

DOLON AND RHESUS

“Speculative to the point of being utterly futile”. These words, penned some forty years ago by Bernard Fenik¹, in criticism of an earlier scholar’s hypothesis concerning the role of Diomedes in the relevant night-time excursion, should serve as warning to anyone who seeks to explore the pre-history², as it were, of the story of Rhesus. But, if we proceed with caution, I believe we actually can extricate something of value concerning the story-patterns, just as, with Athena’s help, Odysseus and Diomedes brought back the Thracian prince’s wondrous horses to the Greek camp.

Our starting point is a scholion on *Iliad* 10.435: ἔνιοι δὲ λέγουσι νυκτὸς παραγεγονέναι τὸν Ῥῆσον εἰς τὴν Τροίαν καὶ πρὶν γεύσασθαι αὐτὸν τοῦ ὕδατος τῆς χώρας φονευθῆναι. χρησμὸς γὰρ ἐδέδοτο αὐτῷ, φασιν, ὅτι εἰ αὐτὸς γεύσεται τοῦ ὕδατος καὶ οἱ ἵπποι καὶ τῆς αὐτόθι νομῆς αὐτοῦ τοῦ Σκαμάνδρου πίωσιν ἔδονται ἀκαταμήχατος ἔσται ἐς τὸ παντελές. The ἔνιοι introduced by the *adversative* δέ which follows are quoted as source for an account *contrasting* with that of Pindar fr. 262 Snell, cited in the immediately preceding portion of the scholion. According to Pindar, Rhesus, the newly arrived ally of the Trojans, performed such heroic deeds of *aristeia* against the Greeks that Hera took fright for them and despatched Athena to rouse Odysseus and Diomedes. The two went forth – at night – and killed the sleeping Rhesus. Others, by contrast, recounted how Rhesus arrived at Troy during the night. No *aristeia* by day, therefore. Rather, the threat posed by Rhesus in this version consists of the oracle which revealed his invincibility once he had tasted the Scamander’s waters and his steeds had done likewise and pastured on the grass there.

As often in such mythographic scholia, the implications of the extremely terse phrasing have to be expanded using the resources of common sense. Thus nothing is explicitly said of the abduction, in this variant, of Rhesus’ horses. But clearly this version does not envisage merely the assassination of their owner: the fate of his horses is to be inferred from the reference to what would happen once they get fodder and drink at Troy. The details we are given in explicit form relate to this version’s difference from the Pindaric account and to the divergence of both from what we get in the *Doloneia*.

The narrative of the anonymous e[nioi, then, presupposes an initial situa-

¹ ‘*Iliad X and the ‘Rhesus’*. *The Myth* (Collection Latomus 73), (1964), 21 n. 1. Hereafter ‘Fenik’.

² For an explanation (and justification) of this phrase see my remarks in “CQ” 38, 1988, 277 n. 2.

tion of crisis for the Greeks at Troy: they need to kill Rhesus and gain control of his horses. The dilemma thus expressed is strikingly reminiscent of the opening stage of a primeval story-pattern whose importance was first properly assessed by Vladimir Propp³. In this, an initial lack precipitates a heroic quest, which in turn leads to the liquidation of the original lack⁴. This seems to fit very closely with what can be inferred of the version we have been considering: the initial lack is of Rhesus' horses. Odysseus and Diomedes sally forth on a quest to obtain them, and, by bringing them away, they liquidate the lack.

It may, perhaps, be objected that I am irresponsibly imposing a pattern where it does not belong, a process doubly objectionable when the narrative in question is only known at second hand. In particular, the story's stress, judging from the evidence of our Iliadic scholion, is on the killing of Rhesus rather than the purloining of his horses. But we have just seen that it is difficult (and dangerous) to gauge issues of narrative emphasis when there is only the truncated language of a scholion to guide us. The murder of Rhesus is the essential preliminary to the theft of his possessions, a sequence which can be paralleled from two Greek legends in particular, both involving labours of Heracles. The horses of Diomedes and the cattle of Geryon both represent goals of a heroic quest and lacks which need liquidating⁵, and, as we shall shortly see, these stories can independently be shown to share features with the tale of Rhesus. They too exhibit the owner's murder before his possessions are finally driven off.

