

MYTHOLOGICAL HYPERBOLES AND PLAUTUS

In the first chapter of my book *Tradition and Originality in Plautus: Studies of the Amatory Motifs in Plautine Comedy*,¹ I have expressed the view that mythological hyperboles in which the Comic character asserts his superiority in one respect or another to a mythological hero, far from being a product of Plautus' own imagination, as suggested by E. Fraenkel,² are a specifically Greek element, adapted by Plautus from his originals. Here I should like to draw attention to one particular aspect of the pattern of thought in question, not dealt with in my book, which reinforces my argument and further underlines the traditional framework of which this pattern forms part. I refer to those 'pointless challenges to deities',³ a typical Epic motif, of which the following examples may serve as an illustration:

- (1) Agamemnon's challenge to Artemis (*Cypria*, ap. Procl. *Chrest.*):

Καὶ τὸ δεύτερον ἡθροισμένου τοῦ στόλου ἐν Αὐλίδι Ἀγαμέμνων ἐπὶ θήρας βαλὼν ἔλαφον ὑπερβάλλειν ἔφησε καὶ τὴν Ἀρτεμιν.

- (2) Thamyras' challenge to the Muses (Hom. *Il.* 2.297–8):

στεῦτο γὰρ εὐχόμενος νικησέμεν, εἴ περ ἂν αὐταὶ
Μοῦσαι ἀείδοιεν, κοῦραι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο

- (3) Niobe's challenge to Leto (Hom. *Il.* 24.607–8):

οὐνεκ' ἄρα Λητοὶ ἰσάσκετο καλλιπαρῆω·
φῆ δ'οῖω τεκέειν, ἥ δ' αὐτὴ γείνατο πολλούς·

- (4) Eurytos' challenge to Apollo (Hom. *Od.* 8.223–8):⁴

ἀνδράσι δὲ προτέροισιν ἐριζέμεν οὐκ ἐβέλῃσω,
οὔθ' Ἡρακλῆϊ οὔτ' Εὐρύτῳ Οἰχαλιῇ,
οἳ ῥα καὶ ἀθανάτοισιν ἐρίζεσκον περὶ τόξων.
τῷ ῥα καὶ αἰψ' ἔθανεν μέγας Εὐρυτος, οὐδ' ἐπὶ γῆρας
ἵκετ' ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν· χολωσάμενος γὰρ Ἀπόλλων
ἔκτανεν, οὐνεκά μιν προκαλίζετο τοξάζεσθαι.

Cf. Eurytos' challenge to Herakles in Soph. *Trach.* 265–6:⁵

λέγων χεροῖν μὲν ὥς ἄφυκτ' ἔχων βέλη
τῶν ὧν τέκνων λείποιτο πρὸς τόξου κρίσιν.

The notion underlying these boastful challenges is analogous to that involving the speaker's assertion of his superiority to a mythological hero. Note the use of verbs denoting superiority for expressing the hyperbolic comparison in two of the above quoted examples,⁶ which corresponds to the formula attested in Plautus.⁷ In these challenges to deities we have one of the earliest presentations of hyperbolic mythological comparisons to have come down to us through Greek literary tradition.

Tel-Aviv University

NETTA ZAGAGI

¹ *Hypomnemata* 62 (Göttingen, 1980).

² *Plautinisches im Plautus* (Berlin, 1922), Ch. I (= *Elementi plautini in Plauto*, trsl. by F. Munari; Firenze, 1960).

³ G. S. Kirk, *The Iliad: a Commentary* (Cambridge, 1985), i, 216.

⁴ Line 223 may be regarded as an inversion of the mythological hyperboles in question. See also M. Davies, *Hermes* 113 (1985), 247–9.

⁵ For a recent discussion of the Sophoclean passage see M. Davies, *CQ* 34 (1984), 480–3.

⁶ Ex. 1: ὑπερβάλλειν; Ex. 2: νικησέμεν. See next note.

⁷ Treated by Fraenkel as a criterion of Plautine originality (*ibid.*). On this question see Zagagi, *op. cit.* 16, 28, 38ff., 46ff., 50. For ὑπερβάλλειν see *op. cit.* 39, 49, 60 n. 139; for νικᾶν, 47f.