

Cucumbers in Praxilla’s “Adonis” fragment (fr. 747)

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Introduction

The Greek lyric poet Praxilla of Sicyon (*floruit* ca. 450 BCE)¹ has left us a curious fragment recording Adonis’ response to a question posed to him in the Underworld. He is asked by his companions below what he misses most from his former life on earth. His answer is preserved by Zenobius (early 2nd c. CE), a Greek sophist active in Rome best known for his collection of sayings and proverbs. Here is Zenobius’ explanation of the proverb, “sillier than Praxilla’s Adonis” (Zenob. 4. 21 = Praxilla fr. 747)² :

ἡλιθιώτερος τοῦ Πραξιλλῆς Ἀδωνίδος· ἐπὶ τῶν ἀνοήτων. Πράξιλλα Σικωνία μελοποιὸς ἐγένετο, ὡς φησι Πολέμων· αὕτη ἡ Πράξιλλα τὸν Ἄδωνιν ἐν τοῖς ὕμνοις εἰσάγει ἐρωτώμενον ὑπὸ τῶν κάτω τί κάλλιστον καταλιπὼν ἐλήλυθεν, ἐκεῖνον δὲ λέγοντα οὕτως·

1 — The church historian Eusebius (early 4th c. CE) assigns her a *floruit* of 451/450 BCE based on a correlation with the 82nd Olympiad; see Praxilla *Test.* 1 = Euseb. *Chron.* Ol. 82.2.

2 — Text and translation of the fragments and *testimonia* are from Campbell (1992) 370-381. See also Zenobius 4.21 in the more recent edition by Lelli (2006) 156-57.

κάλλιστον μὲν ἐγὼ λείπω φάος ἡλίοιο,
 δεῦτερον ἄστρα φαεινὰ σεληναίης τε πρόσωπον
 ἦδὲ καὶ ὠραίους σικύους καὶ μήλα καὶ ὄγκυας·

εὐνηθῆς γάρ τις ἴσως ὁ τῷ ἡλίῳ καὶ τῇ σελήνῃ τοὺς σικύους καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ συναριθμῶν³.

“Sillier than Praxilla’s Adonis”: used of stupid people. Praxilla of Sicyon was a lyric poet, according to Polemon. In her hymn this Praxilla represents Adonis as being asked by those in the Underworld what was the most beautiful thing he left behind when he came, and giving as his answer:

The most beautiful thing I leave behind is the sun’s light;
 second, the shining stars and the moon’s face;
 also **ripe cucumbers** and apples and pears.

For anyone who lists **cucumbers** and the rest alongside sun and moon can only be regarded as feeble-minded.

Both Praxilla’s fragment itself and Zenobius’ framing of it invite further discussion. While an Underworld encounter in which the deceased retrospectively judges his own life is certainly not unique in Greek literature – we can compare Adonis’ response to his interlocutors, for example, to Achilles’ conversation with Odysseus in Hades (*Od.* 11.547-58) – the inclusion of cucumbers in particular, even more so than apples and pears, seems to have bothered ancient readers; Zenobius labels the latter group as simply, καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ (“and the rest”). One question I address here is what we know of cucumbers in the ancient Mediterranean, and why Adonis, and perhaps others, might have thought them as desirable as celestial bodies. The second question I pose is about Zenobius’ reading of Praxilla. I argue that we can see a shift in blame from Adonis to the poet herself: the phrase is, “sillier than [specifically] *Praxilla’s* Adonis”⁴. I begin

3 — Polemon (or Polemon of Ilium) was an early 2nd-c. BCE geographer who also wrote about epigraphic and material objects in Greece, including dedications on statues and monuments. For a detailed discussion of Polemon’s life and works, see Engels (2014) 65-97. Müller (1849) 147-48 offers a slightly different paraphrase of Polemon fr. 100: Ἡλιθώτερος Πραξιλλῆς Ἀδώνιδος. Πράξιλλα Σικυωνία μελοποιὸς ἐγένετο, ὡς φησι Πολέμων. Αὐτῆ ἢ Πράξιλλα τὸν Ἀδωνιν ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν εἰσάγει ἐρωτώμενον ὑπὸ τῶν κάτω, τί κάλλιστον καταλιπὼν ἤκει; ἀποκρίνασθαι· ἥλιον καὶ σελήνην καὶ σικύους καὶ μήλα. Ὅθεν εἰς παροιμίαν παρήχθη ὁ λόγος· ἡλιθιον γάρ τὸ τῷ ἡλίῳ παραβάλλειν τοὺς σικύους (“Sillier than Praxilla’s Adonis. Praxilla of Sicyon was a lyric poet, according to Polemon. In her songs, this Praxilla represents Adonis as being asked by those in the Underworld, ‘what was the most beautiful thing he left behind when he arrived?’ and he answered: ‘the sun and the moon and cucumbers and apples’. Hence his speech became proverbial; for it is foolish to compare cucumbers to the sun”). A new edition of Polemon for Brill’s online *Jacoby* (*FGH*) is in preparation by David Engels.

4 — Here I agree with Balmer (1996) 54, who views Zenobius’ comments as critical of the poet, and disagree with Plant (2004) 38-39, who states, “[t]his is not a criticism of Praxilla... but of a character in one of her poems. Given the light-hearted nature of the image in this fragment, we should not assume that Adonis is meant to be taken seriously... [t]he *bathos* here is effective”. Klinck

with a summary of what we know of Praxilla and her poetry before turning first to Zenobius' transmission of the poem, and second, to possible explanations for the presence of cucumbers in this text, using *comparanda* from both Greco-Roman and ancient Jewish sources.

