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Poison in Athens

Margaret Doody

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I



Agents and Mechanisms

'There is a trial coming up at the Areopagos,' Aristotle said. 'I believe you might like to go. A case of malicious wounding – could be interesting. To be sure, at first glance it is merely the case of a couple of citizens who fought in a brothel over a concubine.'

'This really isn't good enough,' I said – inappropriately. Perhaps I didn't really want to think about Athens' most ancient and most important court of law, after my experience of the Areopagos a few years before. But it was true that this meal warranted an apology. We were sitting at dinner in my *andron*, the nicest room of the house; this room reserved to men served as our dining-room, as is right when one has guests from outside the family. From a child I had thought of this space as our 'best room'. Yet now I could see that my *andron* looked shabby, the paint on the walls chipped and dulled. There was a little crack along one wall. Some table-legs were unmistakably

dusty, and there were other little symptoms of a lack of sharp-eyed housekeepers.

Now that I was seriously thinking of getting married, the defects of my housekeeping were more visible – and more vexatious. It occurred to me – too late – that I should not have invited the Master of the Lykeion into my house to dine with me. At this time, the late spring of the year before my strange journey to the East, Aristotle's wife Pythias had not been very well. So it had seemed a kindness to offer him a meal. Aristotle's wife was merely expecting a baby, but matters were not proceeding as well as they might, and Aristotle was slightly worried. It had been my intention to cheer him up. I had also dutifully invited Theophrastos, Aristotle's right-hand man. How fortunate it was that the solemn and fastidious Theophrastos had declined; he was within the city walls, but visiting another former student.

My invitation had been issued on the spur of the moment, without home consultation on my part. I was paying for having forgotten that my mother's absence left an uncaptained kitchen. My mother Eunike daughter of Diogeiton had gone to our farm for a few days, obtaining the benefit of some fresh air (and the opportunity to look into the ways of all the servants and the stores). Mother, a widow for some three years, could be gently agreeable or gently complaining, but she had her formidable side. My father Nikiarkhos, well-born but not of the most wealthy, had managed to spend a great deal of money before he died, relatively young; our family was in a more precarious financial position than I should have wished. Therefore

it was a pity that my mother's family were not better off, as well as aristocratically proud of their direct descent from Athens' founder Erektheus. Of course, everyone in Athens – except foreigners like Aristotle – is descended from Erektheus or Theseus or Orestes. But not everyone can trace the lineage exactly as my mother's family claims to do, or inherit the capacity to tame snakes. It was too bad their branch of a distinguished family had omitted to give me any powerful male relatives.

Mother has never (as far as I know) tried to tame snakes, but she could do it if she had to. She is certainly capable of keeping the household servants in order. Yesterday, however, she had taken our two best slaves into the country with her – so I realized belatedly. And I had no turn for housekeeping. Though at this point, as marriage was contemplated, it had crossed my mind that I ought to start taking more interest in our household. Such good thoughts had not borne fruit as yet, at least on this evening. Not only had I forgotten to do any marketing myself, but I had not even really ordered it specifically to be done. We were left to the mercy of what the house had to provide, according to the judgement of the one remaining servant, most inefficient of the slaves.

The offerings for the evening proved to be a very watery and tepid soup, dry bread, three very small dried fish accompanied by a little celery (surprisingly flabby with age); to finish with, there were a few nuts and dried figs. It was spring, just turning into summer, and one could hardly expect the best fruit quite yet, but surely something better could have been offered

than these dusty-looking figs and some aged walnuts that had seen much better days. Moreover, even to bring this modest meal to the *andron* took an unconscionable time. If only those two slaves who had gone to the farm for some fresh supplies had returned in time for dinner! Our remaining servant had never found kitchen work his strong point. The wine was served in an old chipped jar, with two cups that did not quite match.

'I will be better off,' I remarked, 'when I have more slaves. We need more household help. How I wish the dinner would cook and serve itself!'

'You are not the first to wish that,' Aristotle remarked. 'You remember what Homer says in the *Iliad*, describing the god Hephaistos at work in his house of bronze. Hephaistos made twenty tripods designed to run about on gold wheels, so they could go in or out of the great hall of the gods by themselves, merely at his wish: "a wonder to see". Homer certainly thought it would be splendid to have objects self-moved, acting spontaneously! That's why he gave that gift to the gods.'

