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Channeling Tradition and Self: An Examination of the Allusivity
and Originality of Theognidean Verse
PAUL BISAGNI

Among the ditches and landmines that plague the battle-plain to which David Campbell likens Theognidean scholarship is the occurrence in the corpus of passages ascribed to other writers.¹ Embraced by separatists – those who reject the single authorship of the *Theognidea* – as evidence for the inclusion of imitations by later writers and explained by unitarians as not unusual instances of one poet reproducing or retouching another’s work, the question is all but insoluble. While I do not aim to endorse one camp over the other, for the purposes of this study I shall regard the noted allusions to earlier poets, using Mimnermus as a focal point, as just that – allusions, evocations, not passages misattributed to Theognis.² Rather, as I shall demonstrate, the reiterations of his forbears’ writings are distinctly Theognidean in style, execution, and context. Far from branding him an unoriginal copycat or even nullifying his authorship, these parallelisms evince Theognis’ poetic skill and keen understanding of his particular circumstances and reasons for writing.

In his commentary on Theognis in *Greek Lyric Poetry*, Campbell cites Solon, Tyrtaeus, and Mimnermus as the lyric poets whom Theognis, their successor by roughly a century, imitates.³ The works of these three writers cover an array of themes, ranging from the political self-apology and sage admonitions against excess and hubris of Solon, to the wartime exhortations and discourses on excellence (ἀρετή) of Tyrtaeus, to the plaintive musings on youth and old age of Mimnermus. Upon first glance, one might presume that Theognis’ verse most closely evokes that of Solon and Tyrtaeus, considering Theognis’ preoccupation with the stability of the city and its people, as well as his aristocratic disgust at

¹ David A. Campbell, ed., *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1982), 344-45.

² *Ibid.*, 344.

³ *Ibid.*

growing social mobility and the consequent degradation of the noble (οἱ ἀγαθοί). And yet, the peevish aristocrat engages Mimnermus just as much – if not more so – as his more politically minded predecessors. To begin with, as Campbell notes in his codicil to Theognis 341-50, in which the poet entreats Zeus to avenge the theft of his property, τεθναίην in line 343 recalls τεθναίην in line 2 of Mimnermus 1.⁴ Granted, the verb “to die” is far from unusual in Ancient Greek, and much of Greek literature explores death as a subject. What distinguishes the connection between these words and, as a result, the poems that feature them is their forceful, dramatic primacy, which is supplemented by their shared position in conditional statements. However, these are not the only likenesses between the two poems. The protasis to τεθναίην’s apodosis in Theognis’ poem expresses the longing for “respite from evil worries” (343: κακῶν ἄμπαυμα μεριμνέων), which in Mimnermus 1 “always torment him [the aged man] all around his brain” (7: αἰεὶ μιν φρένας ἀμφὶ κακαὶ τείρουσι μέριμναι). Theognis borrows “evil worries” as well as “respite” (ἄμπαυμα) from Mimnermus, though the latter appears as ἄμπαυσις in a different poem that details the Sun’s toils (fragment 10, line 2), and just as Mimnermus frames his meditation on the woes of old age with Ἀφροδίτης (1) and θεός (10), so Theognis begins his plea with Ζεῦ (341) and ends it with δαίμων (350). Initially signaled by the repetition of the startling first-position τεθναίην, the similarities between the two poems branch out to other recurring words and the very framework of the pieces.

And yet, Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50 are substantially different. At the elementary level, the poems broach two independent matters. Whereas Theognis is inveighing against the theft of his property (345-47: τίσις δ' οὐ φαίνεται ἡμῖν / ἀνδρῶν, οἳ τὰ μὰ χρέματ' ἔχουσι βίην / συλήσαντες), evidently not the first injustice he has suffered of late (343-44), Mimnermus bemoans the vicissitudes of old age (5-10) and the evanescence of life’s pleasures (1-4). In addition to content, the poems differ markedly in context. The nature of Mimnermus 1 is wholly

⁴ Ibid., 343n, 364.