Praxilla the poet

Ancient *testimonia* about Praxilla are few and relatively uninformative, but most evidence focuses on the poet's well-deserved fame as an author. Thus, the Hellenistic epigrammatist Antipater of Thessalonica (*AP* 9.26) includes Praxilla first in his list of nine "divine-tongued women nourished in song by the Heliconian and Pierian Muses" (τάσδε θεογλώσσους Ἑλικῶν ἔθρεψε γυναικας ὕμνοις καὶ Μακεδῶν Πιερίας σκόπελος, Πηρήξιλλαν...); the rhetorician Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 15.694a), writing in the imperial period, reports that "Praxilla of Sicyon also was admired for her composition of drinking songs" (καὶ Πράξιλλα δ' ἡ Σικυωνία ἐθαυμάζετο ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν σκολίων ποιήσει)⁵; and even the learned church historian Eusebius (early 4th c. CE), in his *Ecclesiastical History* (Ol. 82.2) acknowledges that she, along with Cleoboulina, is "renowned" (*celebris*)⁶. The Christian author Tatian (2nd c. CE), on the other hand, in his diatribe against paganism in general and female poets in particular, unsurprisingly dismisses Praxilla's verses as worthless (*Or. ad Gr.* 33): "Lysippus made a bronze statue of Praxilla, although she said nothing worthwhile in her poetry". (Πράξιλλαν μὲν γὰρ Λύσιππος ἐχαλκούργησεν μηδὲν εἰποῦσαν διὰ τῶν ποιημάτων χρήσιμον)⁷. So if Zenobius had wanted to find a precedent for his critical reception of Praxilla's fr. 747, he could have found it in his contemporary Tatian's doubly ideologically motivated condemnation of the poet's work.

Very little remains of Praxilla's corpus beyond the three lines under discussion. We have two brief fragments preserved in Hephaestion (2nd c. CE) on unusual metrical usage: fr. 754 reads, "you who look so beautifully through the window, with a virgin's head but a married woman's body beneath" (ὦ διὰ τὰς θυρίδος καλὸν ἐμβλέποισα / παρθένε

(2008) 183 also writes of this fragment's bathos and claims (without further explanation) that it is "not particularly feminine", assuming that it was intended to be sung by "maidens" at a festival. As I will argue below, I find these lines neither "light-hearted" nor bathetic.

5 — For debates about Praxilla as the author of σκόλια ("drinking songs"), see Cazzato (2016) 185-203.

6 — For information on Cleoboulina, see Plant (2004) 29-32, esp. 29: "There remains doubt about the very existence of Cleoboulina, although we have three short pieces of poetry attributed to her, numerous references to her life in a variety of ancient sources, and know of two plays named after her. Scholars have long suspected that she may have been invented to personify a female riddler". See also Martin (2001) 55-75.

7 — As Snyder (1989) 54 writes, "the fourth-century statue of her by Lysippos... suggests a prominent reputation".

τὰν κεφαλὰν τὰ δ' ἔνερθε νύμφα)⁸, and is said to be an example of the Πραξιλλειον μέτρον (“Praxillan meter”), a logaoedic (combination of dactylic and trochaic) line, having dactyls in the other positions but ending with a trochaic syzygy; and fr. 748, a dithyrambic song entitled “Achilles” which reads, “but they never persuaded the heart in your breast” (ἀλλὰ τεὸν οὐποτε θυμὸν ἐνὶ στήθεσσιν ἔπειθον), and where Hephaestion notes the presence of synchysis.

Perhaps more interesting for our purposes are two references in the scholia to Aristophanes that point out allusions by the comic poet to (now lost) fragments of Praxilla⁹. At *Thesm.* 528-31 (= Praxilla fr. 750), Aristophanes states, “I approve of the old proverb, “we should look under every stone in case we are bitten by... a politician” (τὴν παροιμίαν δ' ἐπαινῶ / τὴν παλαιάν· ὑπὸ λίθῳ γὰρ / παντί που χρή / μὴ δάκη ρήτωρ ἄθρειν), and the scholiast clarifies (*ad loc.*), “from the words attributed to Praxilla: “under every stone, my friend, look out for a scorpion” (ἐκ τῶν εἰς Πραξιλλαν ἀναφερομένων· ὑπὸ παντί λίθῳ σκορπίον ὧ ἑταίρε φυλάσσεο).

The second reference occurs at *Wasps* 1236-44 (= Praxilla fr. 749), when Bdelycleon advises Philocleon on proper sympotic behavior, asking,

τί δ' ὅταν Θεώρος πρὸς ποδῶν κατακείμενος ἄδη Κλέωνος λαβόμενος τῆς δεξιᾶς·
 Ἀδμήτου λόγον ὧ ἑταίρε μαθῶν τοὺς ἀγαθοὺς φίλει,
 τοῦτ' αὖ τί λέξεις σκόλιον;

And when Theorus, reclining at Cleon's feet, grasps his right hand and sings,
 Learn the story of Admetus, my friend, and love the good,
 what drinking-song will you sing in answer to him?

The scholiast on the passage (*ad loc.*) explains:

Ἀδμήτου λόγον· καὶ τοῦτο ἀρχὴ σκολίου. ἐξῆς δέ ἐστι·
 τῶν δειλῶν δ' ἀπέχου γνοὺς ὅτι δειλῶν ὀλίγα χάρις.

... τοῦτο οἱ μὲν Ἀλκαίου, οἱ δὲ Σαπφούς· οὐκ ἔστι δέ, ἀλλ' ἐν τοῖς Πραξιλλῆς φέρεται παροινοίς.

The story of Admetus: this too is the beginning of a drinking-song; it goes on:
 and keep away from the worthless, knowing that the worthless have little gratitude.

... Some attribute it to Alcaeus, some to Sappho; but it is not by either of them: it is included in Praxilla's drinking-songs.

8 — For a convincing new interpretation of this fragment, see Cazzato (2016) 185-203.

9 — As Snyder (1989) 167 note 39 points out, Schmid and Stählin (1929) 451 concluded that Aristophanes' reception of Praxilla's verses implies that Praxilla's verses themselves originally had a kind of comic coloring. I am not fully convinced by this line of argument.

These two passages show that, at least by the time of Aristophanes, Praxilla's name appears in connection with both proverbs and "songs sung over wine" (ἐν τοῖς Πραξιλλῆς... παροινοῖς), but also that, by the time of the scholiast, some doubt exists about Praxilla's composition of the latter, which could instead be the work of Alcaeus or Sappho. The issue of a female poet composing drinking songs and thus opening herself up to challenge or reproof is something to which I will return. But we can safely postulate, from these references in comedy, that Aristophanes assumed his 5th-century BCE Athenian audiences would be familiar with Praxilla's poetry.

