

**‘How beautiful are the feet...’?**

**Fetish and the masochistic persona in the *Erotic Epistles* of Philostratus.\***

I. Introduction.

Even with the recent boom in Philostratean scholarship recognising the literary qualities of the corpus, the *Epistles* have received little attention: the only major studies are chapters by Rosenmeyer<sup>1</sup> and Goldhill.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand these letters are typical sophistic compositions; however, considered as letters, they represent a significant development of the epistolary genre, exploiting a natural affinity between the themes of erotic epigram and ‘personal’ love elegy and the ‘private’ or personal character of realistic epistolary literature. I wish to explore this affinity through the masochistic persona which Philostratus creates for himself as lover and letter-writer,<sup>3</sup> and particularly through three letters which display a sexual fetish for the feet,<sup>4</sup> as both symptomatic of his sophistic use of the most *recherché* motifs to be found in earlier erotic literature, and as demonstrating a desire for innovation within the epistolary genre. I will begin with a section on foot-fetishism, showing how Philostratus builds on a foundation of literary precedents but creates from them a unique persona with very specialised tastes; I will then tie this in with the masochistic aspect of the persona in the collection as a whole, and discuss the contribution this makes to Philostratus’ take on the epistolary genre.

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<sup>1</sup>\* NB: This paper was given at the Classical Association Annual Conference at Leeds, 1 – 4 April 2004. I have only recently had access to Levine (2006), a survey of the erotics of feet which duplicates much of the non-Philostratean material here (i.e. many of the examples given in the footnotes to §II). I have not yet been able to take account of this article in the revision of this piece for submission to a journal, which is a work in progress: the main body of the text is still essentially the 2004 oral presentation in this version, with much additional material to be incorporated so far only in footnotes.

<sup>1</sup> 2001, ch.12.

<sup>2</sup> Forthcoming. I agree with Goldhill, Trapp (2003:32f.) and most others in attributing the *Epp.* to the same author as the *VS*, *VA*, and *Heroicus*. Cf. Goldhill, forthcoming and Benner and Fobes 1949:387-94 on the confused MS traditions of the collection: the degree of unity and the original order of the collection are both impossible to establish.

<sup>3</sup> Noticed by Rosenmeyer 2001:326.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rosenmeyer 2001:323, 332; Goldhill, forthcoming.

## II. Foot-fetishism.

Letter 18,<sup>5</sup> to a boy whose feet are made sore by the pinching of new sandals, aims to persuade him to go barefoot<sup>6</sup>—but this is not, it emerges, purely out of concern for the boy’s well-being: after building up his case through a list of historical and mythological *exempla* of barefoot heroes, the letter culminates in a eulogy on naked feet:

Let nothing come between the earth and your bare foot.  
Fear not, the dust will welcome your tread as it would  
welcome grass, and we shall all kiss your footprints. O  
perfect lines of feet most dearly loved! O flowers new  
and strange! O plants sprung from earth! O kiss left  
lying on the ground!

This letter collects several motifs relating to feet which, if not exactly commonplace, have at least some Greek precedent. This is in keeping with sophistic *variatio*: Philostratus finds one of the more obscure aspects of erotic literature, and devotes a whole letter to as many variations on the theme as he can find literary precedent for. In doing so, however, he creates what Goldhill calls “the first example we have in Western erotic narrative of a foot-fetishist.”<sup>7</sup>

The first element of the fetish is the simple idea of the foot as one of the parts of the body which descriptions of beauty focused upon. This, in itself, is quite common in Greek, Latin and other ancient literature,<sup>8</sup> (although it is admittedly rarer in pederastic

<sup>5</sup> Commentary in Costa 2001.

<sup>6</sup> As Costa notes ad loc., the address “to a barefoot boy” (μειρακίῳ ἀνυποδέτῳ) found in some MSS should more logically be ‘to a boy wearing tight shoes’.

<sup>7</sup> Forthcoming. On foot-fetishism cf. Rossi 1977.

