

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES: EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY OF POETRY AND ART IN MOSCHUS' *EUROPA*

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Moschus' *Europa* demonstrates a sophisticated use of descriptive language that blurs the boundaries between *ekphrasis* and narrative. In the *ekphrasis* of Europa's basket, Moschus brings movement to the static artwork, giving it a more significant role in the overall frame narrative. On the other hand, he freezes scenes in the frame narrative (I focus on the meadow and Zeus as a bull) and, through vivid description, affords the reader the sensation of viewing works of art. By using these techniques, Moschus acknowledges poetry's artifice and profoundly enriches engagement with the text on aesthetic and interpretive levels.

Key words: art, *ekphrasis*, narrative.

Poetry is a literary art form that transcends the limitations of language in the same way that an artwork is so much more than the medium with which it was created. This is especially evident in the descriptive language of Moschus' *Europa*. Moschus (fl. 150 BCE) demonstrates a remarkable affinity and facility for description: he does not confine *ekphrasis* and narrative to their traditional roles but blurs the lines between the two. In its simplest sense, an *ekphrasis* is a detailed description of art that often bears some relation to the larger story or frame narrative. Moschus' description of Europa's basket develops *ekphrasis* in two directions. First, he animates it into a narrative sequence, imbuing what would be static depictions with a sense of temporal progression. Then, instead of merely using the artwork as a foreshadowing tool for future events, Moschus assigns it a narrative role by employing it as a transitional device that seamlessly bridges the gap between narrative frames. Conversely, he selects scenes from his narrative and, through extraordinarily vivid descriptive detail, suspends them in time, effectively transforming them into art and affording the reader the sensation of analysing an artwork. Of these scenes, two of the most prominent are the flowery meadow and Zeus as a bull. With his clever use of language, Moschus blurs the boundaries of *ekphrasis* and narrative, of art and poetry: static artwork is made to move, and moving scenes are frozen in time.

In the opening lines of his description of Europa's basket, Moschus creates the expectation that the artifact will be something exceptional by drawing attention to spectacle and divine craftsmanship: θηητόν, μέγα θαῦμα, μέγαν πόνον

Ἡφαίστοιο (*Eur.* 38).¹ The repetition of the θ and μέγα in a climactic structure creates a captivating and rhythmic effect, heightening the reader's anticipation, and fuelling the expectation that the basket will be extraordinary. Indeed, it is the work of the great craftsman, Hephaestus: Moschus evokes a mythical lineage stretching from the divine blacksmith to its present owner, Europa, descendant of Poseidon (38–42). On the basket, there are three images depicting the story of Io. The first portrays her still in her cow form as she swims through the Bosphorus strait while people on either shore watch her (44–49). The next scene shows Zeus stroking her and turning her back into a woman (it is uncertain how Io is depicted in this scene: is she a cow, a woman, or a bizarre combination of both?) (50–54).

The final scene presents Hermes, the slain Argos, and a bird rising from his blood. Koopman (2018:243–250) remarks that Moschus' skilful use of words not only creates a visual picture of the basket but also a story unfolding over time. Koopman (2018:244) observes that each episode is described as 'had been wrought' using the pluperfects τετυγμένη (44) and ἐτέτυκτο (47), τετυγμένος (54), and ἐτετέανυστο (56) which suggest stasis (because the pluperfect refers to completed, not continuous, action). However, I suggest that Koopman misses the crucial factor that each pluperfect cognate of τεύχω is paired with each element's respective colour; Io is first crafted in gold, χρυσοῖο (44), the sea in blue enamel, κυάνου (47), Io, again in copper, χαλκείη (54), and Zeus in gold, χρυσοῦ (54). While this reminds the reader/viewer that these scenes are indeed all part of an artwork, it also anticipates the vivid use of colour in the later frame narrative of the meadow and of Zeus as a bull. The use of colour in the *ekphrasis* establishes the language for describing an artwork, so that when the reader/viewer encounters a similar use of colour within the frame narrative, this creates the illusion that scenes within the frame narrative are themselves a kind of artwork.

The temporal sequence of the scenes on the basket suggests movement, and, as Koopman (2018: 246–248) comments, the wording of the descriptions of each artwork is key in creating this story-like flow. In the first scene, Io is still (εἰσέτι) a cow and not (οὐκ) a woman (45); this wording looks forward to a future, which anticipates the next scene with Zeus. One scene replaces the other like a stop-motion movie. Next, Zeus gently touches Io, predicting Io's pregnancy, thus pointing to a future time in this narrative. Io is also described as being turned back (πάλιν) into a woman (52), which references a previous event in the story. While Moschus highlights the static nature of the descriptions by using the pluperfect

¹ All textual references are from Moschus' *Europa* unless stated otherwise. I have used Hopkinson's 2020 edition of the text.

tense, he blurs the lines between art and narrative by emphasising the ways in which the episodes refer backwards and forwards to one another.