'It would certainly save us a world of trouble,' I remarked.

'Ah, yes – what a different world it would turn out to be. If the shuttles shuttled back and forth at the loom by themselves, or the plektra could play the kithara on their own – why then, masters of crafts would have no need of workmen, and no master would need a slave. Slavery would vanish. The world would be utterly changed.'

'But that won't happen. We all need slaves as our

tools. And after all, in Homer the things are being invented – they aren't quite ready. We don't actually see the magic tripods, just brawny lame Hephaistos, sweating among his anvils and bellows. A poor condition in which to meet the goddess Thetis when she comes to see him!'

'An acute – and polite – observation.'

'Those self-moving tripods,' I continued, 'are not as interesting as the other self-movers that Hephaistos made. The figures of gold in the shape of young girls.'

'Quite so. And here he has reached a high point, as you indicate, for these golden handmaidens have *minds*, as well as being able to move on their own.

> "In their minds is understanding and reasoning power, as well as speech and strength."

'To create objects that can think and speak seems more wonderful than to make things that merely move. Really godlike creation. Though these lovely metal maidens are a supplement to his weakness. They support his limping steps by holding him up on each side.'

'Almost sad,' I remarked idly. 'Girls of metal might not be as nice as those of flesh. Perhaps the limping god made them because he lived with golden Aphrodite, who ignored him.'

'How brilliant you are this evening, Stephanos,' Aristotle teased. 'As you say, Homer shows us very vividly the lame god working and sweating. His skill in creating self-moved servants, even these metal slave girls who understand human speech, has not brought him leisure. Nor happiness.'

'But it cannot happen to us – we are not gods. We have to depend on workers and slaves.'

'True enough. Although in all mechanical arts we have improved over time, and invented new instruments, yet we still need tools capable of rudimentary thought. And slaves supply us with that. Useful possessions, living tools not of metal but of flesh and blood, acting out the will of the master. Slaves are the best mechanisms, active and versatile, under another's control. Animals and men are the only real automata, the only things that truly move by themselves, of their own will. By "self-moving", however, we customarily mean beings that move according to choice and will. Slaves are not truly "self-moving" in that sense, as we own them, as we do a hoe or a lamp – or as Hephaistos owns his tripods. Free men alone are truly self-movers.'

'Unless you count things like the little puppets that some folk put on shows with. I used to love those when I was a little boy – I *believed* they could move.'

'I enjoyed them, too. The best ones work on a cunningly wound spring. But few artificial things are lifelike. No one is really deceived by a statue. At least, not since Daidalos, who according to legend made statues so lively they had to be chained to prevent their running away. But things don't move of themselves.'

Just as he said that, my knife fell on the floor. 'Sometimes they seem to do so,' I pointed out.

'Random Chance as a self-mover? An agent without choice,' he mockingly agreed.

We were laughing a little over this, when I heard someone at the front door. My least efficient slave

added poor portering to his other acquirements, and I heard him stumbling along the passageway, and then yelling to me.

'It's someone as wants to see Master Aristotle,' he bellowed. 'You want I let her in?'

As it was evident from the sound of brisk sandalled feet coming to the door that he had done so, there seemed little to say. The door was flung open by an unknown attendant carrying a lantern, to serve the person who walked in. A woman. She was veiled, as a lady must be, and covered with a light cloak, so finely woven that it made her appear like a lady of high rank.

'You have come to see Aristotle? Who are you?' I demanded, rising. I felt slightly annoyed by this unexpected visitant – the more as I knew no ladies with well-woven cloaks would come calling here for my sake. This woman's garb was modest and all-concealing, yet there were shining subtle threads at its edging, and the weave was in a wavy pattern difficult to execute. Through all this muffling apparel, it could be seen that the newcomer was a small-boned little woman, very slender, yet not short. Her dress, visible in part under the cloak, had a saffron threading woven into it, a touch of golden light upon the light brown of the soft wool. She seemed so fine and so well-off that her first words came as a shock.

'Oh, please! We have such trouble. Please, good sir – Aristotle – help me.'

'And you are—?'