<sup>8</sup> This goes back to the usage of epithets describing the feet of women as an important part of their beauty, in Homer and archaic poetry; cf. n.16 below, and Anacreon 358.3 *PMG*. Cf. Haentjens 2002:180-81: “The ancient Greeks judged women’s beauty by their feet and the shoes they wore.” This is possibly connected to fertility: “women were constant [sic] in contact with mother-earth, which made... women’s feet and footwear... regarded as important symbols of fertility for women.” (referring to Heyraud 1994:14, which I have not been able to consult). A female lover straddles Dioscorides “with her extraordinary feet (ὑπερφύεσι ποσσίν)”: *AP* 5.55.3. *Clem.Paed.* 2.11.117 says that for a woman οὐ γὰρ ἀρμόζει γυμνὸν ἐπιδείκνυσθαι τὸν πόδα; nor must they wear lavish (or lascivious!) shoes, the ornamentation of which sometimes displayed erotic greetings (πολλὰ δὲ καὶ ἐρωτικούς ἀσπασμούς ἐγχαράττουσιν αὐτοῖς, 2.11.116; Mondésert and Marrou 1965:220n.2 refer to an example of a shoe which would imprint the word ἀκολουθεῖ on the ground). For Greek brides the adornment of the feet was an important part of the preparations: cf. Oakley and Sinos 1993:16-19 on the *nymphides* or bridal shoes; Eros is often depicted binding the bride’s sandals in wedding-scenes (cf. their figs.30-31 and 44; in fig.31, Helen’s sandals are “the focal point of the picture”). Cf. also n.9

literature than in descriptions of women). This partiality may in part be explained by the fact that a woman's feet were one of the few parts of her body which were (at least partially) visible most of the time, thus offering a tantalising glimpse to an admirer.<sup>9</sup> The psychological and sexual associations of the foot, as phallic symbol, are also seemingly universal: Henderson documents some Greek examples.<sup>10</sup> Quite how this fits with the beauty of women's feet is a more complex issue, but in the case of boys at least, reference to a foot *could* be taken as a conscious euphemism,<sup>11</sup> as is often the case in the Hebrew Bible and sometimes in Greek literature.<sup>12</sup>

The motif of flowers springing up where the beloved has walked has parallels in earlier literature,<sup>13</sup> but the kissing of footprints does not seem to be a *topos* of erotic literature,<sup>14</sup> occurring in an erotic context only in the near-contemporary epistolographer Alciphron.<sup>15</sup> It does, however, occur in a *religious* context: “mention of [a] god's feet is a regular feature of literary epiphanies”; (these divine feet are, of course, beautiful).<sup>16</sup> To kiss the footprints of an ἐρώμενος, then, is to place him on a

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below. On the impropriety for a Roman woman of displaying the feet, cf. Sebasta 1997:535-37; Boels 1973:80-81: “Or un certain nombre d'indices suggèrent que très anciennement le pied féminin dut être l'objet de tabous d'ordre magique. C'est par le pied que la femme est en contact permanent avec la terre, et, par conséquent, avec sa nature profonde, ce qui justifie le soin avec lequel on régleme ce qui le couvre.” In what may be a Greek variant of the Cinderella folk-tale (cf. Scobie 1977:17-18), Strabo (17.1.33) and Aelian (*V.H.*13.33) both relate the story of Rhodopis, a courtesan whose shoe was snatched up by an eagle and dropped in the lap of the king of Egypt, Psammetichus: he was “moved by the beauty of the shoe” (τῷ ῥυθμῷ τοῦ ὑποδήματος... κινήθεις) and sent to find its owner, whom he promptly married! For beautiful feet in Latin literature, cf. e.g. Tib.1.3.91f.; *Ov.Amor.*3.3, *A.A.*3.271f. See below, n.20 for male feet.

<sup>9</sup> In one description of the symbolic unveiling (*anakalypteria*) of the bride (*Luc.Herod.*5), the removal of her shoes is implicitly a prelude to sex; naked feet are thus symbolic of sexuality as the unveiling of the head symbolises the transition to the groom's control: “...There are some smiling Erotes; one stands behind, drawing the veil away... and showing Roxana to the bridegroom; another, like a servant, *draws off the sandal from her foot as though she is ready for bed.* (ἀφαιρεί τό σανδάλιον ἐκ τοῦ ποδός ὡς κατακλίνοιτο ἥδη)” Oakley and Sinos 1993:33 note “sandals (and especially the removal of sandals) are sometimes associated with Aphrodite.”

