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Shedding Misconceptions of Nicander's *Theriaca*

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Nicander has often been criticized for his attempted poetic and pseudoscientific skills used in composing his *Theriaca*¹. One of the issues that arise out of his merging of the scientific with the poetic is that most didactic was usually reserved for works of prose and digressions made in poetic works to instruct the reader/listener on a certain topic, but certainly these digressions did not constitute the entire poem. While the scientific information presented by Nicander may verge more on the side of folklore there is an attempt to convey this 'knowledge' in stylised, virtuoso verse². Through the use of sensational words to describe the species of snakes and their associated *φάρμακα*³, Nicander evokes a conscientious decision to present his didactic material by appealing to the reader's senses. He shows a penchant for expressing sight, taste, smell, and hearing as well as kinesthesia, temperature and pain, as well as the stimulation of sensory receptors situated within the body (throat, stomach, brain, arteries and the like).⁴ Frequently throughout the *Theriaca*, Nicander uses 'colour words' for the various animal and plant species the reader may encounter, but many of these colour words are *hapax legomena*.⁵ This use of sensual detail helps Nicander to establish a scientific description of the natural world while also varying his word choice in his didactic work

¹ Not everyone could understand his language easily, and later his poems were often accompanied by commentaries or simpler summaries (Jacques 1979). Many scholars today such as C. A. Trypanis asserted that, 'Nicander is certainly not an attractive poet. An author, as it seems, of the middle of the second century B.C., he endeavored to reconcile science with poetry and conspicuously failed to achieve either. For poisonous bites and how to cure them, and substances deadly or injurious to man, treated in a fantastic language and style, cannot stimulate the reader of poetry. Nor is his approach to science of much interest to the modern scientist.' (Trypanis 1954: 204).

² Often Nicander is criticised for his scientific 'knowledge' by scholars and quotes such as 'Nicander has again revealed his ignorance of real snakes and their bites' frequently permeate studies of ancient medicine and his use of poetic devices to embellish the symptoms and descriptions of the venomous creatures are misunderstood. (Scarborough 1977: 10).

³ Nicander discusses both the poisons and remedies associated with the animals that he chooses to discuss.

⁴ Sistikou 2012: 203.

⁵ Papadopoulou 2009: 95.

and allows the poet to place himself in the tradition of Homer and Hesiod as well as integrating elements of didactic work usually reserved for prose.⁶

In the proem to the *Theriaca*, Nicander attempting to establish his poem in the same epic/poetic tradition begins:

Ῥεῖα κε τοι μορφάς τε σῖνη τ' ὀλοφώια θηρῶν/ἀπρροιδῆ τύψαντα λύσιν θ'
έτεραλκέα κήδευς,/φίλ' Ἑρμησιάναξ πολέων κυδίστατε παῶν, ἔμπεδα
φωνήσαιμι.

Readily, dear Hermesianax, most honoured of my many kinsmen, and in due order will I expound the forms of savage creatures and their deadly injuries which smite one unforeseen, and the countering remedy for the harm.⁷

With this passage Nicander is able to establish his 'scientific authority' as he is readily able and will in due order present his findings.⁸ While Nicander may not begin with an invocation of the gods as in the Homeric epics, he begins his didacticism with a 'pupil' that he is addressing in Hermesianax, who will then be the recipient of the knowledge that Nicander will expound. Following the precedent set by Hesiod in his *Works and Days* (1-10) in which Hesiod calls for the Muses to tell of Zeus so his brother Perses may know the truth, he juxtaposes the teacher/pupil relationship used by philosophers in their prosaic compositions to establish a foundation for Hellenistic writers to present their didactic poetry. Having established his 'scientific authority', Nicander then appeals to the senses of the reader by attributing a mythological origin for the deadly animals that he will discuss:

⁶ Nicander writes as if the world imposes itself upon man. One observes the world almost as if it were a book. It is a place where we are helpless to influence it in any way. In this way the earth is a hostile and threatening place (Spatafora 2005: 248-256).

⁷ Gow and Scholfield 1997: 29.

⁸ The *Theriaca* attempts to provide a spirited account of how possessing knowledge allows man to counter the dangers of the world even in the presence of serpents and other toxic faunae that would threaten man's survival (Clauss 2006). It is surely a much more positive view of Nicander's work than Spatafora would concede.

