

Myth manipulation in short forms of poetry

Myth is a very large part of ancient Greek culture, history and identity. Through the manipulation of myth poets of the time could tell a story under a different narrative and create connections between heroes, locations and historical events.

In Stesichorus 19 the execution of Geryon, a mythical monster which resembled a Hydra, by Hercules, is described. In the poem Stesichorus uses Homeric images and language style in order to give Geryon human characteristics. By combining the sharpness of the epic language with the softness of the lyric poetic language, he creates a balance within the verses and makes the audience feel sympathetic towards the monster that dies from the arrow of Hercules. In that narrative the myth is manipulated by Stesichorus to make the audience imagine Geryon resembling an Iliadic hero dying in battle. By manipulating the myth, he turns the monster into a hero and Hercules similar to a god, by giving him the element of stealth, which is an ability often used to describe divinity. The scene of Geryon being executed is narrated in total silence and in detail. This description of the killing and the lyric image of the poppy right after, makes the audience wonder whether Geryon was not a monster after all.

Therefore, Stesichorus is reinventing the story of Hercules and Geryon, offering a different version and meaning of the myth. He might want to enhance the divine nature of Hercules and to remind the audience that no matter what human will wants, fate is something they cannot escape from. The use of the shorter poetic form gives Stesichorus the freedom to combine epic and lyric elements to narrate a myth and maybe give emphasis on different aspects of it.

In Bacchylides 17, the myth of Theseus and his parentage is being narrated. In the poem Poseidon is considered as the father of the Athenian hero and it is proven by Theseus' ability to breathe underwater and the gifts he receives from Amphitrite. This poem's textual evidence connects Theseus to Athens and places him in the mythical culture as the son of Poseidon, the god of the sea. Athens, is one of the most powerful cities in Greece, well known for its naval dominance of the Aegean Sea. So, by manipulating the myth, Bacchylides links Athens to Poseidon and offers an explanation for the Athenian naval strength, as well as the imperialistic desires it possesses.

Such poetry was usually commissioned by cities to present an image that will reflect their power and dominance, as well as a panhellenic character, because they were circulated across Greece. Bacchylides connects Athens with Ionia and Crete, by using Homeric language and military vocabulary to send a political message for the greatness of the city. From the final verses one can understand that the poem is likely being performed in Delos, which could mean that the audience is not consisted of Athenian citizens. Those people might have never visited Athens and their only impression of the city might have been made up by such myths. Those people, did not know what Athens was like, created an image of Athens as a powerful city which holds dominance over the seas, and is linked to Poseidon, one of the most powerful gods. Thus, the location of Delos as the performance site of the poem shows that Athens is aspiring to present itself as a new powerful city in the Greek space.

In short forms of poetry, it is easier for the poet to manipulate the myth and reconstruct it under a different narrative and context. Short poetic forms are not as lengthy as epic poems, and they are less tiring for the audience to hear and remember. Therefore, manipulation of the myth becomes easier, as the poet can include Homeric tradition into the myth and address the audience in a way that they are familiar with, while at the same time applying this information into a variation of a known myth or a known hero.