Our last bits of evidence come from the imperial period: three short references to Praxilla's contributions to mythography. In each case, the poet is presented as an authority offering a slightly different version of a well-known story. Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 13.603a) informs us that "Praxilla of Sicyon says that it was Zeus who carried off Chrysippus" (Πράξιλλα δ' ἡ Σικυωνία ὑπὸ Διὸς φησιν ἀρπασθῆναι τὸν Χρῦσιππον); Hesychius (B 128) in his *Lexicon* reports that "Praxilla of Sicyon makes the god (i.e. Dionysus) the son of Aphrodite" (Πράξιλλα δὲ ἡ Σικυωνία Ἀφροδίτης παῖδα τὸν θεὸν (sc. Διόνυσον) ἰστορεῖ); and Pausanias (3.13.5) says that "Praxilla's version is that Carneius was the son of Europa and Zeus, and that Apollo and Leto brought him up" (Πραξιλλη μὲν δὴ πεποιημένα ἐστὶν ὡς Εὐρώπης εἶη καὶ <Διὸς ὁ suppl. Rinckl> Κάρνειος καὶ αὐτὸν ἀνεθρέψατο Ἀπόλλων καὶ Λητώ)¹⁰.

I would like to pause briefly on the topic of Praxilla's σκόλια. While there is no ancient evidence for any anxiety around women composing σκόλια, and Athenaeus, quoted above, states clearly that Praxilla was "admired" (ἐθαυμάζετο) for her compositions in this genre, the thought of "respectable" women writing drinking songs for parties from which they were excluded has bothered some modern scholars. M. L. West has argued, following a line of thought already established for Sappho, that there were in fact two Praxillas: one the author of σκόλια, and the other responsible for choral songs and hymns¹¹. Thus the Praxilla who wrote σκόλια (or παροινοῖα) is assumed to be a ἑταῖρα ("concubine"), although we have no corroborating evidence for this either within the poetry itself or in later *testimonia*; it is a purely modern invention¹². Another scholar,

10 — The scholiast on Theocritus *Id.* 5.83 agrees: "On the Carneia: Praxilla says the festival took its name from Carnus, Apollo's beloved boy, son of Zeus and Europa" (τὰ δὲ Κάρνεα: Πράξιλλα μὲν ἀπὸ Κάρνου φησὶν ἄνομάσθαι τοῦ Διὸς καὶ Εὐρώπης υἱοῦ, ὃς ἦν ἐρώμενος τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος).

11 — On Sappho, see Aelian *VH* 12.19: "The poetess Sappho, daughter of Scamandronymus; even Plato, son of Ariston, calls her wise. I understand that there was another Sappho of Lesbos, a courtesan, not a poet (ἑταῖρα οὐ ποιήτρια)". For Praxilla, see West (1993) xix.

12 — See the objections of Snyder (1989) 56 and 166 note 35, to the original suggestion by von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, which is printed in the 1912 edition of Schmid and Stählin (vol. 1,

I. M. Plant, has suggested that Praxilla was a professional musician who composed σκόλια to meet market demands¹³. An alternative to trying to fit Praxilla into the category of poets who composed drinking songs is to insist that the songs were not composed by her in the first place: one version of this approach is represented by the scholiast on *Wasps* mentioned above – i.e., many think that the material was composed by some other poet, in this case Alcaeus or Sappho. The upshot of this scholarly debate is that either Praxilla is dismissively labeled as a *ἑταίρα* because she wrote σκόλια, or she is deprived of authorship of the drinking songs attributed to her in antiquity. Both approaches undermine Praxilla’s reputation, whether as a poet or as a “respectable woman” and invite the kind of censure that we may see lurking in Zenobius’ commentary on fr. 747¹⁴. Praxilla’s female identity complicates her poetic reception¹⁵.

Zenobius the critic

Let me now return to Zenobius’ framing of Praxilla’s “Adonis” fragment. Zenobius was writing in the Hadrianic period at Rome, and as stated earlier, in addition to his activities as a sophist and teacher of rhetoric, had a particular love of proverbs. By some estimates, his collection included approximately five hundred entries, and filled three volumes¹⁶. It is unclear whether Zenobius was primarily an author or a compiler, since according to the *Suda* (*s.v.* Zenobios), he compiled material previously gathered by Arius Didymus of Alexandria and Lucillus of Tarrha (SW Crete).

While we should be very grateful to him for transmitting fr. 747, our only source for the fragment, I feel that Zenobius presents the poet and her verses in a somewhat negative light. The frame is full of subtle disparagement: Praxilla is only “*said to be*” (ὡς φησι) a lyric poet – Zenobius himself apparently will not swear to the fact; she is described as “this Praxilla” (αὕτη ἡ Πράξιλλα), which can be read as dismissive, i.e. “this per-

204) but missing from their 1929 edition.

13 — Plant (2004) 38: “... she was a professional musician, offering original compositions to paying audiences at *symposia*, probably, initially at least, performing them herself”. Plant (2004) 40 points to evidence from Xenophon (*Symp.* 2.1-2) and Plato (*Symp.* 176e) for professional female musicians offering entertainment at drinking parties.

14 — It is worth noting, however, as the anonymous reader points out, that Zenobius (quoting Polemon) identifies that it is in her hymns (ἐν τοῖς ὕμνοις or, in the alternative paraphrase, ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν), not her σκόλια, that Praxilla reports Adonis’ words. Cf. the Aristophanes scholion above on *Wasps* 1236-44 that refers to the story of Admetus recorded “in the songs of Praxilla that accompany wine-drinking” (ἐν τοῖς Πραξιλλῆς... παραινίσις).

15 — As noted in general terms by James and Dillon (2012) 1, “...ancient materials on women pose interpretive challenges due to unexamined biases in both the sources themselves and in traditional scholarship on the subject, inherited from the nineteenth century”.

