Hapax legomena* and solecisms[4] signal a linguistic drift towards Byzantine norms. The style oscillates between ekphrastic description and bucolic aesthetics, while free indirect speech and hypothetical dialogism[5] introduce dramatic and performative layering. These devices—especially the mserging of narrator and character voices, and imagined exchanges without attribution—confer formal hybridity, enabling the text to shift between monologue and theatrical voice, enhancing its performative resonance.

Beneath its seemingly light tone, Aristaenetus's collection reveals intricate erotic and moral tableaux, with each epistle functioning as a self-contained episode within a loosely structured narrative. The correspondents serve primarily as rhetorical constructs—formal addressees rather than active interlocutors. Recurrent

[1] On Aristaenetus's stylistic framework, see Theodor Nissen, "Zur Briefliteratur der Spätantike," *Hermes* 75 (1940): 1–14; Arnott, "Review of O. Mazal"*,* 355; Renate Burri, "Zur Datierung und Identität des Aristainetos," *Museum Helveticum* 61 (2004): 86.

[2] For stylistic nuance and erotic suggestiveness, see William Arnott, "The Composition of the Letters of Aristaenetus," *Mnemosyne* 35 (1982):310–315.

[3] Aristaenetus employs φιλέω, ἐράω, and ἀγάπη with semantic fluidity, blurring distinctions between civic affection, erotic desire, and transcendent love: Reina Troca Pereira, *Eros e Philia: Semântica do Amor na Antiguidade Tardia* (Coimbra, 2013), 129–220.

[4] Arnott, "Pastiche, Pleasantry, Prudish Eroticism", 295.

[5] Russell, *Greek Declamation,* 1–39; Graham Anderson, *The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire* (London, 1993), 52.

themes such as adultery, sexual initiation (both male and female), incestuous desire, polygamy, and betrayal contribute to a rich affective lexicon shaped by diverse literary configurations. A subtle intertextual web links certain epistles in thematic pairs—'semantic diptychs'—reflecting the compositional logic of novella cycles.[1] These pairings, together with recurring literary *topoi* such as courtship, rivalry, female archetypes, deceit, confessional narrative, and *pathos*, provide cohesion across otherwise disparate episodes.

Lexical choices related to expressions of love are pivotal in shaping the text's affective semantics. In Aristaenetus's *corpus*, love transcends mere physical desire, emerging as a multifaceted cultural symbol encompassing friendship, social cohesion, divine favour, and moral ambivalence.

These themes are deeply embedded in a broader literary tradition, spanning classical antiquity to the Byzantine revival. Aristaenetus engages in sustained dialogue with earlier authors,[2] and this intertextual constellation not only shapes his stylistic register but also situates the epistles within a wider project of cultural memory and philological recovery. Literary imitation (*mimesis*) functions as both homage and potential dilution—a gesture of reverence that simultaneously risks undermining originality.

The epistles prefigure the medieval erotic *topos* of '*fin'amor*', in which romantic subordination becomes a gesture of honour. By inverting conventional social hierarchies, this courtly love schema elevates the unattainable woman, reconfigures feudal vassalage through amorous submission, and stages devotion as moral spectacle. Aristaenetus's *corpus* abounds in motifs such as male desire, sudden infatuation, erotic suffering, rejection, jealousy, voyeurism, oaths, initiation, and transgressive seduction. Gender roles are fluidly manipulated: hetairas punish unwanted lovers; women assert agency over impotent, elderly, or arrogant suitors; and mythic figures are reimagined within quotidian scenes of seduction. Love is portrayed as both sacred and profane—divinely sanctioned yet sacrilegiously enacted within temples and consecrated spaces.

[1] Zanetto, "Le Lettere di Aristeneto," 1987.

[2] Notably, Aristaenetus echoes a wide array of classical and post-classical authors, including Homer, Sappho, Plato, Aristophanes, Lucian, Philostratus, and Ovid.

