

Constructing Realism: Hellenistic Sculpture and *Ekphrasis* in Herodas IV

Herodas, as most scholars agree, composed his *Mimiamboi* in the third century B.C. in or near Ptolemaic Egypt (Headlam, 1922). The *Mimiamboi* are short dialogues which cover a wide range of everyday topics and are often seen as comical spoofs of the lower class. Although they are frequently dismissed as a low and uninformative form of comedy, I would like to reexamine their usefulness as a tool with which Herodas was able to direct the gaze of his audience onto contemporary society in a meaningful way. This becomes most clear when the *Mimiamboi* are placed alongside contemporary Hellenistic sculpture, which I posit serves the same function.

In this paper, I examine the short *ekphrases* found in *Mimiambos* IV alongside contemporary Hellenistic sculpture to argue that both visual and literary artists used these media to create a mixed gaze with which the audience could view contemporary society by mapping images from Archaic and Classical Greece onto everyday life. Utilizing the power of the *ekphrasis* to connect with the gaze of the audience, a concept fully explored by Ruth Webb (2009), Hellenistic poets were able to direct the gaze of the viewer both inward, towards the experience contained within the piece of literature itself and the object it describes and outward, endowing the reader with a critical gaze with which to view society. Building on the concept of viewer supplementation in non-descriptive *ekphrasis*, the process in which the audience fills in narrative gaps in short descriptions with images from memory (Zaknker, 2007), I argue that Herodas facilitated the creation of a critical gaze in his audience that included elements of Archaic and Classical Greek society as well as images from everyday life. Herodas used the tropes and vocabulary of the archaic past, in this case, *ekphrasis*, and presented it to the audience in such a way that audience members were invited to supplement images from everyday life in order to spark reflection on contemporary society.

Placing this literary evidence alongside contemporary sculpture allows me to posit that both literary and visual artists were interested in endowing their audience with the same mixed gaze. In the course of this paper, I examine artworks in the Baroque, Rococo and Veristic styles, examples of which can all be found in the descriptions of sculptures seen by Herodas' characters, Kyno and Kokkale. Just like their *ekphrastic* counterparts, these sculptures allow the audience to supplement images from memory to fill in narrative gaps and create context. Each of these sculpture types also contains contemporary elements balanced with Archaic and Classical Greek features, which encourage the audience to create a mixed gaze with which to view each artwork. In this way both the sculptor and the poet are endowed with the power to cause reflection on modern society and thus to create a new way of viewing in the Hellenistic world, one which integrates both past and contemporary society in the mind of the audience.

Visual and literary artists of the Hellenistic period were engaging with the same issues in a diverse and economically-divided city like Alexandria. The dispersal of Greek culture through education and scholarship, made possible by wealthy benefactors like Ptolemy II, created an extremely educated aristocratic class with strong cultural and scholastic ties to Archaic and Classical Greece. At the same time, the economic prosperity of Alexandria allowed lower class merchants and traders to come face-to-face with Greek monuments. The literary and visual artist was tasked with attempting to bridge the gap created by this cultural disparity and produce artworks applicable to this rapidly evolving world. At the same time, however, it was essential to maintain ties with the cultural history of the Greek past. Using literary evidence alongside Hellenistic sculpture, I posit that visual and literary artists were attempting to use these media to endow their audience with the critical gaze necessary to understand their society.

Bibliography

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