

The Comparison of Art in the *Carmina Priapea*

That Priapus is represented as a statue is a typical feature of Priapic poetry, and the simplicity of Priapus statues is a recurring theme. Poem 10 in the *Carmina Priapea* (*CP*) best represents this motif. In this poem Priapus defends himself against a girl's mockery by stating that he is not the product of an artisan like Phidias, but rather a roughly hewn log produced by a steward. This self-description is very much in line with the *CP*'s literary program: the poet says his poems are written with little to no skill (*non nimium laboriose*, 2.3). What is interesting from the point of poetics is how the poet thematizes the statue in the *CP*. In this paper I argue that the *Priapea* poet incorporates the motif of Priapus as a lowly statue of inferior quality into a series of poems in which he compares his image to the personification of other deities in the pantheon. I suggest that these poems are an ongoing commentary on the aesthetics of art and poetry.

Buchheit (1969) was the first to categorize *CP* 9, 20, 36, 39, 53, and 75 as a group of poems involving the same motif, which he calls "Göttervergleiche," that is, "comparison of gods." Out of the six poems in Buchheit's classification, all but *CP* 53 and 75 concentrate on the physical representations of divinity either by spotlighting their physical accouterments (*CP* 9 and 20) or by describing their physical likeness (*CP* 36 and 39). Stewart (1992) has discussed the artistic images called to mind in some of these poems, and in his recent commentary on the *CP*, Callebat (2012) points out the descriptive language of the divine iconography and portrait types. But more can be said about these artistic images in the literary context of the *CP*, and Hellenistic precedents help us to bridge this gap between comparing gods and comparing aesthetic forms. In poetry books such as Callimachus' *Iambi* and Posidippus' *Andriantopoiika*, statues are understood to represent literary works or genres, and poets compare statuary in such a way that they are also comparing literary texts and genres (Acosta-Hughes 2002, Sens 2005).

Callimachus' two poems on Hermes, for example, emphasize the "low" by referring to the statue in *Iambi 7* as a "minor work" and "rubble," and later by presenting the statue in *Iambi 9* as graphically obscene. Both versions of Hermes, it should be noted, have qualities that foreshadow the Roman Priapus. Hermes stands in opposition to the grand chryselephantine statue of Zeus described in *Iambi 6*, a statue that is a product of Phidias.

With the exception of the artisans named in *CP 10*, nowhere in *CP 9*, *20*, *36*, or *39* are actual statues mentioned such as they are in the *Iambi*. It is difficult, however, *not* to think of physical statues in these poems because the poet frequently calls on our sense of vision in the his descriptions of the iconography and likenesses of gods and goddesses. In *CP 39* the poet cleverly plays with the repetition of *forma* and *formosus*—equating form with beauty. This poem also relies on artistic and aesthetic terminology. In this poem and its three counterparts, Priapus is always the lowest among the pantheon because of his form.

All four poems seem to suggest that Priapus' comparison is an ironic one. Priapus and the poet insist upon Priapus' lowness, but allusively demonstrate the opposite. In *CP 9* and *20* Priapus wonders why his phallus needs to be covered and others' weapons do not need to be. The answer seems obvious: Priapus' "weapon" is his penis. The joke is that in the company of Priapus' "weapon," we can more easily see the phallic qualities of other gods' accouterments, thus adding a tone of mockery to Priapus' protest that he is lacking in modesty. He brings the pantheon into his world, a world in which divine figures are objects of art worthy of mockery or praise depending on their physical endowment. Priapus insists on difference, but demonstrates sameness, that is to say, everything becomes Priapic in his world. The way in which he humorously mediates between high and low registers of artistic media speaks to the core of a

poetry book that insists on its lowness—its difference—while cleverly demonstrating the opposite.

Bibliography

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