The apograph under examination reflects thematic currents consistent with Aristaenetus's epistolary repertoire. Epistle 2.23a, notably, condenses several recurring motifs: erotic intrigue, moral deviation, and emotional disloyalty. What sets this fragment apart is its portrayal of a rift between two male figures, [1] where the emotional fracture arises not solely from romantic tension but from the disintegration of friendship and ethical responsibility. In contrast to the *corpus*'s predominant focus on heterosexual desire and female agency, this epistle centres on male companionship disrupted by competing affective loyalties. The episode thus reconfigures betrayal as a civic and ethical failure, exposing the fragility of φιλία when confronted by ἔρως.

The epistle, composed by Theocles and addressed to Myron, narrates a nocturnal episode in which Myron elopes with Chorine, the daughter of a distinguished host, under the pretext of hospitality (ξενία) and disguised as a fisherman. The seduction, executed under cover of night and across the straits, is shaped by intertextual references to mythological abductions, where Poseidon and Aphrodite appear not as divine instigators of passion but as equivocal celestial observers.

The names of the principal characters carry more than nominal significance. Theocles, derived from θεός and κλέος, evokes moral integrity and divine renown; Myron, interpreted as a variant of Μύρων, symbolises seduction and deceit; Diocleon, formed from Ζεύς and κλέος, embodies civic virtue and paternal authority.[2] The letter's structure, modelled on the admonitory epistle, functions not merely as a narrative vehicle but as a cultural reflection on the boundaries of ἔρως and the ethical weight of φιλία.

Viewed from this angle, the letter assumes a didactic tenor, illustrating that friendship, despite its social prestige, does not guarantee the alignment of ethical values. Theocles appears as a character whose moral convictions are undermined by

[1] Within Aristaenetus's epistolary corpus, interpersonal bonds range from amorous entanglements (e.g. Ep. 2.2) to rivalry (e.g. Ep. 2.6). The absence of recursive affective engagement elsewhere renders Ep. 2.23a exceptional in its sustained emotional trajectory: see also Senad Hajdarević, "Attempts at reconciliation in Aristaenetus," *Umjetnost riječi* 67.1 (2023): 1–24.

[2] Diocleon's name (*Διός* + *κλέος*) invites a *nomen omen* reading, echoing Ζεὺς ξένιος as protector of hospitality (*Il.* 13.624–625; *Od.* 9.270–271).

the pursuit of personal desire, and the episode may be interpreted as a dissolution of φιλία under the influence of ἔρως. Although devoid of explicit sacrality, the narrative resonates with Judaeo-Christian ethical frameworks[1] while, *mutatis mutandis*, preserving structural features of pagan philosophical thought—indicating their continued cultural embeddedness.

Myron's breach of obligation operates on two distinct levels. In concrete terms, he transgresses ethical codes of chastity and virginity by seducing and absconding with the young Chorine. More subtly, he appears to initiate a secondary seduction involving Chorine's mother, once a ἑταίρα and now reabsorbed into a domestic sphere. Through rhetorical charm and calculated speech, he provokes erotic reactions—from blushing to the symbolic gesture of joined hands—gradually implicating her in his scheme. Her whispered utterances remain unheard, yet within ancient epistolary conventions, silence does not negate meaning; it insinuates.

The sea-crossing, the assumed identity of a fisherman, and the distortion of hospitality intensify the symbolic breach. Myron pursues not aquatic creatures but virgins—ἀντὶ ἰχθύων παρθένους ζωγρῶντα—a satirical reversal of social ritual. In Greek literary tradition, the fisherman (ἁλιεύς) typically connotes simplicity, marginal status, or strategic cunning. Here, Myron's adoption of the role undermines the conventional trope, converting a modest figure into an agent of erotic subversion. This reversal—hunting virgins rather than fish—mocks societal norms and redraws the moral contours of hospitality.

As the narrative unfolds, the letter reaches a moment of dramatic confrontation: the father in pursuit of his daughter, the maiden unwilling to return, and the seducer calmly entrenched in his ethical transgression. Despite the betrayal, Theocles urges Myron to flee impending peril, displaying a nobility of character that heightens the narrative's ambiguity. Again, silence acquires expressive force; the letter concludes without resolution.

The evolving drama reveals a generational divide between the daughter (κόρη) and the mother (ἑταίρα), whose erotic bond unsettles conventional expectations. [2] Notably, although the daughter agrees to flee, her portrayal diverges from the lexical

[1] Arnott, *Pastiche, Pleasantry, Prudish Eroticism,* 303.

