BACCHYLIDES EXPERIMENTS: ODE II

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Given that Pindar and Bacchylides were contemporaries and rivals, it is inevitable that the two poets should be compared; and turning from the obscurity of the Pindaric epinician the reader cannot but be struck by the clarity of the Cean poet. Clarity, simplicity, even superficiality, are the features of Bacchylides' art most often stressed by his critics. The traditional view of Bacchylides is summed up by G. M. Kirkwood 1) as follows: "Our poet is, then, Homeric (Stesichorean too, as critics have mentioned), Horatian, balladlike, graceful, simple, elegant, skilful in creating pictures and painting details". Bacchylides is, in fact, a superficial poet; not in thought, for his thinking is at once as profound and as conventional as Pindar's, but in expression. He aims for immediate communication. But there is another side to Bacchylides, a side glimpsed briefly in Ode m, a subtle, enigmatic poem which in many respects could easily have been written by Pindar 2). It is this side of Bacchylides which I wish to examine.

The ode opens with an invocation to Νίξα, 'Victory whose gift is sweet'. Both Pindar and Bacchylides like to begin with a hymnal invocation, but on first reading Bacchylides' invocations seem paler than Pindar's. Φήμη in Odes 2 and 10, 'Ημέρα, addressed to a particular day in Ode 7, seem to lack the grandeur of Pindar's figures. In his hymnal preludes Pindar's vision is expansive; he links the individual occasions to broader issues through his invocations, giving universal significance to the achievements he praises. When we compare the opening of Bacchylides 7 with the address

2) Kirkwood (105) finds likeness to Pindar in the poem but concludes (106) that it has a "simplicity and directness that resemble Homer and Herodotus more than Pindar".

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to the lyre in P. 1, which links the present celebration at Hieron's court to the celebrations of the gods and the forces of order in the universe, or the address to Hesychia in P. 8, which contrasts the piety and patriotic ambition of Aristomenes with the violence of mythical criminals, the gulf between the poets is immense. But to condemn Bacchylides is to misunderstand his aims. Φήμα in Odes 2 and 10 captures succinctly the fame which the victor has won. Ημέρα in Ode 7 recalls for the victor the last day of the Olympic festival, certainly the happiest day of his life. In Ode 11 Νίξα, invoked at the opening of the ode, conjures up for the victor his feelings at the moment of victory 3). Bacchylides uses invocations to personified powers to encapsulate in a single word an important mood or fact.

But Νίξα here is a more powerful figure than Φήμα or Ημέρα. This proem in fact comes very close to the Pindaric type. The powers of Νίξα are defined thus (4-7):

έν πολυχρύσω τ' Ὄλυμπῳ
Πολυτελείᾳ
κράνεις τέλος ἀθανάτοις
σίν τε καὶ θνατοῖς ἀρεταῖς.

By placing Νίξα by the side of Zeus Bacchylides raises her from the individual, the recent victory of Alexidamus, to a cosmic force, the dispenser of victory not only to men (θνατοῖς) but to gods (ἀθανάτοισι). The power of Νίξα is as great as that of Hesychia in P. 8 or Theia in I. 5. In thus expanding the focus of his invocation to include the cosmic powers of the addressee before narrowing the focus in v. 8 to apply the thoughts expressed in the proem to the victor, Bacchylides approaches the elaborate Pindaric prelude 4).

The description of Νίξα in these verses is probably derived from Hes. Th. 384 ff. 5), where Νίξα is a permanent companion of Zeus, together with the other children of Styx, for giving him victory over the Titans. The genealogy of Νίξα is also from Hesiod (κοῦρος.

4) The openings of Odes 7 and 10 are more elaborate than that of 2, but neither approaches the Pindaric solemnity of Ode 11.
5) R. C. Jebb, Bacchylides (Cambridge 1905) on v. 4.