Bacchylides 5 and the theme
of non-recognition on the battlefield

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The myth of Bacchylides' fifth ode recounts an encounter between Heracles and Meleager in the underworld (56–175). In a highly efficient way, Bacchylides manages to use both heroes to illustrate the gnômê οὐ γά[ρ τις] ἐπιχθονίων π[άντ]α γ' εὐδαίμων ἔφυ, 'no mortal on earth is fortunate in all things' (53–5). Meleager recounts his fate himself: he was successful in killing the Calydonian boar but died in the aftermath, during the battle between Aetolians and Curetes over the boar's hide, through the magic of his mother who was angry because in the confusion of that battle he had killed two of her brothers. Heracles is at the height of his heroic career, but his death is adumbrated when Meleager promises him his sister Deianeira as bride who, as the narratees know, will kill her husband through magic. Both *gnômê* and narrative are held up to the ode's *laudandus,* Hieron: he is a model of human success (50, 190), and the dark fates of Meleager and Heracles at first blush stand in contrast to his glorious career, but they should still remind him that he too is subject to the mutability of fortune and the inevitability of death for mortals.[1]

In this paper I will take a closer look at the beginning of the narrative, Heracles' arrival in the underworld and the opening exchange between the two heroes (56–84). The point I will argue is that commentators have failed to notice that Heracles does not know who Meleager is and has to ask for his identity. This theme of non-recognition, which has a Homeric antecedent, prefigures an important moment in the ensuing story of Meleager's death.

The narrator starts his narrative by recounting how Heracles went down to the underworld, in order to fetch Cerberus (63–4):

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1 See Lefkowitz 1969, 64 and 87–90; Goldhill 1983, 79; and Grossardt 2001, 68. Cairns 2010, 226–7 also suggests that the narratees may think of Heracles' initiation and eventual apotheosis and connect this to Hieron.

> ἔνθα δυστάνων βροτῶν
> ψυχὰς ἐδάη παρὰ Κωκυτοῦ ῥεέθροις, ...

There he [Heracles] saw the ghosts of wretched mortals by the waters of the Cocytus, ...[2]

With anaphoric ἔνθα the narrator refers back to 'the house of Persephone', i.e. the underworld (59), and then proceeds to zoom in on one of its rivers, the Cocytus. Three commentators, Lefkowitz, Goldhill, and Cairns, take ἐδάη to mean 'he learnt about' and place much weight on the choice of this verb: Heracles' *katabasis* would involve a process of learning, the hero gradually gaining insight into the mortality of human beings, including his own mortality.[3] I would suggest slightly rephrasing this: when Heracles descends into the underworld he of course already knows that he, like all human beings, is mortal. What he does learn from his descent is what it means to be dead. This starts with his actually seeing dead mortals. Thus, I follow Jebb, Maehler, and Campbell and take ἐδάη to mean 'he saw', with the connotation of acquiring first-hand experience of something.[4]

The verb ἐδάη forms the first in a string of verbs of seeing (cf. μετέπρεπεν, ἴδεν), which signal that Heracles is focalizer. He, naturally, considers the dead 'wretched', just as Odysseus does in *Od*. 11.80, when he addresses Elpenor as ὦ δύστηνε. Heracles' focalization of the dead as 'wretched' prepares us for his outburst of tears after hearing the story of Meleager's death (155–8).

The picture of the ghosts is elaborated in a simile (65–7):

> ..., οἷά τε φύλλ' ἄνεμος
> Ἴδας ἀνὰ μηλοβότους
> πρῶνας ἀργηστὰς δονεῖ.

... like the leaves that the wind swirls on the bright sheep-pasturing headlands of Ida.

Who is the focalizer of this simile? Most commentators connect it with Heracles. The simile recalls the famous Iliadic one: 'As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity' (6.146–9), which opens with οἵη περ φύλλων γενεή and describes the mortality and ephemerality of men. Its evocation here

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2   The text is that of Maehler 1997, and the translation my own, but it is based on those of Campbell 1992 and Cairns 2010.

3   Lefkowitz 1969, 65; Goldhill 1983, 72; Cairns 2010, *ad* 5.63–4 ('But Heracles does not simply see or recognize the ψυχαί: he learns how numerous they are, how their multitude expresses human mortality, and how miserable it is to be mortal.').

