A NOTE ON
GREEK ὀµείχω ‘TO URINATE’ AND μοιχός ‘ADULTERER’

Abstract. This article investigates the problem of the etymological connection between the Greek word ὀµείχω ‘to urinate’ and the agent noun μοιχός ‘adulterer’, the semantics of which has often been termed improbable. It is pointed out that the connection might be made more probable when analyzing the Latin data: the verb meiō, -ere ‘to urinate’ and its meaning in the Latin texts, which is not always restricted to ‘urinating’ but is also used as an obscene word meaning ‘to ejaculate’. We can then postulate that μοιχός was an agent noun of ὀµείχω in the meaning of ‘to ejaculate’ and this way as ‘adulterer’.

1. Greek has a lexeme for ‘to urinate’ in the word ὀµείχω /omḗkʰhō/ (attested as far as Hesiod, going back to PIE *h₂mei̯gh-o-h₂, with cognates in Lat. meiō / later mingō, Skt. mé̄hati, cf. LIV²: 303, LSJ: 1221), the agent noun of which is μοιχός /moikʰós/ but with somewhat surprising meaning ‘adulterer’.

2. The semantic connection has not been termed completely clearly, it has been only mentioned as a probable “vulgärer und verächtlicher Ausdruck” (so Frisk 1960: 250 after Wackernagel 1916: par. 225 A1) and an obscene word (cf. Beekes 2010: 962). Beekes mentions essentially two possibilities: “often analyzed as an agent noun of ὀµείχω ‘to urinate’ as a vulgar expression” (however, without specifying what vulgar expression is meant) or “(...) it may be thought that the semantic connection of adultery with urinating is not specific enough, and that the etymology must be abandoned” (Beekes 2010: ibidem).

3. I would like to show that the connection between urinating and adultery is very specific and cannot be taken as an argument against the etymological connection of those two words. Beside the quite obvious connection of the

*) I would like to thank Prof. Marek Stachowski (Kraków) for drawing my attention to the probable semantic connection between Greek ὀµείχω /omḗkʰhō/ ‘to urinate’ and μοιχός /moikʰós/ ‘adulterer’. Without his suggestion I would not have been able to devise this hypothesis. Needless to add, I am solely responsible for any flaws and errors.
meaning of \( \text{oμείχω} \) /ομέκκ̄h/ with not only ‘urinating’ but also generally ‘emitting fluid’ and thus also ‘ejaculating’, we have some similar semantic developments in Latin and I think the key to the connection lies in the semantics found within the Latin material. If we examine the Latin cognate, the word meiō, -ere, we will find that it means ‘to urinate’ but also, as an obscene term, ‘to ejaculate’ (cf. TLL: 605, which gives its meaning as “semen emittere”). It is attested in this meaning in Horace (Sat. 2, 7, 52) and Martialis (11, 46, 2).

4. It is thus easily imaginable that the Greek verb \( \text{oμείχω} \) /ομέκκ̄h/ meaning ‘to urinate’ could also mean ‘to ejaculate’ and from this meaning one could form a nomen agentis \( \text{μοιχός} \) /moik̄h̄s/ meaning literally ‘the one who ejaculates’ > ‘adulterer’.\(^2\) It is surprising that Beekes in his new etymological dictionary of Greek (Beekes 2010) wishes to abandon this etymology due to the alleged lack of semantic connection between \( \text{oμείχω} \) /ομέκκ̄h/ and \( \text{μοιχός} \) /moik̄h̄s/.

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Bibliography


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1 Note a similar suggestion by Ernout-Meillet: “Le sens de gr. μοιχός ‘adultère’ est isolé; (cf. pourtant l’emploi de mingere, meiere au sens de futture chez les satiriques)” (Ernout-Meillet 1951: 718) and Chantraine: “l’emploi d’un mot vulgaire tiré d’un verbe signifiant «pisser» pour designer l’adultère ne doit pas surprendre (…)” (Chantraine 1968: 709).

2 Note that the Greek term \( \text{μοιχός} \) /moik̄h̄s/ has a very negative meaning.

3 This may also have to do with the fact that the members of the “Leiden school” of Indo-European linguistics have recently been trying to deny the existence of the “Saussure Effect” (cf. van Beek 2011, Pronk 2011), i.e. the loss of laryngeals in words with o-grade of the root (cf. Meier-Brugger 2003: 118-119), of which Greek \( \text{μοιχός} \) /moik̄h̄s/ is one of the prime examples.


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