

Miszelle

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Nonnus' Actaeon: Destiny in a Name

Nonnus, Actaeon, Ovid, Nomina significantia, Acontius

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In Book 5 of the *Dionysiaca*, the story of Actaeon is told twice, first in the third person (5.287–369), and subsequently by Actaeon himself when he appears to his father in his sleep (5.412–532). Writing independently from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,¹ which strive to elide any trace of intention, let alone eroticism, on the hunter's part, and stress the accidental nature of his *error*, Nonnus foregrounds in the opening sequence the role of Destiny in Actaeon's demise (301 ἀλλά μὲν ὤλεσε Μοῖρα)² and then goes on to follow a pre-Callimachean version of the myth which attributes his actions to an unrequited lust for Artemis.³ Actaeon is thus

1 M. Paschalis, "Ovidian Metamorphosis and Nonnian *poikilon eidos*", in K. Spanoudakis (ed.), *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context: Poetry and Cultural Milieu in Late Antiquity*, Berlin/Boston 2014, 97–122; G. Agosti, "L'epillio nelle Dionisiache? Strutture dell'epica nonniana e contesto culturale", *Aitia* 6, 2016, 1–28. Independence, however, does not presuppose ignorance: cf. A. Villarubia, "Nono de Panópolis y el mito de Acteón", *Habis* 29, 1998, 249–68 at 268.

2 Quotations are from F. Vian's *Belles Lettres* edition, Paris 1976–2003 (vol. 2 edited by P. Chuvin).

3 Cf. L. R. Lacy, "Aktaion and a Lost Bath of Artemis", *JHS* 110, 1990, 26–42; M. Depew, "POxy. 2509 and Callimachus' Lavacrum Palladis: αἰγιόχοιο Διὸς κούρη μεγάλοιο", *CQ* 44, 1994, 410–26; Barchiesi, *Ovidio*, *Metamorfosi*, vol. II, Milano 2007, 146–149 on Ov. *Met.* 3.138–252. After Ovid, Statius appears to be accusing Actaeon of intentionally profaning the 'chaste springs' of the goddess (*Theb.* 3.201–4: *nec quod tibi, Delia, castos / prolapsum fontes specula temerare profana / heu dominum insani nihil agnouere Molossi, / deflerim magis ...*; if *prolapsum* may be seen to hint at Actaeon's involuntary arrival onto the scene, *specula ... profana* points decisively to his culpability), whilst Apuleius will turn him into an archetype of the *curiositas* that characterizes the protagonist of his *Metamorphoses*, Lucius (at *Met.* 2.4 Actaeon gazes at the goddess *curiosio optutu*).

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depicted as an ‘insatiable’ voyeur (5.305 ἀκόρητος, on which more below),⁴ who is ‘maddened by love’ (5.311 ἐρωμανέος), and keen to observe in its entirety (5.304 ὄλον δέμας) a virginal body that should remain hidden and which he instead ‘measures with his gaze’ (5.306 ἀγνὸν ἀνυμφεύτιο δέμας διεμέτρεε κούρης). Nonnus focusses on the culpable gaze of Actaeon, a θηητήρ ... ἀθηήτιο θεαίνης (305) whose staring attracts the reciprocal angry glare of a nymph:⁵ ὄμματι λαθριδίω δεδοκημένον, ὄμματι λοξῶ / Νηϊὰς ... ἔδρακε Νύμφη (308–309).⁶ Artemis quickly covers herself up, and at this stage the text omits to establish a direct link between her reaction and the metamorphosis which takes place immediately afterwards.

Later in the book, when he tells his story to his father, Actaeon offers a slightly different sequence of events. In a twist on the gesture of ἀποσκοπεῖν, which is occasionally found in pictorial representations of Actaeon as he observes Artemis from above,⁷ he admits that he had climbed on a tree in order to gain a better view of the goddess (5.478–9), an act of reckless, intrusive presumption (478 ἀτάσθαλον ὕβριω). Before the nymphs can react (489–91), punishment comes directly from the goddess: Ἄρτεμις εὐκαμάτιο μετὰ δρόμον ἠθάδος ἄγρης / λούετο μὲν καθαροῖσιν ἐν ὕδασι, λουομένης δὲ / ὄφθαλμοὺς ἀμάρυσσεν ἐμοὺς ἀντῶπιος αἴγλη / χιονέας ἀκτίνας ἀκοντίζουσα ῥέεθροις (483–6). The sheer splendour of Artemis’ whiteness, reflecting back on Actaeon, blinds him, makes him fall from the tree, and marks his transformation into a deer. Nonnus thus shifts onto the goddess the lack of intention which characterised Actaeon in other versions of the story, and encapsulates the drama in Artemis’ indirect, but lethal, reflection.