4   For this connotation of first-hand experience (after first only knowing in theory or from hearsay), cf. e.g. Hom. *Od*. 3.208 and 4.26–8.

would add to the picture of Heracles learning how the multitude of ghosts expresses human mortality.[5] There is a problem with this interpretation, however. Heracles, of course, does not know the *Iliad*. What he sees is a host of flittering ghosts, and even if this would remind him of leaves being swept by the wind, he cannot think of the Iliadic simile of the leaves nor be reminded of its connotation of mortality. It is more likely that it is the Bacchylides-narrator who expands Heracles' view of the ghosts in an―intertextually loaded―simile.[6] He wants to remind his narratees of the central point of the myth, which had been announced in the *gnômê* preceding it, that 'no mortal on earth is fortunate in all things'. Indeed, the simile of the leaves in the *Iliad* not merely stresses the 'precariousness of the human condition', but it is followed by the story of Bellerophon, another hero who dies unheroically. His fate thus resembles that of Meleager and Heracles. Soon we will see that this Iliadic scene is relevant for Bacchylides' ode for another reason, too.

Heracles' gaze next zooms in on one man among the swarm of ghosts (68–76):

> ταῖσιν δὲ μετέπρεπεν εἴδωλ-
>   ον θρασυμέμνονος ἐγ-
>   χεσπάλου Πορθανίδα·
> τὸν δ' ὡς ἴδεν Ἀλκμή<ν>ιος θαυμαστὸς ἥρως
>   τ[ε]ύχεσι λαμπόμενον,
> νευρὰν ἐπέβασε λιγυκλαγγῆ κορώνας,
>   χαλκεόκρανον δ' ἔπειτ' ἔξ
> εἴλετο ἰὸν ἀναπτύ-
>   ξας φαρέτρας πῶμα·

Among them stood out the ghost of the bold-hearted, spear-brandishing son of Porthaon [Meleager]. And when the son of Alcmene, amazing hero, saw him shining in his armour, he put the shrill-ringing string on his bow-hook, and then opened the lid of his quiver and took out a bronze-headed arrow.

Heracles spots a very martial ghost and reacts with the heroic Pavlovian reaction of stringing his bow and making ready to attack. In my view, this reaction makes clear that Heracles *does not know* that the ghost is Meleager; for if he had recognized Meleager, why would he attack him, a fellow-Greek?[7]

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5   Cf. Lefkowitz 1969, 65–6 ('the inevitability of death'); Goldhill 1983, 72; Maehler 2004, *ad* 5.65–7 ('the precariousness of the human condition'); Cairns 2010, *ad* 5.65–7 ('human mortality and ephemerality').

6   This is a regular Homeric technique, cf. e.g. Hom. *Il.* 22.25–32, where the Homeric narrator expands Priam's focalization of Achilles running fully armed and hence glittering through the Trojan plain with a simile of a dazzling star.

7   We may recall here *Od.* 11.601–27, where the ghost of Heracles himself is described by Odysseus as being very frightful since he holds his bow at the ready and an arrow on the string, yet upon recognizing Odysseus he talks peacefully with him.

Indeed, soon he will ask the man before him who he is (86–8).[8] Commentators so far have either missed this crucial point of Heracles not recognizing Meleager, or have failed to give it its due weight.[9]

I analyse the passage as follows. Heracles sees a 'bold-hearted' man who is brandishing his spear and is clad in shining armour. He does not know who the man is and hence sets out to attack him. His focalization of the unknown man gives, in typical Bacchylidean fashion, full, contextual weight to the epithet ἐγχεσπάλου (which Lefkowitz called 'a merely generalized heroic epithet'[10]).[11] It is also suggested by τ[ε]ύχεσι λαμπόμενον, an expression which in the *Iliad* is twice used to describe frightening heroes that are focalized by other characters (17.214; 20.46). It is, however, the narrator Bacchylides who adds, for the sake of his narratees, that the man is the son of Porthaon, i.e. Meleager. In other words, the narrator intrudes on the focalization of his character, Heracles, in order to add a name, a phenomenon found regularly in Homer too, e.g. in *Iliad* 3.191–2:

> δεύτερον αὖτ' Ὀδυσῆα ἰδὼν ἐρέειν' ὁ γεραιός
> 'εἴπ' ἄγε μοι καὶ τόνδε, φίλον τέκος, ὅς τις ὅδ' ἐστί·'

> Secondly, seeing Odysseus the old man asked:
> 'Come, dear child, tell me also about this man, who he is.'

