

WHAT SHOULD ONE FEAR IN A GRAVE?
(PS.-APOLLODORUS III 3, 4)

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Pseudo-Apollodorus relates the story of the seer Polyidus who, after having found the corpse of Minos' son Glaucus, was shut up in the dead boy's grave¹ by the king, who demanded his son alive, not dead. While lying there, he saw a snake creeping up to Glaucus' body. He killed the reptile, but after a while another snake appeared. Upon seeing the first one dead, it brought an herb in its mouth and revived its companion with it. Polyidus thereupon brought Glaucus to life by means of the same herb². Let us concentrate on the sentence describing Polyidus' reaction to the arrival of the first serpent. In the manuscripts, it has the following shape: τοῦτον βαλὼν λίθῳ ἀπέκτεινε, δείσας μὴ ἂν αὐτὸς τελευτήσῃ, εἰ τούτῳ [or τοῦτο] συμπάθῃ.

The verb συμπάσχειν ('to meet the same fate') seems at first sight to provide an ideal description of what Polyidus feared in the grave even before the snake's visit: he was afraid that lying there together with the dead body he would soon himself become a cadaver. Such an understanding of the sentence can be seen in Tzetzes' version of the myth, which is probably based on the same text of Pseudo-Apollodorus as that appearing in our manuscripts. According to the Byzantine scholar, Polyidus – evidently unable to bear the prospect of a slow death – threw a stone at the serpent in order to enrage it and provoke it to bite him, but accidentally killed it³. Of course, this interpretation is hard to accept.

¹ To be precise, Pseudo-Apollodorus does not mention a grave. He says only that Polyidus was shut up with the body (ἀπεκλείσθη σὺν τῷ νεκρῷ). A sepulchre is mentioned by Hyg. *Fab.* 136 in his version of the myth. MUELLNER 1998: 12 suspects that Pseudo-Apollodorus was thinking about the storage room where the boy killed himself falling into a honey jar. The difference is not so important, for that room would have become the boy's virtual grave.

² Ps.-Apollod. III 3, 3–5. The myth was the subject of plays of the three great tragedians; see especially Soph. Μάντεις ἢ Πολύδος, fr. 399 RADT: ὁ πρόσθεν ἐλθὼν ἦν ἀραιός μοι νέκυς.

³ Tz. ad Lyc. 811 (quoted by RADT 1977: 339): ιδών δὲ δράκοντα ἐπὶ τὸν νεκρὸν ἐρχόμενον, θέλων ἀγριῶσαι τὸν δράκοντα, ὅπως ἀναιρεθῇ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ, βαλὼν τυχαίως ἀνεῖλεν αὐτόν.

The notion of provoking the serpent is absent from the text. Moreover, Tzetzes seems here to ascribe to the word *αὐτός* a peculiar meaning: ‘all by himself, with no help from outside’. Though the pronoun is used sometimes in a similar sense⁴, here such an interpretation would be far fetched.

Straining the meaning of *συμπάσχειν*, one could claim that it might refer to being bitten by the serpent: Polyidus sees that it is going to bite the corpse and fears that very soon he himself (now *αὐτός* fits better the context) will feel its bite.

These interpretations have a fundamental flaw in common. If we accept either of them, the snake’s approach to the dead body becomes needless from the point of view of the economy of the story. In Tzetzes’ version it is enough for the serpent just to enter the grave to become a possible instrument of suicide. In the other version, it would be much simpler if it attacked Polyidus.

These considerations – as well as the grammatical necessity to change the subjunctive after *εἰ* to an optative – probably led BEKKER to propose the excellent emendation of the last clause: *εἴ τι τὸ σῶμα πάθοι*.

This part of the sentence can be regarded as healed, but there are still some problems with the words preceding it. The first difficulty is of a grammatical nature. The particle *ἄν* seems out of place with *μή* and a subjunctive in an object clause after a verb of fearing, even if that clause is followed by a conditional one⁵. This problem was also noticed by BEKKER, who tried to solve it by changing *ἄν* into *καν*. The latter form, though originally a contraction of *καὶ ἄν* or *καὶ εἶναι*, in later Greek becomes just a particle meaning ‘even’⁶.

Nevertheless, the sense still seems strange. FRAZER translates the sentence with BEKKER’s emendations: “He threw a stone and killed it, fearing to be killed himself if any harm befell the body”⁷. This would mean that Polyidus was foreseeing some kind of regular supervision of the grave with inspection of Glaucus’ body. Moreover, in this version the seer becomes the guardian of the corpse, responsible for its state.

The horror of Polyidus’ situation, however, consists in something different. He is going to stay in the grave forever, unless he finds a way to bring Glaucus back to life. Such a happy event, by itself very improbable, would be made impossible if the body were harmed. It seems that the seer’s faint hopes are founded on the way the boy died: he drowned in a jar full of honey, and honey was used sometimes in the Greek world to preserve bodies⁸. Now the special condition

⁴ Cf. LSJ s.v., I 3: ‘by oneself or itself, alone’.

⁵ To be sure, sometimes *μή* is followed by an optative with *ἄν* or by a whole conditional sentence in optative. See SMYTH 1956: § 2232.

⁶ See LSJ s.v. *καν* I 3.

⁷ FRAZER 1913.

⁸ Cf. e.g. Xen. *HG* V 3, 19.

of the body is going to be lost due to the snake's bite. It would be quite natural if in such a moment Polyidus concentrated not on his own fate, no matter how miserable it seemed, but on the safety of Glaucus' body. So he does in Hyginus' version of the myth: "draco repente ad corpus pueri processit, quod Polyidus aestimans eum velle consumere, gladio repente percussit et occidit"⁹.

This is why the pronoun αὐτός seems here suspect. Let us notice that it appears in the manuscripts just after the particle ἄν, itself unacceptable from a grammatical perspective. Thus it becomes an attractive possibility to reduce two problems into one and to assume that ἄν αὐτός is the result of corruption of a word that stood in the original text. This word is, in my opinion, ἀνίατος. Though most often it pertains to incurable diseases, it can be also applied to people who cannot be cured¹⁰. A parallel to μὴ ἀνίατος τελευτήσῃ can be found in a treatise by Galen: ἔχοις ἂν ὁ ἀνθρωπος ἀνίατος γενόμενος εἰς κακεξίαν τε τοῦ παντὸς σώματος ἀφίκηται τε καὶ πολλῷ χρόνῳ κακοπαθήσας ἀποθάνῃ¹¹. If we introduce ἀνίατος into the text and keep BEKKER's emendation εἴ τι τὸ σῶμα πάθοι, we shall obtain the following result: τοῦτον βαλὼν λίθῳ ἀπέκτεινε, δείσας μὴ ἀνίατος τελευτήσῃ, εἴ τι τὸ σῶμα πάθοι – "hitting the serpent with a stone, he killed it, out of fear that Glaucus would die with no chance of being cured should his body suffer any harm". Here τὸ σῶμα is no longer the subject, but rather an accusative of respect. The change of the subject may seem awkward, but the previous sentence ended with a mention of the boy (εἶδε δράκοντα ἐπὶ τὸν νεκρὸν ιόντα).

One could raise here the objection that Glaucus is already dead, so it is too late to fear his death. Still, in the context of a possible healing, it is natural to assume that he is at least potentially alive. After all, the expression "incurably dead", though it appears almost 200 times on the Internet, is absurd both in English and in Greek.

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⁹ Hyg. *Fab.* 136, 6.

¹⁰ See LSJ s.v., 2.

¹¹ Gal. *De methodo medendi* 12, vol. X, p. 864 KÜHN.

