

The Missing Speech of Bacchylides' Dithyramb 15

Bacchylides 15, one of the so-called dithyrambs mentioned by Servius, takes us to a moment of pre-Trojan War negotiation: the embassy of Menelaus and Odysseus to request the return of Helen. The papyrus contains alternate titles: "Sons of Antenor" and "The Demand for Helen's Restitution." Had no more of the papyrus survived than this we would nevertheless have a pretty clear idea what the poem was about, since the embassy is discussed in some detail during the *teichoskopeia* of the *Iliad*, where Antenor, who served as host for the ambassadors, describes their speeches before the assembled Trojans.

Such a scene could have formed part of the *Cypria*, which treated the story prior to the beginning of the war, or of another poem known to Bacchylides. Nevertheless, there is no evidence for this. Moreover, Poem 15, like the reminiscences of Antenor, is largely focused on the demand for restitution. For this reason it seems most reasonable to conclude that the text Bacchylides engages with here is the *Iliad*. I accept that conclusion and will argue that this poem assumes that its audience is familiar with Book 3 of the *Iliad* and subtly re-tells the story to affirm the characterization of sublime Odyssean speech as "like snowflakes on a winter's day" (3.222), marking his rhetorical style as impressive but beyond the limits of poetic representation.

There are two major differences between Homer's scene on the walls and Bacchylides 15. First of all, in Homer the speech of Antenor affirms and expands on the remark of Helen that Odysseus knows *pantoios te doulous kai medea pukna*, "all manner of tricks and cunning devices" (3.202). No attention is given to the social context of the embassy. In Bacchylides 15 rumor flies through the city of Troy as Trojans excitedly make their way to the assembly to see if war can

still be averted. There is considerable ceremony as the assembly commences. It is clear that the event to follow will be one of great importance.

The second difference is even more striking. Antenor describes Menelaus's speech as competent but no more than that: fluent (*epitrochadon*), brief (*paura*), clear (*ligeos*), economical (*ou polymythos*), and on point (*ouk aphantartoepe*). His physical stature is more impressive than that of Odysseus, however, who looked like a stupid man to the audience, as he stared down at the ground dully. When Odysseus began to speak, however, everything changed. Words came from his chest like swirling snow. A summary of one less gifted cannot capture the effect he produced, nor does Antenor attempt it. He concludes simply that after that performance he and his fellow Trojans no longer were astonished at Odysseus's appearance.

Bacchylides recasts the embassy in his poem. In place of Antenor's catalogue of his modest oratorical virtues, Bacchylides's narrator issues an epic call to the Muse to tell who spoke first. The answer follows that it was Pleisthenes's son Menelaus. After that, we hear the speech of Menelaus directly. He appeals to the need for "straight Justice," and invokes the goddesses "holy Eunomia," and "wise Themis" (54-55). He continues by warning about the eventual disaster where Hybris leads (59), and cites the case of the unfortunate Giants, those arrogant sons of Earth (62-63). With that the speech ends. The opinion of Antenor seems to have been justified. Nothing off-putting there but nothing marvelous either.

The narrator asked the Muse who spoke first and an answer was forthcoming. We know from Homer that Odysseus spoke next. How does that speech figure in Bacchylides's poem? Amazingly, not at all. After Menelaus's exemplum of the Giants' fall, the poem ends without any contribution from Odysseus whatsoever. Nor does anything appear to be missing in the papyrus where such a speech could have followed.

How can we account for Bacchylides's deviation from his model? We could go back to the possibility that he is working with a different source but there is no evidence that this is the case. Instead, I argue that Bacchylides 15 affirms Homer's strategy for contrasting Menelaus and Odysseus but alters the part allotted to each character in the *Iliad*. Menelaus's competent speech-making, alluded to by Antenor, becomes a series of moralizing *gnomai* in Bacchylides's version. Yet the same strategy would not work for Odysseus. Antenor said that the words of Odysseus were like swirling snowflakes, dizzying, like that of no other mortal, and so unrepeatable. To attempt to represent such a speech directly would result in failure. Instead, Bacchylides preserves the otherworldliness of Odysseus's sublime speech indirectly by alluding to it ("Muse, who spoke first?" (47)), then leaving the audience to supply its own version, even as the song itself goes silent.