

Painting, Mimesis, and Nothing to do with Dionysus

In his *Histories*, in a fragment transmitted by Strabo, Polybius attributes the origin of the proverb “nothing to do with Dionysus” not to drama, but to painting (Plb. 39.2.1-3). Among the events surrounding the capture of Corinth in 146 BCE, Polybius mentions that he saw soldiers playing dice on paintings they had tossed on the ground. One of the paintings was Aristeides’ *Dionysus*, “about which some say the proverb ‘Nothing to do with Dionysus’ refers” (39.2.3: *ἐφ’ οὗ τινες εἰρησθαί φασι τὸ ‘Οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον’*). Pausanias, the 2nd century CE lexicographer, preserves a similar story, but attributes the painting to Parrhasius (32: οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον).

This is only one of three ancient traditions associated with the proverb. The second, which Chamaeleon of Heraclea rejected in antiquity, reports that spectators heckled Epigenes of Sicyon for a tragedy he composed in honor of Dionysus (Wehrli 9.38). The third, supported by Chamaeleon, Plutarch, Diogenianus, and Zenobius, interprets the saying as a criticism of the shift of dramatic subjects from *komai* and dithyramb to tragedies on mythical subjects. It is this third tradition that has been most influential in modern scholarship since Pohlenz (1927).

I argue that the two more ancient traditions, concerning Epigenes and painting, are easily reconciled. In these, the proverb constitutes a criticism of ineffective mimesis. Affirming the validity of these traditions leads to two consequences: first, it highlights that mimesis was as central an element of painting as it was of tragedy, and second, it diminishes the evidentiary value of the proverb for the origin of tragedy.

The tradition that attaches the proverb to Epigenes claims the earliest provenance. According to the *Suda* (under *Thespis*, θ 282 = TrGF I.1.T.1), Epigenes was considered by some to be the first tragedian, and his audience, underwhelmed by his tragedy honoring Dionysus,

shouted the phrase in protest. The *Suda* reports that the peripatetic Chamaeleon (Wehrli fr. 38) relates a similar story in his work *On Thespis*. David Mirhady argues that the story implies, “apparently, that [Epigenes’] tragedy *per se* did not honor Dionysus” (Mirhady 398). This interpretation, I suggest, is distorted by the third traditional interpretation of the proverb. As Plutarch (*Quaest. Conv.* 615A) writes, “when Phrynicus and Aeschylus directed tragedy to myths and emotions, the question was asked: what has this to do with Dionysus?” Or in Zenobius’s (5.40) version, “poets departed from the custom [of singing dithyrambs in honor of Dionysus], and put their hands to writing *Ajaxes* and *Centaurs*. In response, the spectators watching would say ‘nothing to do with Dionysus.’” This tradition suggests that the expression was an immediate response to drama that did not represent Dionysus. In this interpretation, the complaint is that the content does not fulfill the expectations of the context. Dramatic rituals in honor of Dionysus should represent Dionysus or his rituals. In the case of Epigenes, however, we have no grounds to assume that he did not represent Dionysus, only that the end result did not honor the god.

In the tradition preserved by Polybius and Pausanias, in contrast, it is clear that it was precisely the depiction of Dionysus that displeased the viewers. The elder Pliny praises Aristides for painting the minds and the feelings of his human subjects (*HN* 35.36.98). Among his work, Pliny lists a *Dionysus*, and Strabo (8.6.23 = C 381) claims to have seen the painting (κάλλιστον ἔργον) on display in the temple of Ceres. Pausanias (the lexicographer), though he attributes the painting to Parrhasius, repeats following interpretation of the proverb from Theatetus’ *Περὶ παροιμία*: several painters each produced a picture of Dionysus for a competition. The winning painting was so superior to the rest that the viewers asked “what have these others to do with Dionysus?” Paintings have no ritual Dionysiac context to fail to fulfill;

therefore, in this context the proverb more probably refers to faulty mimesis. The signifier fails to capture the signified. This interpretation is compatible with the examples of the proverb in use (Aristides 29.28; Lucian *Bacch.* 5, *Herm.* 55) as well as the tradition concerning Epigenes. The two most ancient traditions, consequently, stress the role of mimesis in the visual and dramatic arts.

In the first place, the proverb is a reminder that effective mimesis is an essential quality of representational painting as well as of drama. Furthermore, the proverb's association with painting casts serious doubt upon any possibility that it provides evidence for a shift of subject matter in the early development of tragedy.

Bibliography

- Mirhady, D. 2012. "Something to Do with Dionysus: Chamaeleon on the Origins of Tragedy." in *Praxiphanes of Mytilene and Chamaeleon of Heraclea: Text, Translation, and Discussion*. New Brunswick. 387-409.
- Pohlenz, M. 1926. "Das Satyrspiel und Pratinas von Phleius." *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*. Philologisch-Historische Klasse. 298-321.