'Marylla. A woman of Sikilia. The slave of Orthoboulos.' She slowly raised both hands – slim

hands with long fingers – and removed her veil. The sight was very pleasing. A delicate face, wide at the temples and coming to a perfect little point at the chin. This sweet face was set off by the short curls around it, curls the colour of dark honey. The face's owner looked at us out of great deep-grey eyes. Her hair was cut short, indicating her position as a slave, and the absence of gold jewellery also indicated that she was not a citizen woman, nor even a freed person. This lovely creature looked at us beseechingly. These grey eyes focused on Aristotle, and she knelt to him, and tried to grasp his knees.

'You – please! You are a great rhetorician and a cunning man of logic. You can save me from the torture! And save my master from confusion and loss – even to the loss of his whole estate!'

'Ah! Marylla. I have heard of you.' Aristotle pulled her upright. 'The concubine, the bone of contention. But I do not see clearly what you wish from me—'

'I pray you, come and talk with my master Orthoboulos. His enemies have pressed and persecuted him, now Ergokles accuses him of a serious crime. Some of his best friends have dropped off, a few of his associates now throw their favour to Ergokles. My master has saved me and all of our household from being witnesses – saving us from torture! But Orthoboulos must endure the trial at the Areopagos in a short time. His opponent presses him very hard. He has a favourable witness in his good friend Philinos, but we don't know how able Philinos will be in actually speaking. Orthoboulos must handle it all himself. Please come and help him. You have great learning in

argument and persuasion. Discuss his speeches with him—'

'I might be willing to do so. But why does not Orthoboulos ask me himself?'

She flung out a hand with a despairing gesture. 'Because he is proud. He is not the sort of man to ask for help. But we are worried. Philinos' mistress Lykaina has let on to me that she knows Philinos too is worried about how this case will go. Orthoboulos is not vain, but he is well-born, and has pride. Like all gentlemen, he needs to feel he can manage his own affairs. But I heard that you were within the city walls this evening, and have come to plead. I know you would not be rebuffed, if you came. *Please!*

Aristotle pursed his lips and nodded slightly. 'I think,' he said, 'you could tell Orthoboulos straight away that I am going to drop in on him this evening, on the chance that he might be at home at that time. In short, I will come after I have finished dining.'

It seemed kind of him to give this description to partaking of my wretched dried fish and figs. The woman, with profuse utterances of thanks, sprang to her feet.

'You will help him – help all of us! The gods reward you! I shall take no more of your time. Forgive the intrusion.' She vanished with remarkable celerity, before we were tired of looking at her, in company with her light-bearer.

'What a household!' I commented. 'Where even the slaves have slaves.'

'She is a mistress as well as a slave, I think. Some men insist on bringing their sexual lives into the home

scene, which causes difficulties in the household. Though such a weakness is the less censurable in Orthoboulos' case. He is not married, but a widower. This lovely creature commands her master's bed, most probably, and his heart – or at least some of his money. That cloak she wears is of the first quality. That simple tunic is very fine – with saffron-coloured threads cunningly worked into it. "Robes richly and colourfully wrought, the work of Sidonian women." You have brought Homer to my mind and he won't go away.'

'She speaks with an odd accent.'

'Marylla is a Greek-speaking Sikilian. Yet there is about her more than a dash of Karthago. There are many colonists of Karthago along the shores of Sikilia. And in the wars in Sikilia the Greeks have taken Punic captives.'

'A girl of gold – but flesh, not metal. Tell me more about this Orthoboulos who keeps such a pet at home. I think my father knew him, but I do not.'

'Orthoboulos is the defendant in the trial at the Areopagos,' Aristotle said. 'Of an old Athenian family, he has been one of the Athenian patriots, somewhat hostile to Makedonia. He is, however, a patriot in a calm and moderate fashion. He might be won over to support Makedonian rule – in a temperate way. Orthoboulos does everything moderately and temperately, which makes this serious charge against him – assault, malicious wounding – the more surprising. I should like to aid him, now he has deigned to ask for my help. I had already wished to go to the trial to find out if he got fair play. But of course *I* cannot officially attend a trial before the court of the

Areopagos. I am one of the foreigners who has to stop at the barrier. So – I want you to go. I am not a citizen. *You* are.'

'I suppose I should go,' I sighed. 'Since that case of my own, when I had to defend my cousin on a charge of murder, I am not over-fond of the court of the Areopagos. Still, if Orthoboulos was a friend – or something like one – of my father, I ought to show up for his trial.'