Line 486, the climactic moment of this dramatic development, highlights this reversal of roles by suggesting through alliteration and assonance the shared etymological derivation of ἀκτίς (‘sunbeam’ but also ‘gaze’) and ἀκοντίζω (‘throw

4 On the pervasiveness of voyeurism in the *Dion.*: R. F. Newbold, “Curiosity and Exposure in Nonnus”, *GRBS* 48, 2008, 71–94 at 71–2 (on Actaeon) and 78 n. 14; R. F. Newbold, “The Psychology in the *Dionysiaca*”, in D. Accorinti (ed.) *Brill’s Companion to Nonnus*, Berlin/Boston 2016, 193–212, esp. 201 and 206.

5 Actaeon had already been introduced at the beginning of the narrative as the object of Pan’s gaze while he was hunting (5.297 ὄμμασι θαμβάλοισιν ἐδέρκετο μηλονόμος Πάν): the parallelism between lines 297 and 308 underlines his passivity as a defining trait, and an harbinger of his demise.

6 The repetition of ὄμματι is syntactically misleading. E. Magnelli, “Nonniana”, *Eikasmos* 16, 2005, 299–305 at 300 corrects into ὄμμασι λαθριδίως.

7 Cf. *LIMC* s.v. and esp. E. W. Leach, “Metamorphoses of the Actaeon Myth in Campanian Painting”, *MDAI(R)*, 88, 1981, 307–27; cf. C. C. Schlam, “Diana and Actaeon: Metamorphoses of a Myth”, *CA* 3, 1984, 82–110.

a javelin', 'emit beams'),⁸ and, by implication, of Ἄκταίων, whose name is thus reflected in the description of Artemis' actions.⁹ The two foundational elements of Actaeon's characterization, his passion for hunting and his misguided gazing at Diana, are now fused together;¹⁰ the tragic paradox of the hunted hunter, which Nonnus underlines more than once in the passage, is also put in stark relief: his lustful darts have met their match.¹¹ This pivotal moment has been prepared by the alliteration between Ἄκταίων and ἀκόρητος (305), and will be followed by the assonance with κτάνειν.

Both Ἄκταίων and ἀκοντίζω, in fact, share the Indo-European theme *ak-, 'point'.¹² The verb is a denominative from ἄκων 'javelin, dart', 'to hurl (a javelin)', whilst the name refers among others to the eponymous hero of Attika, and the Theban hunter son of Aristaeus. In the former case it clearly originates from Ἀκτῆ,¹³ Attika's ancient name (from ἀκτῆ);¹⁴ in the latter, the name harks back to the cult of Zeus Aktaios ('Zeus of the peaks') described by the periegetes Heraklides Kritikos (*BNJ* 369A F 2), a cult with which Actaeon's story is also connected.¹⁵ The etymology of ἀκτίς is unclear,¹⁶ but the close resemblance to ἀκίς ('arrow,

8 Nonnus may share with some of his contemporaries a particular fondness for images focussed on the notion of 'darting', involving e. g. ἀκοντιστήρ, as suggested by D. Gigli Piccardi, "Ancora su Nonno e la poesia oracolare", *Aitia* 2, 2012, 1–43 at 12, with n. 22, who points to a possible Pindaric model. Cf. D. Gigli Piccardi, *Metafora e poetica in Nonno di Panopoli*, Firenze 1985, 57–63.

9 The passage draws attention to the phonic connections of the name at other junctures as well, cf. 5.420 (δέρκεαι Ἄκταίωνα καὶ Ἄκταίωνος ἀκούεις) and possibly 5.305 (θηρητῆρ δ'ἀκόρητος ἀθηήτοιο θεαίνης). The association with κτάνειν recurs: 5.471, 5.511, 46.290.

10 The Latin *acies*, which also derives from the same root, directly encapsulates the connection between the two meanings (as does Eng. 'dart').