*Ἄλλ' ἦτοι κακοεργά φαλάγγια, σύν καί ἀνιγρούς/ ἐρπηστάς ἔκιάς τε καί ἄχθεα
μυρία γαίης/Τιπήνων ἐνέπουσιν ἀφ' αἵματος, εἰ ἐτεόν περ/Ἀσκραῖος μυχάτοιο
Μελισσήεντος ἐπ' ὄχθαις/Ἡσίοδος κατέλεξε παρ' ὕδασι περμησοῖο.*

Now I would have you know, men say that noxious spiders, together with the grievous reptiles and vipers and the earth's countless burdens, are of the Titans' blood – if indeed he spoke the truth, Ascrean Hesiod on the steeps of secluded Melisseeis by the waters of Permessus.⁹

Nicander lets the reader know that his poem will be instructional within the first few lines, but follows with a sensational tale to allow the reader to understand that his work is a poem at its core. He also wants to emphasise the wondrous and terrifying elements of nature that he will be observing through science. By evoking the dread and danger of the Titanomachy as displayed in the *Theogony* (617-728),¹⁰ these verses create an atmosphere of the sublime for the reader.¹¹ Using phrases such as *σῖνη τ' ὀλοφώια θηρῶν and ἀνιγρούς ἐρπηστάς*, Nicander is evoking this deadly, dangerous natural world that he will convey to the reader and try to tame through his poetry. He presents the struggle that many have debated over in his poems, namely, the battle between representing the scientific with the supernatural.¹² A delicate balance is struck between the fostering of critical thinking and appealing to the senses. Analogies presented through myth and sensory descriptions help to enhance the comprehension of the scientific material to render the information in a literary manner. For example in the following passage, Nicander begins his digression on the *διψάς* with a strict observation of the appearance of the snake before providing a sensory experience of the misfortunes that one bitten by this creature would endure through touch and taste.

*Ναί μὴν διψάδος εἶδος ὁμώσεται αἰέν ἐχίδνη/παιροτέρη, θανάτου δέ
θωώτερος ἴξεται αἴσα/οἴσιν ἐνισκίμψη βλοσυρόν δάκος. ἦτοι ἀραιή/αἰέν*

⁹ Gow and Scholfield 1997: 29.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Hesiod is not considered the source of this myth by scholars. It is said the origin belongs to Akousilaos. Nicander may mean to recall high poetry rather than being scientifically accurate. The genealogy Nicander uses for the serpents is similar to that in Aesch. *Suppl.* 264-267 (Jacques 2002 77-78).

¹¹ Sistakou 2012: 199.

¹² Sistakou 2012: 200.

*ὑποζοφέσσα μελαίνεται ἀκρόθεν οὐρή./δάχματι δ' ἐμφλέγεται κραδίη
πρόπαν, ἀμφί δέ καύσω/χείλε' ὑπ' ἀζαλέης/αὐαίνεται ἄβροχα δίψης.*

Again, the form of the dipsas will always resemble that of a small viper; yet death will come quicker to those whom this grim snake assails. Its thin tail, darkish throughout, grows blacker from the end forward. From its bite the heart is inflamed utterly, and in the fever the dry lips shrivel with parching thirst.¹³

Through the visual description of the *διψάς* the reader can picture the snake in his/her head while perceptibly understanding the parching thirst that accompanies its bite. The use of the verb *ἐμφλέγεται* before the noun *καύσω* and the adjectives *ἀζαλέης*, and *ἄβροχα* ignites the senses for the reader with the abundance of similes for the thirst one experiences having been bitten. For each snake encountered in the *Theriaca*, the reader is given a visual description of the snake before his/her senses are overwhelmed with the agony that follows for one bitten by this serpent.¹⁴ One example that stands out in particular is Nicander's description of the *χέλυδρος*:

*αἰθαλόεις μὲν νῶτα, κάρη γε μὲν ἀρπεδῆς αὐτῶς/ὔδρω εἰσκόμενος. τό δ'
ἀπό χροός ἐχθρόν ἄηται/οἶον ὅτε πλαδῶντα περὶ σκύλα καὶ δέρε'
ἵππων/γναπτόμενοι μυδῶσιν ὑπ' ἀρβήλοισι λάθαργοι./ἦτοι ὅταν κώληπας
ἢ ἐν ποδός ἴχνηι τύψη,/χρωτός ἄπο πνιγέσσης κεδαιομένη φέρετ'
ὁδμή./τοῦ δ' ἦτοι περὶ τύμμα μέλαν κορθύεται οἶδος,/ἐν δὲ νόον πεδῶσιν
ἀλυσθαίνοντος ἀνιᾶι/ἐχθόμεναι, χροίη δὲ μόγῳ αὐαίνεται ἀνδρός./ρίνοι δὲ
πλαδῶσιν ἐπὶ χροί, τοῖα μιν ἰός/ὄξυς αἰεὶ νεμέθων ἐπιβόσκειται. ἀμφί καὶ
ἀχλύς/ᾔσσε κατακρύπτουσα κακοσταθέοντα δαμάζει./οἶ δὲ τε μηκάζουσι
περιπνιγέες τε πέλονται,/οὔρα δ' ἀπέστυπται. τοτέ δ' ἔμπαλιν
ὑπνῶντες/ρέγκουσιν, λυγμοῖσι*

¹³ Gow and Scholfield 1997: 51.