<sup>10</sup> 1975:44 for symbolism; examples on 126, 129-30, 138 (Eubulus fr.107.3 K-A; schol. *E.Med.* 697; *Epicr.*10.5; (?) *Ar. Lys.*664; on 416 see below). Other possible examples are *Ar.Ran.*1324; *AP*12.97, 12.243 (cf. Livrea 1979).

<sup>11</sup> As Richlin 1992:36-37 notes, boys' genitals are very rarely discussed in Greek epigram, but the sexual acts aimed at are alluded to through euphemisms and periphrasis (but see n.12 below).

<sup>12</sup> In the opening idea of the chafing sandal there may be an allusion to *Ar.Lys.*414-9 where by a *double entendre* the foot rubbing inside the sandal stands for sexual intercourse. Cf. Henderson 1975:138; 1977 ad loc. The fact that it is the *woman's* foot on one of the two possible meanings is no obstacle to the symbolism; so in *Ep.*18 if the boy's foot pinched by his sandal is seen as a sexual metaphor, it seems most likely to refer to the letter-writer's penetration of the boy—the usual aim in pederastic Greek epigram, although rarely explicitly so: cf. Richlin 1992:37.

<sup>13</sup> Benner-Fobes 1949 ad loc. cite *Theoc.*8.45-7; *Persius* 2.38.

<sup>14</sup> *Contra* Costa 2001 ad loc.

<sup>15</sup> 3.31.1.

<sup>16</sup> Bassi 1989:228, citing *h.Hom.Dem.*3 (Persephone is τανύσφυρος—with slender feet or ankles [cf. *Ibycus* 282 *PMG*]), *Call.h.Apollo* 3 (his foot is καλός); cf. Dunbabin 1989:87-88, 95-96 for the

par with a god: it is an act of submission and worship by the ἐραστής. Such an attitude to the beloved boy, if not this particular expression of it, can be paralleled from Greek epigram.<sup>17</sup>

Letters 36 and 37, addressed to the same woman, provide further variations on the erotic qualities of the feet. The former begins with the letter-writer expressing a desire to see the feet and ankles of the addressee naked:

“Do not ever wear shoes, or conceal your ankles...”

This is not merely an interest in her feet as one among many parts of her beauty, however: although he would like to see her completely naked, if she *must* wear clothes, it is essential that she uncover her feet at least, along with the other parts which are normally uncovered.

I wish that all the rest of you were visible... exposing  
your whole body to the spectators' eager pursuit. Well,  
be a bit economical of other features, if you will... but  
leave your feet at least bare like your neck, [etc].

Then, in the course of some mythological *exempla* of beautiful feet he defers to the authority of Homer, “the poet who had exact knowledge of all of beauty’s highest forms”: if *he* focused on the feet in describing Thetis, the letter-writer’s fetishism is validated. This listing of *exempla* takes the sophistic requirement to cite parallels from the classics for every phrase or *topos* to the extreme; it is also a trait of lovers in Greek poetry to cite precedents for their situation.<sup>18</sup> The accumulation of mythological parallels is especially a feature of Hellenistic poetry, where it is similarly used in an incongruously ‘low’ register.<sup>19</sup> Further on in the letter, he is eager to kiss her feet<sup>20</sup>—

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association of feet and epiphany as a pan-Mediterranean idea, possibly of Egyptian origin; commonly of Isis: cf. Apul.*Met.* 11.17.3, 11.23-24 for worship and kissing of *vestigia* (cf. Dunbabin 1990:96 for *vestigia* as ‘footprints’ here). Catullus 68.70-71 provides an example of the adaptation of this epiphanic motif to a mistress. Cf. Glenn 1980-81.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. e.g. *A.P.* 12.158, 12.169.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Sappho fr.6: Helen as precedent.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. the domestic witch Simaetha comparing herself to Medea and Circe and to Ariadne in Theocr.*Id.* 2.

<sup>20</sup> For physical attention to male feet—anointing or washing, usually by inferiors (women or slaves)—as an act of submission and as (therefore) associated with sex, cf. Scholz 1996:73-80 on Antiphanes fr.101 K-A, Eubulus fr.107 K-A, Cephisodorus fr.3 K-A, and Herodotus 6.19.2. This is therefore an inversion of gender- and power-relations, an act of submissiveness on the part of ‘Philostratus’ towards a female lover, recalling the roles of Latin elegists and their mistresses.

they should be kept naked in readiness for this<sup>21</sup>—and footprints are again referred to in a quasi-epiphanic context which elevates the addressee to the status of a goddess:

...walk softly and leave a print of your own foot behind  
you, as one who is destined to include even earth in her  
bounty.