11 Cf. 5.325 θηρητῆρ τρομέων θηρήτορας; 5.463 οὐκ ἔλαφον πυθόμην ἐλαφήβολον; 5.465–6 ὑπ' ἀνδροφόνῳ δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς / Ἄγρέος αἶμα φέρων ἀγρευέται Ἰοχαίρη, with Schubert on 5.463.

12 A. Ernout/A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*, Paris 1985 (4th ed., revised by J. André), 6.

13 W. Pape/G. E. Benseler, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen*, Braunschweig³1884, 49.

14 Cf. Eur. *Hel.* 1673; Callim. *Hec.* 1 Hollis (= 230 Pfeiffer), with A. S. Hollis, *Callimachus. Hecale*, Oxford 1990, 137 (on *Hec.* 1).

15 F. Pfister, *Die Reisebilder des Herakleides: Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar mit einer Übersicht über die Geschichte der griechischen Volkskunde*, Wien 1951, 209–12; W. Burkert, *Homo necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1983, 113–4. Inscriptions mention Zeus Akraios (L. Preller, *Griechische Mythologie*, bearbeitet von C. Robert, Berlin⁴1884, 144, cf. Zeus Epakrios, 116 n. 11) rather than Aktaios, but the epithet Aktaios, which is also attested for Apollos and Dionysos, is defended by Pfister 209.

16 Cf., s.v., H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Heidelberg 1955–72; P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Paris²1968; R. S. P. Beekes, with the assistance of L. van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, Leiden 2010.

dart'), would have naturally favoured a pareymological connection with Ἀκταίων and ἄκοντιζω.

There appear to exist no other instances of a similar wordplay on the name Ἀκταίων (or Actaeon), but a comparable one involving the same root occurs, both in Greek and in Latin,¹⁷ in connection with the names Acontius and Aconteus. In particular, some aspects of Acontius' treatment of the story in Ovid's *Heroides* 20 and 21, and perhaps also in his model, Callimachus, point to features shared by Actaeon's and Acontius' stories.

In *Heroides* 21.209–10 Cydippe remarks that Acontius is a speaking name, referencing the Greek ἀκόντιον:¹⁸ *mirabar quare tibi nomen Acontius esset: / quod faciat longe uulnus, acumen habes*, and goes on to strengthen the connection in the subsequent couplet: *certe ego conualui nondum de uulnere tali, / ut iaculo scriptis eminus icta tuis*.¹⁹ Albeit without a tragic ending, she, like Diana, has fallen prey to an aggressive gaze: *forsitan haec spectans a te spectabar, Aconti, / uisaeque simplicitas est mea posse capi* (*Her.* 21.103–4), although Acontius had argued that the opposite was equally true: *tu facis hoc oculique tui, quibus ignea cedunt / sidera, qui flammae causa fuere meae* (*Her.* 20.55–6). Callimachus' Acontius, too, is likely to have expanded on the beauty of the woman's eyes.²⁰ The specularity that seals Actaeon's fate is also enacted here, albeit without tragic consequences. If, as seems likely, fr. 70 Pf. = Harder of the *Aitia* deals with the same story,²¹ Callimachus had indirectly suggested a move in this direction: ἀλλ' ἀπὸ τόξου / αὐτὸς ὁ τοξευτῆς ἄρδιν²² ἔχων ἑτέρου. These lines also lie behind

17 An epigram of the *Anthologia Palatina* attributed to Thallus of Miletus, possibly writing in the first half of the first c. CE (C. Cichorius, *Römische Studien. Historisches Epigraphisches Literaturgeschichtliches aus Vier Jahrhunderten Roms*, Leipzig/Berlin 1922, 356–8), lists a number of warriors and their votive offerings to Ares; among them, τὰ δέ δούρατα θῆκεν Ἄκοντεύς (*AP* 6.91.1 = *GP* 3408).

18 We do not know whether Naevius' *Acontizomenos* (*pall.* 1 R.³ = I.1 Marmorale), 'perhaps referring to the Greek original' (G. O. Hutchinson, *Greek to Latin: Frameworks and Contexts for Intertextuality*, Oxford 2013, 48, 71) by Dionysius (title in fr. 1 Kassel-Austin), also played on the name's etymological associations.