contemplative. Although Mimnermus delineates the sorrows of aging with great poignancy – he twice emphasizes the detrimental effects of growing old on the individual (6: γῆρας, ὃ τ' αἰσχρὸν ὁμῶς καὶ κακὸν ἄνδρα τιθεῖ; 9: ἀλλ' ἐχθρὸς μὲν παισίν, ἀτίμαστος δὲ γυναιξίν) and interposes a fleeting whiff of what the old man was once able to enjoy (8: οὐδ' αὐγὰς προσορῶν τέρπεται ἠελίου) – this is attributable to his panache as a poet, not his experiences as an old man. Indeed, he wishes to die “when the joys of life no longer matter to him” (2: ὅτε μοι μηκέτι ταῦτα μέλοι), that is, “when painful old age arrives” (5-6: ἐπεὶ δ' ὀδυνηρὸν ἐπέλθη / γῆρας). As the moods of the verbs indicate, the infelicities that Mimnermus lists have not yet seized him, which lends the poem a gnomic air and makes the poet a distant contemplator. Theognis, on the other hand, is reeling from a real-time calamity. He delivers his supplication with urgent aorist imperatives (341: τέλεισον, 342: δός) and makes ample mention of the bad things that have befallen him (342, 343, 344, 346). Moreover, he accentuates the direness of the situation and his indignation with a jarring simile, absent of a softening ὥστε, that likens him to a dog (347: ἐγὼ δὲ κύων), and he proceeds from there with a trenchant wish to drink the blood of the wrongdoers (349). Juxtaposed with such glaring divergences, the aforementioned similarities seem to dwindle in significance.

Why, though, would a conscientious poet such as Theognis link his prayer to Mimnermus' meditation? What light does the connection shed on 341-50? Perhaps the simplest explanation is the desire for poetic glory while incanting in the symposium. By channeling Mimnermus' piece and, in a sense, incorporating it into his own, Theognis showcases not only his familiarity with an older, esteemed poet but also his own dexterity and skill. But, why Mimnermus 1 in particular? In addition to his use of aorist imperatives, a starkly unexpected metaphor, and a bloodthirsty vow, Theognis vivifies and enhances the urgency of his plea in evoking Mimnermus 1, which is by contrast calm and restrained. Though its subject matter is bleak, though Mimnermus does not equivocate about the pains of growing old, the poem is nonetheless modulated by a smooth thematic flow and, as Campbell highlights in his citation of C.M.

Bowra, an artfully crafted rhythmic scheme. Indeed, Mimnermus guides the reader through a pleasant but swift account of youth and progressively slows the verbs, shortens the sentences, and accentuates the stops, concluding the poem with a stark declaration of the god-given difficulties of aging.⁵ Theognis, on the other hand, bounds from urgent imperative (341, 342) to stern wish (343) and to the more caustic wish (344) already cited, and he intersperses these terse utterances with an abrupt remark about his fate (345: αἴσα γὰρ οὕτως ἐστί) and the aforementioned metaphor. Such effects add an element of dissonance to the poem that reflects and reinforces the rage Theognis is experiencing. Although, as Bowra astutely points out, Mimnermus truncates his sentences and amplifies the stops to a dramatic end, the amount of short sentences is greater, and the sentences themselves are shorter, in Theognis 341-50. Furthermore, in ending the poem with yet another pained plea (349-50: ἐπί τ' ἐσθλὸς ὄροιο / δαίμων, ὃς κατ' ἐμὸν νοῦν τελέσειε τάδε) whose fulfillment, of course, is entirely dependent on the will of the gods, Theognis denies the reader the sense of concrete finality afforded by Mimnermus (10: οὕτως ἀργαλέον γῆρας ἔθηκε θεός).

Considering the direct connection between Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50 through τεθναίνην and the presumed learnedness of the fellow-aristocrats to whom Theognis would be incanting, as well as the simple fact that Campbell highlights the connection in his commentary note, one may reasonably conjecture that the audience would have picked up on the allusion upon hearing line 343. Even if τεθναίνην did not trigger the association in the minds of the listeners, the following phrase (κακῶν μεριμνέων), which occurs two lines after τεθναίνην in Mimnermus 1, would have likely alerted the audience to the connection being drawn. In thus evoking his predecessor's graceful poem, which Campbell posits is "one of the short poems *admired for their sweetness* by Callimachus," Theognis sets the audience up to hear a similarly graceful recitation, only to confront them with the harsh lines delineated above.⁶ This ingenious

⁵ Ibid., citing Bowra, 224.