This obsession with feet is, as in letter 18, created by combining motifs from earlier literature, in this case mostly to do with the feet of goddesses, transposed into an erotic context. Again, the letter-writer describes in his fantasy what amounts to an act of submission and worship.<sup>22</sup>

The next letter goes even further into the realm of the submissive and the masochistic: after similar requests to keep the addressee's feet bare, based on an adapted mythological *exemplum*, it ends with this eulogy:

O feet unfettered! O unhampered beauty! Thrice happy  
me and blessed, if on me ye tread!

The footprints which the writer is in raptures about in *Epistles* 18 and 36 should now be stamped onto his body: he wants his beloved to inflict pain upon him, and to do so with her feet, which are, for him at least, the object of erotic desire. This combination of pain and eroticism is true masochism. There are very few parallels for this, although there is some evidence from Attic vase-paintings, depicting spanking with sandals, that “some Greeks were aware of the sexually exciting effects of... mild pain”, in the words of Kilmer.<sup>23</sup> There is one very similar passage in Greek poetry, noted by Rosenmeyer:<sup>24</sup> *Anacreontic* 22 lists various items which the writer wishes to be, in order to be used by a woman,<sup>25</sup> including “I wish I were a sandal, if only you would step on me.”<sup>26</sup> The masochistic idea is there, but not the particular fetishism, as

<sup>21</sup> There is perhaps a punning allusion here to Musonius' statement that κινδυνεύει γὰρ τὸ μὲν ὑποδεδέσθαι ἐγγύς εἶναι (*Dissertationum a Lucio digestarum reliquiae*, 19; echoed by Clem.*Paed.*2.11.117): Philostratus refers shoes as “bonds” (δέου, δεδέσθαι).

<sup>22</sup> Unusual of *women* beloveds except in Latin elegy.

<sup>23</sup> 1990:265 with figure 29.4, the tondo of a cup by the Thalia Painter (R192). Curletto 1990:53-54 argues for the erotic connotations of sandals: after Aphrodite beating Eros with her sandal, such instances as Omphale beating Heracles with hers (e.g. Luc.*Dial.Deor.*13, *Hist.*10) are to be seen as *erotic* submission.

<sup>24</sup> 2001:333n.12.

<sup>25</sup> A commonplace: cf. e.g. *AP* 5.83, 5.84., and *Ov.Amor.*2.15. The Anacreontics are impossible to date with any accuracy, so that the question of influence can only be speculated upon.

<sup>26</sup> Καὶ σάνδαλον γενοίμην · | μόνον ποσὶν πάτει με. (15-16).

this is only one item in a list. Philostratus is innovative in his selection and accumulation of literary themes to create this fetish.

Philostratus' fetishism for *female* feet cannot be explained away as deliberate euphemism—this makes it probable that there is more to the boy's feet in *Epistle* 18 than phallic symbolism. Of course, I am not trying to argue that Philostratus really was a foot-fetishist and a masochist; but the persona he adopts in the letters certainly is. As Rosenmeyer says, the fetishistic and masochistic elements of his persona are “difficult to analyze”;<sup>27</sup> however, since many features of the *Epistles*, including the fantasy of submission to a female, are more similar to Latin elegy than to any other literary form around at the time, we might begin by taking a glance at some approaches to elegiac submissiveness. Rabinowitz explores the masochism of Propertius' persona, saying “This is more than the conventional *servitium amoris*... it is a program of erotic defeat and humiliation which identifies Propertius as a “love slave”.”<sup>28</sup> This applies to some aspects of Philostratus' epistolary persona, as we shall see.

Goldhill<sup>29</sup> compares Philostratus' *Epistles* to Ovid's *Amores*, which is very apt in many ways.<sup>30</sup> For one, Philostratus' multiple, anonymous addressees correspond to Ovid's many anonymous conquests. Then there is the sophistic *variatio* which leads to many inconsistencies between the Philostratean persona's positions in different letters:<sup>31</sup> on the one hand this shifting rhetoric might be perceived as a flaw; alternatively, it could be compared to the Ovidian persona of the *Amores*, shamelessly including in the same book poems which expose his contradictions.<sup>32</sup> Either one will say whatever it takes to persuade the object of his desire, thus displaying a consistently inconsistent persona. It seems almost certain that Philostratus was composing a *collection* of letters—comparable to a poetic book—from the outset.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 2001:333.

