Euripides *Helen* 375-85 and Sophocles *Electra* 150-2 as 'Mythological Hyperboles'

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Abstract: The late Netta Zagagi's interpretation of this passage as constituting a 'mythological hyperbole' is bolstered on stylistic grounds (as is Diggle's confirmatory but independently advanced emendation of v. 377), and the interpretation is shown to exclude a more recent reading of the stanza which distracts from the mythological hyperbole's effect.

Keywords: mythological exemplum *and* hyperbole; allusive; adversative particle; *makarismos*

375   ὦ μάκαρ Ἀρκαδίᾳ ποτὲ παρθένε
           Καλλιστοῖ, Διὸς ἃ λεχέων ἀπέβας τετραβάμοσι γυίοις,
           ὡς πολὺ κηρὸς ἐμᾶς ἔλαχες πλέον,
           ἁ μορφᾷ θηρῶν λαχνογυίων
           +ὄμματι λάβρῳ σχῆμα λεαίνης+
380   ἐξαλλάξασ' ἄχθεα λύπας
           ἅν τέ ποτ' Ἄρτεμις ἐξεχορεύσατο
           χρυσοκέρατ' ἔλαφον Μέροπος Τιτανίδα κούραν
           καλλοσύνας ἕνεκεν, τὸ δ' ἐμὸν δέμας
           ὤλεσεν ὤλεσε πέργαμα Δαρδανίας
385   ὀλομένους τ' Ἀχαιούς.

More than three decades have passed since Netta Zagagi[1] identified this stanza from the *Helen* as exemplifying the phenomenon of 'mythological hyperbole'. Writing in a book published in 1980 she was unable to take account of James Diggle's brilliant emendation of μητρός[2] to κηρός in v. 377 which was advanced in a volume that appeared in 1978 (no more, of course was he able to take into account her interpretation). Since the two studies seem to me to corroborate each other, I have thought it worthwhile to show how. And the need for such a demonstration appears all the more pressing because two relatively recent English commentaries on the play[3] say nothing of Zagagi's treatment of

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[1]   *Tradition and Originality in Plautus* (*Hypomnemata* 62 (1980)) 35 f.
[2]   *Dionysiaca* (Page Festschrift, 1978) 159-162, esp. 161 = *Euripidea* 176-80, esp. 178.
[3]   P. Burian (Aris and Phillips 2007) and W. Allan (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics 2008). R. Kannicht's meritorious commentary (Heidelberg 1970) of course appeared too early to be able to refer to Zagagi's findings.

the stanza; and a recent chapter on the stanza[4], advancing an extraordinarily elaborate and ingenious, detailed and ambitious, interpretation, likewise ignores her findings and rejects Diggle's conjecture. Whether these three scholars were unaware of or unpersuaded by Zagagi's arguments I do not enquire.

Stylistically, as Zagagi famously showed, a mythological hyperbole conveys its ideas by comparative and/or superlative adjectives together with a verb of superiority or transcendence: e.g. 'x and y are apparently examples of the worst sufferings/greatest achievements; but my (or someone else's) sufferings/achievements go beyond theirs.' So in our passage, the sufferings of earlier heroines (Callisto and the daughter of Merops) are contrasted with those of the singer, Helen, than whose sufferings theirs are declared to be less. 'There is a common link between these three … their beauty which destroyed them all'.[5] Zagagi has discussed and exemplified this 'hyperbolic comparison with a mythological character formulated using the comparative form'. The only modification worth mentioning is that the comparative form in question much more often assumes the form 'they say that x and y have suffered greatly, but I have suffered more'. In the present instance, however, we find 'x and y have suffered, certainly, but their good fortune in contrast to mine is greater [='I have suffered more']'. In spite of this formal difference, the equivalence of the modes of expression should be clear to all.

We may set down the features of the stanza which are idiomatic in the context of mythological hyperboles (Zagagi omits some of them, possibly as being too obvious). ποτε in vv. 375 and 381 is, of course, extremely common in mythological paradeigmata in general,[6] but for its use in mythological hyperboles in particular cf. Soph. *Phil.* 678 (the chorus juxtaposes the sufferings of Ixion with those of Philoctetes) and Eur. *Hyps.* fr. 752 h Kannicht (=Diggle, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta Selecta* p. 141) in the context of a contrast between the sufferings of Procris and the speaker, Hypsipyle. In v. 382 of our passage the name of the daughter of Merops is not supplied, which has given rise to considerable speculation[7] as to what it was. This allusiveness too is idiomatic in mythological paradeigmata in general.[8] It may even be the case that in the very first line of our stanza Kallisto should be deleted as a gloss, thus achieving the same allusive technique.[9]