19 E. Kenney, *Ovid. Heroides XVI–XXI*, Cambridge 1996, 242 (on *Her.* 21.209).

20 Callim. fr. 67.21 Pf. = Harder δθμασιν. The last part of the fr. is incomplete, but the substance can be reconstructed on the basis of Aristaenetus 1.10, and of Musaeus *Her.* 63–65 (H. Sell, "Kallimachos fr. 67,20f.", *RhM* 107, 1964, 370–1). It is less probable, but not impossible, that the eyes in questions are Acontius', as tentatively suggested by R. Pfeiffer, *Callimachus*, Oxford 1953, vol. 1 p. 73 (ad loc.), followed by Kenney (n. 19) 16, cf. A. Harder, *Callimachus. Aetia*, Oxford 2012, 566 (on 67.21).

21 See Harder (n. 20) 566 (on 68–70).

22 Glossed as ἀκίς in *Etym. Gud.* p. 189, 13 de Stefani s.v. ἄρδιν (A. T. Drago, *Aristeneto. Lettere d'amore*, Lecce 2007, 210).

Her. 20.231–32 *e quibus alterius mihi iam nocuere sagittae, / alterius noceant ne tibi tela caue*, where Ovid contrasts the arrows of *iaculatrix* ... *Phoebe* (20.229), who has ordered him to compose his letter, with those of *Amor* (2.230).²³

Virgil also links *acer Aconteus* ('Javelinman')²⁴ with ἀκόντιον: *continuo aduersis Tyrrhenus et acer Aconteus / conixi incurrunt hastis primique ruinam / dant sonitu ingenti* (*Aen.* 11.612–4).²⁵ The warrior's demise, too, elaborates on this point, since he is 'thrown' like a javelin: *excussus Aconteus / fulminis in morem aut tormento ponderis acti / praecipitat longe et uitam dispergit in auras* (615–7).²⁶ An indirect reference to the same etymological connection has also been surmised at *Buc.* 10.59–60, in a passage where Virgil may indeed have specific aspects of Gallus' poetry in mind.²⁷ Here the lovesick Gallus appears to be following in the steps of Acontius, and the *Cydonia* ... / *spicula* he sees himself throwing would evoke the character's name through etymology.²⁸

Later epic writers continue to exploit the etymological implications of the name. In Ovid, Aconteus' fate mirrors that of Actaeon's: he looks at the Gorgon, and is turned into a statue (*Met.* 5.202 *Gorgone conspecta saxo concreuit oborto*);²⁹ but Astyages believes he is still alive, strikes him with a sword, and is also petrified – again the focus is on the reciprocity, and dangers, of the gaze: *dum stupet Astyages, naturam traxit eandem / marmoreoque manet uultus mirantis in ore* (*Met.* 5.205–6).³⁰ Silius' Aconteus, a hunter, takes part in a javelin competition

²³ Kenney (n. 19) 214 (on *Her.* 20.231–2).

²⁴ Kenney (n. 19) 242 (on *Her.* 21.209).

²⁵ Cf. C. Saunders, "Sources of the Names of Trojans and Latins in Vergil's Aeneid", *TAPA* 71, 1940, 537–55 at 553–4; M. Paschalis, *Virgil's Aeneid: Semantic Relations and Proper Names*, Oxford 1997, 365; J. J. O'Hara, *True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay*, *Ann Arbor* 2017, 231 (cf. 32, 292), with N. Horsfall, *Virgil, Aeneid 11: A Commentary*, Leiden 2003, 351 (on 11.612s).

²⁶ P. R. Hardie, *Virgil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium*, Oxford 1986, 178 n. 61 persuasively suggests that in the Virgilian passage the name of Acontius, who is thrown like a 'missile' *fulminis in morem*, may also evoke words connected with celestial or comparable related phenomena such as ἀκοντιζομαι ('flash'), ἀκοντιάδες ('meteors', cf. Plin. *HN* 2.89 *acontiaie iaculi modo uibrantur*), ἀκοντισμοί ('shooting stars', Ptol. *Tetr.* 102), or the very late ἀκοντιστήριον ('siege-engine', Agathias 3.5).

²⁷ As argued by D. O. Ross, *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry: Gallus, Elegy, and Rome*, Cambridge 1975, 87–91.