Priam does not know the identity of the man he is seeing and has to ask Helen for his name, but the narrator informs the narratees that it is Odysseus, in order that they can appreciate Priam's ensuing positive description of this hero.[12]

At this point it may be relevant to ask ourselves *why* commentators

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8 That Heracles does not recognize Meleager is not surprising, since commentators agree that a meeting between the two heroes was no traditional element but most probably an invention of Bacchylides. Also, Meleager is not one of the famous inhabitants of the underworld (though he does feature in Hesiod's *Peirithou Katabasis*, Fr. 280 Merkelbach–West). I owe this reference to Ettore Cingano.

9 Lefkowitz 1969 is not consistent: on pp. 66 and 70–1 she assumes that Heracles knows who he is facing, but on p. 68 she writes 'Heracles' reaction *to the shining figure*' (my italics). Segal 1976, 116 assumes that Heracles recognizes Meleager ('in his reaction to Meleager's shade'). Goldhill 1983, 73 merely writes 'Meleager appears to Herakles'. Only Cairns 2010, 88 notes explicitly 'Heracles does not know Meleager, but Meleager knows him', but does not follow up on this observation. See also below on Heracles' question at 86–8.

10 Lefkowitz 1969, 66.

11 For Bacchylidean epithets having concrete, contextual value, see Segal 1976. The other epithet, θρασυμέμνονος, has a double significance: for Heracles it adds to the frightening view of the martial man he spots, while the narratees may note that this is an epithet commonly used by Homer for Heracles himself, and this may alert them to the affinity in fate between the two heroes, such as the rest of the myth will make clear.

12 See discussion in de Jong [1987] 2004, 104.

have failed to note that Heracles does not recognize Meleager. I think they have been put on the wrong track by the anaphoric pronoun τόν in τὸν δ’ ὡς ἴδεν (71), which picks up (*kata sunesin*) εἴδωλον θρασυμέμνονος ἐγχεσπάλου Πορθανίδα. This suggests that Heracles sees ‘him’, i.e. Meleager. But here we should realize that the pronoun functions on the level of the communication between narrator and narratees. Putting it somewhat exaggeratedly, we should analyse τὸν δ’ ὡς ἴδεν as ‘when he saw him, i.e. the martial ghost whom I, the narrator, just told you, the narratee, was Meleager’. An exact parallel is found in *Iliad* 5.144–78: the narrator recounts how Diomedes kills many Trojans (144–65); he, i.e. Diomedes, is spotted by Aeneas (τὸν δ’ ἴδεν Αἰνείας ἀλαπάζοντα στίχας ἀνδρῶν: 166), who in the ensuing speech exhorts Pandarus to shoot an arrow at the man *whose identity he does not know* (τῷδ’ ἔφες ἀνδρὶ βέλος ... , ὅς τις ὅδε κρατέει: 174–5). The τόν at 166 anaphorically refers back to Diomedes, but the focalizing character Aeneas does not know who ‘him’ is. In the same way, Heracles in Bacchylides 5 sees ‘him’, but does not know who ‘him’ is.

The narrator now switches to Meleager (76–84):

> τῷ δ’ ἐναντία
> ψυχὰ προφάνη Μελεάγρου,
>   καί νιν εὖ εἰδὼς προσεῖπεν·
> ‘υἱὲ Διὸς μεγάλου,
>   στᾶθί τ’ ἐν χώρᾳ, γελανώσας τε θυμὸν
> μὴ ταΰσιον προΐει
>   τραχὺν ἐκ χειρῶν ὀϊστὸν
> ψυχαῖσιν ἔπι φθιμένων·
>   οὔ τοι δέος.’

> But the ghost of Meleager appeared close to him and, knowing him well, addressed him: ‘Son of great Zeus, stay where you are and, making your heart smile, do not in vain shoot a harsh arrow from your hands at the ghosts of dead men. You have nothing to fear.’

