

HEADS, GHOSTS AND OMENS: INTERTEXTUALITY, *EKPHRASIS* AND PICTURAL INFLUENCES IN PHILOSTRATUS THE YOUNGER'S *EIKONES*, 9 (PELOPS' RACE)

At the end of the 2nd century and the beginning of the 3rd century AD, two authors named Philostratus composed two series of *Eikones* (or *Imagines*) depicting pictures whose subjects are borrowed from the mythological past, history or everyday life. The older series is attributed to Philostratus "the Elder" and the more recent to Philostratus "the Younger". The second, being a relative of the first, explicitly writes an answer or sequel to the first *Eikones*. Recently, the works of Philostratus the Elder have attracted the attention of many scholars, but his relative and the newer *Eikones* remain undeservingly obscure, as if plunged in the shadow of his predecessor. I think the Younger's own conception of *ekphrasis* is worth the study, all the more than it is everything but a servile imitation of the Elder's.

Here, I will be analysing one of the Younger's *Eikones*: the ninth picture, showing Pelops and Hippodameia, ancestors of the Pelopids. The most famous episode featuring them in Antiquity is Pelops's chariot race, during which he defeats his reluctant stepfather, Oinomaos, to gain the hand of Hippodameia, Oinomaos' daughter. Oinomaos, as early as the classical era, is depicted as a cruel man, sometimes said to have slain his daughter's suitors once they lost the race and suspended their detached heads on the gate of his palace.

In this paper I will shed light upon three aspects of the Younger Philostratus' handling of this topic: how he writes this *ekphrasis* in a different way from his elder even though he is conceiving a sequel to his book; how his work shows a closer proximity to Greek and Roman iconography; and how he uses the supernatural, specifically the presence of the suitors' heads and of their ghosts.

I. Intertextuality and uses of *ekphrasis*

In the Prooemium of his book, Philostratus the Younger says that the author of the first *Eikones* was “the mother of [his] father”. He wants to “challenge” (ἀλλ’ ἐπιβάλωμεν τῷ φθάσαντι) the work of his relative and “follow his footsteps”. He thus invites the reader to read his series as a kind of answer or sequel to the first one. And the Younger’s work can indeed be—partially—explained in the light of the Elder’s pictures, as Fairbanks (1931: 275-277) noticed in his introduction for the Loeb edition.

Philostratus the Elder devoted two pictures to the subject: one set before the race, showing Pelops receiving a flying, golden chariot from Poseidon, his former lover and everlasting ally (I, 30); and the other showing the race just after its end (I, 17). Philostratus the Younger writes only one picture about Pelops, but he includes in it several references to, and deliberate variations from, the pictures written by his relative, thus showing that he did use them as an important source of inspiration.

Though the Younger depicts the same episode, he chooses a different moment, as he describes Pelops’ race just before it starts. Such a choice (a different moment in the same episode) often recurs in the Younger’s *Eikones* in order to indirectly refer to the Elder’s work while creating distinct pictures. It is not systematic: some pictures by the Younger describe similar *themes* with different main characters, and one third of the Younger’s pictures explores entirely new subjects.

The Elder’s influence on his relative also appears in choices going back to older common sources: the kidnapping of Pelops by Poseidon and the chariot’s ability to run on the sea like on firm ground both go back to Pindar’s first *Olympian* (*antistrophè* 3 and epod 3, 71-87). The Elder’s subject for his first picture of Pelops and Poseidon (I, 30) was directly taken from this ode, as the encounter is not detailed

in any other ancient text or image. Both the Elder and the Younger Philostrati use another character, Oinomaos' driver Myrtilos, whom Pindar either ignored or suppressed in his poem, but many later authors and artists had him play the traitor's part during the race and may have inspired them.¹ The general characterisation of the heroes in the Elder's pictures remains the same in the Younger's sequel: Pelops was already proud in the Elder's second picture (I, 30), and, in the first (I, 17), Hippodameia was modestly blushing and Oinomaos shown as cruel. More specific details show this dependence: Pelops wears a tiara, a rare detail appearing only in the Elder's picture I, 30 and in Seneca's *Thyestes* (663); everywhere else, Pelops' usual hat is a Phrygian cap.

The Younger also alludes to his predecessor's work through deliberate differences. In the Elder's *Eikones*, the horses given by Poseidon are "of mainland breed" despite their sea-bound abilities. In the Younger's picture, they become "marine horses". The Younger's comment about their brisk mood is probably modeled on the Elder's similar remarks concerning the horses of both racers in his picture I, 17. But the Younger Philostratus' most visible innovations are the use of Eros and the apparitions of Hippodameia's unfortunate suitors. While the Elder alludes to the role of Myrtilos in I, 17, the Younger has Eros cut the axle of Oinomaos' chariot. As for the suitors, the Elder only mentions Oinomaos' macabre habits (I, 30) or the tombs (I, 17). The Younger shows the suitors directly, both as rotten heads and as ghosts (εἰδῶλα).