[2] Senad Hajdarević, *Epistolary Poetics,* 2018, 1–24; *idem*, *Aristaenetus's Collection: "Male" and "Female" Letters? Systasis 41* (2023): 1–19.

norms associated with παρθενία, being labelled παρθένος only once and otherwise consistently referred to as κόρη. This terminological choice underscores her ambiguous position within the semantic framework of virginity. [1]

The rhetorical structure of the letter draws on techniques emblematic of the Second Sophistic, including *captatio benevolentiae*, *ethopoeia*, hypotactic complexity, and subtle paronomasia. Scholarly analysis—most notably by Bast—reveals significant manuscript divergences, indicating editorial instability and textual malleability. The edition prepared by M. Polyzois incorporates interpretive glosses (e.g. Εραστής ὑπὸ φίλου τῆς ἐρωμένης ἐπιβούλως ἁρπαγείσης) and conjectural emendations such as συγχυσμένος for νυκτί διαπλεύσας, many of which Bast contests through consultation of Parisian manuscript sources.

Bast's analysis, informed by subsequent correspondence, adopts a sceptical perspective. He portrays Aristaenetus not so much as an original author but as a compiler, proposing that he assembled *sententiae* from diverse sources and recast them in epistolary form. This interpretation underscores the epistolographer's reliance on existing literary material, suggesting that his principal contribution lies in structural arrangement rather than stylistic invention. Nevertheless, Bast concedes the text's value for philological inquiry, situating its academic significance chiefly in the critical apparatus rather than in the narrative content.

The name Μεϊρον has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Both the classical philologist Villoison and Bast regard it as a corrupted form, favouring Μύρων, which is attested in classical sources.[2] Vatican manuscript 997 presents an alternative variant—Αὐθαν Μόραν—though this reading remains open to interpretive scrutiny. Lexical irregularities such as ξένου ὄντα, and extended forms

[1] A latent parallelism emerges between the daughter's hesitant complicity in her abduction and the mother's suggestive infidelity, both figures expressing libidinal agency across generational and social divides. While the daughter's desire appears to align with her seducer's initiative, the mother—already socially embedded as a wife—manifests a more covert erotic autonomy. This duality underscores Aristaenetus's recurring motif of female desire transcending normative constraints, irrespective of age or status: see Sabira Hajdarević, *Epistolary Poetics,* 2018, 1–24.

[2] Friedrich Bast, *Lettre Critique,* 229 n. 85; cf. Jean-Baptiste-Gaspard d'Ansse de Villoison, *Anecdota Graeca,* vol. 1 (Paris, 1781), 112–114.

like τῆς πόλεως, accentuate Myron's estrangement and reinforce the thematic transgression.

In later passages, erotic undertones resurface, particularly in the account of Myron's encounter with the stranger. The phrase ἐπὶ τῇ τοῦ ξένου ὄψει, though seemingly neutral, conveys a latent sensuality—especially when juxtaposed with Myron's trembling (σπαράττειν) and the stranger's gaze. Bast reads this moment as a 'homoerotic rupture,' a reading that resonates with the text's broader themes of desire and transgression.

Ultimately, Epistle 2.23a occupies a liminal space between fictional narrative and ethical reflection. It reveals the porous boundaries among erotic prose, moral philosophy, and rhetorical stylisation, foregrounding the interplay between affective drama and textual ambiguity. Whatever of his historical veracity of its attribution, the *corpus* attributed to Aristaenetus remains a fertile site for interpretive inquiry, where philological precision and literary resonance converge.

**4. Echoes of Betrayal: Concluding Reflections**

Concluding this study, it becomes evident that Epistle 2.23a—dubiously attributed to Aristaenetus yet philologically and literarily suggestive—stands as a potent specimen of fictional epistolography. Its uncertain provenance, complex editorial history, and absence of a secure manuscript witness have elicited scholarly scepticism concerning its authenticity. Yet, as recent research underscores, literary value need not hinge upon authorial certainty, especially within the tradition of stylised love letters in late antiquity and Byzantium.

