# *Cleobulina of Rhodes (6th century BCE)*

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ABSTRACT

Cleobulina was a renowned composer of riddles. Only four of her riddles have reached us: the cup riddle, the art riddle, the Phrygian flute riddle, and the year riddle. All of them belong to a particular type of riddle that folklorists have named the "true riddle". Its main characteristic is that it refers to an item through a description that either does not apply to it or that contradicts our normal experience of it. Cleobulina did not propose any philosophical theories. This is probably the reason why no ancient author referred to her as a philosopher.

Like her father, she might be considered a "sage" (σοφή), as Plutarch explicitly calls her (*Symposium of the Seven Sages* 148d). Despite not being a philosopher, Cleobulina could be seen as a figure relevant to the history of ancient philosophy. First, since her riddles were prominent in the development of the ancient Greek riddle tradition, they help us to understand the first philosophical reflections on riddles credited to Aristotle and to his disciple Clearchus. Second, Plutarch presents Cleobulina's riddles as a kind of sympotic entertainment, while the anonymous author of the *Dissoi Logoi* uses one as a vehicle for philosophical reflection.

Although we do not know if Cleobulina composed her riddles to reflect on ethical issues, at least one of them served this purpose. Third, Cleobulina's riddles reflect a singular epistemological perspective, according to which knowledge does not emerge from new findings, but rather from new connections between items already known. This perspective could be relevant to philosophical discussions of ancient epistemological problems. Riddles lead us to acquire a different understanding of things already known. To guess the answer, the listener or reader must decode the metaphors of the seemingly improbable or impossible descriptions used in riddles and find out what they really allude to, which is usually something familiar or of their prior acquaintance. Although this is a distinctive characteristic of all riddles, it is important to focus on those formulated by Cleobulina, since they are among the oldest examples of riddles.

## 1. WHO WAS CLEOBULINA?

Cleobulina was a composer of riddles. She was the daugther of Cleobulus, one of the Seven Sages and the sovereign of the city of Lindus on the island of Rhodes (Diogenes Laertius, I 91). She was especially renowned during the eighty-second Olympiad (452-449 BCE), along with Crates, Telesilla, Bacchylides, and Praxilla (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Chronicle* = Jerome, *Chronicle* 112). Since Cleobulina and her father lived during the sixth century BCE, this date is most likely not that of her *floruit* but rather when her riddles became known in Athens.[1]

It has been suspected that Cleobulina may have been a fictional character: the female personification of the riddling activity to which her father was devoted (Diogenes Laertius, I 89).[2] Wilamowitz maintains that she was a comic character created by Cratinus for the piece titled *Cleobulinas* (Κλεοβουλῖναι), and used later in another comic play, Alexis' Cleobulina (Κλεοβυλίνη).[3] However, this does not seem to be a good reason to deny the historical existence of Cleobulina. In Greek comedy we find many allusions to women poets and philosophers whose existence has not been questioned: for example, Sappho (Antiphanes fr. 194 KA), the Pythagorean women (Alexis, fr. 201-203 KA) or Aspasia (Cratinus, fr. 258-259 KA). Furthermore, Cleobulina is mentioned among prominent historical women, such as Theano, Gorgo, Timocleia, Claudia, and Cornelia, who were exemplars of feminine virtue (Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 145e).[4]

In the *Symposium of the Seven Sages*, Plutarch delineates a singular portrait of Cleobulina. Although it is a fictional account, it gives us valuable information about her and her work. Before the symposium begins, Cleobulina is presented as a young girl who does not utter a word. She brushes Anacharsis' hair with her hands and kisses Thales upon meeting him (148c). When Diocles asks Thales who she is, he answers that although she was called

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[1] Matelli 1997, pp. 35-36.
[2] Konstantakos 2005, p. 16.
[3] Wilamowitz 1899, pp. 220-221. Cratinus' play was probably performed between 435 and 420 BCE. The plural of the name in the title suggests that the chorus might have been made up of riddling women. In fact, two of the ten extant fragments of the play (fr. 94 and 101 KA) appear to be riddles. Alexis' play was most likely performed in the first half of his career, before 320 BCE. The one surviving fragment (fr. 109 KA) is a reference to the hetaira Sinope and gives no information about the play's contents or the meaning of its title.
[4] See also Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* IV 19. 123.

