

TRAGIC IRONY IN OVID, *HEROIDES* 9 AND 11

I

A dominant theme in the ninth of the *Heroides*, Deianira's letter to Hercules, is Deianira's indignation that Hercules has been defeated by a woman: first by Iole (especially in the first part of the letter: for example, lines 2, 5f., 11f., 25f.); then by Omphale (especially in the section 103–18). The theme is exploited so insistently that Vessey, who regards the epistle as spurious, sees in this insistence a sign of the forger's clumsiness.¹ I consider the exploitation of the motive of 'victor victus' in *Heroides* 9, on the contrary, as a strong sign of Ovidian authorship. From the very beginning of the letter, the reader is reminded that if a woman, Iole, has metaphorically destroyed Hercules, another woman is on the point of destroying Hercules in a much more real and literal way, and this woman is none other than Deianira herself. When Deianira writes the letter, she has just sent to Hercules the garment soaked in Nessus' poison that will provoke Hercules' horrible death (see 143–68): thus Deianira, rather than Iole or Omphale, is the woman who vanquishes the unvanquished hero. But this is not only a matter of dramatic irony based on the general lines of the story. *Heroides* 9 is an elegiac rewriting of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (it is no coincidence that the letter opens with an allusion to Propertius 3.11),² and at the same time is inserted in the time and the 'body' of the tragedy. Ironic prefiguration in *Heroides* is normally realized through intertextual anticipation: the future events that are prefigured are present in the texts of the model epic or tragedy.³ Deianira blames Hercules for his defeat:

quem numquam Iuno seriesque immensa laborum
fregerit, huic Iolen imposuisse iugum (Her. 9.5f.)

quem non mille ferae, quem non Stheneleius hostis,
non potuit Iuno vincere, vincit amor. (Her. 9.25f.)

¹ D. T. C. W. Vessey, 'Notes on Ovid, *Heroides* 9', *CQ* 19 (1969), 349–61, pp. 351f. For a detailed discussion of Deianira's epistle, see now my commentary (*P. Ovidii Nasonis Heroidum Epistula IX: Deianira Herculi*, a cura di S.C. [Florence, 1995]).

² The theme of 'victor victus' is obviously very common. But in line 2 'victorem victae' is surely allusive to Prop. 3.11.16 'vicit victorem candida forma virum' (Penthesilea and Achilles): the example of a woman ruler which follows is actually Omphale, who enslaved Hercules (Prop. 3.11.17–20). This is a passage that the new elegiac Deianira 'knows' very well, just as she clearly knows Prop. 4.9.45–49. The opening distich of Deianira's letter ('gratulor Oechaliam titulis accedere nostris, / victorem victae succubuisse queror') has a programmatic value: the elegiac *querela* is superimposed to the 'epic' boast, but it is paradoxical that the very foundation of the elegiac code, the *servitium amoris*, is censured not only by means of the programmatic *queror*, but even through the allusion to Prop. 3.11, i.e. to an elegy aimed at justifying the *servitium amoris* (3.11.1 'quid mirare meam si versat femina vitam?') and in which Hercules himself is mentioned as an exemplary model for the elegiac lover submitted to his *domina*.

³ For the concept of 'elegiac rewriting' (or better 'elegiac transcodification'), in *Heroides*, and for that of 'ironic prefiguration realized through intertextual anticipation', see D. F. Kennedy, 'The Epistolary Mode and the First of Ovid's *Heroides*', *CQ* 34 (1984), 413–22; A. Barchiesi, 'Narratività e convenzione nelle *Heroides*', *MD* 19 (1987), 63–90 = *P. Ovidii Nasonis Heroidum Epistulae 1–3*, a cura di A.B. (Florence, 1992), pp. 15–41 (fundamental); S. Casali, 'Enone, Apollo pastore e l'amore immedicabile', *MD* 28 (1992), 85–100, esp. 85–94; A. Cucchiarelli, 'Ma il giudice delle dee non era un pastore?', *MD* 34 (1995), 135–152.

