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ON THE DEATH OF ACTAEON

GREGORY NAGY

THE myth of Actaeon the hunter is famous from the version in Ovid. *met.* 3.13ff, where Artemis literally turns Actaeon into a stag. The hapless victim is then torn to shreds by his own hounds. Rose¹ claims to see the same theme in Stesichorus 236P (= 68B), a fragment derived from the following passage in Pausanias (9.2.3):

τοῖς δὲ ἐκ Μεγάρων ἰοῦσι πηγῇ τέ ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ καὶ προελθοῦσιν ὀλίγον πέτρα. καλοῦσι δὲ τὴν μὲν Ἀκταίωνος κοίτην, ἐπὶ ταύτῃ καθεύδειν φάμενοι τῇ πέτρᾳ τὸν Ἀκταίωνα ὁπότε κάμοι θηρεύων, ἐς δὲ τὴν πηγὴν ἐνιδεῖν λέγουσιν αὐτὸν λουομένης Ἀρτέμιδος ἐν τῇ πηγῇ. Στησίχορος δὲ ὁ Ἴμεραῖος ἔγραψεν ἐλάφου περιβαλεῖν δέρμα Ἀκταίωني τὴν θεόν, παρασκευάζουσάν οἱ τὸν ἐκ τῶν κυνῶν θάνατον ἵνα δὴ μὴ γυναικὰ Σεμέλην λάβοι.

If we follow Rose's interpretation, the expression ἐλάφου περιβαλεῖν δέρμα Ἀκταίωني reflects Stesichorus' own words, and it means that the goddess transformed the δέρμα "hide" of Actaeon into that of a stag. For this purportedly traditional usage of περιβαλεῖν in the sense of "transform," Rose adduces a parallel in Aesch. *Ag.* 1147, where the gods have transformed Philomele into a nightingale:

περέβαλον γάρ οἱ πτεροφόρον δέμας

While conceding that the verb περιβάλλω implies "transform" in this passage, Bowra² rejects a parallel interpretation in Stesichorus 236P. Rather, he reads ἐλάφου περιβαλεῖν δέρμα Ἀκταίωني to mean that Artemis merely flung a deerskin around Actaeon. For support, he cites the evidence from Greek iconography, where the motif of a dying Actaeon clad in deerskin is clearly attested.³ As a prime example, he singles out a metope from Temple E in Selinus (middle fifth century

¹ H. J. Rose, "De Actaeone Stesichoreo," *Mnemosyne* 59 (1931) 431f.

² C. M. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry*² (Oxford 1961) 99f.

³ Bowra 99f, 125f. Cf. also P. Jacobsthal, *Aktaiens Tod (Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 5, Sonderdruck), which also surveys the alternative representation of Actaeon sprouting antlers.

B.C.),⁴ which features Actaeon wearing the deerskin and his hounds lunging more at it than at him.⁵

Such evidence is inconclusive: the motif of Actaeon wearing rather than having the hide of a stag may be a *visual* as well as *verbal* metaphor. On the verbal level, περιβάλλω implies clothing, as in the Philomele passage of Aeschylus (*Ag.* 1147). The gods transform Philomele into a nightingale, but Aeschylus represents the action as if they *clothed* her with the δέμας “body” of a nightingale:

περέβαλον γάρ οἱ περοφόρον δέμας.

The meaning of περιβάλλω as “clothe” is commonplace in Greek (*Od.* 5.231, 22.148; *Hdt.* 1.152, 9.109; *E. IT* 1150; etc.), and the derivative περιβλήμα actually means “garment” (*Arist. Pr.* 870^a27, etc.). I propose, then, that the wording ἐλάφου περιβαλεῖν δέρμα Ἀκταίωνι is also metaphorical: “[that the goddess] flung the hide of a stag round Actaeon,” meaning that the goddess transformed him into a stag. Bowra, however, insists on the nonmetaphorical interpretation, noting simply that “δέρμα is not the same as δέμας.”⁶

This objection does not reckon with the notion of equating one’s identity with one’s “hide.” The lexical evidence of the Indo-European languages reveals traces of this primitive equation. Consider, for example, the cognate of Rig-Vedic *tvác-* “hide,” and Greek *σάκος* “cowhide-shield,” namely Hittite *tweka-*: besides meaning “body,” this word is also regularly used to designate “person, self, one’s own self.” Consider also Latin *uersipellis*, meaning literally “he whose hide is turned” (from verb *uertō* “turn” and noun *pellis* “hide”). In *Plaut. Am.* 123, *uersipellis* designates Jupiter when he transformed himself into the human Amphitruo; in *Plin.* 8.22.34 and *Petr.* 62, *uersipellis* means “werewolf.”

Thus we have philological evidence for the assertion that the text of Stesichorus 236P reflects a traditional usage which we can interpret metaphorically to mean that Actaeon was indeed transformed into a stag. The iconographical evidence may be explained as the result of a misunderstanding of the original expression περιβαλεῖν δέρμα, or perhaps an equally symbolic means of representing the same conception.

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⁴ G. Richter, *The Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks* (New Haven 1950) Fig. 411.

⁵ Bowra 125.

⁶ Bowra 100.