Most idiomatic of all is the phrase that opens the final sentence of the stanza (v. 383): τὸ δ᾽ἐμὸν δέμας. Some such words, with the same adversative particle, often conclude a mythological hyperbole,[10] when the character uttering it is contrasting her greater sufferings. So at Aesch. *Ag*.1149 Cassandra contrasts her own woe with that of the metamorphosed Itys: ἐμοὶ δὲ μίμνει σχισμὸς ἀμφήκει δορί. Or at Soph. *El.* 847 the heroine points out the differences between her agonies and those of Amphiaraus in a clause beginning ἐμοὶ δ᾽ οὔτις ἔτ᾽ ἔσθ᾽ ὃς γὰρ ἔτ᾽ ἦν φροῦδος ἀναρπασθείς. And in the

4   D. B. Robinson, 'Stars and heroines in Euripides' Helen 375-85' in *Dionysalexandros* (Garvie Festschrift 2006) 151-72.
5   Diggle (as in n. 2) 160 = 178 n. 2.
6   See my remarks in *CQ* 56 (2006) 585 n. 17.
7   See esp. Robinson (as in n. 4) 157-9.
8   See my remarks in *ZPE* 72 (1988) 42.
9   Diggle (as in n. 2) argues for its retention on the ground of etymology.
10   In this respect the adversative particle has similarities to the same particle when it marks the climax of a Priamel: see my commentary on Sophocles *Trachiniae* 1062.

fragmentary context of Eur. *Hyps.* fr. 752h 5 Kannicht (=Diggle, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta Selecta* p. 141 v. 107) τὰ δ'ἐμά πάθ[εα seems to be how the heroine introduces the differences between the sufferings of Procris and her own.[11] So Kannicht on the *Helen*'s passage rightly interprets τὸ δ'ἐμὸν δέμας[12] as referring to Helen's own suffering.

The same sentiment as the statement which ends the stanza (and, perhaps, formally concludes the second mythological exemplum) is expressed at v. 377, in the middle of the Callisto exemplum, if we accept, as I am convinced we should, Diggle's κηρός for μητρός. The anticipation of the point made at v. 383 f. should rank as unexceptionable: as Zagagi has rightly said,[13] in general 'Euripides sought modes of expression that would enable him to bring out *as clearly as possible the element of hyperbole underlying such comparisons*' (italics mine), in contrast to the more allusive hyperbolic technique of Aeschylus and Sophocles. And of our passage in particular she says, again rightly, 'the comparison is couched in plain terms'. But, not knowing of Diggle's emendation, she is obliged to contradict herself by accepting the paradosis in v. 377, of which she has to confess[14] Leda's 'fate is not specified here by Helen', in an unspecific manner that would be very unusual for a Euripidean hyperbole.

We may re-enforce this contrast by appealing to a Sophoclean mythological hyperbole which has eluded comparison in this context, probably by very virtue of its allusiveness. But the passage in question does actually supply the closest formal parallel to what stands at the start of the *Helen*'s stanza: a mythological hyperbole that commences with an apostrophe of the heroine with whom the character uttering the words is contrasting herself, an apostrophe taken up by a relative clause. The passage to be compared is Soph. *El.* 150-2 ἰὼ παντλάμων Νιόβα, σὲ δ'ἔγωγε νέμω θεόν / ἅτ'ἐν τάφῳ πετραίῳ, / αἰαῖ, δακρύεις. The passage is problematic (see Finglass' commentary *ad loc.*). Probably the most satisfactory interpretation is that of Jebb in his commentary:

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11   Bond on vv. 2 ff. says 'δέ in 5 indicates a clear contrast: Procris had someone to mourn her fate. Hypsipyle is alone, there is none to weep for her; this must be the meaning of τίς ἂν ἢ γόος ἢ μέλος … ἔλθοι;

12   In light of the Euripidean use of δέμας + genitive as periphrasis (LSJ s.v.I. 2, Harder on *Archelaus* fr. 2A 16) one might initially feel inclined to regard Helen's reference to her δέμας as equivalent to 'I', and thus even more closely related to the ἐμοί of the Aeschylean passages just cited. But given that physical beauty is the feature Helen shares with Callisto and the daughter of Merops (see n. 5 above), it is likelier that δέμας has some such connotation here. Cf. Willink on Eur. *Or.* 107: 'the periphrasis … alludes to the "physical person", aptly here in relation to 98 ff.'.

13   As above (n. 1) p. 45. The following quote comes from p. 35. Note also p. 36 on 'the clarity of the representation of the facts on both sides' in Euripidean hyperboles. The text produced by Diggle's emendation slightly contradicts a generalisation made by T. C. W. Stinton, *CQ* 29 (1979) 253 = *Collected Papers on Greek Trage*dy p. 386 (in the course of his persuasive demonstration that the third strophe and antistrophe of the first stasimon of Aeschylus' *Choephori* should be reversed).The generalisation runs: 'when a series of mythological examples is invoked, the point to be illustrated always comes before or after them, or both — never in the middle'. I prefer contradiction of this rule to the anomaly of a brief insertion in passing of a further irrelevant exemplum.