But the words of Deianira are nothing but a metaphorical (elegiac) adaptation of words which will be uttered by Hercules himself in his lament in *Trachiniae*, when he is tormented by the fatal gift sent by Deianira:

ὦ πολλὰ δὴ καὶ θερμά, καὶ λόγῳ κακά,
καὶ χερσὶ καὶ νώτοισι μοχθήσας ἐγὼ
κοῦπω τοιοῦτον οὐτ' ἀκοίτις ἡ Διὸς
προῦθηκεν οὐθ' ὁ στυγνὸς Εὐρυσθεὺς ἐμοὶ
οἶον τόδ' ἡ δολῶπις Οἰνέως κόρη
καθῆψεν ὥμοις τοῖς ἐμοῖς Ἐρινύων
ὕφαντὸν ἀμφίβληστρον, ὃ δίολλυμαι. (Trach. 1046–52)

[Many and savage, even evil to relate, have been the labours of my arms and my back! And never yet has the wife of Zeus or hateful Eurystheus set such a thing upon me as the woven covering of the Erinyes which the daughter of Oeneus with beguiling face has put upon my shoulders, by which I am perishing'.⁴

κοῦ ταῦτα λόγῳ πεδιάς, οὐθ' ὁ γηγενὴς
στρατὸς Γιγάντων, οὔτε θήρειος βία,
οὐθ' Ἑλλάς, οὐτ' ἀγλωσσος, οὐθ' ὅσσην ἐγὼ
γαίαν καθαίρων ἰκόμην, ἐδρασέ πω
γυνὴ δέ, θῆλυς οὐσα κἄνανδρὸς φύσιν,
μόνη με καθεῖλε φασγάνου δίχα. (Trach. 1058–63)⁵

[The spearmen of the plain never did such a thing, nor the earth-born army of the giants, not the violence of the monsters, nor Greece, nor the Barbarian lands, nor every country that I came to in my purifying work. But a woman, a female and unmanly in her nature, alone has brought me down, without a sword.]

The reader recognizes the ironic truth that Hercules will be destroyed by a woman: not by Iole, but by Deianira herself. This is the constitutive paradox of *Heroides*: narrating tragic events in elegiac language is a dangerous operation. Elegiac rewriting does not cancel the tragic nature of the events. Indeed, just where the reader seems to be 'turned away' from tragedy by means of a particular concentration of elegiac language and imagery (here, of course, Hercules is none other than the Propertian *servus amoris*), precisely there he is made to recall with attention the model text (and its continuation): a bitter return to anti-elegiac events.⁶

In the digression about Hercules' stay with Omphale, Deianira dwells on reproaching the hero for the luxurious and effeminate clothes he wears: but the reader knows that Deianira's indignation is quite out of place: the clothes that have just been 'suggested' by Deianira herself will be much more dangerous for Hercules than those of the Lydian queen. While Deianira condemns Omphale's garments, which destroy Hercules' reputation, she has already sent him a garment that will destroy, literally, his life. Again, ironic prefiguration makes use of intertextual anticipation:

non puduit fortes auro cohibere lacertos,
et solidis gemmas opposuisse toris?
nempe sub his animam pestis Nemeaea lacertis
edidit, unde umerus tegmina laevis habet! (Her. 9.59–62)

⁴ Translations by H. Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

⁵ An important medium between Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and Ovid's rewriting is Cicero's translation of Hercules' Sophoclean lament: see Cic. *poet. frg.* 34.1–5 Buechner: 'o multa dictu gravia, perpersu aspera / quae corpore exanclata atque animo pertuli / nec mihi Iunonis terroris inplacabilis / nec tantum invexit tristis Eurystheus mali, / quantum una vecors Oenei partu edita ...'; 12–8 'hos non hostilis dextra, non terra edita / moles Gigantum, non biformato impetu / Centaurus ictus corpori infixit meo, / non Graia vis, non barbara ulla inmanitas, / non saeva terris gens relegata ultimis, / quas peragrans undique omnem ecferitatem expuli, / sed feminae vir feminea interimor manu'. The same Priamel is also found in a monologue of Hercules dying, in *TrGF* adesp. F 653.54–7 Kannicht-Snell.

