



Ancient Fanfiction: Nossis

By Celine Baumbach

I shuffled through the parchments on my desk, fruitlessly trying to find one that was empty. In the end I settled for the backside of one I had already written on. Then I looked at the desk and sighed; in trying to find something to write upon I had only created more chaos, and now I had somehow lost my list of commissions. Great.

Groaning, I rested my forehead against the table. Maybe I should clean up today and try writing again tomorrow.

“Are you feeling unwell, my Lady?” my servant Zoe asked, appearing in the doorway. “You have a guest, but I can tell her to come back tomorrow?”

I sat back upright, hoping it was not another potential customer but at this point being willing to take any distraction from the mess on my desk. “No, please, show her in.”

Zoe returned moments later with a short woman wrapped in expensive fabrics and jewelry. Her hair was done up elegantly but strict. Yet her smile was warm.

“Lady Menodora,” Zoe introduced her.

I got up as my guest curtsied. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said.

I curtsied as well. “Nossis. But you already knew that.” I leaned against the desk, waiting for her to speak.

Menodora continued smiling benevolently. “I did. It’s why I’m here.” She pulled an ottoman from its place at the wall and sat down. “I had dinner a few nights back with your friend Cleouchas, and she recited the most wonderful epigram about a portrait. She told me you had written it, and also that you were taking commissions.”



My own smile dropped. "That's true. But I'm afraid I have a somewhat long list of commissions already, so I'll have to recommend you seek out some other poet in Locris. I think Akakios is still taking commissions?"

"I don't care if there's a long wait," Menodora said. "I'm sure some other writer would do a good job. But my request is a little complicated, which is why I want to commission you specifically."

I raised an eyebrow silently.

"My friend, Polyarchis, donated the statue of Aphrodite that was unveiled at the temple recently. Are you familiar?"

"It's beautiful."

"I agree." She smiled fondly. "The problem is that Polyarchis works as a courtesan. And while I don't doubt that some other poet would also accept my commission, I would prefer the epigram not to tear down Polyarchis for how she made the money with which she bought the statue being praised."

I nodded, understanding perfectly. I had read too many epigrams that did exactly what she had described, and I never understood them. What did it matter whether a woman bought a gift to the goddess with the money of the one man she had married or the many whom she had rented her body to? But it was always like this when a woman had property of her own. My own critics were neither as loud nor as harsh as those of courtesans, but I could empathize.

"I'll do it," I told Menodora. "But it will take more than two weeks at least."

She was still smiling. "Of course. Take as much time as you need."



Context:

Nossis was a 300 BCE ancient Greek poetess from Locris. She was one of the most well-known poetesses of ancient Greece, but today all that is left of her work are eleven epigrams, preserved because they were part of an anthology. Most interesting about her is that she is described as a very women-centric poet, and the anthology associates with her the adjective “thêlyglôssos”, which means “one who speaks like a woman/to women”. Nossis wrote about women and in a style that was distinct from her male contemporaries. Notably, she also wrote about sex workers in a positive way, something that I wanted to reflect in the story. While going so far as to describe Nossis as a feminist might be too far, especially since she didn’t actually advocate for women’s rights within her patriarchal society, she is an example of female solidarity and a kind of counter culture within the ancient world.

Resources:

<https://sententiaeantiquae.com/2019/03/04/sapphos-equal-some-epigrams-assigned-to-the-poet-nossis/>