Cleobulina after her father, her real name is Eumetis (148d). The name *Eumetis* is linked with the mythological figure of Metis, who was the paradigm of cunning. According to Thales, this name expresses the cleverness and skill that Cleobulina showed in composing her riddles, which are presented as fun games and compared with knucklebones thrown mischievously at random people.[5] But it also refers to her admirable thinking, political mind, and philanthropic character, qualities by which she influenced her father and that made him a mild and popular ruler (148d-e).

## 2. CLEOBULINA'S RIDDLES

We do not know if Cleobulina was dedicated to the collection of traditional riddles or to the composition of new ones. Neither do we know whether she composed (or collected) riddles in writing or orally. According to Atheneus, she offered her compositions «in her riddles» (ἐν τοῖς Αἰνίγμασιν) and Diotimus of Olympene, an author completely unknown to us, discussed them at length (*The Learned Banqueters* X 448b). The expression ἐν τοῖς Αἰνίγμασιν, together with the possibility of this latter discussion, provide evidence that there may have been a riddle book written either by Cleobulina or by someone who collected her riddles and published them in a book under her name.[6]

Four of her riddles have reached us: the cup riddle, the art riddle, the Phrygian flute riddle, and the year riddle. Besides these four riddles, a short tale about the garment of the moon is also attributed to Cleobulina (*Symposium of the Seven Sages* 157a-b).[7] All of her riddles belong to a particular type of riddle that folklorists have named the "true riddle".[8] Its main characteristic is that it refers to an item through a description that either does not apply to it or that contradicts our normal experience of it. In Greek tradition, the name for the true riddle is αἴνιγμα. According to the definition given by Aristotle, «it is the form of a riddle to use impossible combinations of names in saying things that are the case» (αἰνίγματός τε γὰρ ἰδέα αὕτη ἐστί, τὸ λέγοντα ὑπάρχοντα ἀδύνατα συνάψαι) (*Poetics* XXII 1458a26-27).[9] This

[5] According to Martin 2001, riddles were typically attributed to the female voice, even in sympotic contexts.
[6] Kwapisz 2013, pp. 151-152.
[7] For a complete analysis of the sources related to Cleobulina, see Gardella 2021.
[8] Potamiti 2021, p. 55.
[9] All the translations are mine.

definition establishes a basic opposition between ὑπάρχοντα and ἀδύνατα. The term ὑπάρχοντα, which in this context can be translated as simply "be", refers to the items that are meant (λέγοντα) by the riddle. As we will see from the examples quoted below, the solution to many riddles are familiar items: that is, objects or experiences that form part of a person's daily life. The riddle refers to those well-known items through a combination (συνάψαι) of ἀδύνατα. In contrast with the ὑπάρχοντα, the ἀδύνατα are the strange things, unusual characters, and improbable or impossible situations described by the riddle.[10] The descriptions of ἀδύνατα usually contain many metaphors. Aristotle accordingly posits that riddles are the result of an excessive use of metaphors, an excess that makes poetic speech opaque and enigmatic.

The example chosen by Aristotle to illustrate his definition of αἴνιγμα is the cup riddle:

> I saw a man using fire to weld bronze to a man.
> ἄνδρ᾽ εἶδον πυρὶ χαλκὸν ἐπ᾽ ἀνέρι κολλήσαντα.
> (Aristotle, *Poetics* XXII 1458a29-30)

This riddle is quoted in many sources with few variants, but only Plutarch attributes it to Cleobulina.[11] The answer to it is the cupping therapy, a procedure used to restore the balance in the four humors and to recover good health. The doctors warmed bronze cups and applied them to the body where a small incision had been made, so that the heat would draw out the blood. The reference to the blood appears in the version of the riddle quoted by the Peripatetic philosopher Clearchus of Soli in his work *On Riddles* (Περὶ γρίφων):

> I saw a man using fire to weld bronze to a man
> so tightly that they shared the same blood.
> ἄνδρ᾽ εἶδον πυρὶ χαλκὸν ἐπ᾽ ἀνέρι κολλήσαντα
> οὕτω συγκόλλως ὥστε σύναιμα ποιεῖν.
> (Clearchus of Soli, fr. 94 Wehrli = Athenaeus, X 452b)

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[10] Luz 2013, p. 93.
[11] See, for example, Aristotle, *Rhetoric* III 2. 1405b1; Plutarch, *Symposium of the Seven Sages* 154b; and Athenaeus, X 452b10.

