

The Poetics of Mime(sis) in Herodas

Even a cursory glance at Herodas' surviving poetry leaves little doubt of the poet's debt to low genres such as mime and comedy. Unlike Theocritus, who also writes mimes but whose herdsmen or misguided magician Simaetha may harbor wisdom or garner sympathy, Herodas' characters always seem violent, promiscuous, or ignorant. Though the coarseness of his characters may reflect Herodas' close adherence to the tradition of mime (a connection of considerable importance if the poems were, in fact, performed and meant to entertain [Hunter, 1993]), one should not assume that genre alone determines characterization in the *Mimiamb*s. On the contrary, Herodas is as engaged in generic experimentation and expounding poetic principles as Callimachus and Theocritus, as scholars have already demonstrated (Stern, 1979; Rosen, 1985; Hunter, 1993). In this paper, I will consider how Herodas uses low, coarse characters specifically as a means of explicating a poetic program that is both in general accord with Callimachean ideas and unique in its emphasis on the role of mimesis in art. This analysis will reveal a cogency and consistency to Herodas' poetics which is befitting but generally unrecognized in the poet's work.

One significant example of Herodas' interest in poetics begins in a famous scene from Herodas' fourth *mimiamb*, where women who have come to the temple of Aesclepiades to sacrifice spend some time gazing at the temple's statuary. The works evoke wonder from the women, but only for their realism: ὄρη, Φίλη, τὴν παῖδα τὴν ἄνω κείνην / βλέπουσαν ἐς τὸ μῆλον· οὐκ ἐρεῖς αὐτήν / ἦν μὴ λάβῃ τὸ μῆλον ἐκ τάχα ψύξειν; 4.27-29 (See, dear, the girl yonder looking up at the apple; wouldn't you think she will swoon away suddenly, if she does not get it? trans. Headlam) and εἰ μὴ τις αὐτὴν εἶδε Βατάλην, βλέψας / ἐς τοῦτο τὸ εἰκόνισμα μὴ ἐτόμῃς δέισθω 4.37-38 (Anyone who has not seen Batale, may look at this image and be satisfied

without the woman herself, trans. Headlam). The women “read” the statues with the expectation of realism that one might have when reading (or watching) Herodas’ mime, that is, as a low genre that represents scenes from everyday life. Though the women’s interest in realism is not incompatible with contemporary thoughts on excellence in art (Skinner, 218), the notion of an ancient sense of aesthetics that is detached from social function has been seriously questioned (Kristeller, 1951). Just as the reader, then, feels a sense of superiority to Herodas’ characters in *Mimiamb* 4 (DuBois, 48), so too does he perceive a naiveté in their “reading.” Perhaps in the sacrificing women Herodas warns against a similarly superficial reading of his new form of mime.

The corollary (and, I suggest, corrective) to Kokkale and Kynno’s obsession with realism comes in the sixth *mimiamb*. Stern notes that the *baubon* phallicly represents, among other things, Herodas’ poetry. It “has a superficial ugliness but contains hidden layers of meaning” (252). Unlike the statues, the *baubon*’s virtue is not in its realism—in fact it is superior to reality (6.69)—but in the delicate craftsmanship that makes it functionally exceptional. As a representation of poetry, the *baubon* is not mime but *mimesis* in an Aristotelian sense. One ought not to read the *Mimiamb*s as literal representations of particulars but as demanding cognitive activity to convey what are in some sense universals, especially about poetry and art. Realism emerges as an issue in much of Hellenistic poetry, but Herodas’ close adherence (as far as we can tell) to the traditional genre of mime uniquely problematizes concept by reinventing mime as a more subtle form of representation.

Herodas’ interest in representation is born out in the fragmentary *mimiamb* 8 (Rosen, 1985) and through other playful moments (such as the student jumping while fettered as reference, perhaps, to Herodas’ use of choliamb). Though Herodas’ Hellenistic credentials are

often noted, I hope this paper will demonstrate how much is left to be done. If, as I propose, Herodas' poetry demonstrates a coherent poetics, it may be necessary to rethink much about the context and audience for his "low" poetry.

Works Cited

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