⁶ Ibid., 224 (emphasis mine).

confrontation, this swift contradiction of the listeners' expectations, magnifies the already jolting elements of the vengeance-prayer and, consequently, the urgency and incensement that Theognis is trying to convey through the jolts.

The relationship between Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50, however, need not be interpreted as entirely adversative. While the contents and contexts diverge on the whole, there are subtle similarities beyond the verbal ties that enrich this connection. In addition to emphasizing the woes of old age, Mimnermus touches on the transience of youth and of youth's delights. Although men and women in their prime enjoy "clandestine love and kind gifts and the bed" (3: κρυπταδίη θιλότης καὶ μείλιχα δῶρα καὶ εὐνή) in abundance, time inexorably eats away at them and thus renders them unfit for past pleasures. Mimnermus singles out the man, whom old age makes "ugly" (αἰσχρὸν) and "base" (κακὸν) and, consequently, "hateful to boys" (ἐχθρὸς μὲν παισίῳ) and "dishonorable to women" (ἀτίμαστος δὲ γυναίξι). Underlying this sobering account of life's progression is the notion of the inevitability of this progression. While the poet never explicitly mentions this, and while he himself, as was noted before, still basks in life's pleasures, the exposition proper of "painful old age" (ὀδυνηρὸν γῆρας) employs bare present-tense indicative verbs that allow for no exceptions or escape – old age *makes* (6: τιθεῖ) man base; worries *oppress* (7: τείρουσι) him; he *does not enjoy* (8: οὐδ' τέρπεται) the sun's rays. As if the reader were not assured by now of the ineluctability of aging, Mimnermus cements it by recalling its divine source – θεός emphatically concludes the last line of the poem, and Mimnermus strikingly renders the god's act in the aorist tense (10: ἔθηκε). To amplify at once the connection and contrast between youth and old age, the poet gives them nearly identical adjectives – alas, ἥβης ἄνθεα...ἀρπαλέα (4) will ultimately give way to ἀργαλέον γῆρας (10). Indeed, the transience of youth, the impermanence of its delights, is immanent in Mimnermus' musing.

How, then, does this underlying notion in Mimnermus 1 affect our interpretation of Theognis 341-50? What, if anything, does it illuminate about the plea for revenge? Interestingly enough, amidst the jarring

language, abrupt stops, and ardent invocations of the gods that define the poem, Theognis briefly comments on his lot in life: αἴσα γὰρ οὕτως ἐστὶ (345). As Campbell rightly points out, his “lot” is the offenses he has suffered and the resultant “evil worries” that plague him.⁷ Amidst his indignation, therefore, he acknowledges with startling equanimity that bad things are bound to befall mortals. Such a gnomic admission recalls Mimnermus’ emphasis on inescapable, troublous old age. Indeed, just as youth is fated to flee and old age is fated to beleaguer men and women, so Theognis is fated, as he has just realized, to lose his property. The affronted aristocrat must accept what transpired, as he seems to be doing rather tersely in line 345, and humans ought to be aware, if they are not already, of what awaits them. In this sense, therefore, the relationship between Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50 is not adversative but complementary, for by channeling the former Theognis adds an intriguing subtext to his prayer. Though his desire for vengeance is manifest, he retains his rationality and, one might add, his piety – he does not imprecate the gods for enabling his misfortunes but accepts his fate and begs the gods’ favor. Concomitant with Theognis’ acknowledgement of his αἴσα may be a recognition of the ephemerality of things – of property, of status and respect in one’s state. So, too, did Mimnermus intimate the transience of the things he prizes – secret loves, presents, bedroom exploits – in poem 1. Having plucked Mimnermus’ thematically grave yet formally graceful and winsome piece from the pool of his poetic predecessors and integrated it into his own poem, Theognis not only showcases his knowledge of older poets and their verse but also masterfully enhances 341-50.