¹⁴ This passage is intentionally macabre and possesses a voyeuristic nature. There is a bizarre gratification in the observation of human suffering in these dire situations. Nicander shows little concern for the victim, but rather describes his/her condition in vivid and graphic detail while clearly being intrigued with an emotional detachment Toohey 1996: 65.

θαμέσσιν, / ἢ ἀπερευγόμενοι ἔμετον χολοειδέα δειρήσ, / ἄλλοτε δ' αἱματόεντα. κακή δ' ἐπιδίψιος ἄτη/ἔσχατιή μογέουσι τρόμον κατεχεύατο γυίοις.

Its back is of a smoky hue, but in the flatness of its head it resembles the Hydrus, and from its skin exhales a hateful air, as when about the damp horse-skins and hides the scraps of leather ooze beneath the paring of the tanner's knives. And truly, when it strikes the hollows of the knee or on the sole of the foot, a stifling smell is diffused from the flesh; also there rises up a dark swelling about the victim's wound; moreover he is distraught, hateful distress shackles his mind, and his body is parched with suffering, His skin hangs loose about him, so consuming is the fierce poison which feeds ever upon him, and an encircling mist, veiling his eyes, overcomes him in his sore affliction. Some men scream and choke, and their urine is stopped; or again they fall asleep and snore, oppressed with frequent retchings, or from their throat discharging a bilious or sometimes a bloody vomit; and last of all a dreadful plague of thirst sheds a trembling upon their afflicted limbs.¹⁵

Here, Nicander as an intrepid observer of nature provides a visual description of the *χέλυδρος* with a scientific obsessiveness to implant the imagery he is witnessing into the minds of his readers. After presenting his visual description, one-by-one Nicander assails the senses with details surrounding the symptoms of one having been bitten by the reptile. The reader might scrunch up his/her nose as they read *τό δ' ἀπό χροός ἐχθρόν ἄηται οἷον ὅτε πλαδῶντα περί σκύλα καί δέρε' ἵππων/γναπτόμενοι μυδῶσιν ὑπ' ἀρβήλοισι λάθαργοι*. The rich description of the smell that emanates from the snake as that of the odor that is released from horse's skin and leather oozing out while being worked on with a tanner's knife causes the reader to grimace taking a deep swallow. Nicander does not permit the reader to find some relief as he continues to describe the wound that results from the strike of the snake. One can feel the dark swelling of the infected area and sense the panic that would seize the mind and cause a distortion of one's surroundings. As with most of the snakes Nicander describes, the reader is told: *δ' ἐπιδίψιος τη/ἔσχατιή μογέουσι τρόμον κατεχεύατο γυίοις*. Once again a thirst plagues the victim that cannot be quenched. As the unfortunate victim is beset with a feverish countenance seeking a remedy for his/her ailment, the reader feels his/her lips crack

¹⁵ Gow and Scholfield 1997: 57.

and laments the condition of the piteous man/woman. With taste, touch, smell, and sight besieged by Nicander's stark description of the *χέλυδρος*, the author then proceeds to provide an auditory element to his description to complete his siege of the senses. Nicander espouses the sounds that emerge from the victim from the screams and convulsive choking back of the waves of nausea that ransack the bowels to the snores and bloody bile retched forth. The amount of sensory detail contained in this one example is indicative of how Nicander treats each discourse on the varied snakes, spiders, and other venomous creatures that inhabit the ancient world.

The use of colour vocabulary in the *Theriaca* strongly serves to add an artistic quality as well as an attempt to describe accurately the wild life he discusses therefore denoting a two-fold purpose to his selection of lexicon. Nicander uses these "colour words" for a multifaceted purpose allowing for them to convey multiple roles in his didactic work. They create a distinction among and assist in providing a correct visual description of the toxic faunae.¹⁶ They also allow for an intertextuality where Nicander is able to draw literary allusions to the Homeric epics through his 'colour word' choice and place his *Theriaca* in line as a descendant of the famous poetic works and lastly he is able to use them as a sensationalistic tool to amaze his readers.¹⁷ Fifty seven out of one hundred and thirty of these 'colour words' appear in the section of the *Theriaca* concerning snakes and twenty four of them are applied particularly to the symptoms of the snake bites.¹⁸ Culling through the *Theriaca*, the 'colour words' can best be categorized as follows: white/grey, black/dark, red/crimson/purple, blue, and green/yellow.¹⁹

