

Timothy HECKENLIVELY

The Forgotten Cloak: Agonistic Subtext in the Shield of Herakles

Since Russo's 1950 commentary on the Ps.-Hesiodic *Aspis*, it has been common to recognize some level of unity within the poem, at least on the level of the composer's "gusto per il macabre". However, the festive and agricultural scenes at the conclusion of the shield ecphrasis do not conform to such taste. These scenes are generally treated as little more than an inferior duplication of the Homeric "city at peace" contrasting with the terror of the "city at war". However, such interpretation falls short on several levels. First, the grammar of the passage suggests that this is not the central contrast at play. Second, the diction of the verses exploits ambiguities of Greek thought, allowing numerous echoes of the earlier terror. Finally, the traditional contrast overlooks basic facets of performance dynamic and agonistic diction.

The activities within the city at peace are not easily separated from the earlier imagery of the *Aspis*. The first is a bridal procession. However, the conflation of death and marriage is common in Greek poetry and art from the earliest periods. The use of the *apene* underscores this duality, for such a cart plays a central role in both *Iliad* 24 and *Odyssey* 6. The bridal torches of the procession blaze with fire in a diction typical of conflagration and roaring battle-fury (275, *selas eiluphaze*). The description of the music employs the same phrase used for the final clash of the two opponents (*peri de sphisin agnuto echo*, 279, 384).

The "city at peace" is the concluding section of the poem. The subtle continuance of diction allows the poet to make an effective transition between the horrors which precede it and the central, agonistic message that he encodes within. Scholars are generally agreed that the *Aspis* was composed for a Theban audience. The city in question is conspicuously seven-gated. The poet praises this city as a place where men delight in festivities and dance. The image suggests the beginning of an extended dialogue between performer and audience aimed at attaining victory in the competition at hand. After passing through images of song and dance exemplifying that in which the city delights, the poet passes to agricultural imagery. The parallel images on the shield of Achilles are no doubt a partial allusion, but the primary subtext is the agonistic argument. Farming is a common Greek metaphor for the poetic art. Constructions in *men...de* develop a contrast between the types of agricultural activity described. The effect suggests a fundamental comparison between the poetics of the performer and his competitors. Combat sports (a poetic metaphor in Pindar) follow, leading up to the final image, a horse race around a tripod in which victory remains undecided. The argument and technique recall Odysseus' manner of seeking a cloak in *Odyssey* 14.457-522, an apparently digressive tale of a forgotten garment whose subtext is readily grasped by Eumaios.

Such a reading is beneficial on several levels. It points to a greater degree of ordered construction within this portion of the *Aspis* than has hitherto been admitted. Moreover, recognition of agonistic subtext as a component of ecphrasis has implications for other such passages. It strengthens the old suspicion that the poet himself is at the center of the dance which concludes the shield of Achilles (Il. 18.590-606). A similar reference

appears to be present the verses concluding the description of the baldric of Herakles (Od. 11.613-614): *me technesamenos med' allo ti technesaito / hos deinon telamona heei egkattheto technei*. Viewed within such a framework of agonistic poetics, these verses also suggest tantalizing possibilities.