The dialogue that Theognis thus initiates with Mimnermus is not confined to the poems discussed. Although Mimnermus 1 and Theognis 341-50, when taken as a pair, provide a sterling example of Theognis’ proclivity for replicating others’ verses and incorporating them into his own, many other poems in the Theognidea conjure up Mimnermus in subject matter and tone if not through borrowed words. One such poem

⁷ Ibid., 345n, 364.

is 567-70, which Campbell aptly deems “reminiscent of Mimnermus.”⁸ And yet, no words or phrases employed by the older poet reappear, certainly none as striking as τεθναίην. Granted, ἦβη τερπόμενος in line 567 parallels ἀνθεσιν ἦβης / τερπόμεθα in lines 3-4 of Mimnermus 2. However, the phrase is not especially distinctive, though the connection between the two poems may have very well materialized in the minds of Theognis’ audience. What solidifies the influence of Mimnermus 2 on Theognis 567-70 is the latter’s subtler elements. Just as Mimnermus conceives of the light of the sun as an embodiment of life – and of youth in particular – so Theognis directly contrasts it with death (569: λείψω δ’ ἐρατὸν φάος ἡελίου). Furthermore, in restricting his introductory joyous thought about youth to one pithy sentence that occupies half of the line (567: ἦβη τερπόμενος παίζω) and devoting the rest of the poem to nonexistence, dramatically concluding it with the hopeless ὄψομαι οὐδὲν ἔτι (570), Theognis channels the brilliantly unbalanced structure of Mimnermus 1. He is clearly indebted to, and arguably admiring of, his forerunner in the elegiac tradition.

The simple meditation on youth’s all-too-quick concession to death gleams with Theognidean flourishes. The most elementary diversion from Mimnermus lies in line 569, where Theognis supplants the characteristic Mimnerman phrase “rays of the sun” (e.g. poem 1, line 8: αὐγὰς...ἡελίου) with “lovely light of the sun” (ἐρατὸν φάος ἡελίου). Though the change is slight and the effect stays the same, it represents Theognis’ distinctive reconfiguration of another poet’s verse. Theognis further distinguishes himself and his poetry through the use of ἄφθογος, “voiceless,” in line 569. The connection to Mimnermus is patent: he describes old age as rendering man ἀτίμαστος (1.9) and ἄτιμον (5.4), both of which mean “dishonorable,” as well as ἄγνωστον (5.4), which one may interpret as “unrecognizable” due to age’s enervation of the face and body or as “unknown,” forgotten, denuded of whatever notoriety he once had. While Theognis also employs a negated adjective – though in 567-70 it illustrates the result not of aging but of death – the effect is

⁸ Ibid., 368.

arguably more chilling. Aside from its arresting primacy in line 567, ἄφθογγος is striking because it would have likely been said aloud during a recitation. Regardless of the identity of the speaker – Theognis himself in the midst of a symposium, a later classical admirer aloud to himself, or even a modern student aloud in class – the act of vocalizing the word “voiceless” generates a jarring existential disconnect. In addition, the word resonates especially with Theognis not only because he is a poet, a man whose voice serves as his creative outlet, but also because he is deeply conscious of his poet status. Indeed, in 237-54 Theognis reminds Kyrnus, his perfidious confidant, that he has conferred immortality upon him by mentioning him in his poems, and in the famously mystifying σφρήγις poem (19-26), he is adamant about marking his work as his own and safeguarding it against forgery or adulteration. For such a self-referential, self-aware poet to liken himself to a “voiceless stone” (568-69: ὥστε λίθος / ἄφθογγος) when dead is remarkably poignant and jolting. In using ἄφθογγος in this brief musing on life and death, therefore, Theognis at once hearkens back to Mimnermus and forges his own path forward.

Following his summary of the fractious nature of Theognidean scholarship and the separatist skepticism concerning repetition in the corpus, Campbell asserts that the disgruntled aristocrat “worked unadventurously within the elegiac tradition.”⁹ While it is true that he works exclusively in elegiacs, one cannot accuse him of being unadventurous. As his artful incorporation of Mimnermus 1 into his vengeance-plea and his other adaptations of Mimnerman verse indicate, Theognis does not shy away from experimentation, nor does he stifle his own thoughts and creative impulses in favor of reproducing the work of his predecessors. Rather, he engages others’ poetry and grafts it dramatically, if not always harmoniously, onto his own, simultaneously honoring his influential forebears and leaving his seal in the annals of Greek elegiac poetry.

⁹ Ibid., 346.

Works Cited:

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