

## IBYCUS *PMGF* 287: LOVE AND DISGRACE

- Ἔρος αὐτέ με κυανέοισιν ὑπὸ  
βλεφάροις τακέρ' ὄμμασι δερκόμενος  
κηλήμασι παντοδαποῖς ἐς ἅπει-  
ρα δίκτυα Κύπριδος ἐσβάλλει·  
5 ἧ μὰν τρομέω νιν ἐπερχόμενον,  
ὥστε φερέζυγος ἵππος ἀεθλοφόρος ποτὶ γῆρα  
ἀέκων σὺν ὄχεσφι θοοῖς ἐς ἄμιλλαν ἔβα.

Judging from the source which has preserved this fragment for us and from its overall structure, which I will analyze below, I believe that these lines of Ibycus constitute in all probability a complete poem<sup>1</sup>. This provides us the opportunity for a thorough interpretation and evaluation, an opportunity which has not, in my opinion, been adequately exploited by scholars so far. The intricacy and dexterity of Ibycus' poetic art in this particular specimen of his work has gone largely unnoticed. As will be seen by the ensuing analysis, there is not even a single word in these seven verses which has a superfluous or merely ornamental function; on the contrary, it is carefully chosen, put and invested with a particular significance that contributes effectively to the production of the implicit meaning that the poet imparts to his creation. And this meaning mostly concerns the unavoidable danger of facing disgrace in one's efforts of erotic conquest.

The first remark to be made is that Ibycus' poem is comprised by two distinct images, which are however implicitly linked<sup>2</sup>; an initial connection is established by the correlation between the phrase Ἔρος αὐτέ με and the adjective φερέζυγος: the subjugation of the horse, which comes to represent the poetic persona that Ibycus here adopts, denotes precisely that the speaker is constantly under the influence of Eros, that he finds himself repeatedly falling in love. And that is, metaphorically speaking, his yoke. Another probable correlation linking the two images might be traced between the adjective κυανέοισιν, which is often used in Homer to refer to the turbulent sea<sup>3</sup>, and the verb τρομέω, that graphically expresses the feeling of angst at Eros'

<sup>1</sup> Cf. D. A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, Bristol 1982, 311.

<sup>2</sup> See C. M. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, Oxford 1961, 263.

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it has been maintained that this is a possible allusion to the brows of Zeus as a way of linking Eros with the king of the gods, in order to augment his power and influence over the fates of men. See B. Gentili, *Poesia e pubblico nella Grecia antica*, Milano 2006, 172-74; H. Fränkel, *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, transl. M. Hadas and J. W. Willis, New York 1975, 284; E. Cavallini, *Ibico. Nel Giardino delle Vergini*, Lecce 1997, 143; and C. L. Wilkinson, *The Lyric of Ibycus*, Introduction Text and Commentary, Berlin and Boston 2012, 233 and 237.

approach. Finally, it might not be inconceivable that the racing horse in the second image is characterized as ἀεθλοφόρος because –among other reasons– it has already gained at least a token of the interest of its object of desire, judging from the exchange of looks in line 2 (ὄμμασι δερκόμενος). This view, of course, presupposes that we accept Wilamowitz’s opinion that in the poet’s description of the eyes of Eros he is in fact describing the eyes of his beloved<sup>4</sup>. However, it seems to me that the personification of Eros by Ibycus is here intended rather as a generalization; the intense look that the deity casts upon him is perhaps meant to represent *all* the beloveds of the speaking ‘I’, an assumption strengthened by the application of the adverb αὐτε.

Apart from these three possible correlations noted above, the most important connection between the two different images of the poem lies in its overall meaning. The emphasis of the first image is that the poet is lured into the inescapable nets of Aphrodite. The ineluctable of this event is elucidated by the second image in that the speaker is forced to participate in a contest against his own will. The notional link between the adjective ἄπειρα<sup>5</sup>, which qualifies Cypris’ nets, and the participle ἄεκων is reinforced by the adverb τακέρ’. What the exchange of looks “melts” is the will of the poet to resist this implicit invitation to a contest. Thus, in both images of the poem the primaeval effect of Eros’ look, by affecting as it does the speaker’s will, reduces him to an animal, in both cases “trapped”. But what is it exactly that causes the speaker’s reluctance to participate in Eros’ contest and to perceive the deity as an enemy, an impression created by the use of the participle ἐπερχόμενον in line 5?<sup>6</sup> It is, I believe, above all the uncertainty whether this participation will be victorious for him. The simile of the racing horse is carefully constructed by the poet so as to convey an ambivalence concerning the outcome of the speaker’s decision: the adjective ἀεθλοφόρος, which might refer to the speaker’s experience in love affairs and to his confidence fomented by the fact that they had been repeatedly successful in

<sup>4</sup> U. von Wilamowitz, *Sappho und Simonides*, Berlin 1913, 125. See also M. Davies, *The Eyes of Love and the Hunting-Net in Ibycus* 287 P., “Maia” 32, 1980, 255-7. Of particular interest is the comment of Wilkinson (n. 3 above) 234 that through this assimilation not only is the seductive appeal of the youth emphasized, but also the deity is more closely connected with human experience.

<sup>5</sup> Be it noted that ἄπειρα has been emended by several scholars into ἀπείρονα. See M. Davies’ apparatus criticus.

