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Backwards Perspectives: Subversive Approaches to Sex in Dioscorides

In their poetic treatment of sexual experiences, the erotic epigrams of Dioscorides subvert both the formal tradition of heroic language and conventional attitudes toward the subject of sex itself. Dioscorides reflects not only the permissive attitude towards sex typical of the genre of Hellenistic epigram, which frequently deals with it in an explicit manner, but a distinctive, self-conscious interest in depicting subversive sex in a rhetorically shocking way. This paper seeks to explore the effect of this approach through three erotic epigrams of Dioscorides which present destabilizing uses of epic language and a transgressive conception of the creative potential of sexual performance. In *A.P.* 5.56, the poet's erotic praise of his mistress's physical attributes in grandiloquent, epic vocabulary is undermined by a vulgar sexual cliché in the final couplet. *A.P.* 5.55, a rare explicit depiction of mutual orgasm between the poet and his mistress, plays on the longstanding trope of literary immortality by insinuating that it is achieved through extreme sexual pleasure. In the final and perhaps the most transgressive poem, *A.P.* 5.54, the poet exhorts an amorous husband to take his pregnant wife from behind in a gender-inverted pederastic fantasy, effectively amalgamating—and problematizing—the categories of procreative and recreational sex, male and female, and 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' normative behavior. The natural brevity of epigram demands a focus on individual erotic experiences and thus allows Dioscorides to deploy a 'shock ending' present in all three of these epigrams, where he fully illuminates his subversive sexual approach. The gaze of the erotic poet that is felt throughout each of these poems enacts a transformative power on sexual performance, demonstrating innovative uses of poetic language as well as innovative attitudes towards sex and gender.