<sup>28</sup> 2000:210 on Prop.1.1.1-6 (Amor steps on Propertius' head with his feet!).

<sup>29</sup> Forthcoming.

<sup>30</sup> Of course, in their epistolary form they resemble the *Heroides*, which build up the persona of the mythical figure as letter-writer within one letter; but in Philostratus it is the epistolary collection which is the unit of composition more than the individual letter, so that the comparison to collections of elegiac or lyric poems is more apt. Goldhill also compares them to Greek lyric poems.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Rosenmeyer 2001:330-31 and 323 for sophistic *variatio* (quoted below, n.37), which she describes as undermining the unity of the collection; cf. *Epp.* 13-15, discussed below.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. e.g. *Amor.* 2.7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Following in the centuries-old Greek epistolographic tradition: the first collections, if they contain any genuine letters, were compiled from pre-existing material, but the pseudonymous or fictional

The formal aspects of Philostratus' letters, as Rosenmeyer notes,<sup>34</sup> represent a "radical departure" from earlier Greek epistolary collections: the unmediated voice of the letter-writer and the 'personal' nature of the letters are more like a book of elegies or a collection of epigrams or lyric poems: a set of crafted utterances which allow the reader to build up a picture of an erotic persona.

This said, let us conclude our analysis of the epistolary persona's foot-fetish. Goldhill<sup>35</sup> wants to view the collection as "a sort of handbook or manual for the desiring subject"; "an anthology of moments... to be chosen from... used and re-used." Indeed, a variety of situations is catered for; but I would say perhaps *too many*—how often will a lover require a letter asking a woman to tread on him with naked feet? Even if we assume a higher proportion of foot-fetishists among the ancients, three letters on the theme seems excessive; these letters are not 'one-size-fits-all', but tailored to suit this particular persona, which lends the whole collection the "strange, brooding spirit" noticed by the Loeb editors Benner and Fobes.<sup>36</sup> Only a card-carrying foot-fetishist would be attracted by a lover offering letters such as these three, with their obsessive concentration on feet to the exclusion of all else.<sup>37</sup> Since the addressees of these fetishising letters are two, and anonymous, it is clear that the letters are meant rather as part of the construction of the epistolary persona than expecting the reader to imagine that the lucky Philostratus has found two lovers who share his fetishism. These anonymous objects of his desire are, even more than those in most erotic literature, simply objects of fantasy: the letter-writer has fetishised one body part so that it, rather than even a whole body (much less a whole person), is almost all that counts.<sup>38</sup> Such fantasy-objects are created by, and therefore easily

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epistolary collection was a compositional unit by the first centuries C.E. (cf. e.g. 'Chion', ps.-Aeschines, Aelian). As such Philostratus must have been aware of the potential of combination or juxtaposition of complementary letters such as 13-15, in which the first two warn (a) boy(s) of impending puberty and therefore loss of his good looks, while the last reassures another boy that his first beard, already present, is not the end but the beginning of his manly beauty. If he is consciously forming his collection with books of lyric or elegiac poems in mind, this is even more likely.

<sup>34</sup> 2001:324.

<sup>35</sup> Forthcoming.

<sup>36</sup> Benner and Fobes 1949:393, quoted approvingly by Goldhill (forthcoming); Rosenmeyer 2001:323 disagrees, but accepts their characterisation of the "grotesque" (332-3: see below).

<sup>37</sup> Rosenmeyer (2001:323) sees the collection functioning as "a sophistic exercise in *variatio*... meant to be read only to oneself, "sympathetically", with an eye to literary craftsmanship rather than practical application."

