

SHORTER NOTES

EURIPIDES, *TROADES* 1050: WAS HELEN OVERWEIGHT?

- Με. παῦσαι, γεραιά· τῆσδε δ' οὐκ ἐφρόντισα.
λέγω δὲ προσπόλοισι πρὸς πρύμνας νεῶν
τήνδ' ἐκκομίζεω, ἔνθα ναυστολήσεται.
- Εκ. μὴ νυν νεῶς σοὶ ταῦτ' ἐσβήτω σκάφος.
- Με. τί δ' ἔστι; μείζον βρῖθος ἢ πάροιθ' ἔχει;
- Εκ. οὐκ ἔστ' ἐραστῆς ὅστις οὐκ αἰεὶ φιλεῖ.
- Με. ὅπως ἂν ἐκβῇ τῶν ἐρωμένων ὁ νοῦς.
ἔσται δ' ἂ βούλῃ· ναὺν γὰρ οὐκ ἐσβήσεται
ἐς ἧνπερ ἡμεῖς· καὶ γὰρ οὐ κακῶς λέγεις·

1050

Menelaus' question in 1050 has puzzled interpreters. Why would Euripides put a joke at the end of this scene? It is true that of all the scenes in this play, the Helen scene is the only one that could admit a joke without terrible discomfort. And there is already humour in it. Hecuba employs scornful laughter (983) and an amusing *reductio ad absurdum* (976–81) in her arguments against Helen. So a joke here is not as utterly ruinous as it would be, for example, in the scene where Astyanax is buried.

Still, this joke seems a bit pointless. Had it suited the purposes of the play to suggest that Helen is past her prime, her noted beauty fading, we could ascribe such a suggestion here to Euripides' mythological irreverence. As it is, the audience almost certainly was intended to receive the impression, emphasized by Helen's finery (1022–4), that she is dangerously attractive and that Menelaus is going to fall once more under her spell. The suggestion that she could use two weeks in a reducing clinic seems to detract from the scene. And given that the figure before the audience on the stage is of normal proportions, the suggestion that she weighs enough to sink a ship—even an ancient one—seems absurdly far-fetched. What could Euripides have been thinking of?

B. Seidensticker, *Palintonos Harmonia: Studien zu komischen Elementen in der griechischen Tragödie* (Göttingen, 1982), p. 89, says of 1050, 'Der Zuschauer dürfte jede andere Antwort eher erwartet haben als diese. Ein Witz über mögliche Gewichtsprobleme der Heldin hat gewiß eher in der Komödie seinen Platz, und der komische Ton des Verses steht in schneidendem Widerspruch zum Ernst der Situation.' This seems a fair statement of the problem. Seidensticker concludes that the point of the jest is that Menelaus understands perfectly well what Hecuba means but decides to dodge her request—and the implication that he is not proof against Helen's charms—by making a joke. The joke, however, by alluding to Helen's famous beauty, reveals the hidden springs of his behaviour. This shows Menelaus in an ironic or satiric light. It also illuminates the tragedy of the Trojans, who are denied their only solace: the guilty will escape.

Seidensticker's is certainly a possible way of explaining the passage, but some doubt remains: the questions in the second paragraph above have still not been satisfactorily addressed. Another line of approach may be called for, one already adumbrated by T. V. Buttrey, 'Epic illusions, tragic realities; or, Was Helen overweight (Euripides, *Troades* 1047–54)', *LCM* 3 (1978), 285–7, an article I came upon when I had already written a draft of this paper. Buttrey too feels that a joke about Helen's weight is out of place. He argues that Menelaus is more worried about his own weight. In a

fragment of Pherecydes of Athens (*FGrH* 3F111a) Heracles did not take part in the voyage of the Argonauts because the *Argo*, breaking into speech, refused to take him on board, afraid that he would sink the ship. Menelaus, says Buttrey, alludes to this incident: casting himself in a similar role, he expresses concern that if a great hero like himself should take on another passenger, it might prove to be the proverbial straw. The dramatic point of the remark is the contrast between the real heroic grandeur of Heracles and Menelaus' delusions of grandeur. The big difficulty with Buttrey's interpretation, welcome as it is in other respects, is that it is Helen's *βρίθος*, not Menelaus', that is explicitly mentioned as the problem. It seems worthwhile to see whether Buttrey's approach can be improved.

