Verbal-Visual Kinship in the *Shield of Herakles*

In this paper I shall argue for reading the ekphrasis of the Ps.-Hesiodic *Scutum* as a type of engagement with the form and function of apotropaic devices. Such a reading gives purpose to the horrific imagery of the poem and suggests a way to approach verbal-visual interaction through a lens of complementarity rather than rivalry.

Despite its lackluster reputation in scholarship, the received text of the *Scutum* exhibits some striking points of thematic unity. The *ehoie* section of the *Scutum* eschews comedic lust, magnifying Alkmene as unrivaled among women (οὕ τις ἔριζε, Sc. 5) and Amphitryon as best of men (ἀνὴρ πολλὸν ἄριστος, 48). More important, Zeus beds her with a cunning purpose (μῆτις, Sc. 28): to engender an ἀλκτὴρ ἀρῆς, an "averter of bane", for gods and men (29). This anticipates the manifold forms of bane described on the hero's shield. Read as wordplay or folk etymology (ἀρή/Άρης), the phrase also suggests the hero's final confrontation with Ares after the defeat of the god's son, Kyknos. Most of the elements described in the ekphrasis evoke traditional epic associations with Ares (his retinue, aspects of combat, general gore, clamor, pervasive death). Elements common to the Archaic *gorgoneia* are also frequent: glaring eyes, ravenous mouth, rapacious claws. This is especially true of the shield's centerpiece: Terror (Φόβος, Sc. 144 ff.). These images are characteristically ἄπλητοι, unapproachable (Sc. 147, 230, 250, 268). Prior to the final battles, both hero and adversary are characterized through piled similes evoking the same nexus of imagery, and concluding with a portrait of the hero as participant in these very motifs. Shield and hero thus mirror Ares to confront and defeat Ares.

Russo (1965: 7-17) read the *Scutum* as a synthesis between the composer's interest in symbolism and his "taste for the macabre". Similarly, Lamberton (1988: 141) saw in the poem an "outrageousness... that is both satisfying and liberating." Most recently, Richard Martin

(2005: 156-70) has extended such approachs, suggesting that we should appreciate the poem through the lens of a 'pulp aesthetic' in which tasteless excess is validated as its own end. His particular comparison is anachronistic, but the instinct to seek *comparanda* in a specific artistic *topos* is an important insight. Unlike pulp fiction, apotropaic objects and artistic motifs were commonplace in Archaic art. The *Scutum* ekphrasis clearly draws visual inspiration from this range of imagery, but it does more than just describe. By repelling Ares with a shield replete with martial imagery, and by a hero conceived as an $\mathring{\alpha}\lambda\kappa\tau\mathring{\eta}\rho$ $\mathring{\alpha}\rho\mathring{\eta}\varsigma$, the poem mirrors apotropaic function as well.

There are useful parallels for such a reading. There is already a significant body of secondary literature discussing apotropaic effects in Egyptian, Near-Eastern, and Hebrew texts. Given that the *Scutum* was likely composed during the Orientalizing period, a Greek example of such interplay need not be surprising. More directly, Faraone (2011) has argued that hexameters discovered recently on lead amulets in Magna Graeca stem from an ancient, oral pattern of using hexameter verse for binding and averting formulae and that the poet-healer could adapt such incantations as illness or audience demanded, much like an oral bard. Use of crafts or craftsmanship as a metaphor for versification also appears to have been a commonplace of Indo-European poetics, as also was the use of verse in hymns and spells (see West 2007: 35-43, 304-39 for a useful distillation of scholarship). In this light, Carl Olsen's observations (2009: 13, 233-9) about binding and apotropaic potentialities in the dangerous / horrific imagery of skaldic shield ekphrasis offer a suggestive parallel.

Although rivalry between the verbal and visual arts is the more frequently discussed paradigm for ekphrasis, thus read, the *Scutum* offers an exemplar of co-operation between word and image. The clarity and vividness of description are not merely ends in themselves, as

analysis models based on later rhetorical handbooks would suggest (Becker 1995, Webb 2009, Koopman 2014). They serve an active function in the poem, one with deep roots in the historic of epic song itself.

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