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Spelman 1999, an application of the Lacanian distinction of the fetishised body part from the accompanying romantic fantasy to Prop.2.3; in these terms, Philostratus' obsessive fantasy—an extreme variant of Propertius' romantic fantasy—is the product of an ultimately unsatisfying, but nevertheless inevitable, desire for the object of fetish. Cf Henderson (n.10 above) on the psychosexual

manipulable by the subject; but in this respect they are at a great remove from the reality to which they are tenuously connected. Taken in this way, these three letters might fit into a category shared with others in the collection, as we shall see shortly, namely the erotic pursuit doomed to failure—or at least the highly risky lover’s strategy. The obsessive lover, alone with his fantasies, may be imagined as writing the kind of letter which is best left undelivered: these letters are each self-contained fantasy worlds of the epistolary persona’s imagination, which make sense only in isolation. To send them would be to attempt to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality, and it is at this conjunction that the risk of failure arises: where the real boy or woman does not match up to, and is not so controllable as, the corresponding fetish or fantasy. It is for the reader to decide whether to imagine these letters as being sent, but it would be consistent with Philostratus’ epistolary persona, who seems to revel in pain and to court rejection elsewhere, to do so.<sup>39</sup>

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associations of the foot.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Goldhill (forthcoming) on the “performative value” of the letters, following Benner and Fobes (cf. n.36 above): he notes the “sense of *failure of exchange*” (his emphasis) and the “solipsistic obsessiveness” of the writing. Rosenmeyer agrees on solitary reading (cf. n.37 above). But the performative value of the letters read *as literature* is a different matter from how the reader imagines their performative value as ‘real’ letters within the imaginary world they create.

### III. Masochistic elegy.

I shall now examine briefly some of the other *Erotic Epistles* which display this masochistic persona; I hope to show that Philostratus creates a persona which, whilst it could be that of a Latin elegist or Greek lyric poet, is also extremely well-adapted to the epistolary form; and that this adaptation is part of Philostratus' reinvention of the prose epistolary genre. To this end, I shall point to some further lyric or elegiac elements which he imports into the *Epistles*: some of these fit well with what are considered by ancient authorities as typical features of literary and real letters, while others are, before Philostratus, poetic rather than epistolary features. He adapts erotic motifs from poetry to be read aloud and in company<sup>40</sup> to a form most likely read in private,<sup>41</sup> and thus more suited to the extremes to which he takes them, thereby exploring further the qualities of letters and the potentials of epistolary literature.

One of the traditional functions of letters is to persuade; and the ostensible function of a love-letter, as of a personally addressed love-poem, is persuasive: it aims to win over an object of desire, and can use a heavy dose of rhetoric as well as dishonesty in the attempt. Several—the more 'conventional'—of Philostratus' *Epistles* are in this mould:<sup>42</sup> like Ovid's *Amores*, they exhibit a variety of rhetorical manoeuvring. The difference is in those letters grouped by Rosenmeyer<sup>43</sup> under the heading "the grotesque", including our fetishising letters. Ovid's persona in the *Amores* is, above all, successful: his inconsistencies appear as such only to the reader of a poetic book, generally remaining concealed from his various mistresses; he is therefore extremely confident, even smug. Philostratus' persona, on the other hand, is often desperate, employing strategies which might be thought of as persuasive by forcing the beloved to take pity on him, but which in fact only display his desperation and obsession—an unattractive combination!

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<sup>40</sup> Mainly in a sympotic context for Greek lyric and elegiac poems.

<sup>41</sup> See above on the letters' performative context.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. *Epp.* 13-15, discussed above.

<sup>43</sup> 2001:332-3.

Private letter-writing is by nature a personal affair, allowing and encouraging the writer to bare his soul: Demetrius' rhetorical handbook says letters should be strong on characterisation, since

...everyone in writing a letter... composes an image of his own soul.<sup>44</sup>

The solitary activity of writing a letter and its personal nature allow the writer to dwell on the situation (s)he is in at length: much like a personal journal, it is a self-reflexive form. It is therefore both amenable and conducive to an obsessive persona such as Philostratus creates, and as Jason König has suggested to me,<sup>45</sup> “the way in which letters can concentrate very narrowly on a single subject—shutting out everything else around them—is relevant to that obsessive persona.” This is a kind of expression explored in earlier literature through erotic monologues—another form of expression arising from contexts where literary characters are alone with their thoughts—such as that of Simaetha in Theocritus' second *Idyll*.<sup>46</sup> Philostratus, by adapting this poetic trope, explores a new avenue in epistolary literature.