Orthoboulos had been an associate of my father – at least, at one point he had lent my father money. That, unhappily, had been true of most of my father's friends, as I had discovered when I tried to disentangle his affairs after his death.

'A good sort of man,' commented Aristotle. 'Orthoboulos might have some claim to be called "a great-souled man". A rich man who is not mean. He has performed liturgies, given benefits to Athens. He would much rather give a favour than take one.'

'A man of importance,' I agreed.

'And Orthoboulos has at least one thing entirely in his favour – he possesses the kind of deep, slow, important voice that does well in a lawcourt. So far in the preliminary hearings he has refused to give way on the point of having his slaves as witnesses.'

'So I suppose his household slaves haven't had to be tortured – not yet, anyway.'

'Exactly. This woman's testimony would be desirable, and it is true his opponents will press him hard. It is something of a degradation for a man to yield on such a point, I grant you. The citizen who can keep his own slaves from getting tortured always looks

stronger than the man who gives way. But Ergokles has a case, and I daresay he will make the best of it, even without evidence extracted from Orthoboulos' servants.'

At this point in our conversation Theophrastos arrived, a tall man, oblong in shape and always somewhat stiff. He was ready to walk back to the Lykeion, but I had to invite him in. I always found Theophrastos, so unbending and such a precise speaker, rather a strain to talk to, and on this occasion I was also embarrassed at his seeing the remains of my poor dinner. Theophrastos followed the Pythagorean doctrine, at least as far as not eating flesh of any kind was concerned, but I could not fancy that he would have found pleasure in the flabby celery. As the plate of musty figs and nuts was still with us, I had to offer it to him, for hospitality's sake, but was not surprised when he declined to become involved with these old fruits of another season.

'We were just talking of Orthoboulos' trial,' Aristotle said, kindly diverting Theophrastos' attention.

'Athens has a lot of courts and trials,' I remarked. 'I wonder who thought of them, and why it works that way.'

'That's the kind of thing that my scholars are studying now,' exclaimed Aristotle. 'You should come and discuss it with them. At the Lykeion. It is good to have one place separate from the pressures of the agora, the assembly or the law courts, in which such matters can be fully discussed, bringing knowledge to bear rather than passion or interest.'

'I miss the philosophical conversations,' I admitted.

'What I should like to know, really, is this: what is the happiest life for the individual and for his city? How should a man live and what should laws be?'

'Indeed,' said Theophrastos, 'you ask questions that are not small! These matters certainly concern us at the Lykeion.'

At this point there was a further diversion as my young brother Theodoros took it upon himself to join us. He had been supposed to eat apart in the *gynaikon*. A boy child of only ten years, he was of the age to be kept in the women's quarters – so everyone thought but Theodoros himself. Some men invite their children in to entertain visitors (and attract gifts) after dinner, but I do not approve of this practice, and it was not my intention to introduce Theodoros. He was too young to join in men's talk. But now that we were finished the actual business of eating, he had made bold to enter. He had no qualms about helping himself to one of the questionable figs, nor about joining in the conversation.

'I know what you're talking of,' he said. 'The trial. The big case. Ergokles says Orthoboulos attacked and wounded him. The boys were talking about it at school. Does someone found guilty of attack and wounding have to *die*?'

'No,' said Aristotle slowly. 'But his estate is in question. He could lose everything he has.'

'But not be put to death?' Theodoros sounded almost disappointed. 'People who are sentenced to death – they have to take poison. Up there in the gaol, just at the corner of the Agora. Not far from us. One of the older boys told us about it – his father was one

of the Eleven and had charge of the prison once. The gaoler brings hemlock poison to the man who is to die. The man drinks the hemlock. It tastes very nasty! Then he coughs and turns blue and goes stiff.'

'That was how Sokrates died,' Aristotle said sadly. 'I know a great deal about that. Plato, my teacher, who adored Sokrates, was not there at his death. I think he was too upset to go, though he said he was ill. But I have heard about the event from a few people who were there, including the once-beautiful Phaido, who like Plato was so young when Sokrates died that he survived well into my own time.'

'What do you know? Please tell me!' said Theodoros. 'Why was Sokrates killed? And who was Phaido?'