As is apparent from my translation, I connect (with Jebb) νιν as object with εὖ εἰδώς,[13] whereas most other commentators prefer to take εὖ εἰδώς absolute, ‘in full knowledge’, ‘in his full experience’. Their analysis ties in with the thesis already referred to above, that Heracles is portrayed in this myth as a learner: during his visit to the underworld he comes to understand what being dead is. Meleager, εὖ εἰδώς, already has this superior form of knowledge: ‘Meleager’s

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13 Lefkowitz 1969, 69 also seems to follow Jebb, paraphrasing the lines as ‘Meleager’s approach, *recognition of Heracles*, use of the patronymic title “son of great Zeus”, and specific request’ (my italics).

knowledge in particular is of the futility of Heracles' action; he does not know that the dead are mere insubstantial shades'.[14] Thus, shooting arrows at ghosts is futile ('in vain'), since they are dead already, and Heracles has 'nothing to fear' because dead ghosts are too insubstantial to kill him.

I agree that Meleager in his speech imparts knowledge to Heracles, but, as in the case of ἐδάη, I think commentators are reading too much into the Greek, here into εὖ εἰδώς. The interpretation I prefer, taking νιν εὖ εἰδώς together as 'knowing him well',[15] signals that Meleager recognizes Heracles, as also transpires from the opening of his speech: 'Son of great Zeus'.[16] To mark his recognition is important, in that it stands in contrast to Heracles, who, as his reaction now makes explicitly clear, does *not* know whom he is facing (84–9):

> θάμβησεν δ' ἄναξ
> Ἀμφιτρυωνιάδας,
> εἶπέν τε· 'τίς ἀθανάτων
> ἢ βροτῶν τοιοῦτον ἔρνος
> θρέψεν ἐν ποίᾳ χθονί;
> τίς δ' ἔκτανεν;'

> And the lord, the son of Amphitryon was amazed, and said: 'What god or mortal nurtured such an offshoot, and in what land? Who killed you?'

Rather than countering Meleager's vocative 'Son of Zeus' with a vocative of his own, Heracles enquires after his interlocutor's identity: 'What god or mortal nurtured such an offshoot?' Commentators have failed to give this question its due weight. Lefkowitz does not discuss it at all, and Goldhill writes that Heracles 'wants to know the nature of Meleager's parentage and birth, not precisely who he is' without explaining why this would be so.[17] Maehler, rightly, calls it a variant of the epic τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν; – the standard question to ask who someone is – but does not consider the fact that the question therefore implies that Heracles, so far, has not recognized Meleager.[18]

When we *do* take the fact that Heracles asks for Meleager's identity

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14 Cairns 2010, *ad* 78; similarly Goldhill 1983, 72 and Maehler 2004, *ad* 78.

15 Maehler 2004, *ad* 78 notes that 'In Homer εἰδώς never refers to a person as object'. But we do find οἶδα +personal object at Hom. *Od.* 6.176–7.

16 This vital point of Meleager's instant recognition of Heracles remains, even when one does not accept the construction νιν εὖ εἰδώς. Why does Meleager immediately recognize Heracles? I would suggest that it is his famous bow which gives away the hero.

17 Lefkowitz 1969; Goldhill 1983, 73.

18 Maehler 2004, *ad* 86–8. He adduces Pind. *Pyth.* 9.33–35 as parallel for a question arising out of amazement and admiration (and we may add: ignorance): there, Apollo comes across a girl wrestling with a lion (whom the narratees know to be the nymph Cyrene), and asks Chiron τίς νιν ἀνθρώπων τέκεν;

into account, we have the following situation at the opening of the myth in Bacchylides: one hero, Heracles, does not recognize his 'opponent' and has to ask who he is, while the other, Meleager, does. We now realize the additional relevance of the Iliadic intertext, the meeting between Glaucus and Diomedes in *Iliad* 6, to which οἷά τε φύλλ' had directed us. There too we have one hero, Diomedes, who, challenging his opponent to fight, first asks him who he is, and then another hero, the Lycian Glaucus, who does know whom he is facing (as is clear from his opening vocative: 'great-hearted son of Tydeus') and explains who he is,[19] which leads to the peaceful conclusion of the meeting.[20] Thus, the Homeric intertext does not merely provide a parallel for the outcome of the meeting between Heracles and Meleager, as Goldhill suggested,[21] but also for the theme of (non-)recognition on the battlefield.