16 — See the introduction to (11-67) and organization of Zenobius’ collection in Lelli (2006).

son named Praxilla whom I don't know personally and don't necessarily admire"; and the adjectives "sillier" (ἡλιθιώτερος) and "feeble-minded" (εὐηθής) seem to apply to not just Adonis for his answer, but also to Praxilla for her reporting of it.

At the root of this criticism seems to be the unexplained presence of cucumbers in Praxilla's list (along with apples and pears): "for anyone who lists **cucumbers** and the rest alongside sun and moon can only be regarded as feeble-minded". One could argue that the making of lists often invites exaggeration or what may appear to be odd choices: grains of sand on the beach, stars in the sky, and leaves on the trees are just a few examples from antiquity that still resonate today. But we still need to address the issue of the specific items in this list. For Zenobius, the ranking of cucumbers alongside the sun, moon, and stars appears to be the sticking point. In contrast, apples have a long and noble history of overdetermination in literary or mythological contexts; we need only think, for example, of Eris' golden apple that led up to the Trojan War, the apples of Atalanta, or Sappho's Cydonian apple (or quince) trees (fr. 2), and her comparison of a young woman to a ripe apple on a high branch (fr. 105a). Apples (μῆλα) are traditional love gifts – Acontius throws an apple in the path of his beloved Cydippe in Callimachus' (and Ovid's in *Heroides* 20 and 21) love story – but also markers of late summer and early fall harvests¹⁷.

Pears are less obviously eroticized, appearing early on as fruit-bearing trees in blooming orchards or as symbols of seasonal plenty. In Alcinous' realm in the *Odyssey*, we find "a large orchard of tall and luxuriant pear, pomegranate, and apple trees" (*Od.* 7.114-15), noted for their fruit that ripens throughout the year: "pear upon pear becomes ripe" (*Od.* 7.120) without pause in winter as well as summer. Pears, along with pomegranates and apples dangle from nearby trees to torture Tantalus in Hades (*Od.* 11.589-92), and it is under a pear tree that Laertes stands (*Od.* 24.234) when Odysseus finally reveals himself to his father by naming all the trees in the orchard. Theocritus will later mention pears in his first idyll, where the young shepherd Daphnis, dying of unrequited love, could be compared to Adonis at some level; but even here, the pears appear simply as an item in an *adynaton*: "since Daphnis is dying, the pine tree may bear pears" (*Id.* 1.134-35).

Both fruits are often interpreted as suggestive of a woman's breasts, although I would urge caution here. In his exhaustive catalogue of the symbolism of the apple in Greek and Roman literature, A. R. Littlewood concludes that the comparison of apples to a woman's breasts does not

17 — See Callimachus *Aetia* fr. 67-75; Ovid *Heroides* 20 and 21; Aristaenetus *Ep.* 1.10. For an overview of the symbolism of apples in ancient literature, see Littlewood (1967) 147-81 with accompanying bibliography.

appear before the comic poets, and that the fruit is connected more closely to marriage and fertility than to what he terms “flirtation”¹⁸. Also, while the art of grafting was certainly known and practiced in the ancient world, apples and pears in antiquity were presumably smaller and less cosmetically perfect than their modern-day equivalents. One could certainly argue that both sexual and seasonal connotations undergird Adonis’ role in Praxilla’s poem: he is Aphrodite’s beloved who dies before his time. But as I will argue shortly, in the context of Adonis and Aphrodite, sexual immaturity and early death are the hallmarks of their (failed) affair, not consummation or procreation.

Cucumbers

So why does Zenobius direct most of his scorn towards Adonis’ cucumbers? What is so “foolish” about choosing this particular item as an object of nostalgia? This question is the focus of the rest of my discussion, and it involves a closer look at the cultivation and consumption of cucumbers in Greco-Roman antiquity, along with a digression into ancient Jewish food culture.

The first point I want to make is that in this context, Adonis’ cucumber is not primarily phallic, just as his apples and pears are not primarily suggestive of female anatomy¹⁹. Taken together, the three plants certainly may be seen as symbols of fertility and growth, but the emphasis here is on seasons in nature, the cycle of life and death, and not specifically human sexual reproduction²⁰. This interpretation fits well with Adonis’ parallel list of three celestial bodies: both astronomy and farming are closely connected to human attempts at controlling nature, whether on sea or on land²¹. In addition, Adonis himself was emphatically not a hyper-masculine, sexualized divinity; as Aphrodite’s beloved, he is usually depicted as young, unmarried, sexually passive, and fated to die before reaching

18 — Littlewood (1967) 180-81.

19 — For some non-phallic examples, consider this phrase in Theopompus Comicus (5th-4th c. BCE): “she has come to me, softer than a ripe cucumber” (μαλθακωτέρα πέπονος σικουῦ μοι γέγονε); see fr. 76 in Kassel and Austin (1983), vol. 7, 742. The phrase is preserved in Athenaeus *Deipno*. 2.68d: “she/it was softer than a melon to me’. Phaenias: cucumbers and melons are edible, except for the seeds, once the flesh is soft; the flesh is the only part that is cooked. Gourds are inedible when raw but are edible if stewed or baked” (“μαλθακωτέρα πέπονος σικουῦ μοι γέγονε”. Φαινίας: βρωτά μὲν ἀπαλὰ τῷ περικαρπίῳ σικυῶς καὶ πέπων ἄνευ τοῦ σπέρματος, πεττόμενον δὲ τὸ περικάρπιον μόνον. κολοκύνθη δὲ ὠμὴ μὲν ἄβρωτος, ἐφθῆ δὲ καὶ ὀπτῆ βρωτή); text and translation from Olson (2006) 388-89.

20 — Technically, as Aristotle already acknowledged (*Problemata* 923a 14-16), the cucumber is also a fruit, like apples and pears; the parts that we eat are actually long, green berries; see <https://www.kew.org/plants/cucumber>.