The older *Eikones* thus appear as the most visible hypotext for the Younger Philostratus in the composition of his vision of the chariot race. He uses intertextuality

¹ No well-confirmed apparition of Myrtilos is known before the 5th century BC (his presence on the East pediment of the temple of Zeus is not so certain). He gains importance during the 5th century BC, in Greek pottery and probably in tragedies (though we have no certain proof that he appeared in Sophocles' and Euripides' lost tragedies). During the 3rd century BC he appears in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, on Jason's embroidered cloak depicting the race at its climax (I, 752-758).

as some sort of cultivated family game, choosing subjects and details to link his work with his grandfather's. He is writing a different, autonomous version of the race, but he adds a layer of meaning only understandable to readers who know both works.

But these variations must not let go unnoticed a more global distinction between the Younger's and the Elder's conceptions of their *Eikones* and their stylistic devices.² The *Eikones* of the Elder Philostratus are everything but a rigorous and systematic physical depiction of pictures. The main device used in these pictures is *ekphrasis*, that is, the production of images in the mind.³ But the Elder interweaves this with several other types of discourse which we would not deem as "descriptions": quotes, short asides for exposition about the subject of the picture, historical and geographical remarks. The Elder Philostratus merges into one fictional picture elements borrowed from many authors and elaborates the fiction of a commentary about it, which allows him to display his rhetorical virtuosity and to share his knowledge with his readers.

This explains why, even though the book is about describing pictures, exhaustivity is not the purpose of the descriptions. For instance, in the encounter between Pelops and Poseidon (I, 30), Poseidon is not described at all apart from his gesture (he holds Pelops' hand). This vagueness applies to the composition of the pictures as well.

The Younger Philostratus does not aim at providing the reader with a precise factual view of the composition of the picture. The transitions from one character or detail to another are also marked by vague adjectives such as πλησίον αὐτῶν ("near

² Cf. Fairbanks' Introduction to the Younger's *Eikones* in Fairbanks (1931: 275-280).

³ I use here the word *ekphrasis* as used by the authors of *Progumnasmata* like Ailius Theon, that is, a descriptive discourse aimed at producing vivid images in its audience's minds, as if it were put before their eyes: Webb (2009: 197-200). *Ekphrasis* includes visual but also auditive and other synaesthetic descriptive elements. The Younger Philostratus uses this word to speak about the *Eikones* written by his elder: see his *Eikones*, proem, 2, and Webb (2009: 2). See also Webb (2009: 187-190) on the Elder's *Eikones*.

them [Pelops' horses]”) to situate Hippodameia, or ὁ δ' οὐκ ἄποθεν ὁ Οἰνόμαος (“Oinomaos is not far”); the ghosts are only known to be ὑπεριπτάμενα (“flying over”) the place. However, the reader is plunged much more constantly into the scene itself, for the commentary elements are rare. The picture of Pelops' race includes only one quote from the *Iliad* in the beginning to characterize Pelops. The narrator's presence is much more discreet, for apart from Πέλοψ οἶμαι he does not reveal himself at all. The remark about the habits of the sea-horses is the only expression formulating a general thought on the basis of the picture. The narratee's presence is just as rarely explicit: though the Younger Philostratus, like the Elder, stages a visit in a gallery in the company of a young boy as a fictional setting for his descriptions, nothing in this one ever makes clear that he is speaking to someone, except in the transition τοιούτοις ἀκροθινίοις [...] ἃ δὴ ὄρας (“such spoils as you do see”) and then he immediately shifts back to description.

As a result, the statements which do not feed the immediate visual description massively consist in elements of exposition about what is going on in the scene. They identify the characters, use their features to deduce their feelings and thoughts⁴, explain what happened before the moment we see, what is at stake now and what is going to happen. The mixture is between *ekphrasis* and *diegesis*, description and narration, but *ekphrasis* dominates, for the bits of exposition are interwoven with the description and sometimes used as transitions to a new part of it, as is the case with the short characterization of Oinomaos as taking pride in the spoils of the suitors, which are immediately added to the picture itself.

By using this device, unlike the Elder whose scholarly commentary constantly brought back to mind the artificial nature of the picture, the Younger Philostratus

⁴ The ability of painting to give access to human nature through the representation of expressions and attitudes is of particular interest to the Younger Philostratus: Proemium, 3, and M. Pugliara's commentary in Ghedini (2004: 7-16).

blurs the frontier between paintings and reality: he wants his readers not to admire a picture as the work of a painter, but to imagine a truly lively scene in their minds just as if they had real persons and animals before their eyes. In this, his devices are closer to those of the *ekphrasis* in the modern sense of the word, that is, descriptions of works of art bringing life to their subjects.