Furthermore, the position of the basket's *ekphrasis* in the poem promotes it to a role in the narrative beyond the straightforward foreshadowing of Zeus' next cow-related exploit. It is placed neatly between the scenes of Europa and her friends heading out to the meadow (ποτὶ δὲ λειμῶνας ἔβαινον ἀγχιάλους, ὅθι τ' αἰὲν ὁμιλαδὸν ἡγερέθοντο τερπόμεναι ῥοδέηι τε φυῇ καὶ κύματος ἡχῇ, 34–35) and their arrival at the meadow (αἱ δ' ἐπεὶ οὖν λειμῶνας ἐς ἀνθεμόεντας ἵκανον, 63). Before the *ekphrasis* properly begins, Europa 'was carrying' (φέρειν, 37) her basket. The imperfect tense of φέρω signifies that the basket is being described as Europa walks with it to the meadow (Koopman 2018:240), and this stands in contrast to the pluperfect verbs used to depict the artistic craftsmanship of the basket.

The sequence of scenes on the basket is achronological, with the slaying of Argos coming after Io's frantic swim and transformation back into a woman. Petrain (2006:251–256) suggests that this is due to a conflict between the narrative chronology and the spatially determined sequence of viewing. According to his interpretation, it is the basket's physical structure that determines the order in which each scene is presented. I would go further: for this *ekphrasis*, there is no viewer within the poem. Neither Europa nor the maidens are described as looking at the basket. This leaves the reader as the only viewer, and the reader must view the basket in its context of being carried. When examining the basket in motion, one would not be at liberty to inspect it up close, frame by frame, but would have to do so as the motion of the basket allows. The achronological order of the story mimics this motion. The scenes are observed as the motion allows them to come into the viewer's line of sight. In this way, the basket performs the narrative role of facilitating the transition from wherever the maidens were before the meadow to the meadow. In other words, the jumps between scenes in the frame narrative are ironically elided by the distraction of a static object.

Once the maidens have arrived, Moschus jumps immediately into an ekphrastic description of the setting rather than focusing on motion or action. The positioning of the meadow by the sea (ποτὶ δὲ λειμῶνας ἔβαινον ἀγχιάλους, 34–35) creates a sense of unreality common in art. While a meadow is not implausible, its being positioned right on the seashore compresses space, lending the meadow an art-like quality.² Moschus describes this meadow in vivid detail, employing a technique that mirrors the process of viewing art; he begins the description with general observations, then he zooms in closer and closer, gradually drawing the reader/viewer's attention to the focal point of Europa. This deliberate zooming effect mimics the way one would examine an artwork, starting with an overall

² The spatial limitations are made clear by, e.g., στεφάνην (55) and χεῖλεα (61).

impression and progressively delving into the finer intricacies. At first, before the basket *ekphrasis*, the meadow is simply where the girls go to pick fragrant lilies (ἢ ὀπότε ἔκ λειμῶνος εὐπνοα λείρι ἄμέργοι, 32) by the ocean where roses grow and the crash of waves can be heard (ὅθι τ' αἰὲν ὀμιλαδὸν ἡγερέθοντο τερπόμεναι ῥοδέηι τε φυῇ καὶ κύματος ἡχῇ, 35–36). It is not a close-up description, but a description from afar, a brief anticipation of what is to come. After the basket *ekphrasis*, Moschus gives us a closer look. First, the meadow is described in general floral terms (ἀνθεμόεντας, ἄνθεσι 63–64). Then in quick succession Moschus focuses on each specific flower type individually: narcissuses, hyacinths, violets, and thyme (ἢ μὲν νάρκισσον εὐπνοον, ἢ δ' ὕακινθον, ἢ δ' ὄνον, ἢ δ' ἔρπυλλον, 65–66). He uses a μέν...δε construction to link them together as a descriptive unit, and, in addition to giving the section a poetic flow, the repetition of the ἢ at the beginning of each clause repeatedly returns the focus to the flowers and thereby conducts a close-up examination of the meadow as if it were a work of art. In the next lines, Moschus zooms in even closer on the flowers. The first group of flowers was described either with a single adjective or none at all, but the descriptions of the crocuses and roses are more intricate. The handmaidens do not simply pluck crocuses, but the fragrant yellow tresses of crocuses (αἱ δ' αὖτε ξανθοῖο κρόκου θύοεσσαν ἔθειραν δρέπτον ἐριδμαίνουσαι, 68–69) and Europa picks the splendour of the flame-coloured roses (ἀτὰρ μέσσησιν ἄνασσα ἀλγαῖην πυρσοῖο ῥόδου χεῖρεσσι λέγουσα, 69–70). This transition from a general description of the meadow to progressively more detailed descriptions of individual flowers, creates the impression of a gradual approach toward a captivating artwork. By employing this technique, Moschus invites the reader/viewer to experience the meadow as if they were appreciating a meticulously crafted piece of art.