My first point is that there is more evidence than Buttrey cites on the subject of divine and heroic bodies. In Greek and Latin literature it is not only by being bigger or more plentifully endowed with flesh that one person can have more *βρίθος* than another. Some beings are made of heavier substance than others, and although they are roughly the same size, they weigh more. Just as ghosts are less substantial than living mortals, so the gods, in addition to being slightly larger than men, are also considerably heavier. The same seems to be true to a lesser degree of god-descended heroes.

The early Greek evidence for this belief is, admittedly, not terribly plentiful. But such evidence as has survived, together with its echoes in Roman literature, makes it likely that this poetic fiction could have been alluded to in a fifth-century tragedy. The earliest attestation in Greek is *Iliad* 5.837–9, where Athena climbs aboard Diomedes' chariot:

ἡ δ' ἐς δίφρον ἔβαινε παρὰ Διομήδεα δῖον
ἐμμεμανία θεά· μέγα δ' ἔβραχε φήγινος ἄξων
βριθοσύνη· δεινὴν γὰρ ἄγεν θεὸν ἄνδρα τ' ἄριστον.

Here both goddess and hero contribute to the weight on the axle. At *h. Hom.* 7.17–21, the helmsman says of Dionysus

δαιμόνιοι, τίνα τόνδε θεὸν δεσμεύεθ' ἐλόντες
καρτερόν; οὐδὲ φέρειν δύναταί μιν νηὺς εὐεργής.
ἡ γὰρ Ζεὺς ὅδε γ' ἐστὶν ἡ ἀργυρότοξος Ἀπόλλων
ἡὲ Ποσειδάων· ἐπεὶ οὐ θνητοῖσι βροτοῖσιν
εἴκελος, ἀλλὰ θεοῖς οἱ Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσιν.

At *h. Hom.* 28.9–10 we are told that when Athena was born

μέγας δ' ἐλελίζετ' Ὀλυμπος
δεινὸν ὑπὸ βρίμης γλαυκώπιδος, κτλ.

Latin literature provides further attestations, and Ovid is particularly fond of this conceit. At *Met.* 2.161–2 the horses of Sol realize that it is a mortal who is driving them because the chariot lacks its customary weight (*solitaque iugum gravitate carebat*). At 3.621–2 Ovid has the helmsman of the Homeric hymn to Dionysus tell the story as a first-person narrative.

'non tamen hanc sacro violari pondere pinum
perpetiar' dixi.

In 4.449 Juno goes to the Underworld and the *limen* feels her weight:

quo simul intravit sacroque a corpore pressum
ingemuit limen, eqs.

When Asclepius is being brought by ship, we are told (15.693–4)

numinis illa
sensit onus, pressa estque dei gravitate carina.

Finally, Lucan (1.56–7) uses this motif to describe the apotheosis of Nero: whatever part of the heaven he settles in

sentiet axis onus.¹

The reader will not have failed to notice the similarities between the passages cited above and *Tro.* 1050. In the Homeric hymn to Dionysus and in the Pherecydes passage cited by Buttrely, as well as in *Met.* 3.621–2 and 15.693–4, we have ships feeling the weight of a god or a hero, and in three of these four cases the ships are in danger of sinking under their respective cargoes. In *Iliad* 5.837–9 we have a pair of figures, one male (and heroic) and one female (and divine), who put great strain on a vehicle because of their weight (*βριθοσύνη*). Compare with this the situation imagined by Menelaus, where he and Helen, both divinely descended, threaten danger to a ship because of her *βριθος* (or perhaps the combination of hers and his in one ship).

Hence my second point, that Menelaus' expressed fear is not about his own weight but about hers, and that this fear is not so absurd when viewed in light of the mythic category of divine and heroic bodies. 'What is it? Does she weigh more than she did before?' might be objecting seriously that Helen could endanger the ship if she and Menelaus both occupy it: she might have gained in *βριθος* of late. The audience have been constantly reminded throughout the play who Helen's father is: see 398–9, 766–71, 1109. It is also plain from this scene that the reconciliation of Menelaus and Helen, enshrined for all time in the fourth book of the *Odyssey*, lies at the other end of their sea-journey home. The reconciliation is hinted at unmistakably by 1051, as well as 891–3. In consequence of his marriage to her, Menelaus will receive from the gods the honour of being transported to Elysium (*Od.* 4.561–9). Helen is not going to be punished. There may be a hint at her coming deification. Euripides' audience knew that Helen was worshipped as a goddess at Therapnai and elsewhere (Hdt. 6.61.3, Isocr. *Hel.* 63), and Euripides was to end both *Helen* (1666–9) and *Orestes* (1635–6) with allusions to her apotheosis. An allusion to this apotheosis here would thus not be without precedent.