We may now ask ourselves *why* Bacchylides worked this theme into the opening section of his myth. My suggestion is that in so doing he foreshadows an important detail in the ensuing story of Meleager's death. The hero's death is precipitated by the fact that he unintentionally kills two of his own uncles on the battlefield (127–35):

> 'ἔνθ' ἐγὼ πολλοῖς σὺν ἄλλοις
>   Ἴφικλον κατέκτανον
> ἐσθλόν τ' Ἀφάρητα, θοοὺς μάτρωας· οὐ
>   γὰρ καρτερόθυμος Ἄρης
> κρίνει φίλον ἐν πολέμῳ,
>   τυφλὰ δ' ἐκ χειρῶν βέλη
> ψυχαῖς ἔπι δυσμενέων
>   φοιτᾷ θάνατόν τε φέρει
>   τοῖσιν ἂν δαίμων θέλῃ.'

'On that occasion I killed, among many others, Iphiclus and noble Aphares, swift brothers of my mother. For hard-hearted Ares does not distinguish a friend/relative in battle, but blind do the missiles go from one's hands against the souls of one's enemies and bring death to whoever god wants.'

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19 Just like Meleager, Glaucus does not give his name but identifies himself by referring to the name of his father: cf. Hom. *Il.* 6.206 and Bacchyl. 5.97 and 101.
20 The meeting of Glaucus and Diomedes is splendidly analysed by Andersen 1978, 95–110.
21 Goldhill 1983, 72, n. 23.

Commentators are not clear on what exactly happens, and they merely state that Meleager inadvertently kills his uncles.[22] There are, in principle, two possible ways of reading the incident: Meleager aimed at an enemy but hit his uncles instead,[23] or in the *mêlée* of the battle Meleager did not recognize his uncles and, taking them to be enemies, killed them – an instance of what is known in military history as 'friendly fire'. In my view, the phrasing of the *gnômê*, with the verb κρίνειν and the epithet τυφλά for the arrows, favours the second interpretation: in the heat of the fight, with dust rising and men clinging together, it would be difficult 'to distinguish' friend from foe, and spears, metonymically standing for the men who throw them, are 'blind'. Meleager killing his two uncles is a case of 'friendly fire': he failed to recognize them and thus accidentally killed them.

If I am right about this interpretation of lines 127–9, we can understand why Bacchylides shaped the beginning of his myth the way he did: there too we are dealing with the situation of one hero not recognizing another and aiming his bow at him. Thus, Bacchylides has turned it into an anticipatory doublet:[24] the climactic and fatal event of the myth, Meleager killing his two uncles because he does not recognize them (and dying himself as a consequence), is effectively prepared for by a minor and innocent rehearsal at the start, when Heracles, not recognizing Meleager, sets out to 'kill' him.[25] Bacchylides' intertextual play with the Iliadic meeting between Glaucus and Diomedes turns out to be even more brilliant, since that scene, too, deals with the theme of (non-) recognition on the battlefield.

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22 Maehler 1997, *ad* 136 writes 'he has killed his uncles "aus Versehen"'; this becomes in the English version (2004, *ad* 136) 'not intentionally'. He and other commentators adduce Hom. *Od*. 11.537 (ἐπίμιξ δέ τε μαίνεται Ἄρης) and *Il*. 18.309 (ξυνὸς Ἐνυάλιος, καί τε κτανέοντα κατέκτα), but both passages merely express the ideas that war makes many casualties and that one's luck can always change since the man who has killed may soon be killed himself. The situation in Bacchylides 5 is different, however.
23 This is the situation we find in another description of a boar hunt, where Adrastus inadvertently kills the son of Croesus instead of a boar (Hdt. 1.43), and of course it occurs quite often on the Iliadic battlefield (e.g. *Il*. 4.491–2).
24 Such anticipatory doublets are a Homeric device and are found regularly in Bacchylides, e.g. *Ode* 17: Theseus in his self-introduction to Minos briefly recalls how Nereids gave his mother a golden veil at the moment of her marriage to Poseidon (37–8), an event which is replayed at 112–18, when Amphitrite gives him a purple cloak and garland.
25 I thank my audience at the University of Ca'Foscari, Venice, for their helpful comments.

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