Bacchylides and the Self-Effacing Narrator of the Dithyrambs

The self-effacing narrator is one that does not use narratorial persona as a principal method of structure and avoids first-person statements and self-naming (Morrison, 2007). Each of the Dithyrambs of Bacchylides features a narrator that is self-effacing, offering little reference to its own life beyond its capacity to narrate. There are moments in the texts, however, when the narrator does explicitly acknowledge its own existence, and identifies itself. Such moments come in four poems, Bacchylides 15, 16, 17, and 19 (=*Dithyrambs* 1, 2, 3, and 5).

This paper analyzes two of the Dithyrambs in particular, Bacchylides 16 and 19, because they feature extended proems which expound especially complex communication situations separately from their mythical content. When analyzed together, a thematic parallel between the two poems emerges: Both feature numinous, abstract agents who weave, and the product of their weaving is a creation of the mind. The mysterious $\delta\alpha\iota\mu\omega\nu$ weaves Deianeira's plot in Bacchylides 16 and the renowned Cean $\mu\epsilon\rho\iota\mu\nu\alpha$ in Bacchylides 19 weaves the very song being performed for Athens.

Studies on the use of the first person in Pindar (Lefkowitz, 1991) and Alcman (Calame, 1997) guide this investigation of the narrator in the Dithyrambs of Bacchylides. D'Alessio (1994) shows that the question whether the first person refers to the poet or the chorus is less fruitful than attempts to describe the communication strategy at work in each poem. Claude Calame (1995) analyzes communication situations in Sappho and Alcman in his work on the enunciation in Ancient Greece and on the narrativization of the enunciation. He makes especially good use of the terms Sender and Receiver from Greimas's actantial theory of narrative (for a summary see Schmitz, 2007).

In Bacchylides 16 and 19 we see how first and second person references assign and re-assign the roles of Sender and Receiver in order to narrativize the communication situation. The theme of weaving as a mental process further links these two poems and brings their structural parallels into sharp focus.

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