On this view, Menelaus' question is not an attempt at wit but a puzzled response to Hecuba's request that he not allow Helen to travel on the same ship. Menelaus may not be thinking of apotheosis, but merely putting forward a possible explanation for Hecuba's urgent-sounding request. But though Menelaus may not fully understand the implications of what Euripides has made him say, his question in 1050 alludes to the apotheosis of his estranged wife. The hint, to be sure, is made *en passant* and remains undeveloped. But though fleeting, it helps to remind the audience of what they know about the future that awaits the frivolous and beautiful daughter of Zeus.

¹ For a good summary of the ways in which the Greeks expressed the difference between human and divine bodies (but with no discussion of divine density), see J.-P. Vernant, 'Corps obscur, corps éclatant', in C. Malamoud and J.-P. Vernant (edd.), *Corps des dieux* (Paris, 1986), pp. 19–45.

She is to become a goddess, and one manifestation of her divinity will be the weightiness of her now immortal body.²

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² My thanks to Jasper Griffin for drawing my attention to both ancient evidence and modern bibliography.

PLATO, *TIMAEUS* 52c2–5*

In a long and important sentence in the *Timaeus* (52b6–d1), Plato explains that, whereas that which truly or really is (τῷ δὲ ὄντως ὄντι) cannot come to be in anything else, sensible things, being mere images, must necessarily come to be *in* something else, on pain of not existing at all:

ὥς εἰκόني μὲν, ἐπεὶ περ οὐδ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐφ' ᾧ γέγονεν ἑαυτῆς ἔστιν, ἑτέρου δέ τινος ἀεὶ φέρεται φάντασμα, διὰ ταῦτα ἐν ἑτέρῳ προσήκει τινὶ γίγνεσθαι, οὐσίας ἀμωσγέπως ἀντεχομένην, ἢ μηδὲν τὸ παράπαν αὐτὴν εἶναι (52c2–5).¹

The syntax and sense of the clause οὐδ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐφ' ᾧ γέγονεν ἑαυτῆς ἔστιν have been much disputed. In 1956 Harold Cherniss offered a thorough review and critique of previous translations and interpretations.² He convincingly rejects, on grounds of sense and grammar, interpretations that give ἐφ' ᾧ a straightforward local (that 'in which' an image is or has come to be) or final sense (that 'for the sake of which' an image is or has come to be). He rejects as well those that take ἐφ' ᾧ γέγονεν to designate that 'on which' or 'after which' an image has been made or modelled or that 'which it was made to' represent.³ Included herein are all interpretations that make the clause say that an image is not its own original or model or, alternatively, its own image. A rather different interpretation was proposed by Cornford,⁴ who supposed that ἐφ' ᾧ expresses the conditions or terms on which an image comes to be (for ἐπί with the dative in this sense cf. e.g. *Lg.* 874b7 with England's note). The 'conditions' of an image's coming to be are the existence of (1) an original for it to be modelled upon and (2) a medium to contain it, and Cherniss cogently objects that if Cornford's interpretation were right, the words ἑτέρου δέ τινος ἀεὶ φέρεται φάντασμα, which express condition (1), should be parallel with ἐν ἑτέρῳ τινὶ γίγνεσθαι, which express condition (2), and therefore (like them) in the infinitive construction of indirect discourse (rather than in the ἐπεὶ περ-clause).⁵

Cherniss himself explains the clause in terms of the idiom Plato uses to designate that which a word refers to.⁶ Cf. e.g. *Prt.* 349b1–3: σοφία καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ ἀνδρεία

* I wish to thank *CQ's* anonymous referee for several suggested improvements.

¹ References to dialogues of the first and second tetralogies follow the new OCT of E. A. Duke *et al.*, *Platonis Opera* i (Oxford, 1995); all other dialogues are cited from the edition of Burnet.

² H. Cherniss, 'Timaeus 52 C 2–5', in *Mélanges de philosophie grecque offerts à Mgr. Diès* (Paris, 1956), pp. 49–60, reprinted in his *Selected Papers* (Leiden, 1977), pp. 364–75, hereafter referred to as 'Cherniss'.

³ Cf. Cherniss 50–7 = 365–72.

⁴ F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (London, 1937), pp. 192 n. 4, 370–1.

⁵ Cf. Cherniss 54–5 = 369–70.

⁶ Cf. Cherniss 58–9 = 373–4.