Factions and Fractures: The Poetics of *Stasis* in the *Theognidea*

It has been generally accepted that the *Theognidea* portrays the city of Megara in a time of civic crisis or *stasis* (e.g. Nagy (1985), Cobb-Stevens (1985), Wees (2000)). However, the effects and implications of this *stasis* on the poetics of the *Theognidea* have not been fully explored. In this paper I argue that *stasis* provides the necessary background to Theognis' distinction between the *agathoi* and *kakoi*. *Stasis* not only creates social distinctions, but poetic ones as well: like factions of his Megara, Theognis' poetry is also stratified between "good" and "bad" verses. "Good" and "bad" poetry is to be distinguished by its didactic qualities: "good" verses give good advice, "bad" verses bad advice.

I begin by discussing another famous description of *stasis*, Thucydides' own description of the "great *stasis*" on Corcyra (3.69-85). In an extended instance of direct authorial intervention, he describes the consequences of the revolutions throughout the Greek world (3.82-3). One of the primary consequences of *stasis*, as it turns out, is semantic: words lose their meanings and are transformed into their opposites. As Thucydides himself summarizes: καὶ τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαιώσει (3.82). For Thucydides, the condition of *stasis* creates a semantic crisis in the meaning of words themselves. Fractured language echoes the factions in the city itself.

I argue that Thucydides' description of *stasis* can also provide a model for the poetics of the *Theognidea*. The connection between the Corcyrean *stasis* and the *Theognidea* has already been suggested in passing by Cobb-Stevens (1985), but she restricts her analysis to the words *agathos* and *kakos* and their fluctuating relationship to social realities. For my part, I argue that this "crisis of meaning" extends beyond social realities to the level of poetics. In the so-called *sphragis* poem (lns. 19-38), Theognis writes οὐδέ τις ἀλλάξει κάκιον τοὐσθλοῦ παρεόντος (21). In this passage, as elsewhere in the *Theognidea*, *esthlos* is synonymous with *agathos* (e.g. lns. 183-92). Theognis' poetry, therefore, is described in the same terms (*esthlos / kakos*) that he elsewhere uses to describe the social divisions of Megara. The poetry becomes factionalized just like the city. As in Thucydides, language reflects faction.

This "stratification" of the poetry, as I proceed to argue, also leads to a stratification of the advice itself. As Hubbard (2007) notes, the *sphragis* poem, with its advice to Cyrnus at the end, associates good poetry with good advice. The *agathoi* make good poetry and give good advice; the *kakoi*, the opposite. Theognis makes it a frequent point in his verses to advise Cyrnus to associate with the right people (e.g. lns. 31-6, 101-112, 113-4). At one point Theognis even claims that the *kakoi* are not "bad" from birth, but become so by associating with other *kakoi* and "believing everything that those men say is true" (ἐλπόμενοι κείνους πάντα λέγειν ἔτυμα) (ln. 308). By associating with the wrong people, Cyrnus will learn untrue precepts and himself become debased. The false and hubristic lessons that the *kakoi* teach form a sort of counter-discourse to Theognis' own poetry and always threaten to distract Cyrnus from Theognis' own good advice.

I conclude my paper with some final remarks about the *sphragis* poem. While there has been intense debate about the nature and function of Theognis' *sphragis*, I wish to suggest that part of the function of the *sphragis* is related to the "crisis of meaning" outlined above. As Ford (1985), has argued, the seal "guarantees not the origin of these *epē* but their homogeneous political character and aristocratic provenance." By assuring that the verses are "good" both socially and aesthetically, the *sphragis* is an attempt to control the possible anarchy of the verses. By excluding such verses, Theognis not only tries to quell the *stasis* in the collection, but through his good advice, also hopes to quell the *stasis* in the city.

Works Cited:

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