This letter offers a layered exploration of desire, betrayal, and the collapse of social and sacred obligations, conveyed through an emotionally charged voice that enacts what Patricia Rosenmeyer terms the "performance of epistolary intimacy".[1] The exchange between Theocles and Myron unfolds against the backdrop of disrupted φιλία and violated ξένια. These names, previously noted, function as ethical and narrative markers, reinforcing the symbolic architecture of the epistle.

On a cultural level, the letter engages with wider discourses surrounding feminine virtue and sexual transgression. Chorine, depicted as a παρθένος deceived

[1] Patricia Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (Cambridge, 2001), 131–135.

under the guise of hospitality, embodies the contested significance of virginity in late antique society. As Kelto Lillis and Castelli have observed, virginity is not merely a biological state but a cultural construct bound to honour, spiritual integrity, and social capital.[1] Its violation— particularly outside marriage, was perceived as a rupture of familial cohesion and even of cosmic order. The mother's ambiguous role in the narrative, both as recipient of Myron's flirtatious advances and as potential facilitator of hospitality, echoes literary archetypes of feminine transformation, in which erotic pasts are reconfigured within socially sanctioned domestic roles. [2] Bonnie and Feldman identify this transformation as a recurring literary motif: the courtesan who is narratively rehabilitated into the role of a socially accepted wife through marital legitimation.[3]

From a philological standpoint, Epistle 2.23a discloses a dense fabric of rhetorical devices—*ethopoiia*, *paronomasia*, and *pathos*-infused hypotactic constructions—that stylistically resonate with the Aristaenetan *corpus*, even though its provenance remains contested. The editorial reconstructions undertaken by Kontos, together with the critical refinements introduced by Bastius, underscore the precarious condition of the manuscript tradition and the interpretive challenges inherent in damaged or interpolated texts. In his *Epistola Critica*, Bast placed particular confidence in a manuscript copy transmitted by Polyzois during his stay in Paris, which he judged more reliable than the printed edition. Boissonade, following his lead, incorporated the *apographum* into his own version, consigning textual variants and suspected interpolations to the notes. Yet he also remarks on the critic's puzzling decision to leave the epistle unfinished, raising doubts as to whether the author ever intended to bring the thought to completion.

In sum, Epistle 2.23a is not merely a styised lament; it also functions as a site of ethical reflection, cultural memory, and aesthetic experimentation. It interlaces

[1] Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women in Antiquity," *J. Fem. Stud. Relig.* 2 (1986): 61–88; Kate Lillis, *Virgin Territory* (Oakland, 2023), 45–78.

[2] The mother's role, oscillating between courtesan and domestic matron, recalls figures in Alciphron's letters, such as Glycera, who negotiate erotic agency within socially ambiguous contexts. Her complicity in Myron's seduction destabilises conventional maternal authority, repositioning her as a mediator of desire.

[3] Bonnie Gordon and Martha Feldman, *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Oxford, 2006), 133–270.

motifs of erotic folklore, moral interrogation, and literary emulation within the performative frame of the epistle. Whether or not it was authored by Aristaenetus, it speaks in a voice unmistakably shaped by the literary milieu of late antiquity—a voice that navigates desire, dignity, and loss in ways at once intimate and expansive. The letter transcends its immediate communicative role, assuming the form of a dramatic tableau of ethical and emotional interplay—a testament to the enduring capacity of epistolography to simulate, sublimate, and preserve the fragile contours of human experience.

If there is a final truth to be drawn from Epistle 2.23a, it lies not in its narrative of betrayal, nor in its stylistic finesse, but in its capacity to unsettle both textual stability and narrative certainty. The letter, whether genuinely transmitted or artfully devised, compels reflection on the instability of agency and the fluidity of voice. Who seduced whom? Was it the youth who abducted the maiden, or the maiden who entrapped him? Or perhaps the decisive act of seduction emerged from the whispered utterances of the mother-in-law—unrecorded, undeciphered, yet pivotal. In this light, the epistle becomes a theatre of ἀπουσία: a space in which presence is simulated, origin effaced, and meaning endlessly deferred. It stages intimacy while withholding truth; it enacts fidelity while concealing invention. The scholar's task is not to resolve the enigma but to dwell within it—to recognise that what seduces most in the text may be precisely what is withheld. Such is the paradox of Epistle 2.23a: a fiction that insists on being read as truth, and a truth that endures only through the performance of reading.

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