This obsessiveness is present in several letters: for instance, he twice offers to commit suicide for love—obviously a doomed enterprise: such desperate pleas, even if they do evoke pity, are not likely to win a lover. From *Epistle 23*:<sup>47</sup>

Command me as you please, and I obey... order me to suffer stripes, I endure; to cast away my life, I do not hesitate; to run through fire, I do not refuse.

Another example of obsession and masochism combined is *Epistle 48*:

You are so spiteful that you have no pity for anybody except yourself, and I am so unfortunate that I will not accept pity from anybody except you; and I am very happy in my misery...

These features can be compared with those Rabinowitz highlights in his discussion of ‘erotic masochism’ in Propertius' *Elegies*: for instance (on 2.8) “the poet would gladly be dead if only she'd pity him, or better still, actively abuse him: let her at least

<sup>44</sup> *On style 227*: σχεδὸν γὰρ εἰκόνα ἑκάστος τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς γράφει τὴν ἐπιστολήν.

<sup>45</sup> *Per litteras!*

<sup>46</sup> Cf. also *Id.* 3.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Ep.* 57.

dance beside his pyre and trample his bones!”<sup>48</sup> Here, again, there is some innovation<sup>49</sup> in using the extreme sentiments appropriate to the elegiac persona to create, as it were, the letters of an *exclusus amator*.

Letters are also concerned with reciprocity, and not just the sending and receiving of letters themselves: they were strongly associated with accompanying gifts or other goods sent, or even persons carrying them and recommended to the recipient.<sup>50</sup> The ‘darker’ side of Philostratus’ persona emerges when epistolary reciprocity fails: rejected, he revels in the pain given by his beloved in the absence of any other response.<sup>51</sup> So for instance *Epistle 5*, to a boy who is “impervious to love”, ends:

...if you are unwilling to spare my life, here’s the  
sword. I am not asking for mercy—have no fear of that!  
Even for a wound I yearn.

Of course, a ‘wound’ in an erotic context often means the wound of love; but Philostratus already has this wound, apparently—hence the letter—and yearns not for this but for another, real wound. Similar is *Epistle 47*:

...I do not beseech you; I do not shed tears; bring the  
play to its conclusion, so that you may touch me, even  
though it be with a sword.

His desire for the epistolary exchange to be completed is so strong that if its object will only touch him with a sword, he will embrace it.

I would suggest that none of the letters surveyed here would be very appealing to a potential lover; furthermore, their addressees have *already* rejected the letter-writer. It is hard to imagine a collection including them as performing any ‘function’ other than a purely literary one. The reader can imagine the rejected lover brooding on his misfortune, too obsessed with his latest fantasy to give up; writing such letters—and perhaps sending them—as an act of sheer desperation.

<sup>48</sup> 2000:219, on Prop.2.8.16-20. Propertius engineers a scolding (in 1.3) since “Abuse and scorn were for him the one best proof of Cynthia’s love.” (2000:216). He also notes (217) the poet’s enjoyment of “rough sex” (2.15.4; 3.8.1-12, 21f.; 2.19; 2.22.13-20).

<sup>49</sup> Whether or not we imagine Philostratus to have read Latin elegy.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Rosenmeyer 2001:100-105; 325-27 on the gifts in Philostratus’ *Epistles*.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. n.39 above.

Philostratus' *Epistles*, then, exploit both sides of the dichotomy of epistolarity: a letter can be a powerful tool for persuasion, or (by the very necessity for a letter) an admission of powerlessness. For a successful lover or letter-writer the first time around has no need for further letters; letters are usually motivated by distance or separation from the addressee,<sup>52</sup> and when this distance is a result of the addressee's rejection of the writer, they are the medium of the desperate. This negative aspect of epistolary motivation can be seen as partially accounting for the darker side of Philostratus' persona: a rejected lover, especially one with masochistic tendencies, can turn from sexual fantasies, to fantasising about being hurt by the object of his desire. Letter-writing is usually a solitary and private activity, and as such, when the subject is highly personal and emotional, it is an activity conducive to obsessiveness. Philostratus' *Erotic Epistles* are grounded in a range of imaginary situations in which one might write to a lover, recognising the letter as the realm of the desperate, the fantasist, and the obsessive lover (as well as the prospective). Philostratus' masochistic persona thus fits its epistolary form well.

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Trapp 2003:1.

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