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The Clothes Make the Man: Spectacle and Narrative in the Life of Pyrrhus

In the most likely fragmentary essay entitled *To an Uneducated Ruler*, Plutarch describes the foolish ruler as an unskilled sculptor. 'They think their colossal figures look large and imposing if they are modeled with their feet apart, and their muscles tense, and their mouths wide open' (Plut. TUR 2.1). He continues, explaining that these kings counterfeit harshness and severity for the dignity of kingship, that there is a distinct disparity between the outside appearance, like a heroic looking colossus, and the interior, with is, in the same manner as these statues, full of lead, clay, and other such base materials. Such rulers, instead of imitating the power and majesty of the gods, i.e. taking up the scepter, trident or lightning bolt as exterior symbols of power, should cultivate the interior qualities of wisdom and intelligence in their efforts to elevate themselves to the divine.

Among the lives, the dichotomy between appearance and substance is particularly conspicuous in the *Life of Pyrrhus*, the paradigmatic uneducated ruler. The biography opens up, after an account of the miraculous survival of the infant Pyrrhus, with a description of the grotesque king. 'Pyrrhus, in aspect of his appearance had more terror than the majesty of kingship. He had few teeth, and his upper jaw was all one bone, with the place of teeth being marked by slight depressions' (Plut. Pyr. 3.4). Plutarch signals to his readers the importance that appearance will play within this life by this fearsome description. A tension between the appropriate appearance for a king and that of Pyrrhus is present from the outset, and this disparity is all the more stressed when one considers Plutarch's essay mentioned above.

As Pyrrhus is known for his exceptional appearance, he becomes recognized through specific dress and armor on the battlefield and without these accoutrements loses his force of personality and power as a king and general. During his early attempts to master Macedonia, he becomes unrecognizable without his goat-horned helmet; his soldiers are unable to locate him when he removes it. (Plut. Pyr. 11.11). In his first battle with the Romans, his presence, 'conspicuous immediately for the beauty and splendor of his richly ornate armor' (Plut. Pyr. 16.7), rallies his troops and prevents them from being immediately cowed by the surprisingly unbarbaric Romans. Later in the engagement, Pyrrhus exchanges armor with a companion of his, Megacles. While the exchange of armor ensured Pyrrhus' safety, his troops, without his conspicuous appearance, were nearly routed. As J. M. Mossman has noted, 'the contrast between anonymity and renown is expressed in terms of dress and has an almost ethical connotation' (Mossman 100).

While Mossman discusses appearance in reference to the Plutarch's consistent (and very present) comparison between Pyrrhus and Alexander, I intend in this paper to show that spectacle and appearance help form the dominant narrative structure of the *Life*. Pyrrhus displays appropriate attributes, such as bravery, forethought, consistency, for a king in scenarios, such as battle scenes, where he is visible and conspicuous. In situations where spectacular actions, in the most literal use of the term, are inappropriate or of no use, Pyrrhus' worth as a ruler is significantly lessened. He reverts to tyrannical and despotic behavior, such as the execution of his rival Neoptolemos, his treatment of the Sicilians,

and his behavior before his death with his conflicts at Sparta. In all these instants Pyrrhus shows an inability to succeed in inertia. The consistent comparison to Achilles and Alexander throughout the Life, two semi-divine figures, does not in fact strengthen the royal image and ability of Pyrrhus, but further indicates his inability to rule effectively, since he is imitating the appearance and not substance of these figures, in the same manner the poor ruler, according to Plutarch, attempts to display the power and destructive ability of divinity as opposed to the wisdom.

Bibliography

Mossman, J.M. 1992. 'Plutarch, Pyrrhus, and Alexander', in P.A. Stater (ed.), *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition*. (London). pp. 90-108.