21 — Stephen White *per litteras* points out that these three earthly fruits parallel the three heavenly bodies mentioned. Whether there is further meaning in this parallelism is up for debate.

maturity. Theocritus (*Id.* 15.100-11) shows how Adonis is honored at Alexandria under the Ptolemies: "all sorts of seasonal produce are placed near him, such as is gathered from high tree branches, and other delicate orchard fruits collected in silver baskets" (*Id.* 15.112-15: πὰρ μὲν οἱ ὄρια κείται, ὅσα δρυὸς ἄκρα φέρονται, / πὰρ δ' ἀπαλοὶ κάποι πεφυλαγμένοι ἐν ταλαρίσκοις / ἀργυρέοις...). All this is in anticipation of a marriage that is tragically cut short. The Theocritean *Adonia* festival that celebrates this aborted ἱερός γάμος ("holy marriage") and Adonis' unseasonably early death focuses more on funerary than on nuptial rituals, and I read Praxilla's Adonis' reference to fruits along the same lines, as reminders of the natural cycle of growth and decay. So sometimes a cucumber is just a cucumber²².

The next question to ask is, how did the cucumber fit into its cultural context²³? This is where it gets more complicated, especially since we cannot even be sure which species is under discussion²⁴. A *TLG* search for all the instances of the word σίκυος in archaic, classical, and early Hellenistic Greek (through the end of the 3rd c. BCE) yields quite a few options for σίκυος [i] or σικυός, ὀ (also the feminine form σίκυς, ἦ, found in e.g. Alcaeus 151 = Athen. *Deipno.* 3.73e: δάκη τῶν σίκυων ["s/he takes bites of the cucumber"]); Aristophanes *Acharn.* 520 and *Peace* 1001; and Theophrastus *Historia plantarum* 7.4.1). We can immediately rule out a) the *Cucumis sativus*, with its native range in China, the Himalayas, and Thailand; but we can consider b) the σίκυς ἡμερος, eaten unripe and raw (Hippocr. *Vict.* 2.55); c) the σίκυς πέπων, also called σ. σπερματίας, "seeded", i.e., ripe cucumber (Cratinus fr. 147 from his *Odysseus and Company* = Athen. *Deipno* 68c); and finally, d) the σίκυς ἄγριος, the "wild" or "squirting" cucumber, *Ecballium elaterium*, native

22 — I accept Holst-Warhaft's idea that the fragment might be an excerpt from a serious ritual hymn that would have been sung at the *Adonia*, but I reject her interpretation of the cucumber itself as "a misandric metaphor for the male contribution to fertility" (1992) 84, i.e. a phallic symbol.

23 — I do not think that the amusing overlap between the Greek word for cucumber (σίκυος) and Praxilla's hometown of Sicyon near Corinth is a clue to understanding the tone of the fragment; cf. Plant (2004) 39.

24 — I do not want to dive too deeply into the botanical complexities, but we are dealing here most broadly with the family *Cucurbitaceae* (commonly referred to as "cucurbits") which is then divided into various *genera*, and further divided into species and varieties. Our modern cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*) is native to South Asia and did not appear in the Mediterranean before the Middle Ages. The muskmelon, including the "snake melon", "chate melon", or "serpent cucumber" (*Cucumis melo*) may be a more likely contender for the item mentioned in Praxilla's poem: it is a non-sweet melon, much like our modern cucumber in taste but more spiral than straight in appearance, and is known to have been cultivated in the ancient Mediterranean. For an argument against using the word "cucumber", see Paris and Janick (2010-2011) 1: "[t]he translation of the classical Latin *cucumis* as cucumber may be acceptable to the general public but is problematic when extended to use by students of botany, horticulture, and crop history". Natoli, Pitts and Hallett (2022) 185 have taken the bold (and botanically correct) step of translating Praxilla's fruit here as "snake-melon"; see the explanation on 186-87 note 13.

to the Mediterranean (Theophrastus *Historia plantarum* 9.15.6; Hippocr. *De Nat. Mul.* 95, *De Mul.* 1.77). All these varieties may have had more in common with what we think of as a gourd (also a member of the *Cucurbitaceae* family) than with our modern cucumber, which has been bred to be less spiny and to possess fewer (or even no) seeds.

One added complication beyond identifying the actual species mentioned in Praxilla's fragment is interpreting the curious similarity between the term for cucumber and Praxilla's hometown of Sicyon. Praxilla is a Σικυωνία μελοποιός ("Sicyonian poet") writing about Adonis' love of the σίκυος. Is there some sort of local bond between Praxilla and Adonis based on geography? Was Sicyon known for producing high quality cucumbers? These are questions that will remain unanswered in this paper, as I wish to focus more on how the cucumber fit into its wider cultural context in the Mediterranean.

While this is not the place to discuss all the different ways cucumbers were used in the Greco-Roman world, the range is quite broad, including medical, magical, agricultural, and culinary usage. I will touch here only on a few of the more interesting cases. Within the category of medical applications, we find cucumbers in the Hippocratic corpus being used to cure choleric conditions caused by overeating in the hot summer (*De morbis popularibus* 5.1.71.4; 7.1.82.6), consumed as a diuretic or cooling drink (*De morbis* 3.17.34; 3.17.40; *De affectionibus* 4.57), ingested as a remedy for bloody urine or constipation (*De morbis popularibus* 7.1.115.5-6; 7.1.118.7), and applied to the skin for the practice of cupping (*De affectionibus* 4.14; *De medico* 7.1). In the books on women's health – *De natura muliebri* and *De mulierum affectibus* – we hear of cucumbers used as pessaries or suppositories (*DNM* 97.3; *DMA* 78.60, 68), abortifacients (*DNM* 95.1), birth accelerants (*DMA* 77.12), a cure for various vaginal or cervical diseases (*DMA* 157.7; 159.3; 162.12), and even as a remedy for unwanted freckles (*DMA* 190.2)²⁵.

