

A Ten-Line Tragedy: The Discovery of Othryadas in AP 7.430 (Dioskorides)

Despite a recent swell of scholarly interest in the late Hellenistic poet Dioskorides of Alexandria, forty of whose epigrams are preserved in the *Greek Anthology*, little attention has been paid to one of his most curious works: AP 7.430, a depiction of the aftermath of the sixth-century BCE battle of Thyrea between Sparta and Argos, cast as a dialogue between the two Argive survivors of the conflict, who find that in their absence a lone Spartan survivor, Othryadas, has set up a victory trophy inscribed in his own blood. While Thyrea was a popular topic in Hellenistic epigram (Legrand 1901), most surviving treatments are brief, moralistic, and explicitly pro-Spartan; commentators (e.g. Weisshäupl 1889) have generally explained away the remarkable vividness and uncharacteristic dialogue-form of 7.430 by assuming that it was written to accompany a painted representation of the scene. In this paper I advance an alternative hypothesis: Dioskorides has in fact constructed a tragedy in miniature, playing upon his audience's expectations and deliberately blurring the line between the realms of history and myth.

Hellenistic readers would, thanks to the popularity of Herodotus' narrative of Thyrea (I.82), have known well the basic tale of Othryadas (Kohlmann 1874). Dioskorides, however, by speaking in the voice of the two returning Argives, can pretend an initial ignorance of the situation, allowing him to gradually reveal the paradoxical and (to the Argives) dreadful truth that Othryadas has triumphed in death. This revelation unfolds in multiple steps, each indicated by deictic pronouns and adverbs, in a fashion very similar to the arrival of Euripides' Orestes and Pylades at Tauris (*Iphigeneia in Tauris* 62-76): the discovery of an unknown, blood-inscribed shield (akin to Euripides' blood-stained altar), which is called "Dorian" and hence could belong to either army; a search for any still-breathing Spartan, coupled with an anguished refusal to

grant the Spartans “bastard glory” (κῦδος νόθον); and finally, direct confrontation with Othryadas himself, marked by the two-word sentence ἵσχε βάσιν, “Halt your steps”. In a particularly poignant touch, Othryadas is neither awaiting the Argives alive (as in Herodotus), nor already dead (as in some later treatments), but in the very act of breathing his last; we are presented, in effect, with a tragic tableau.

This interpretation allows us to make sense, not only of the poem’s overall structure, but of the puzzling final line, whose apparent awkwardness has often been noted (e.g. Gow-Page [1965] vol. 2 ad loc.) The Argives call on Zeus their ancestor (πρόπατορ Ζεῦ) to “revile the tokens (σύμβολα) of an ἀνίκατος φύλοπις”. φύλοπις, often translated “battle” but properly “battle-cry”, is a rare word, largely confined to epic; when it appears in other genres, like the mock-oracle of Aristophanes’ *Peace* (1076) or a choral ode in Sophocles’ *Electra* (1073), it is an ostentatiously artificial touch, giving a deliberately “heroic” cast to the proceedings (TLG s.v.) By employing it here, Dioskorides signifies to the careful reader that he has elevated his scene from the mundane realm of history to the mythic plane. ἀνίκατος, meanwhile, is taken by most commentators and translators (W.R. Paton’s Loeb, Gow-Page ad loc.) to mean “unwon”; but in every other occurrence of the word, its meaning is “unconquerable” (TLG s.v. ἀνίκητος). In fact, both the usual and the atypical meanings are at play. Through semantic ambiguity, Dioskorides underscores the gulf between the Argives’ limited understanding of the situation and the view future generations would take of the battle; while Othryadas is destined to be a symbol of the Spartans’ indomitable character, those he defeated insist upon denying the immediate reality of his impossible triumph, protesting, like so many tragic heroes, to a god who turns a deaf ear. Thus we see that Dioskorides, by his skillful weaving of tragic elements into the framework of

epigram, has not only successfully reinvigorated a hackneyed theme, but also expanded the possibilities of the epigrammatic genre.

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