He also cares more about the relationship between what fixed moment in time a painting represents and the general plot that is hinted at through this precise moment. The painters themselves had to solve similar problems in order to paint “readable” scenes on pictures or vases. But an author can provide more information about the plot and characters, and the Younger, contrary to his predecessor, builds a plot as much as possible. The author also has to devise an order in which to describe successively the parts of the picture: by ending his description with the most ominous elements, the Younger Philostratus creates suspense, something the Elder does not care much about.

II. Visual inspirations

If we now turn to the respective relationships between the authors of the two series of *Eikones* and visual arts, there is once more a striking difference between the Elder and the Younger Philostrati. Both describe fictional pictures. But the Elder does not even directly borrow his subjects from real paintings. One of his pictures (I, 30) is inspired by Pindar. The other (I, 17) shows a unique mixture of details which I did not find anywhere in the visual arts, neither Greek nor Roman.⁵ His inspirations for these details seem more literary than iconographical. The Younger Philostratus’

⁵ Cf. my general study of the Greek and Roman iconography of Pelops and Hippodameia in my PhD: Cuvelier (2012 : 60-228).

scene, on the contrary, seems to have been more directly influenced by real-world representations of Pelops' race.

The race just about to start has been a moment regularly represented in Greek art. Its first known representation is the east pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, which was completed in 456 BC; but Oinomaos is not sacrificing in this scene. During the following century, a few Greek vases from Italy show the scene with the two chariots and Oinomaos sacrificing while Pelops is already ready to start.⁶ A direct inspiration taken from these works would be a fragile hypothesis, as they predate the Younger's *Eikones* by something like six centuries. And this peculiar choice of moment by painters or sculptors is not attested in Pelops' iconography during the Younger's time, so we do not know precisely how the painters or sculptors showed the chariot race on the works the author did see. It is probable, though, that the Younger Philostratus knew at least about the pediment of the temple of Zeus in Olympia, a sanctuary in which the panhellenic games and the cult of Pelops were still active during his lifetime. The presence of one or several Eros in scenes of the race is well-attested, but they don't play an active role in the sabotage.⁷

An important detail in the Younger's *ekphrasis* also reminds the reader of the visual arts: the heads of the suitors appear on several Greek vases, on scenes that sometimes show not the race itself, but the encounter between Pelops and Oinomaos (Hippodameia and Myrtilos being present too).⁸ On these scenes, the macabre gaze of the heads upon the racers contributes to the dramatic tension in the image.

⁶ The oldest is the 380-370 BC red-figured Attic bell-shaped crater by the Oinomaos painter, Naples, National Museum, H2200. *LIMC* Hippodameia I 10*. Four four-century vases from Italy also show Oinomaos sacrificing.

⁷ Concerning this detail, see Isabella Colpo's remarks in Ghedini (2004 : 102-103).

⁸ Cf. the red-figured Apulian amphora from Ruvo (circa 360 BC), London, British Museum, F331. *LIMC* Hippodameia I 12*.

This detail is also attested in times much closer to the Younger Philostratus' lifetime. During the 2nd century AD it appears on the lid of a Roman sarcophagus from the Via Prenestina, at some time between 150 and 170 or 180 AD.⁹ The scene depicts the death of Oinomaos after his chariot breaks during the race, and, on the left, the heads of three suitors are sculpted on the top of the walls of Oinomaos' house. During the Philostrati's time, it appears on a Roman sarcophagus from Campania that dates from 280-290 AD:¹⁰ the first scene, on the left, shows either Pelops or one of his Lydian companions (wearing Phrygian caps) looking at two heads suspended near the entrance of Oinomaos' house. So this detail was still present in the iconographical traditions during or shortly after the Younger Philostratus' period of activity, and it is probable that he saw some of these works or, maybe, others using similar details.

III. Strange singing suitors' ghosts

We can now better understand the Younger Philostratus' sources and originality in his handling of his subject, and more precisely of the supernatural elements in it. While his predecessor was mainly interested in the love affairs and focused on the agreeable aspects of the episode, the Younger Philostratus has a darker vision of it. While the Elder shows the race as a victory of love, the Younger keeps the ambiguity attached to the episode at least since Attic tragedies, where the deaths of Oinomaos then Myrtilos were mentioned by Sophocles and Euripides among the symptoms (or even causes) of the fatality leading the Pelopids to their end.¹¹ He makes room for the hatred between the protagonists and for the spooky appearance of the suitors'

⁹ Rome, National Museum, 108407; Ghedini *et alii* (2004 : 103, fig. 36); *LIMC* Oinomaos 35*.

¹⁰ Naples, National Museum, n°6711. *LIMC* Hippodameia I 37*.