In the category of white/grey 'colour words' used by Nicander, many draw an intertextual relationship hearkening back to Homer's works. The use of the word *νιφόεις* is used throughout the *Theriaca* in lines 145, 291, 440, 502, and 958. It is a Homeric adjective usually associated with a snowy or snowcapped mountain (*Iliad* 1.420,

¹⁶ Interestingly enough, color is one of the criteria for classifying flora and faunae today. (Touwaide 1999: 239).

¹⁷ Papadopoulou 2009: 98.

¹⁸ Papadopoulou 2009: 99.

¹⁹ Maria Papadopoulou gives many more examples than the ones presented here and chooses different categorisations of the colors used in the poem. For a full rendering of all the uses of "colour words" in the *Theriaca* and Nicander's other surviving work, the *Alexipharmaca* cf. Papadopoulou (2009).

13.754,18.186).²⁰ In all instances except lines 291 and 881, Nicander uses *νιφόεις* while referring to a snow context retaining its original meaning and drawing allusions with Homer. In line 291 though, Nicander extends its meaning by using it to describe the horns of the *δάκεος αίμορρόου* or blood-letting snake. The horns of the blood-letting snake are not snowy, but rather are given a colourised description of being snow-white while also alluding back to the Homeric adjective whence it originated. Another word *πολιός* is used by Nicander to describe wine in line 582 of the *Theriaca*. Normally wine would not be described as grey but as white if one were trying to describe the actual colour of the wine. Usually used as an epithet to describe grey hair thereby denoting an old person, this word is used here for the first time to describe old wine through the following semantic transition. *Πολιός* = grey (hair) = grey (person) = old (person) = old (wine). Old wine is what Nicander wishes to convey for its antivenom effect as new wine would not demonstrate the same healing results.²¹

The term *μέλας* is used three times to refer to the symptoms suffered from the infectious bite or sting most likely due to its association with death. It appears twice in reference to the *σηπεδών* or serpedon where the reader is told *νέμεται δὲ μέλας ὀλοφώϊος ἰός πᾶν δέμας* and then a few lines later *βλεφάρων δὲ μέλαιν' ἐξέφθιτο λάχνη*. The other usage appears in the passage quoted earlier in the description of the wound's dark swelling from the strike of the *χέλυδρος*. Nicander frequently will add the suffix – *όεις* to his 'color words' to create a *hapax legomenon* for a poetic, descriptive flair.²² For example, the word *ζοφόεις* derived from the Homeric noun, *ζόφος* is used by Nicander and is not the only *hapax legomenon* that Nicander construes from this noun. *ζοφοείδελος* and *ὑποζοφόω* are compounds that are *hapax legomena* that Nicander constructs for his poem. *ζοφερός* is used twice to describe the flesh of the victim bitten by the basilisk and as an adjectival modifier for night drawing literary allusions to its usage in the works of Hesiod (*Theogony* 814) and Apollonius Rhodius (3.1265).²³

²⁰ These are just a few of the references to the usage of the word *νιφόεις* used in the *Iliad*. It frequently appears as an epithet for Olympus and its snowy peaks.

²¹ Papadopoulou 2009: 98.

²² Papadopoulou 2009: 102.

²³ Papadopoulou 2009: 102.

The term *φοινός* and its many derivatives appear throughout the *Theriaca* as well and convey a double meaning to its usage. While it can be defined as red or crimson it also holds connotations of murder, slaughter, and may be translated a blood-red allowing for both its specificity as a ‘colour word’ and its more sinister implication. Derivatives of this root are scattered throughout the text such as *φοινήεις* with the intended meaning of deadly when describing the *άσπίς* or asp in line 158 of the *Theriaca*. Certainly the asp is not blood-red, but the deep crimson colour is associated with blood that would be drawn from a slaughter and is thus used to draw out that association when discussing the dangerous serpent from Egypt. The use of the word *πορφύρεος* draws comparisons to its usage in Homer (*Iliad* 1.482 and *Odyssey* 2.428)²⁴ and Nicander once again adds the suffix – *όεις* to *πορφυρ* to create a Nicandrian ‘colour word’ to flavor his descriptions. *κυάνεος* and *κύανος* contain Homeric and Hesiodic resonances whether it is Hesiod’s use as a dark-blue description of a serpent or the dark clouds in Homer or even cyanus or the blue used to adorn metal works in the Heroic age. Nicander uses *κυάνεον* to describe the colour of a spider in line 729 of the *Theriaca*. Another shade of a deep, rich violet-tinged blue is emphasized with the use of *ιοειδής* in line 243 where the reader is told that the wound from the *κωκυτός* emits a *ιοειδέα λοιγόν* or a dark blue poison. *Λοιγόν* immediately brings Homer to mind as ruin, plague, and destruction are frequently presented in the *Iliad*, especially in Book I where *λοιγόν* immediately calls to mind the plague of arrows rained down upon the Achaeans by the god Apollo.