Turning to agricultural and culinary references, some of the texts are straightforward practical comments about growing cucumber crops: proper soil (clay vs. marsh), environment (wet vs. dry), and ways of preparing the fruit. Thus Aristotle discusses planting methods (*Problemata* 924a36-b4-7, 11), including how to encourage early sprouting (*Problemata* 923b17-24), while Theophrastus elaborates on the habits of the cucumber in three different works: his more technical treatises *De causis plantarum* and

25 — Similar usages are mentioned in the fragments of 4th-c. BCE Athenian medical pioneer Diocles (61.1: cupping; 115.2, 153.5, 182.91, 119: emetic and cooling properties); for the texts, see van der Eijk (2000) vol. 1. Two centuries later, Nicander mentions (*Theriaca* 866-67) "the bitter root of the squirting cucumber" (σικύοιο ... ἐνιπευκέα ρίζαν ἀγροτέρου) and lists cucumbers as a remedy for stomach ailments. On cupping, see also the Pythagorean Timaeus (221.1; 221.5) in Marg (1965) 203, 205-25.

Historia plantarum, and his essayistic *Characters*, including such topics as supporting its vines (*DCP* 2.18.2.6); providing shade by covering the plants or placing them in or near a well to keep them tender and moist (*DCP* 3.16.4.8; 5.6.4-5; see also Aristotle *Problemata* 924a36); soaking the fruits or its seeds in milk or honey to sweeten them (*DCP* 2.14.3.6 and 3.9.4.2; *HP* 7.3.5.10); and time required for germination (*HP* 7.1.3.5, 7; 7.1.6.3-4)²⁶. Theophrastus also differentiates between wild, cultivated, and squirting cucumbers (*HP* 7.6.4.7; 7.8.1.3; 7.10.1.8), and mentions the fruit's ability to adapt its shape to the vessel in which it is planted (*HP* 7.3.5.7).

Cucumbers in Winter

These more technical medical and agricultural observations (and I have by no means exhausted the sources), although not limited to the 4th c. BCE, emphasize one aspect of the plant and its fruit that is relevant for our understanding of Praxilla's Adonis fragment: its seasonality. Cucumbers are freely available in summer, although humans can intervene to trick nature. Here is Aristotle again (*Problemata* 924b 11-15)²⁷:

... ἐάν τις χειμῶνος φυτεύσῃ σπέρμα σικύου ἐν ταλαρίσκοις καὶ ἄρδῃται θερμῶ καὶ εἰς τὸν ἥλιον ἐκφέρῃ καὶ παρὰ πυρὶ τιθῆ, πρῶϊμοι σφόδρα ἔσσονται, ἐὰν ὡς ἔχει ἐν τοῖς ταλάροις εἰς τὴν ἰκνουμένην ὥραν εἰς τὴν γῆν φυτεύσῃ.

...if one plants **cucumber seeds** in baskets in winter and gives them hot water and carries them out into the sun and places them by a fire, they will appear very early if one plants them into the earth just as they are, in their baskets, when the season arrives.

Even more explicit is this passage in Aristophanes' fragmentary play *Ἔρωται* (*Seasons*)²⁸:

(A.) ὄψει δὲ χειμῶνος μέσου σικνούς, βότρυς, ὀπώραν,
στεφάνους ἰων, < (B.) οἶμαι δὲ καὶ > κωνιορτὸν ἐκτυφλοῦντα.
(A.) αὐτὸς δ' ἀνήρ πωλεῖ κίχλας, ἀπίους, σχαδόνας, ἐλάας,
πύον, χόρια, χελιδόνας, τέττιγας, ἐμβρύεια·
ύρίσους δ' ἴδοις ἂν νειφομένους σίκων ὁμοῦ τε μύρτων·
(B.) ἔπειτα κολοκύντας ὁμοῦ ταῖς γογγυλίσιν ἀροῦσιν.
ὥστ' οὐκέτ' οὐδεὶς οἶδ' ὀπηνίκ' ἐστὶ τούνιαυτοῦ.
(A.) < ἄρ' οὐ > μέγιστον ἀγαθόν, εἴπερ ἔστι δι' ἔνιαυτοῦ
ἔτου τις ἐπιθυμεῖ λαβεῖν;...

26 — See Bekker (1831/1960) vol. 2; Dengler (1927); Amigues (2003) vols. 1-4, (2006) vol. 5; and Steinmetz (1960) vol. 1.

27 — Text and translation from Mayhew (2011) vol. 2, 14-17.

28 — *Ἔρωται* fr. 581 in Kassel and Austin (1984), vol. 3.2, 298-300.

(A) In midwinter you'll see **cucumbers** and the fruit of the vine
and crowns of violets. (B) And blinding clouds of dust, I think.
(A) One and the same man sells thrushes, pears, honeycombs, olives,
beestings, haggis, swallows, crickets, fetal meat;
and you'd see baskets with figs and myrtle-sprays even when it
snows. 5
(B) Then they sow the pumpkins together with the turnips,
so that no one knows what time of year it is.
(A) Well, isn't it fine indeed if, at any time of the year, you can get
what your heart desires?...

The second speaker concludes with the statement, "You have changed their city from Athens into Egypt!", with "Egypt" representing a land of abundant crops and exotic foods, regardless of the season, because the flooding of the silty Nile made the land unusually fertile. Elsewhere, Aristophanes also imagines enjoying delicacies out of season, as Trygaeus sacrifices to the goddess Peace and requests (*Pax* 999-1007) as follows²⁹:

καὶ τὴν ἀγορὰν ἡμῖν ἀγαθῶν ἐμπλησθῆναι ἔκ Μεγάρων σκορόδων, σικύων πρῶων , μήλων, ροιῶν, δούλοισι χλανισκιδίων μικρῶν· κάκ Βοιωτῶν γε φέροντας ἰδεῖν χῆνας νήττας φάττας τροχίλους: καὶ Κωπᾶδων ἐλθεῖν σπυρίδας, καὶ περὶ ταύτας ἡμᾶς ἀθρόους ὀψωνοῦντας τυρβάζεσθαι...	1000
Have our markets fill up with good things: Megara garlic, early cucumbers , apples, pomegranates, little wool jackets for our slaves; and from Boeotia, let them bring geese, ducks, pigeons, and larks; and baskets of eels from Lake Copais; we will all rush to buy them...	1000 1005

My final Greek example of the appeal of cucumbers out of season comes from Theophrastus again (*Characters* 1.14.9.1): "and in spite of the fact that it is winter, he quarrels with his slave because he did not buy **cucumbers**" (καὶ χειμῶνος ὄντος μάχεσθαι τῷ παιδί ὅτι **σικύους** οὐκ ἠγόρασεν). But we can also find discussions of out-of-season cucumbers in Roman sources, especially among those who condemned any sort of luxury or excess: thus, to give just one example, in the first century CE,

29 — Text and translation from Henderson (1998) 552-53.

Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 19.64) and Columella (*De Re Rustica* 11. 51-53)³⁰ both complain about the self-indulgence of the emperor Tiberius, who was so fond of cucumbers that he built special greenhouses to produce fruit even in winter (Pliny *NH* 19.64)³¹:

... *Cucumis*, mira voluptate Tiberio principi expetitus: nullo quippe non die contigit ei pensiles eorum hortos promoventibus in solem rotis olitoribus rursumque hibernis diebus intra specularium munimenta revocantibus.

...the **cucumber**, a delicacy for which the emperor Tiberius had a remarkable partiality: in fact there was not a day on which he was not supplied with it, as his kitchen gardeners had cucumber beds mounted on wheels which they moved into the sun and on wintry days withdrew under the cover of frames glazed with transparent stone.

All the passages cited above focus on the difference between cucumbers that ripen naturally in summer and those that are forced to grow in artificial environments or are imported out of season as luxury goods³². Both types may be juicy (i.e. hydrating) and tender – Theophrastus (*De causis plantarum* 4.3.2.9) calls cucumbers moist and cold, – but there is something suspicious or unnatural about cucumbers appearing in winter. Seasonal cucumbers, in contrast, seem to embody everything delightful about summertime, by extension the most enjoyable time of life (*pace* Hesiod on excessively warm weather): something κάλλιστον (“most beautiful”) indeed, rather than the recollection of someone εῤηθής (“foolish”).

Cucumbers in the desert and on the rabbi's table

I would like to bring in two more examples before returning to Praxilla's poem. The first is from a Hellenistic Jewish source, the *Septuagint* (ca. 250 BCE). The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible translates the Hebrew “*qishuim*” as σικύους, the same word for “cucumbers” as we find in Praxilla: in *Numbers* 11:4-5, the Israelites, wandering in the desert, complain about the monotony of eating only manna, and list the delicious foods they enjoyed during their years of enslavement in Egypt³³:

30 — At *De Re Rustica* 10.389-99, Columella distinguishes between the *lividus cucumis* (“dark or bluish cucumber”), which is hairy, grows coiled like a snake on the ground, and is poisonous, and the *candidus cucumis* (“white cucumber”), growing in the shade near water, which is soft, sweet, and when ripe, beneficial to humans.

31 — See further discussion in Weingarten (2016) 55.

32 — I should include one exception to the rule, reported by Suetonius in praise of Augustus' self-control when it came to alcohol consumption before dinner (*Vit. Aug.* 77): “instead of drinking, he used to take a piece of bread dipped in cold water, or a **slice of cucumber**, or some leaves of lettuce, or a green, sharp, juicy apple” (*pro potione sumebat perfusum aqua frigida panem aut cucumeris frustum vel lactuculae thyrsium aut recens aridumque pomum suci vinosioris*).

33 — In the Hebrew Bible the items mentioned are: *qishuim* (cucumbers), *avaticim* (water-

4: Καὶ ὁ ἐπίμικτος ὁ ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐπεθύμησεν ἐπιθυμίαν, καὶ καθίσαντες ἔκλαιον καὶ οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ εἶπαν· τίς ἡμᾶς ψωμειῖ κρέα; 5: ἐμνήσθημεν τοὺς ἰχθύας, οὓς ἠσθίομεν ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ δωρεάν, καὶ τοὺς σικύους καὶ τοὺς πέπονας καὶ τὰ πράσα καὶ τὰ κρόμμυα καὶ τὰ σκόρδα· 6: νυνὶ δὲ ἡ ψυχὴ ἡμῶν κατὰξηρος, οὐδὲν πλὴν εἰς τὸ μάννα οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ ἡμῶν·

4: The rabble among them had a strong craving; and sitting down, they wept, and the Israelites also wept and said, “Who will buy us meat to eat? 5: We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, **the cucumbers**, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; 6: but now our strength is completely dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna in front of our eyes”.

Here the Israelites, tired of the monotony and blandness of the heaven-sent manna, wax nostalgic about the juicy and spicy variety of foods they were served without even having to pay for them; in their exhaustion and desperation, they conveniently forget the misery of their earlier bondage in Egypt. The emotions of the speakers – reflecting nostalgia, sadness at the current situation, and vivid memories of fresh food no longer available – are strikingly similar to those of Adonis in Praxilla’s fragment³⁴.

My second example from ancient Israel comes from the Babylonian Talmud, which mentions *qishuin* on the table of Rabbi Judah haNasi (135-220 CE), a leader of the Jewish community of Palestine under imperial Roman occupation and chief editor of the Mishnah, the written version of oral Jewish law which laid the foundation for later rabbinical traditions³⁵. As Weingarten argues in her fascinating article, “The Rabbi and the Emperors: Artichokes and Cucumbers as Symbols of Status in Talmudic Literature”, cucumbers, whether identified as snake melons, chate melons, or our modern cucumber, were indisputably highly desirable fruits in antiquity³⁶. Rabbi Judah haNasi was occasionally paired

melons), *hatzir* (leeks), *bezalim* (onions), and *humim* (heads of garlic). Vered Lev Kenaan points out to me *per litteras* that the modern Hebrew word for cucumber is *melaphephon*, a conflation of two Greek words: μήλον (“apple” or any “tree fruit”) and πέπων (“ripe melon”).

34 — It has been suggested by an anonymous reader that the Hebrews may be portrayed here as foolish, and that it might then follow that Praxilla, with her allusion to cucumbers, similarly aimed to depict Adonis as foolish in his choice. To my mind, however, the Hebrews are represented here as primarily ungrateful (for divine manna) and forgetful (of the evils of slavery in Egypt) rather than foolish *per se*.