⁶ See Casali (n. 3), 93f.

anticipate Hercules' words in his lament, when his arms are burned by Nessus' garment:

ὦ χέρες χέρες
ὦ νῶτα καὶ στέρν', ὦ φίλοι βραχίονες,
ὕμεις ἐκείνοι δὴ καθέσταθ', οἳ ποτε
Νεμέας ἐνοικον, βουκόλων ἀλάστορα,
λέοντ', ἄπλατον θρέμμα κἄπροσῆγορον,
βίᾳ κατειργάσασθε

(Trach. 1089–94)⁷

[O hands, hands, O back and shoulders, O dear arms, are you they that once by force subdued the dweller in Nemea, the scourge of herdsmen, the lion, a creature none could approach and none confront?]

Deianira harshly accuses Hercules of effeminacy (e.g. line 65 'lascivae more puellae'; 106 'quod tu non esses, iure vir illa fuit'): but her charges anticipate the words of Hercules himself. In his death-struggle, Hercules will say that he has become a woman because of the horrible pains that compel him to weep and moan:

ἴθ', ὦ τέκνον, τόλμησον· οἴκτιρόν τέ με
πολλοῖσιν οἴκτρον, ὅστις ὥστε παρθένος
βέβρυχα κλαίων, καὶ τόδ' οὐδ' ἂν εἰς ποτε
τόνδ' ἄνδρα φαίη πρόσθ' ἰδεῖν δεδρακότα,
ἀλλ' ἀστένακτος αἰὲν εἰκόμην κακοῖς.
νῦν δ' ἐκ τοιούτου θῆλυς ἡῤῥημαι τάλας.

(Trach. 1070–75)

[Come, my son, bring yourself to do it! Pity me, pitiable in many ways, I who am crying out, weeping like a girl, and no one can say he saw this man do such a thing before, but though racked with torments I never would lament! But now such a thing has shown me as a womanish creature.]

(cf. Cic. *poet. frg.* 34.27 Buechner 'ecfeminata virtus').⁸

The reader cannot appreciate the sense of *Heroides* 9 without constantly bearing in mind the fact that, while Deianira writes the letter, the addressee is dying through the action of the sender herself. When, in line 17, Deianira says:

quod te laturum est, caelum prius ipse tulisti,

the reader has to recognize the tragic irony in these words: Hercules is really on the point of being received into heaven, in a very short time (after all, such encomiastic expressions were always somewhat dangerous: cf. Serv. *G.* 1.24, where Vergil uses an ambiguous *mox*: 'Vergilium ... aviditate laudandi citum interitum Augusto optasse'; it was advisable to make use of the 'serus in caelum redeas' topos).

In lines 43f. Deianira complains at her loneliness:

mater abest queriturque deo placuisse potenti,
nec pater Amphitryon nec puer Hyllus adest.

Alcmena's absence is noticed, en passant, in *Trachiniae* 1151f. (and the reader cannot refrain from thinking that Hercules' mother will soon have much more motivation for her lament); Amphitryon's absence is quite irrelevant (he is not mentioned in *Trachiniae*, and in the main tradition he is already dead at this time);⁹ but what about

⁷ Cf. Cic. *poet. frg.* 34.34f. Buechner 'o pectora, o terga, o lacertorum tori, / vestrone pressu quondam Nemeaeus leo / frendens efflavit graviter extremum halitum?'.
⁸ This is the real meaning of the 'perverse relationship' noticed with some perplexity by H. Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides* (Princeton, 1974), p. 239 n. 32 ('the theme of the effeminate Hercules may have a perverse relationship to Trach. 1075, θῆλυς ἡῤῥημαι').
⁹ 'He was slain in battle with the Minyae before Deianira's marriage' (A. Palmer [Oxford, 1898] ad 1.); but see Eur. *Herc.* 49f., 220, where he is still alive after this battle; cf. *RE* 1.1968.67ff.

