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Stesichorus, Geryoneis S 11 SLG: the Dilemma of Geryon

Summary – Geryon must be aware that he is mortal before fighting Heracles, just as, for example, Achilles already knows that he is the mortal son of a divine mother (cf. Il. 1, 352, etc.). A Geryon who is ignorant of his own nature is more a subject of parody than of epic. Contrary to Page's assumptions (JHS 93 [1973], 149ff.), Geryon's dilemma at S 11, 8ff. must be: 'If I am to gain immortality is it worth avoiding battle with Heracles and being disgraced, by allowing him to steal my herd. Otherwise, it is better to die honoured than to disgrace myself and my stock.'

With the help of Apollodorus, who in Bibl. 2, 5, 106ff. narrates the story of the tenth Labour of Heracles, i. e. the capture of the cattle of Geryon, we can incorporate S 11 SLG within the episode of the conversation between Menoites and Geryon. Heracles has already killed off the two guards of Geryon's herd, the watchdog Orthos and the herdsman Eurytion. Another herdsman, Menoites, who herds the cattle of Hades on the same island, runs to Geryon and informs him of what has happened (Apollod. 2, 5, 108). Menoites obviously warns Geryon to avoid fighting with Heracles and not to endanger his life (cf. S 10, S 11, 5/6). Fragment S 11 contains Geryon's reply to Menoites.

D. L. Page (Stesichorus: *The Geryoneis*, JHS 93 [1973], 149ff.) was the first to observe correctly the similarities between S 11 and Homer (Il. 12, 322–328). In this Homeric section, Sarpedon urges Glaucus that they should fight among the foremost, in order to knock down the wall of the Achaeans. His argument is as follows: if, by escaping the battle, you and I were to remain forever ageless and immortal, then neither would I fight among the foremost nor would I send you into battle. But, because we are mortal and cannot escape death, let us go and fight so we shall be glorified, whether we survive or not.

Yet, as regards S 11, Page argues that: "The argument in Stesichorus is quite different. Geryon's father and mother are of divine descent, and he is grandson to Poseidon. Who can tell whether he himself is immortal or not?" He thus proposes the following argument for Geryon: "Whether I am immortal or not, I must not avoid battle with Heracles. If I am immortal, so much the better; he cannot kill me. If I am not, then I would rather die with honour than survive without." Page's proposals have been accepted by later scholars (see e. g. E.

Tsitsibakou-Vasalos, Stesichorus, Geryoneis S 11,5–26: The Dilemma of Geryon, *Hellenika* 42 [1991/1992], 245–256; 253f.).

W. S. Barrett, as Page informs us (p. 150), accepts the second part of the dilemma (i. e. ‘if I am not immortal’, etc.), yet doubts if the first part (i. e. ‘if I am immortal’, etc.) can be squared with the text; “for the first alternative I am by no means sanguine of restoring ‘fight in any case, since he won’t be able to kill me’. It looks more likely to be ‘it is better to endure disgrace and to allow Herakles to make away with my cattle’.”

My own objection begins with the question: Are we truly certain that Geryon is unaware whether he is mortal or immortal? Why does Page consider Geryon’s ignorance as a given one? In other words, it does not seem logical to me for Geryon not to be aware at this age whether he is mortal or immortal, and that he must wait to discover this from the outcome of his battle with Heracles. Nor does it seem logical that Stesichorus would portray a Geryon who is ignorant of his own nature, unless he wanted to parody him and compose a parody instead of an epic. Achilles, for example, knows from the start that he is the mortal son of a divine mother (cf. *Il.* 1, 88; 352; 416/417, etc.).

Now, as for the nature of Geryon’s father, Chrysaor, it is extremely doubtful whether he is immortal. Chrysaor was born of the union between the mortal Medusa and the god Poseidon (Hesiod, *Theog.* 276ff.). In the catalogue of goddesses who united with mortals (*Theog.* 965–1020) the Oceanid Callirrhoe and Chrysaor appear (979ff.); on the basis of these lines, then, Geryon was a mortal on his father’s side. As such (as regards S 11, 3/4) I find the suggestion of N. Prest far more convincing (Note alla *Gerioneide* di Stesicoro, *Sileno* 15 [1989], 69–75; 70: ποτέφα [κρατεροῦ Χρυσάορος ἄ- / θανάτιοι [τε Καλλιρόας γενέθλα), than Barrett’s earlier suggestion (printed by Page) of ποτέφα [κρατερός Χρυσάορος ἄ- / θανάτιοι [γόνος καὶ Καλλιρόας.

It should be noted that in the above catalogue (*Theog.* 965ff.), aside from Ploutos (see below), all the other children born from the union of goddesses with mortals have been mortal. Some of these were deified and so became immortal later (e. g. Ino, Semele). Ploutos, because he is the personification of wealth, is a peculiar case. It is not clear whether he was born immortal, or became immortal later (cf. *LIMC* VII, I p. 416: “P. was a mere personification and never given formal worship as a god; no sacrifices are attested.”). As for Geryon, the line at *Theog.* 981 clearly states that Callirrhoe bore a son who was the strongest of all men. As such, it seems odd that Geryon would be so ignorant of his own nature in Stesichorus.

I believe, therefore, that Geryon already knows that he is mortal before he fights with Heracles. This gives more substance to Menoites’ guidance that he (Geryon) should not endanger his life (see above), whilst Geryon is shown to be

even more heroic, as, despite all this, he chooses to endanger himself rather than be shamed. I also believe that Stesichorus is much closer to the aforementioned Homeric original. Geryon's dilemma, therefore, is as follows: 'If I am going to be immortal and ageless living all my days on Olympus, then it is better for me to avoid the clash and be disgraced, by allowing him to steal my herd. If, however (mortal as I am), the only gain I will have in avoiding the clash is to live more and to reach hated old age, then it is better for me to die honoured rather than to disgrace my name and that of my father.'

Geryon would thus prefer to avoid the clash and be disgraced only if he were to enjoy immortality and eternal happiness on Olympus. He himself knows (as I argue) that this is not possible. As such, he prefers to take the risk and die a glorious death rather than live a disgraceful life (if, of course, he defeats his rival the remainder of his life will be glorious).

As such, I suggest e. g. the following completion for lines 8–12:

αἰ μὲν γάρ[ρ, πέπον, ἀθάνατός τ' ἔσο-
 μαι καὶ ἀγή[ραος ἤματα πάντα μένων
 10 ἐν Ὀλύμπ[ῳ,
 κρέσσον[με λιπόντ' ὀπίσω κάκ' ἐ-
 λέγχεα δ[ῆριν ἔαν

8–10 γὰρ πέπον ἀθάνατός τ' ἔσομαι καὶ ἀγήρωσ παρ μακάρεσσι θεοῖσ ἐν Ὀλ. Barrett; γὰρ γένος ἀθάνατος πέλομαι καὶ ἀγήραος ὥστε βίου πεδέχειν ἐν Ὀλ. Page 11s. ἐλέγχεα iam Lobel (The Oxyrhynchus Papyri XXXII [1967], p. 13)

(For this form of the conditional sentence, cf. W. W. Goodwin, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb*, London 1889 [New York 1965], 146/147. We find a similar if-clause at Il. 1, 293/294; this is spoken by Achilles, who is sure that the substance of the matter will never come about.)

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