

Geryon the Hero, Herakles the God

In the fragments of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* we glimpse a three-headed hero defending himself against an unprovoked aggressor. The poet's sympathetic portrayal of his monstrous protagonist has long been recognized and interpreted as an intentional divergence from earlier traditions (e.g. Hes. *Theog.* 280-292, 982-983) which represent Geryon's death as nothing more than one more notch on Herakles' enormous belt. Stesichoros does not skimp on monstrous trappings for Geryon, adding wings to his already excessive heads and limbs. Also added, though, are self-knowledge, a personal code, rationality and an ability to articulate it. When he recognizes his own mortality Geryon is humanized; when he embraces death as the price of glory he is heroized. In this paper I argue that Stesichoros draws on Herakles' impending immortality to throw *his* Geryon's status as mortal hero into relief.

The earliest evidence for Herakles' apotheosis appears in literary and artistic traditions at the beginning of the sixth century, a matter of decades before Stesichoros' composition (Stafford 2010). This cultural shift constitutes a relevant context within which Stesichoros' linguistic and thematic choices can be seen as emphatically - if implicitly - alluding to Herakles' future place among the gods. Geryon's determination to fight is framed in terms of what he is not : ageless, immortal, soon to be welcomed to the society of Olympos. These might seem excessive protestations of his own nature, but each word points ahead to Herakles' fate and represents Geryon as the braver of the two, fighting for honour alone. The same effect lies in the weapon that ultimately kills Geryon: an arrow soaked in the blood of the hydra. This same blood which felled Geryon will bring an end to Herakles' mortal life as well: but Herakles will become a god, Geryon a memory.

To demonstrate the themes at play within Stesichoros' text I analyze three fragments (S 13, S 11, and S15 (col. i and ii)) which recount, respectively, Geryon's mother's plea to her son, Geryon's assertion that he will have honour even at the cost of his life, and Geryon's fatal encounter with Herakles. Through these fragments I trace two major threads: the Homeric intertexts which cluster around Geryon and the intimations of Herakles' immortality. Already in antiquity Stesichoros was seen as Homeresque (Longinus, *de Subl.* 13.3; *A.P.* 9.184.3) and that epic inheritance is in play here. Rather than assimilating Geryon to a single epic model, Stesichoros' homeric stylings underscore that Geryon's choice was the choice of *every* hero on the Trojan plain. The pleading mother is Hekuba, but also Thetis (Rozokoki 2009), Geryon's decision to fight draws on the choice Sarpedon made (Page 1973). And Geryon is not only the great heroes – the famous poppy simile is drawn from the fate of Gorgythion (*Il.* 8.306 ff), who took an arrow meant for Hektor. Through an accretion of Homeric references, Geryon's death becomes the death of every heroic warrior fighting for honour and for family while Herakles' victory becomes the cheapened success of the unthinkingly and unendingly powerful.

When the monster-hero faces off with the hero-god the audience is forced to confront their own sympathies, and their own natures. Herakles, the consummate hero, has joined the Olympian gods; the human condition, the face (or faces?) in the mirror, belongs to Geryon.

Bibliography

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