Hyllos' absence? Is that irrelevant too? The reader must recollect why Hyllos is away: he has just been sent by Deianira in search of news about his father (see *Trach.* 49–93). The absence of Hyllos is actually the prelude to a disaster: he will give Deianira the news of Hercules' death agony.¹⁰

In *Heroides* 9.115f. Deianira is filled with indignation to think that a woman, Omphale, has carried the most dangerous of Hercules' weapons:

femina tela tulit Lernaeis atra venenis,
ferre gravem lana vix satis apta colum.

But the reader knows that Omphale is not the only woman who has handled Hydra's poison. If Deianira knew that to handle Hercules' arrows was a risky business, owing to the Hydra's deadly poison (as was shown in Chiron's fatal accident: cf. *Ov. Fast.* 5.397f. 'dumque senex tractat squalentia terga venenis, / excidit et laevo fixa sagitta pede est'), she would therefore guess that Nessus' blood (and with it the soaked garment), containing that poison ('tela ... Lernaeis atra venenis'!), would be equally lethal. Ovid reproduces here the tragic irony of Sophocles: in *Trachiniai* Deianira, sharing the tragic unconsciousness of Ovid's heroine, reports Nessus' words: the Centaur had told her to collect his blood ἡ μελάγχολος / ἔβαψεν ἰὸς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας (lines 573f. ['where the poison's black gall, the creation of the hydra of Lerna, dyed it']).¹¹ Deianira will understand too late what her own words implied:

ἐγὼ δύστηνος ἐξαποφθερῶ·
τὸν γὰρ βάλλοντ' ἀτρακτον οἶδα καὶ θεὸν
Χείρωνα πημῆναντα, χῶνπερ ἄν θίγη,
φθείρει τὰ πάντα κνώδαλ'. ἐκ δὲ τοῦδ' ὅδε
σφαγῶν διελθὼν ἰὸς αἵματος μέλας
πῶς οὐκ ὀλεῖ καὶ τόνδε; δόξῃ γοῦν ἐμῇ. (Trach. 713–18)

[I, miserable one, shall be his ruin; I know that the arrow that struck him tormented even Chiron, who was immortal, and it destroys all the beasts whom it touches. How shall the black poison of the blood, coming from the fatal wound, not destroy my husband also? That is my belief.]

In the same way here too, in line 163, Deianira will understand: but too late: 'illita Nesseo misi tibi texta veneno'.

In lines 139–42 Deianira reminds Hercules that he once loved her, and reminds him that he fought for her twice: against Achelous and against Nessus. The mention of the fight with Nessus comes immediately before the news of Hercules' death agony reaches Deianira, a death agony caused, of course, by the same fight.

This sounds somehow exaggerated: almost a parody of tragic irony. Actually Ovid condenses in three distichs the long and complex narrative development of *Trachiniai*, which begins with the first stasimon: the fight with Achelous (497–530), with tragic

¹⁰ The news of Hercules' death is given to Deianira by a 'nuntia ... / fama' (lines 143f.). *Heroides* 9 is an elegiac transcodification of a tragedy: it is inserted in a precise point of the model-text, but also sets out to include in itself the whole of the model-text. In an elegiac epistle there is no space for messengers' speeches: they become *famae*, which articulate the letter's text (see lines 3, 119, 143), just as tragedy is articulated by messengers' speeches. *Nuntia fama* is a Vergilian phrase (*Aen.* 4.188, 9.471; in Ovid cf. *Her.* 6.9, 16.38, *Met.* 14.726, *Pont.* 4.4.15f.; in later epic Val. Fl. 1.46f., Stat. *Theb.* 6.1). But here *nuntia*, said of *fama*, alludes exactly to messengers' (here, Hyllos') speeches (for this technical use of *nuntius*, i.e. messengers' *rhexis*, see e.g. *Rhet. Her.* 4.7). There is the same allusion to this technical use in another epistle that rewrites a tragedy: *Her.* 12.146 'quis vellet tanti nuntius esse mali?', i.e. 'who could want to reveal something so terrible?', but also: 'who could want to play the rôle of *ἄγγελος*'.