Following Aristotle's definition, the cup riddle alludes to a familiar and well-known activity (cupping therapy) through the description of an improbable or an undesirable situation (a man welding bronze to another man). Two metaphors are at play in this description. First, cups are called "bronze" because this is the material they are made of; this is a metaphor based on the application of the name of the genus to one of the species. Second, the doctor is said "to weld" because, as Aristotle recognizes in the *Rhetoric*, there is no specific name for this medical practice. Given that both the work of a doctor who practices the cupping therapy and the work of a blacksmith who forges bronze belong to the same genus insofar as they both are a kind of application (πρόσθεσις), it is possible to apply metaphorically the name of the latter to the former and to call it "welding" (κόλλησις) (*Rhetoric* III 2. 1405b2-3). This is a metaphor based on the application of the name of one species to another belonging to the same genus (*Poetics* XXI 1457b13-16).

The art riddle is to be found in the *Dissoi Logoi*:

> I saw a man stealing and deceiving by force
> and doing it by force was very just.
> ἄνδρ' εἶδον κλέπτοντα καὶ ἐξαπατῶντα βιαίως,
> καὶ τὸ βίᾳ ῥέξαι τοῦτο δικαιότατον.
> (Anonymous, *Dissoi Logoi* 3. 11)

The anonymous author of the *Dissoi Logoi* introduces Cleobulina's riddle as an example of the contextualist position defended in the third chapter of that treatise. According to this position, it is impossible to establish abstract moral norms that apply to everyone in any circumstance, since what is right or wrong cannot be judged *in abstracto* but must be judged according to the moment (καιρός) when one decides and acts. For example, although it is usually wrong to lie or steal, there are occasions when lying or stealing are considered morally acceptable: it is right to deceive one's parents by hiding a medicine in their drink if they have to take it and refuse to do so; it is also right to steal a friend's weapon if he wants to hurt himself with it (*Dissoi Logoi* 3. 2-4).

Cleobulina's riddle portrays a man who must conduct himself in a way usually considered unjust in order to achieve noble goals. Like the bleeding-cup riddle, the riddle found in the *Dissoi Logoi* also begins with the expression ἄνδρ' εἶδον («I saw a man»), which may be characteristic of Cleobulina's riddling style. However, in this case, no ancient source offers the solution to the riddle. Bergk relates the riddle to a scholion on the *Nichomachean Ethics* (fr. 128a Rose) saying that one who steals the sword of a madman is not a thief but rather a savior.[12] Thus, the answer to the riddle would be «a man who stole the weapon of a madman», a case also mentioned in *Dissoi Logoi* 3. 3-4. Matelli suggests identifying the man with a soldier, since the riddle expresses the warlike mentality of the archaic age to which Cleobulina belonged.[13] As shown in *Dissoi Logoi* 3. 5-8, during wartime, a soldier can commit unjust actions for a fair cause, like defending himself or his city. However, it should be noted that Cleobulina's riddle is quoted after a reference to painters and tragedians. The author of the *Dissoi Logoi* claims that, regarding painting and the writing of tragedies, «the best person is the one who deceives the most in creating things that are like the real thing» (3. 10). This has led Untersteiner to suggest that the answer to the riddle is the artist who deceives by creating depictions resembling the real world.[14]

The flute riddle is passed on by Plutarch:

> With a horned shin a dead donkey kicked my ear.
> Κνήμῃ νεκρὸς ὄνος με κερασφόρῳ οὖας ἔκρουσεν.
> (Plutarch, *Symposium of the Seven Sages* 150f)

This riddle belongs to a distinctive tradition of sympotic poetry that mystifies the materials and practices of the symposium, like the Simonidean riddle about snow used to cool wine (Athenaeus, III 125c). The answer to it is the Phrygian flute. Although the flutes were usually made with the bones of fawns, in Plutarch's symposium Aesop says that the flute makers decided to replace them with donkey bones because of their superior sound (*Symposium of the Seven Sages* 150e).[15]

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[12] Bergk 1866, p. 62.
[13] Matelli 1997, pp. 19-21.
[14] Untersteiner 1954, pp. 167-168.
[15] On this riddle, see also Fabro 2008.

Just like the cup riddle, the Phrygian flute riddle refers to a familiar object (the Phrygian flute) via the bizarre description of a frightening experience (a dead donkey striking someone's ear with a horned bone). Two metaphors are at play in this description. First, the Phrygian flute is called "horned shin" because this is the material it is made of; the metaphor is based on the application of the name of the genus to one of the species. The adjective κερασφόρος refers to the material of the flute's mouthpiece, which was made of horn taken from dead animals.[16] Second, the act of listening to the sound of the flute is associated with the act of kicking insofar as both are kinds of striking; this is a metaphor based on the application of the name of one species to another belonging to the same genus.

Cleobulina's last known riddle is the riddle of the year:

> One father and twelve sons that had thirty sons each.
> εἷς ὁ πατήρ, παῖδες δὲ δυώδεκα, τῶν δὲ ἑκάστῳ παῖδες τριάκοντα.
> (*Suda* K 1718)

According to Diogenes Laertius, a longer version of this riddle attributed to Cleobulus was recorded in Pamphila's *Commentaries* (Müller, *FHG* III 521):

> One father, twelve sons. Each of them
> has twice thirty daughters with double form.
> Some look white, others black.
> Although they are immortal, they all die.
> εἷς ὁ πατήρ, παῖδες δὲ δυώδεκα· τῶν δὲ ἑκάστῳ
> παῖδες <δὶς> τριάκοντα διάνδιχα εἶδος ἔχουσαι·
> αἱ μὲν λευκαὶ ἔασιν ἰδεῖν, αἱ δ' αὖτε μέλαιναι·
> ἀθάνατοι δέ τ' ἐοῦσαι, ἀποφθινύθουσιν ἅπασαι.
> (Diogenes Laertius, I 90-91)

This riddle uses a metaphor based on an analogy between the three generations of a family tree and different units of time: the grandfather represents the year, his sons the twelve

[16] Potamiti 2021, p. 53.

months, and his grandsons the days of each month. The days have two forms. Some of them look white; this is a reference to the day. The others are black; this is a reference to the night.

## 3. Was Cleobulina a philosopher?

Cleobulina is only credited with having composed riddles. She did not write any philosophical texts and she did not propose any philosophical theories. This is probably the reason why no ancient author referred to her as a philosopher. Like her father, she might be considered a "sage" (σοφή), as Plutarch explicitly calls her (*Symposium of the Seven Sages* 148d).

Despite not being a philosopher, Cleobulina could be seen as a figure relevant to the history of ancient philosophy. First, since Cleobulina's riddles were prominent in the development of the ancient Greek riddle tradition, they help us to understand the first philosophical reflections on riddles credited to Aristotle and to his disciple Clearchus: indeed, both of them cited the cup riddle as being illustrative of the genre. Second, Plutarch presents Cleobulina's riddles as a kind of sympotic entertainment, while the anonymous author of the *Dissoi Logoi* uses one as a vehicle for philosophical reflection. Although we do not know if Cleobulina composed her riddles to reflect on ethical issues, at least one of them served this purpose. Third, Cleobulina's riddles reflect a singular epistemological perspective, according to which knowledge does not emerge from new findings, but rather from new connections between items already known. This perspective could be relevant to philosophical discussions of ancient epistemological problems. Riddles lead us to acquire a different understanding of things already known. To guess the answer, the listener or reader must decode the metaphors of the seemingly improbable or impossible descriptions used in riddles and find out what they really allude to, which is usually something familiar or of their prior acquaintance. Although this is a distinctive characteristic of all riddles, it is important to focus on those formulated by Cleobulina, since they are among the oldest examples of riddles.

Through metaphors, Cleobulina's riddles transform a usual and common item into something unknown and invite us to rediscover it from a different perspective by revealing its connections with other things or phenomena—the connection between the medical practice of cupping therapy and the work of a blacksmith, between the artist and someone

who deceives and steals by force, between the Phrygian flute and donkey bones, and between the generations of a family tree and different units of time.

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