²⁸ R. M. Rosen/J. Farrell, "Acontius, Milanion, and Gallus: Vergil, *Ecl.* 10.52–61", *TAPA* 116, 1986, 241–54; cf. O'Hara (n. 25) 252.

²⁹ See G. Rosati, *Ovidio, Metamorfosi*, vol. 3, Milano 2009, 157 on Ov. *Met.* 5.201 (p. 157) on *Aconteus* as a 'nome parlante'.

³⁰ *Acutis* (204) could be seen a displaced confirmation of the etymological play on Aconteus' name.

(16.557 *tum iaculo petiere decus*): *cuius numquam fugisse hastilia cerui praerapida potuere fuga, uenator Aconteus* (16.562–3). In the *Thebaid*, Aconteus kills Bacchus' tigresses (7.593 *insequitur telis, multumque hostile resumens / ter, quater adducto per terga, per ilia telo / transigit*) and is killed in turn by an enraged Phlegeus after he runs out of arrows (*Theb.* 7.604 *uacuum telis*) – and with this metapoetic farewell Aconteus departs from Latin texts.³¹

Nonnus' interest in *nomina significantia*,³² to be sure, hardly needed encouragement from Latin models, suggestive as they are. Not only could he rely on a rich set of precedents harking back to the earliest stages of Greek literature, including the tradition of Alexandrian learned writing,³³ but further stimuli are likely to have come from the interest in allegorical and symbolic interpretation fostered by the Neoplatonic intellectuals active in Alexandria in his time³⁴ and the Christian conception of language.³⁵ In his sensual world, overdetermined with signification, speaking names represent a veritable 'category of thought',³⁶ reflecting the nature of things, the genealogy and character of people, and indeed their destiny. In this vein, for instance, Nonnus will go on to exploit the well-known etymological associations of the name of Actaeon's father Pentheus, grieving for his son.³⁷ Actaeon's nature, faults and demise are all already in-

31 At 593 *resumens* aptly stresses the topical nature of the characters' actions.

32 E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, London 1953, 495–500 provides a fundamental intellectual framework on speaking names, and G. Agosti, "Poesia sul gioco e giochi letterari nella poesia tardoantica e bizantina", in *Il gioco nella società e cultura dell'Alto Medioevo. Atti della LXV Settimana di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, Spoleto 2018, 721–760 at 738–739, situates this feature within the broader context of Byzantine and Late Antique 'wordplay' and its stylistic and conceptual implications. A comprehensive study of *nomina significantia* in Nonnus is missing, but a number of instances are listed by I. Opelt, 'Etymologie', *RAC* 6, 805–6, and in commentaries. For an overview see Gigli Piccardi (n. 8) 140–44; F. Tissoni, *Nonno di Panopoli. I Canti di Penteo* (Dionisiache 44–46). *Commento*, Milano 1998, 153, 156–8; L. Miguélez Caverio, "Personifications at the Service of Dionysus: the Bacchic Court", in Spanoudakis (n. 1) 175–191; Cf. also D. Accorinti, "L'etimologia di Βηρυτρός: Nonn. *Dion.* 41.364–7", *Glotta* 73, 1995/96, 127–33; cf. also A. M. Lasek, 'Nonnus and the Play of Genres', in Accorinti (n. 4) 402–21.

33 On the importance of etymologizing in Alexandrian scholar-poets see the excellent treatment by O'Hara (n. 25) 21–42.

34 Tissoni (n. 32) 157. On Nonnus' contact with Neoplatonism: E. Livrea, *Nonno di Panopoli. Parafraresi del Vangelo di S. Giovanni. Canto XVIII*, Napoli 1989, 29–32. For the importance of the names of gods in Neoplatonic theology see I. Gualandri, "Words Pregnant with Meaning: The Power of Single Words in Late Latin Literature", in J. Elsner/J. Hernández Lobato (edd.), *The Poetics of Late Latin Literature*, Oxford 2017, 125–46 at 126.

35 Curtius (n. 32) 496; Gualandri (n. 34) esp. 129–31, who also touches upon the precedents to be found in the Hebrew Bible.

36 Curtius (n. 32) 495.

37 Cf. Chuvin (n. 2) 192 (on 5.555).

scribed in his name. At the most dramatic point of the narrative, when light is reflected on water as in a distorted mirror, the hunter turns into a hunted prey, and thereby finds his death.

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