At the beginning of the meadow's description, the maidens were scattered, one delighting over one flower, another over another flower (ἄλλη ἐπ' ἄλλοίοισι τότ' ἄνθεσι θυμὸν ἔτερπον, 64). This observation anticipates the subsequent arrangement of the maidens around Europa. While the other maidens pick the fragrant yellow tresses of the crocuses (68–69), Europa is at the centre picking the splendour of the red roses (69–70). The maidens are described as collecting the crocuses in competition (ἐριδμαίνουσαι, 69), further indicating that, in the composition of this scene, they are spread out rather than gathered in one spot. Immediately contrasted to this with an ἀτὰρ is Europa in the middle (μεσσησιν ἄνασσα, 69), which cements the visual picture of Europa as the focal point of the description. Europa is further set apart from the maidens by the fact that while they are described as picking the crocuses, she is described as picking the beauty of the rose, not the rose itself. This beauty she is picking for herself is reflected in the

simile that compares her to Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, eminent among the Charities (οἷά περ ἐν Χαρίτεσσι διέπρεπεν Ἀφρογένεια, 71).

Europa's central position is reinforced by the symmetrical construction of the sentences. The lines describing the maidens picking crocuses and Europa picking roses consist of 22 syllables each with the crocuses and roses both in the middle of their respective lines. In this way, the syntax mimics the visual symmetry of the scene. It is at this visual climax that Moschus reveals that the reader is no longer the only viewer because Zeus has already espied Europa (οὐ μὲν δηρὸν ἔμελλεν ἐπ' ἄνθεσι θυμὸν ιαίνειν... ἣ γάρ δὴ Κρονίδης ὥς μιν φράσαθ', 72–74). Indeed, the reader discovers that they are viewing Europa through the eyes of Zeus (Harden 2011:92) who, in turn, only has eyes for her.

Just as Moschus has set Europa apart from the other maidens, he works to set Zeus apart from the other bulls. After all, the king of the gods cannot be like the other mortal bulls. Zeus is not the same as the bulls who eat in stables (οὐχ οἷος σταθοῖς ἐνι φέρβεται, 80), or those who strain, cutting furrows under a bent plough (οὐδὲ μὲν οἷος ὄλκα διατμήγει σύρων εὐκαμπὲς ἄροτρον, 80–81), or who feed in a flock (οὐδ' οἷος ποιμένης ἐπι βόσκεται, 82), or are tamed by the yoke and pull a heavy-laden wagon (οὐδὲ μὲν οἷος ζεύγλῃ ὑποδμηθεὶς ἐρύει πολύφορτον ἀπήνην, 82–83). These descriptions all include actions of some kind (like eating in stables or cutting furrows). The description of Zeus that follows is contrasted to this: one way in which Zeus is not like these other bulls is that he is static like an artwork. This idea is reinforced by his physical description, which moves from the negative of what Zeus is not to the positive of what he is. Zeus in his new bull form is described in a manner that reflects the description of the images on the basket. His skin is yellow, even golden (ξανθόχροον, 84), the circle on his forehead is silver (ἀργύφειος, 85), and his eyes may be described as 'flashing greyly' (ὕπογλαύσσεσκε, 86) (Harden 2011:94). The silver circle on Zeus' forehead is referred to as gleaming, using the same word (μάρμαιρε, 85) that was used for the embellishments on the basket (μαρμαίροντα, 43). All this links Zeus back to the scenes depicted on the basket, and he is the only character to appear in both the basket *ekphrasis* and the frame narrative. His horns are described with an emphasis on their precise shape, and this suggests a visual and artistic focus: they rise from his head in perfect symmetry as if someone had cut the full moon in half (ἰσά τ' ἐπ' ἀλλήλοισι κέρα ἀνέτελλε καρήνου ἄντυγος ἡμιτόμου κεραῖς ἅτε κύκλα σελήνης, 87–88). Moschus demonstrates this symmetry once more in the structure of his sentence: the words for horns, κέρα (87) and κεραῖς (88) cut their respective lines perfectly in half with 12 syllables on either side. Just as he did with the crocuses and roses, he creates a visual representation of the description with the Greek words themselves.

In his *Europa*, Moschus shows himself to be a master manipulator of the Greek language, artfully picking his words and constructing his sentences to add subtle meaning or to enhance visual images with the Greek words themselves. While he gives the basket *ekphrasis* a temporal role and uses it to convey motion from one point in the poem to the next, he freezes his frame narrative in time both when describing the meadow and when describing Zeus in his bull form. The meadow is viewed as if analysing a painting, slowly bringing the reader in for a closer, more detailed look. Zeus is rendered motionless, depicted in the colours of the real artworks, and described with such mathematical precision that the reader/viewer forgets he is a living being, not a statue. Moschus gives art a narrative role in his poem, and his words in turn become a work of art, successfully blurring the lines between *ekphrasis* and narrative and creating a captivating and immersive experience for the reader/viewer.

Through his stylised descriptions, Moschus appears to comment on the necessary dual role of the reader as a viewer. By skilfully crafting vivid and artful depictions, he acknowledges the inherent artifice of poetry which relies on imaginative language to evoke sensory experiences. He invites the reader/viewer to engage in visualising and experiencing the scenes he paints with words. This interplay between poetry and art profoundly enriches the poetic experience, facilitating engagement and interpretation at their deepest levels.

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