¹¹ Cf. Sophocles, *Electra*, 505-515, and Euripides, *Orestes*, 988-994, for the death of Myrtilos.

heads, to which he adds their ghosts. These two details may reveal other influences at work in the Younger's writing as well as convey his personal vision of the episode.

The heads of the dead suitors are described in morbid, if partly implicit, detail: "these heads which have been suspended one after another from the gateway, and the time which has elapsed since each of the men perished has given them each a distinctive appearance" (κεφαλὰς ταύτας τῶν προπυλαίων ἀνημμένην ἐκάστην, καὶ σχῆμα δέδωκεν ὁ χρόνος ἴδιον, ὃν ἕκαστος ἀπώλετο σφῶν). This is found nowhere among Greek authors. My hypothesis is that, here too, the Younger Philostratus may have been influenced not only by Greek but also by Roman sources. Roman authors, poets and drama writers show a strikingly different way of handling death and the supernatural in Pelops' race compared with their Greek-speaking predecessors, in that they more easily focus on dead bodies, wounds and bloody spectacles. This is easily seen in Seneca's tragedy *Thyestes* and in Statius' epic the *Thebaid*, in which the ghosts of Pelops and Oinomaos appear in the form of bloody corpses in ghostly form.¹² If not a direct inspiration, at least a more general Roman gusto for gore might have influenced the Younger Philostratus. But even if this is so, the influence does not result in plain imitation, for there are no explicit details (no explicit word for blood, bones or flesh), only a macabre suggestion of the rotting of the heads. In this respect, the Younger Philostratus holds an intermediate position between most of the Greek and Roman authors.

This is also the only known representation of the suitors' ghosts (εἶδωλα). They hover over the scene, watching the protagonists, without being seen themselves, and are used as a kind of tragic choir. They add auditive synaesthesia to the picture as they lament (ὀλοφύρεται, 4.) over their past deaths, and, by singing (ἐφύμνοῦντα), they provide information about what is at stake in the coming race.

¹² Seneca, *Thyestes*, 641-682 (morbid house of the Pelopids); Statius, *Thebaid*, IV, 586-592; VII, 415-416 (Pelops' and Oinomaos' ghosts).

But the ghosts also modify the symbolic meaning of the presence of the heads. On vases or sarcophagi, the heads appear as an angst-inspiring sight for Pelops, as he becomes conscious of the death that awaits him if he loses the race. On Greek vases, the Fury who sometimes watches or attacks Oinomaos' chariot appears most often without any link with the suitors' heads, so the only supernatural power seeking revenge is not related to them. But in this text, the central cause that drives Fate onwards is the ἀλάστωρ of the dead suitors who demand revenge against Oinomaos. And Pelops promised Hippodameia that she would be free of the ἀλάστωρ. The presence of the dead suitors is then a good thing for Pelops, as he benefits not only from the help of a god, Poseidon, and the young maid herself, but also of all his unfortunate predecessors. The apparent motivation for showing of the heads – a display of power from Oinomaos – is reversed, as it shows that many supernatural powers have interest in seeing him at last vanquished by a new suitor.

This is an evidence of the very different vision of the race devised here by the Younger Philostratus. His text remains deeply rooted in the world of rhetorics, but he pays attention to the fluidity of the transition between visual elements, auditive elements and everything that pertains to exposition and narration. His writing takes inspiration not only from his predecessor's *Eikones*, but also more directly from visual arts, directly or indirectly using elements from the Greek and Roman iconography of Pelops while giving them a different meaning in his *ekphrasis*. Far from exhausting all the possibilities of analysis, this paper hopes to have shown the interest of studying the second *Eikones* with the help of both literary studies and art history.

P. CUVELIER
ATER in the University Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense
pierre.cuvelier@normalesup.org

Bibliography

Editions

Boudot, A., and Lissarrague, F. (2004). *Philostrate, La Galerie de tableaux*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

Fairbanks, A. (1931). *Philostratus the Elder, Philostratus the Younger Imagines; Callistratus, Descriptions*. London: Loeb Classical Library.

Ghedini, F., I. Colpo and M. Novello, eds. (2004). *Le "Immagini" di Filostrato Minore: la prospettiva dello storico dell'arte*, con la collaborazione di Elisa Avezzù. Roma: Quasar.

Kayser, C. L. (1871). *Flavii Philostrati opera*, vol. 2. Leipzig, Teubner, (repr. Hildesheim, Olms, 1964).

Other studies

Cuvelier, Pierre (2012). *Le Mythe de Pélops et d'Hippodamie en Grèce ancienne: cultes, images, discours*, PhD thesis, Université de Poitiers.

LIMC. Reverdin, O. (dir., 1981-1999). *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Zürich–Munich: Artemis Verlag.

Webb, R. (2009). *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*. Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate.