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An Incredulous Scholiast and Some Issues of Genre and Performance in Bacchylides' Dithyrambos

The T Scholia on *Iliad* 24.496b express incredulity at the possibility that Theano, the wife of Antenor, could have borne the fifty children that Bacchylides is said to have claimed for her. Not only does this remark indicate that Bacchylides increased the number of offspring; as Zimmermann (*Dithyrambos*) acutely observes, this remark also indicates a possible factor in the change: fifty was the canonical number for a circular chorus at Athens, and Bacchylides could have played on this in a poem performed in the medium. Zimmermann goes on briefly to point out the suitability, in terms of mythical content, of that poem, Bacchylides 15 (*The Sons of Antenor or the Request for the Return of Helen*) to the Athenian Panathenaea. I will briefly state some of the religious and socio-political consequences of Zimmermann's insight, whilst pointing out some of the pitfalls inherent in the view of (but not exclusive to) Zimmermann, that somehow Bacchylides' Dithyrambos, qua non-Dionysiac, indicate a reactionary trend in the development of the genre away from a close proximity to Dionysiac cult. The flip-side of this is that we can use Bacchylides' works to show that political questioning in Athenian poetry need not be assumed paradigmatically to be related to Dionysus.

Although the evidence for the number of Athenian choreuts comes from the scholia to Aeschines in *Timarchus* 10 which refers specifically to performance at the City Dionysia, it has recently been argued that dithyrambic performances at the Thargelia (cf. e.g. Lysias 21.1f.) also involved choruses of fifty. So the number fifty seems to fit more generally the performative criteria for dithyramb at Athens.

These points involve us in the question of the flexibility of the dithyramb to different performance scenarios, and the concomitant relation between the dithyramb as genre and the circular chorus as performance medium (not, it should be noted, exclusive to dithyramb or to Athens: a fact which removes any sense of security in the purely Dionysiac nature of the so-called genre). I shall go on to point out that any necessary association of the 'narrative dithyramb' (exemplified by all of Bacchylides' poems) with Dionysiac cult is not to be taken for granted, and also bears the mark of a wrong-headed conception of dithyramb, of Bacchylides' place within its development, and more generally of the relation between literature and religion, a view exemplified by Pickard-Cambridge and also by Zimmermann, but deeply affected by Plato's diachronic perspective on the disastrous mixing of performance genres at *Laws* 700a. It will also emerge that certain ancient testimonies bear witness to ongoing controversy during the heyday of dithyramb as to its religious affiliations, partly a consequence of the interchange of poets and styles of poem between Dionysiac and non-Dionysiac Athenian performances in the same performance mode. Although recent work has been published on some of these questions, it is still not yet clear to what extent dithyrambos, circular choruses, and the Dionysiac, interact and overlap. I hope to shed some light on this question.

As such, I aim to pose questions and to challenge assumptions about the nature of Athenian dithyrambs – both in relation to particular Athenian festivals and to more general aspects of Greek choreia –, and about the relation between dithyramb as historically attested phenomenon and Dithyramb attested in the Alexandrian classifications of lyric poetry.

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