¹¹ This is a disputed passage: but, whatever interpretation we may accept, the ominous sense does not change: see M. Halleran, 'Repetition and Irony at Sophocles, *Trachiniai* 574–81', *CP* 83 (1988), 129–31, on tragic irony in ἔβαψεν.

irony, prepares the reader for the other, dramatically more important, fight, the combat with Nessus, which will be at the centre of the play until Hyllos' arrival. Here, everything is compressed in three distichs: too compressed.

Consider now lines 141f.:

semivir occubuit in letifero Eveno
Nessus et infecit sanguis equinus aquas.¹²

Why 'letifero'? Literally, Deianira defines the river Evenus as *letifer* because it has actually been the cause of Nessus' death: the river was in flood and so provoked the Centaur's 'helpful' (and fatal) intervention. But, at a second level, the reader must recognize that (tragic irony) the epithet is also well-suited to Evenus as *letifer* for Hercules.¹³

Tragic irony continues in the following line. Deianira uses for the death of Nessus the well-known topos of the μάχη παραποτάμιος: the image of blood staining the waters. However, the reader knows that Nessus' blood does not limit itself to 'colouring' the waters, but most probably poisoned them (*inficio*, of course, means also 'to poison'): for the effect of the Centaurs' blood infected by Hydra's poison on the water of a river, see e.g. Ov. *Met.* 15.281–4, where Pythagoras speaks about metamorphosing rivers: Anigros' waters are no longer drinkable, after 'illic lavere bimembres / vulnera, clavigeri quae fecerat Herculis arcus' (*Met.* 15.283f.). It is probably not coincidental that *inficere* is used also for the dyeing of garments (*TLL* 7.1.1411.48–61): Deianira says that Nessus' blood has coloured the waters, just as, with that same blood, she has coloured the garment sent to Hercules. Tragic irony is particularly pointed here, because Deianira speaks in deliberately ambiguous terms: in fact, she knows very well that not *all* the blood from Nessus' wound has gone to colour the waters of the river. Deianira consciously keeps silent about the fact that part of Nessus' blood has been preserved by herself and has not dispersed in the waters of Evenus.

To summarize: Deianira says that Nessus' blood has coloured Evenus' waters (i.e. Evenus is *letifer* for Nessus), but 'thinks' that actually that magic blood has dyed Hercules' garment; the reader, on the contrary, knows that Nessus' blood has poisoned both the waters of Evenus¹⁴ and Hercules' garment.

II

In a recent article, in which he examines the structure of Euripides' *Aiolos*, Gareth Williams¹⁵ has convincingly demonstrated the dramatic irony characterizing Canace's letter in Ovid's *Heroides*. Canace writes to Macareus immediately prior to committing suicide, as ordered by her father Aeolus, who has discovered that she and her brother have had a child. However, the reader who is familiar with Euripides' *Aiolos* knows that at the very moment Canace is busy lamenting her father's immovable cruelty and the inexorability of her fate, Macareus is pleading for her life with Aeolus. The reader

¹² 'In letifero Eveno' is the text restored by Heinsius. **P** and **G** *ante corr.* have 'in letiferoque veneno'; they both are corrected in 'in lerniferoque veneno', that is the reading attested in the majority of the MSS. (note that *Eveno* plays on the sound of *veneno*: that the word is a possible substitute to remove the hiatus is no coincidence). For the discussion of the question and of the lengthening in *occubuit*, see G. Rosati, 'Note al testo delle *Heroides*', *MD* 24 (1990), 161–5.

¹³ For this point, see A. Barchiesi, quoted in Rosati (n. 12), 165 n. 16.

¹⁴ It is likely, if not attested, that Evenus, like Anigrus, becomes literally *letifer* after contact with Nessus' poison.

¹⁵ 'Ovid's Canace: Dramatic Irony in *Heroides* 11', *CQ* 42 (1992), 201–9.

also knows that Macareus' pleas are successful: Aeolus annuls the death-sentence and Macareus rushes to bring the news to her sister, but too late. Canace is dead and Macareus kills himself in his turn beside his sister's dead body.