35 — See Weingarten (2016) 51: “By the time Rabbi Judah haNasi became leader of the Jews of the Land of Israel in the third century, *provincia Palaestina* had been part of the Graeco-Roman world for hundreds of years. From Rabbi’s Mishnah and the later Talmudic literature, it is clear that Jews shared many aspects of Graeco-Roman culture with their non-Jewish neighbours, including both some foods and some attitudes to food. As reflected in the Talmudic literature, identifications of foods and even attitudes to them changed very little over time, as opposed to the complex development of *halakhot*”.

36 — Weingarten (2016) 53: “Biblical *qishuim*, usually translated as ‘cucumbers’, have been identified by Feliks and Zohary as chate melons, *Cucumis melo* var. *Chate*, which were cucumber-shaped, and usually cooked before eating... Paris has recently suggested that by the Mishnaic period

with a certain "Antoninus", understood to be a generic Roman ruler, and of them it is said that, "There was no lack of radish or lettuce or cucumber (*qishuin*) from their table, neither in the days of sun, nor in the days of rain"³⁷. Again, the emphasis is on seasonality, and in this case, only the wealthy or powerful are able to include cucumbers in their diet at all seasons ("in the days of sun, [and] in the days of rain"). Weingarten suggests that by this time, the story "would seem to have become proverbial"³⁸.

Conclusions

While we may never fully understand why cucumbers should take center stage in proverbs or stories in the ancient Mediterranean, I have tried here to offer a wide range of evidence to suggest that the plant and its fruit can be better appreciated when put into a wider cultural context. When Adonis reminisces about cucumbers, apples, and pears alongside the sun, moon, and stars, it is not a case of, if my readers will pardon the pun, apples and oranges. Rather, the ripe cucumbers serve to paint a picture of a time of easy living, good weather, and plentiful seasonal harvests. Pliny may have condemned eating cucumbers out of season as conspicuous consumption, but for Adonis, cucumbers must have represented what was enjoyable in life – ripe fruit, long summer days, and natural pleasures – all of which has been stripped away from him in the dark realms of death. Aphrodite's love could not save Adonis from dying; his mortality is emphasized by the wistful memory of the delicious human food he leaves behind. The annual rituals of the *Adonia* may have tried to recreate a natural setting for Adonis, connecting him with growing plant life and a fruitful *ἱερός γάμος*, but as stated above, the ritual always ended

the term *qishuin* refers to the snake melon (also known as the snake cucumber), *Cucumis melo* subsp. *melo Flexuosus*, which is very closely related to the chate melon, but is more snakelike in shape. The snake melon is covered with a downy coating which has to be removed before eating". The botanists Janick and Paris have come down definitively on the side of the snake melon: see Paris and Janick (2010-11) 1-2.

37 — See Weingarten (2016) 56 and *Avodah Zarah* 11a. (https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.11a.5?lang=bi): "The Gemara returns to its discussion of Antoninus: When the matriarch Rebecca was pregnant with Jacob and Esau, 'the Lord said to her: Two nations [*goyim*] are in your womb' (*Genesis* 25:23). Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: Do not read it as *goyim*, meaning nations; rather read it as *geyim*, meaning proud ones. This verse was fulfilled in two prominent individuals who descended from Rebecca, Antoninus and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, whose tables, due to their wealth, never lacked for lettuce, nor **cucumbers**, nor radish, neither in the summer nor in the rainy season, despite the fact that these foods do not grow year-round. The reason they ensured that these items were always present at their tables is that the Master said: A radish breaks up food, lettuce stirs up food, and **cucumbers** expand the intestines".

38 — Weingarten (2016) 57; she also points out (58-59) that Athenaeus (*Deipno*. 9.372) reminds us of the extent to which cooks would go to disguise dried or winter gourds as fresh vegetables for their wealthy patrons.

in the death of the young man along with the potted plants forced to bloom before their time.

When Praxilla reports Adonis' answer to what he misses most on earth, she represents him acknowledging the passing of day into night and back again (sun, moon, stars), and then listing juicy ripe cucumbers and sweet fruit. My understanding of the fragment is that both statements function as a kind of shorthand for the best things in life. Perhaps if we try to imagine the senses involved in eating these items – the cool watery crunch of the cucumber, the sweet-smelling skin and pulp of the apples and pears – we can better appreciate Adonis' and Praxilla's choice of words³⁹. Zenobius' framing of Adonis' answer, however, ignores its connection to the senses and condemns it as foolish, lumping the poet together with her subject. In recuperating Adonis, we may also recuperate Praxilla's female voice, the voice of a poet who seems to understand the joy of being alive and appreciating food and drink – a mark of being human and not divine, after all –, and, to come full circle in this paper, who might well have been the author of the drinking songs denied to her by later tradition.

I leave the last word to the brilliant Irish poet Michael Longley: here is a section from his poem entitled "Praxilla", from the collection *Snow Water* (2004)⁴⁰:

Praxilla was *not* 'feeble-minded' to have Adonis
 Answer that questionnaire in the underworld:
 'Sunlight's the most beautiful thing I leave behind,
 Then the shimmering stars and the moon's face,
 Also ripe cucumbers and apples and pears'⁴¹.

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39 — Cf., however, Snyder (1989) 57-58, who comments on the role of the senses, but still sees a certain triviality in the scene: "The lines themselves seem to portray Adonis not so much as a fool as an exuberant youth who cannot really decide what he misses most – the light of the day, the night sky, or the fruit of the earth. He misses all these earthly pleasures, whether they appeal to his sense of sight or of taste".

40 — I acknowledge Balmer (2013) 114, which first introduced me to this "exemplary classical versioner". The poem appears in *Snow Water* (2004) 57.

41 — I thank Jacqueline Serris and Judith Hallett for their kind invitation to submit to *Eugesta*. Kenneth Katz first pointed out to me the presence of cucumbers in the *Septuagint*, thus inspiring this essay. I am grateful for Elizabeth Needham's thorough research assistance, Marie Jones' meticulous editorial eye, and Jordan Rosenblum's generous reading of the first draft. The anonymous readers for *Eugesta* helped clarify my arguments and improved the final version.

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