14   Zagagi (as in n. 1) 36.

Electra 'means μακροτάτην … Niobe is happy in the highest, the divine sense, because by her permanent grief, she is true to the memory of those whom she has lost'. Similarly Kaibel *ad loc*. Both compare the opening phrase of the most famous poem by Sappho 32.1 ἴσος θεοῖσιν. If v. 150 is to be taken (with Jebb and Kaibel implicitly and Finglass explicitly) as a (paradoxical) *makarismos*, the similarity to *Helen* 375 ὦ μάκαρ … παρθένε is remarkably close.[15] The Sophoclean instance is, as implied above, much more allusive and concentrated than the Euripidean, but that difference is in keeping with Zagagi's above-cited distinction between Euripides' aim 'to bring out as clearly as possible the element of hyperbole' and 'the more allusive hyperbole technique of … Sophocles'.

Let us then consider the consequences of Diggle's small change. Accepting it, we encounter another idiomatic expression. As it happens the closest formal parallel[16] is Plautus' *Bacchides* fr. 15 **verum** *hic adulescens* **multo** *Ulixen anteit*, where we find not only the idiomatic adversative *verum* equivalent to the δέ considered above, but also *multo* equivalent to πολύ[17] (though here the sufferings or achievements in question are not the speaker's). Lists of mythological exempla more usually involve two than three figures. So, for instance, Eur. *Her*. 1016-27, where the daughters of Danaus killed their husbands; and Procne killed her own daughter; but Heracles' murder of his wife and all their children transcends these atrocities. Or from the world of Roman Comedy (with a reminder that the Greco-Roman culture made no serious distinction between myth and history, and that the pattern encompasses achievements as well as sufferings) Plautus' *Mostellaria* 775-7 *Alexandrum magnum atque Agathoclem aiunt maximas / duo res gesisse. Quid mihi fiet tertio/ qui solus facio facinora immortalia?* Even in cases where the number of exempla to be transcended does amount to three, as in the first stasimon of Aeschylus' *Choephori* with Althaea, Scylla and the women of Lemnos, the amount of space allotted to each is roughly equivalent: there is simply no parallel for the brief parenthetic interjection to which the reference to Leda in the unemended passage from the *Helen* would amount.

The whole logic of mythological hyperbole is that it emphasises the speaker's greater misery, and this emphasis would not exactly be helped in the present instance by the complicating dimension of Leda. Her retention raises distracting issues such as that Callisto and the daughter of Merops 'were in animal form but Leda was not', or that Callisto and Merops' daughter 'were happier than Leda because they were rewarded with catasterism', or that 'at the first level … Euripides wanted his hearers to think … "how generous of Helen to wish for catasterism for Leda when the myth never provided

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[15]   Perhaps the compressed thought-sequence becomes marginally clearer if we accept (with e.g. Jebb) in v. 152 the *v.l.* αἰέν for αἰαί: the *makarismos* is obscured by the negative connotations of a cry of woe. Electra is portraying Niobe as happy in being able (unlike herself) to lament *constantly* in her rocky tomb.

[16]   It is interesting to compare Zagagi's own language in summing up the effect of Aesch. *Ag*. cited above: Cassandra's 'misery has *by far* [my italics] surpassed Procne's sad fate'.

[17]   The various emendations of this line proposed by Kannicht ('fort. potius ὡς τότ'ἐμᾶς μοίρας vel ὡς τὸτ' ἐμοῦ μελέας vel sim.') must be ruled out since *inter al*. they eliminate the idiomatic πολύ. They are intended to clarify that the 'differing' referred to is Helen's, but this is already achieved in the paradosis' employment of mythological hyperbole.

for it"'.[18] On the contrary, as we have seen, at the first level Euripides wanted his hearers to notice the mythological hyperbole he was, not for the first time, employing, and they would be distracted from this by the other considerations so eloquently evoked in the passages just quoted. In this context I recall the wise words of the late Robin Nisbet:[19]

> if we are familiar with the literary conventions that apply to a particular type of poem [read 'passage' for our purposes] we shall be less tempted to look for extraneous interpretations … We have to block out extraneous associations as if they were background noises that must not be allowed to interfere with our conversation with the author.

Robin Nisbet was, as it happens, one of the scholars who helped Netta Zagagi with the doctoral thesis in Oxford from which *Tradition and Originality in Plautus* developed. I hope the above few pages will serve as a not totally inadequate tribute both to the career of the scholar who has been so prematurely taken from us, and to her most important and original contribution to our studies.

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[18] These quotations are taken from Robinson's article (n. 4 above), 156, 163, and 165 respectively.

[19] *Collected Papers* (Oxford 1995) 421 and 428.