Williams has very clearly shown how this situation affects our reading of the letter (pp. 207–9). However, it seems to me that something still remains to be said. For Canace's is not the only life at stake. In his anger Aeolus has not only decided the death of Canace; he has also ordered her son to be given as prey to the wild beasts (83–90). Canace laments the child's bitter fate in a moving passage that has melted many a critic.¹⁶ Now, I think that the irony uncovered by Williams places this passage too in a different light. For if Aeolus revokes Canace's death-sentence, then he is more than likely to go back also on his decision to expose the child to the wild beasts. Having forgiven the mother, why persecute the child?¹⁷ If the child too is pardoned, then the letter's dramatic irony becomes all the more telling. Thus, Canace writes of Aeolus' inflexibility and of the consequent inevitability of her own submission to his will, when his father has in reality already changed his mind and decided to forgive her. Similarly, she bids Macareus cherish her memory (125 'vive memor nostri'), whereas he will kill himself with the same sword as was used by his sister. Again, Canace is desperate at the thought of the horrible death awaiting her son, when in reality he is the only one of the three to survive.

But above all, in my opinion, one thing must be borne in mind. Williams (pp. 207f.) remarks that the irony of the situation also affects the reader's understanding of Canace's allusive language in line 7. She wishes her father could see her while she writes the letter, with her pen in one hand and the sword she is to kill herself with in the other: 'ipse necis cuperem nostrae spectator adesset'. This line is an evident imitation of the words uttered by Turnus when he taunts Pallas in *Aen.* 10.443: 'cuperem ipse parens spectator adesset'. 'But' Williams points out 'the imminence of Canace's death gives the allusion in line 7 an ironical twist for two reasons. First, unlike Turnus' merciless slaying of Pallas, Canace's death can be seen both as avoidable and needless in view of Aeolus' change of heart. Secondly, Aeolus cannot be there to watch Canace die precisely because at the very moment of her death we are to imagine him elsewhere, giving in to Macareus' appeals on her behalf'.

Now this is not the only passage in the letter in which Canace expresses herself by means of allusion, though commentators have strangely failed to notice this. In the second passage too the allusion is explicitly to the *Aeneid*, and to a phrase referring to Pallas. In lamenting her son's sad fate Canace says (line 114):

haec tibi prima dies, haec tibi summa fuit.

While here is how Virgil had lamented the death of Pallas (*Aen.* 10.508):

haec te prima dies bello dedit, haec eadem auferit.

If the first allusion to Virgil has the ironical implications remarked by Williams, then the second is also likely to be intended ironically. Just as in the former Canace's death

¹⁶ See, for example, L. C. Purser, in Palmer (n. 9), p. xix ('The poet [...] has no part here, the mother has it all'); Palmer, pp. 381 and 385; L. P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Surveyed* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 39. It goes without saying that all this emotion is highly suspicious. Florence Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart: Epistulae Heroidum* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 224ff. has a much more 'Ovidian' approach.

¹⁷ Though on the basis of quite other considerations, the possibility that Canace's son is spared at the end of Euripides' *Aiolos* was pointed out by H. Lloyd-Jones, *Gnomon* 35 (1963), 444; see also T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London, 1967), p. 159. H. Jacobson (n. 8), p. 162 n. 14) is over-hasty in his scepticism.

does not share the inevitability of that of Pallas, so here too it is not actually the child's first and last day of life. Again, just as Aeolus is not in fact the cruel and implacable assassin which the comparison to Turnus would make him, so here too while Canace laments her son's fate, Aeolus, unlike the unyielding Turnus, is in the process of changing his mind and deciding to save the child's life. Thus the child, who had already survived Canace's attempted abortion, is once more shown to be 'nimium vivax', as described in line 43f.: 'a! nimium vivax admotis restitit infans / artibus et tecto tutus ab hoste fuit'. Canace should have had more faith in her son's powers of survival.

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