χλοάω is used by Nicander when describing the greenish hue around the infected area from the bite of the *κωκυτός*. *Χλωρηίς* is also used as a descriptive modifier similar to its appearance in the *Odyssey* (19.512-534) describing a nightingale. The word choice of *ξανθός* to describe the *βασιλεύς έρπηστών* or king of snakes draws a pause to consider the connotations that Nicander wishes to convey. *Ξανθός* which is usually reserved for describing blonde or golden hair is in this case used to describe the skin of the basilisk, king of the snakes. It is not just Nicander that uses *ξανθός* to describe the basilisk.

²⁴ Also used in many Hellenistic authors’ works such as Apollonius Rhodius (1.438), Moschus (2), and Theocritus (2.122).

Galen (12.249), Philumenus (CMG 6.2.2), Paulus Aegineta (5), and Aetius Amidenus (13) all use some derivative of this word as well when describing the snake. They may all be drawing their information though from Nicander as Galen tell us in his *De Simplicium Medicamentorum* (12.250.14) that he has never actually seen the snake and does not know whether it is in fact dangerous or not. Using a word normally reserved for such iconic figures as Helen and Achilles and the gods to describe the basilisk allows Nicander to describe the skin tone of the king of snakes while also drawing comparisons to its role in the serpentine world. As Nicander tells us:

τεκμαίρευ δ' ὀλίγον μὲν ἀτάρ προφερέστατον ἄλλων ἐρπηστῶν βασιλῆα.

Consider too the King of Snakes, small indeed yet far excelling all others.²⁵

The basilisk is suggested to be superior to the other snakes and therefore whether it truly did give off a golden hue is subject to debate, but there is no mistaking Nicander using a poetic license to suggest it contained an almost royal nature when compared to other serpents.

The use of these 'colour words' with the sensory descriptions that Nicander uses in his *Theriaca* support Nicander's quest to present his information in an authoritative, didactic manner while sensationalising his text with sensory descriptive elements to establish his place in the collective poetic tradition. His word choices and associated usages show his attempts of establishing his work in the intertextuality of the Homeric and lyric tradition while also attempting to portray himself as an authority on the subject of toxicology and the natural world. This is all done in an attempt to create a balance between innovation and allusion as well as poetry and science in corresponding with the aesthetics of the Hellenistic literary tradition. It has even been suggested that the original text may have contained drawings of the associated faunae to parallel with the descriptions.²⁶ Nicander must have felt that the combination of prose and poetic

²⁵ Gow and Scholfield 1997: 55.

²⁶ It is possible that painted drawings may have accompanied the text as it was customary for prose texts during this time were often illustrated and there are traces of illustrations apparent on the Medieval manuscript Parisinus Suppl. 247 (Gow and Scholfield 1997: 222-223).

elements into one work would justify his inclusion in the textual tradition of lyric. The inclusions of these elements that have been discussed in this paper demonstrate his desire to be remembered foremost as a poet. This is evinced by the last line of the *Theriaca* in which he uses his authoritative voice to articulate to the reader his ultimate wish.

*Καί κεν Ὀμηρείοιο καί εἰσέτι Νικάνδροιο/μνηστὶν ἔχοις, τὸν ἔθρεψε Κλάρου
νιφόεσσα πολίχνη.*

So now you will treasure ever the memory of the Homeric Nicander, whom the snow-white town of Clarus nurtured.²⁷

Nicander desires to be remembered as the Homeric Nicander and just as he has presented his didactic treatise with an authoritative tone, he does not beseech the reader to remember him, but states matter-of-factly that after having read his work, the reader will treasure the memory of the Homeric Nicander. His work has survived to this day and continues to be read, so it appears that Nicander's work has struck a tone with readers and his inclusion into the poetic tradition of Homer is warranted. The *Theriaca* is a difficult work to categorize into the subdivisions of lyric poetry, but just as with the other Hellenistic poets, Nicander is experimenting with the blending of different genres and creates something truly unique that transcends the basic classifications of poetry.

²⁷ Gow and Scholfield 1997: 93.

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