'Sokrates was executed because he was found guilty of impiety – and corrupting the young in his teaching. Phaido was a disciple of Sokrates, a very young one. Plato in his narrative has Phaido give the account. Actually, Phaido lived for many years to tell his story himself, and not just as he is made to speak by Plato.'

'How exactly did Sokrates die?' Theophrastos was curious to hear gruesome details, and Aristotle replied before I could reprove the boy and turn the topic.

'He was in prison. People had tried to get him to consider escape. It was a refutation of the charge of impiety that he accepted his sentence with religious tranquillity and did not let it alter what he thought or believed, even while he sat in a prison cell, in chains and awaiting death. It was very hard for the great philosopher's friends to believe they were really going to put Sokrates to death, but when they came one

morning they found it was so. They not only wept, as in Plato's story of the event, but several of them became sick to their stomachs, especially later when the hemlock was brought in. Sokrates, now freed of his fetters, talked of immortality and endeavoured to cheer his friends. Then he had an evacuation of bowels and bladder, and a bath, and put on clean clothing, before saying farewell to the women and to his children. After that, he sat among his friends until the poison came.'

Aristotle sighed, and then smiled.

'Sokrates was very brave, you know. He could have saved himself by running away (his friends had a plan for escape). But he refused. He emphasized that his remaining to accept Athens' sentence was his own will, his own choice. There is an example, Stephanos, of a self-mover!'

'Why didn't he run away? I would! Or if I couldn't, I would throw down the cup when they brought it to me,' said Theodoros with energy.

'The brave man accepts necessity, Theodoros. Sokrates was brave. He did not shrink from the very end. Some condemned persons put off putting the poison cup to their lips, and have feasts or even make love well into the night of their execution, but not Sokrates. The sunlight had not left the tops of the mountains, yet he refused to wait, and drank the poison. He conversed as tranquilly as ever, and walked about, and then lay down, soon unable to move. When the poison reached his heart, he gave a great convulsion and died, as the gaoler had predicted.'

Theophrastos sighed, while Aristotle gazed into the

distance as if he could see that spectacular sad scene.

'You should not dwell on that event,' I said gently. 'It happened before your time, long ago.'

'Time seems different to me, at my age, than it does to yourself, Stephanos. And I find much hope in Sokrates' end. For I believe it must be possible to find a good death.'

Athens' long-ago insult to philosophy in putting to death one of its most brilliant and outspoken citizens was depressing Aristotle's spirit. So I attempted to change the subject, if perhaps not very happily.

'Not everyone is executed in that way,' I explained to my young brother. 'Only Athenian citizens of good standing. It is of a piece with the fact that no Athenian can be flogged or tortured. Citizens do not inflict physical pain on each other, for we Athenians are not slaves. But other malefactors die more unpleasantly – nailed or stapled to a plank of wood.'

'I knew *that*,' said Theodoros, helping himself to a tired walnut left over from this meal of state. 'But I'd like to see the poison. There must be a lot of it in Athens – in the prison, I mean. Could anybody make hemlock poison?'

'The gods forbid! I hope not,' I said.

'I guess the prison *must* have a jar of poison in it,' persisted Theodoros. 'All ready. If the gaoler doesn't want to have to make it. They'd probably make Orthoboulos drink it, if he went about wounding people all the time.'

'Little boys should be thinking about their lessons and not of poisons,' I said repressively. 'Now, go, and ask the slave to see that you get to bed at the right time.'

'Your little brother is almost right,' said Aristotle, as Theodoros made his departure. 'Though the charge against Orthoboulos seems almost ridiculous, considering the circumstances of the alleged crime, the consequences could be serious. Orthoboulos could be banished, losing his citizenship. All his property, land and goods included, would be confiscated. He is evidently concerned, or he would not have sent Marylla in this roundabout way to ask my help. I shall explain later, Theophrastos, but I cannot go home yet.'

He rose and the two men prepared to depart.

'Yes,' said Aristotle, 'I shall call on Orthoboulos this evening, and if he is in the humour to bear it, we will go over his defence. A charge of malicious wounding is not to be trifled with. As the woman indicated, he could lose his whole estate – including the woman Marylla herself. If Ergokles succeeds in putting his case, that pretty Sikilian would at once be taken over by him as the rightful property of Ergokles.'