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The Tyrant and the Gentleman: Bacchylides 17 as *Agon*

The narrative of Bacchylides' seventeenth ode takes the form of a conflict between Theseus and Minos on the voyage from Athens to Crete, as Theseus protests Minos' treatment of an Athenian girl he finds attractive. Critics have tended to see the two characters as representing different values, so that the ultimate victory of Theseus represents support of one of these opposed positions. Gail Pieper ("Conflict of Character in Bacchylides *Ode 17*," *TAPA* 103 (1972) 396-400) sees Theseus as an emblem of the honor Minos lacks, Charles Segal ("The Myth of Bacchylides 17," *Eranos* 77 (1979) 33) and Giorgio Ieranò ("Il Ditirambo XVII di Bacchilide," *QS* 15 (1989) no. 30:174-75) find the demigods to be negative and positive exempla of proper sexual behavior, and Henry Walker (*Theseus and Athens*, Oxford, 1995, 93-94) reads the ode as a parable of how *metis* is superior to *bia*. All these interpretations tend to read the ode as a sort of fable, in which king and hero represent different possibilities for personal action, proposing that we take Theseus as a better example of virtuous behavior. But this contest takes place in front of the audience of the other young Athenians, and by referring to their presence, the poet turns the conflict into an *agon*, a struggle carried out in public, with implications for the future social roles of the opposing parties. Hence, like *agones* in tragedy, this debate can reflect concerns of the city as a whole. In this case we see a conflict between a monarch who uses his power to satisfy his personal desires, and a youth who demands that the social forms which give meaning to the claims of aristocratic families be honored. The victory of Theseus is a victory of aristocracy over tyranny.

The conflict centers on the issue of marriage, that a king's desires do not permit him to undermine the marriage economy that binds noble families together and provides them with a legitimate posterity; Theseus tells Minos that he will not allow the king to make himself the master (*damazein*) by force of one of the unmarried young people (*êitheoi*) who make up the Athenian contingent (43-45). Minos displays his right to treat the Athenians in this way by showing the power he has inherited from his father Zeus; his demand that Zeus send lightning is immediately fulfilled (67-71). If the king of the gods shows him "outstanding honor" (68-69), his will ought to be respected by the Athenians. Theseus receives a quite different favor from Amphitrite, but one even more significant: he appears wearing a garland Amphitrite received at her wedding to Poseidon (113-16), a reminder that the marriage economy is important even among the gods. But even before these miraculous events, the two show their different attitudes toward sex and marriage in the way they speak of their births. Theseus portrays both his conception and Minos' as moments when daughters of kings were taken to the beds of gods in marriage (29-38), while Minos merely describes women of a particular locale giving birth to divine children (53-60). For Theseus, his conception created a connection between Poseidon and his mother's family, while Minos views his own conception merely as the means by which Zeus had a powerful son.

Bacchylides makes clear that Theseus stands for a superior principle. For both Theseus and Minos, their divine father remains at a distance: Zeus sends lightning from afar (55), while Poseidon doesn't appear at all. Yet Theseus ultimately gets closer to the gods

because of marriage, the institution he is defending. He actually enters his father's palace (97-101) and there he is dressed by his father's legitimate wife, a far more intimate interaction than Minos enjoys. Theseus' reappearance with a symbol of his father's divine marriage serves as a check on Minos' desires. The king can "no longer restrain his hand" and touches a noble girl, the future wife of the hero Telemon and the mother of Ajax in fact (11-14). Theseus demands that Minos control himself or face his wrath (40-46). Minos refuses, but even though he avoids violence, Theseus' reappearance wearing Amphitrite's garland and surrounded by Nereids forces the king to see the value the gods place on marriage, and upsets his plan to disregard the hero's challenge (119-127). By describing how Theseus stands in the way of Minos' desire, Bacchylides shows that the proprieties that make possible the bonds of marriage between noble families take precedence over desires of even the most powerful kings.