<sup>6</sup> For the precise meaning of this participle see A. D. Skiadas, *Αρχαϊκός Λυρισμός* 2, Athens 1981, 336-7; cf. G. P. Tsomis, *Eros bei Ibykos*, “RhM” 146, 2003, 241; E. Degani- G. Burzacchini, *Lirici Greci*, Bologna 2005, 312. M. Davies, *Symbolism and Imagery in the Poetry of Ibycus*, “Hermes” 114, 1986, 403 asserts that ἐπερχόμενον functions as a pivot between the two images of the poem.

the past, together with the characterization of his chariot as swift (σὺν ὄχεσφι θοοῖς, 7) create an optimistic mood that is balanced by the rather advanced age of the horse (ποτὶ γῆρα, 6) and its concomitant unwillingness (ἀέκων, 7). Apparently, the horse hesitates to run the race of love again because this time its age compromises its ability to win. In fact, I would go even further by maintaining that its prospective loss might even annul its former victories, a prospect which better justifies the use of such a strong verb as τρομέω in line 5, as well as the preceding affirmative particle (ἦ μὲν).

The specific agonistic context of the simile is not, I think, random; the fact that the poet has to participate in a contest in order to win his object of desire extols it by implying that it has attracted the interest of many antagonists whom the speaker must surpass. On the other hand, horse races in ancient Greece were notorious for being dangerous for the participants; many accidents or even deaths occurred during them. The case of the messenger's false report in Sophocles' *Electra*, which seems however plausible to its hearers, is indicative. The simile of the race horse is, thus, employed by the poet in all probability to indicate that by entering the competition the participant risks losing something valuable; maybe it is his personal integrity or his fame. Consequently, I believe that the premise of the entire poem is that love "forces" you to play a game where the possibilities of victory or shame, and even disgrace, are always existent. This thesis presupposes to an extent that the speaker is not necessarily old, as it had been supposed by the commentators. We must take into careful consideration the fact that the whole concept of the horse which heads towards old age is just part of a simile and that its age, in its turn, is part of the poet's device to create an equilibrium between the prospects of victory and loss. Thus, the speaking 'I' might as well be at his prime<sup>7</sup>.

Another important question over which we must ponder is whether the speaker really participates in Eros' contest *contrary* to his own will and better judgment. The emphatic position of ἔβα at the very end of the poem, which balances the adjective φερέζυγος and creates the impression that the horse is making a conscious decision, rather prevents us from forming such an opinion. Indeed, we must take into account the repetition of the verb

<sup>7</sup> Contrary to what, for example, D. E. Gerber (*Euterpe. An Anthology of Early Greek Lyric, Elegiac, and Iambic Poetry*, Amsterdam 1970, 216), R. A. Felsenthal (*The Language of Greek Choral Lyric: Alcman, Stesichorus, Ibycus and Simonides*, Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison 1980, 119), and Wilkinson (n. 3 above, 235) believe. Of course, my assertion is contrary to the testimony of Plato (*Parmenides* 137a), but it is not inconceivable that the speaker in this part of the dialogue has misinterpreted the poetic intention of Ibycus or has not been able to discern it in its entirety.

φέρω in the two adjectives of line 6 (φερέζυγος - ἀεθλοφόρος)<sup>8</sup>; it is its very subjugation to Eros that has brought to the horse its victories; thus, this significant repetition might discourage us from perceiving its participation in the erotic contest as entirely compulsory. This notion is reinforced by the participle δερκόμενος at line 2, which, as Snell points out, refers not so much to the function of the eye as to its gleam as noticed by someone else<sup>9</sup>. With the use of the verb δέρκομαι Ibycus introduces an element of subjectivity to the experience of the speaker. His erotic entrapment is partly a personal impression derived from the act of exchanging looks. It is as if he consciously defers a large part of the responsibility for his own inner workings to the deity of love. In this context, the κηλήματα of line 3 are probably the promises of erotic fulfillment, whatever this entails for the speaker, generated and undoubtedly intensified by the glance of Eros, whose eyes ultimately assume the function of a mirror<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, similarly to the ambiguity of the second image that is created by the words φερέζυγος and ἔβα, an ambivalence is established in the first image with the combination of the words δερκόμενος and ἐσβάλλει: the speaker “allows” Eros to compel him into a contest in which he will jeopardize his integrity. The “compulsion” is, thus, doubly determined.

Hopefully, my analysis has shown that Ibycus’ poem, as becomes obvious from its agonistic context, is lacking any kind of playfulness or irony<sup>11</sup>, but has serious overtones<sup>12</sup>. Through his personal experience Ibycus suggestively exposes a situation that is timeless and that many prospective lovers have to confront, especially if they feel “compelled” into it by a superior power that transcends their will, but that in reality is merely a projection. And it is precisely this projection and its concomitant deferral of responsibility which to an extent rationalize the risk taken.

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<sup>8</sup> A repetition noted by Wilkinson (n. 3 above), 241.

<sup>9</sup> B. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, Oxford 1953, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 255d: ὥσπερ δὲ ἐν κατόπτρῳ ἐν τῷ ἐρῶντι ἑαυτὸν ὁρῶν λέληθεν.

<sup>11</sup> As S. T. Mace (*Amour, Encore! The Development of δηῶτε in Archaic Lyric*, “GRBS” 34, 1993, 347) maintains.

<sup>12</sup> This opinion, of course, presupposes that we have the whole poem at hand and not merely a part of it, in which case it would be extremely difficult to discern the poet’s precise intentions. I believe that my overall argument rather encourages the view that these lines should be read as an entity. I am under the impression that especially the word ἔβα at the end imparts to those lines a sense of finality and that anything additional would have been superfluous and would have destroyed the admirable symmetry and implicitness of the poem. However, any kind of certainty in this matter would be ill-founded and my assertion must remain at best subjective.

**ABSTRACT:**

In this fragment of Ibycus every single word is carefully chosen, placed and charged with a peculiar significance that contributes effectively to the conveyance of the implicit meaning that the poet imparts to his creation. And this meaning mostly concerns the unavoidable danger of facing disgrace in one's efforts of erotic conquest.

**KEYWORDS:**

Ibycus, erotic contest, disgrace.