

# An Apophthegm of Diogenes the Cynic

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*Διογένης ὁ κυνικὸς φιλόσοφος ἰδὼν γυναῖκα ὑπὸ ποταμοῦ φερό-  
μένην εἶπεν· ἄφες φέρεσθαι (sic) τὸ κακὴν ὑπὸ κακοῦ.*

THE TEXT of this graffito from Herculaneum has been published and discussed by M. della Corte,<sup>1</sup> A. Maiuri,<sup>2</sup> K. Schubring<sup>3</sup> and G. Strohmaier.<sup>4</sup> *κακοῦ* is the original writer's supralinear correction of *κακίως*.<sup>5</sup> But even with the correction, the last four words present a problem in interpretation to which neither della Corte nor Maiuri allude. Schubring emends *ἄφες φέρεσθαι ὑπὸ κακοῦ κάκιόν τι*, Strohmaier *ἄφες φέρεσθαι τὸ κακὸν ὑπὸ κακοῦ*. None of the four scholars notes earlier Greek proverbial usage that might be relevant.

Writers of the fifth century B.C. sometimes deprecated rash, dangerous or dishonorable solutions with a proverb, *νίχ. μὴ κακὸν κακῶ ἰᾶσθαι*,<sup>6</sup> and the usage persisted into later antiquity.<sup>7</sup> Some Athenian comic playwrights amused themselves by playing on the notion, *e.g.* *ἦλω τὸν ἦλον, παττάλω τὸν πάτταλον*,<sup>8</sup> and it may be that Diogenes was evoking the prohibition, "Don't cure bad by means of bad," with a twist. If one prints *ἄφες φέρεσθαι· τὸ κακὴν ὑπὸ κακοῦ*, the sense becomes: "Let her go. It is a case of, 'Bad to get rid of bad . . . woman'."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Le iscrizioni di Ercolano," *RendNap* ns 33 (1958) 262, no. 264, with a facsimile on Plate II. He translates the apophthegm: "Lascia che un malanno sia portato via da un (altro) malanno."

<sup>2</sup> *Ercolano, I nuovi Scavi, 1927-1958* (Rome 1958) 435 with fig. 379.

<sup>3</sup> "Epigraphisches aus Kampanischen Städten," *Hermes* 90 (1962) 240f.

<sup>4</sup> "TO KAKON ΥΠΟ ΚΑΚΟΥ: Zu einem weiberfeindlichen Diogenes-spruch aus Herculaneum," *Hermes* 95 (1967) 253ff.

<sup>5</sup> Maiuri has *τι* in his facsimile but prints <το>. His use of angular brackets is not clear; he uses them also to bracket <κίως>.

<sup>6</sup> Aesch. fr.695 (Mette); Soph. *Ajax* 362, fr.77, 589; Hdt. 3.53.4; Thuc. 5.65.2.

<sup>7</sup> Dion.Hal. 11.14; Plut. *Vit.Alc.* 25; Ael. *NA* 3.47; Ael.Aristid. I p.377, II p.274; Polyaeus 5.11, Phot. *Bibl.* II p.483 (Bekker).

<sup>8</sup> *FrAttCom* Adesp. 494; cf. Antiphanes, fr. 300; Adesp. 453.

<sup>9</sup> The article serves as quotation marks. Whether the phrase as a whole should be regarded as standing in apposition to the foregoing phrase (see Kühner/Gerth 1.285, 311 n.7; E. Schwyzer 2.617) or as the object of some verb to be understood, *e.g.* λέγω, is not clear.

What I have rendered in English as 'to get rid of', a Greek would have supplied from the proverb and from various sorts of play on the proverb. Diogenes in that case has substituted the particular *κακὴν* for a general *κακὸν*, while turning an admonition into a recommendation. Given the misogynous cast of the anecdote, one might *exempli gratia* reconstruct a response that found utterance in the elliptical allusion. It would go somewhat as follows: The woman, a bad thing, is being carried off by the river, which while not essentially bad is certainly bad for her. We often hear, "Don't cure bad by means of bad," but here the combination seems to work.

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