How the Greeks at Troy became aware of the lack they needed to liquidate is not clear on the evidence of our Iliadic scholion. This merely states that an oracle had been received by Rhesus himself, and the manner in which the contents of that oracle were conveyed to the Greeks we are not told. The motivation for Odysseus' and Diomedes' night-time sally in the *Doloneia* is problematic very largely because that later insertion shares the reluctance of the *Iliad* at large to include such folk-tale motifs as the conditional oracle or prophecy⁶. A narrative which did allow itself to give so crucial a role to an oracular pronouncement would not have to resort to the expedient we find in the *Doloneia*, whereby the two heroes set forth with one end in mind, only to be directed towards a different and more important goal. And yet even the

³ *The Morphology of the Folktale*: first published (in Russian) 1928. English translation (second edition) 1968. For further details and an account of the work's relevance to ancient Greek narratives see e.g. my article as cited in the previous note, 277 ff.

⁴ Cf. my remarks in "Prometheus" 29, 2003, 1 ff.

⁵ On Geryon's cattle see the article cited in n. 2 above. For the two stories as doublets see J. Fontenrose, *Python*, 99 and 345.

⁶ On this reluctance see e.g. Fenik 10 f.; J. Griffin, "JHS" 97, 1977, 47.

prospect of negative knowledge is denied us. We cannot be absolutely confident that such redirection did *not* feature in our narrative. A quest that is undertaken with one aim and arrives at another and greater might be said to be idiomatic within the sphere of folktale. A good instance would be “Saul, the son of Kish, who went forth to look for his father’s asses, and found a kingdom”. Similarly, Archilochus rose up early on one occasion to sell his father’s cow at market and returned not with a good price but with the lyre that certified his future career as a poet⁷.

Some illumination may result from the following line of thought. Quests of the sort cited above, beginning with a lack and ending with that lack’s elimination, frequently feature the hero’s encounter, at an early stage of the quest, with a helper figure⁸. The most obvious candidate for the role of helper figure in our story would be Athena. She frequently features in this capacity within Greek myth in general – consider her role in the careers of Bellerophon, Heracles, or Perseus, for instance – and in the *Iliad* in particular, where she regularly aids Achilles, as well as Diomedes and Odysseus. As regards the story of Rhesus, Pindar fr. 262, as we have seen, has her despatched by Hera to rouse Odysseus and Diomedes to action, while in the *Doloneia* she sends them the lucky omen of a heron on their right (vv. 274 ff.) and later urges Diomedes’ return to the Greek camp before it is too late (vv. 509 ff.). Helper figures are often disguised or resort to metamorphosis, so it is interesting that, in the *Rhesus*, Athena not only directs her two heroes to where the Thracian prince and his horses are resting (vv. 613 ff.) but presents herself to Paris as Aphrodite – another helper figure, incidentally⁹ – in order to lull him into a false sense of security (vv. 646 ff.).

Quest stories sometimes allow for the intervention of more than one helper figure, so it is worth while considering whether Dolon’s role in *Iliad* 10 and the Greek tragedy just mentioned may not bear the vestiges of some such original function. It has occasionally been suggested that Dolon is the invention of the *Doloneia* poet¹⁰, to replace Athena’s function as guider of her protégées to Rhesus, but we should first ask ourselves if he may not fulfil a more primeval role – he does, after all, alert Odysseus and Diomedes to Rhesus’ presence at Troy and his precise whereabouts (vv. 413 ff.). The very paradoxicality of help from the Trojan side should not deter us, since this is in fact an idiomatic aspect of the ambivalent helper. Force or persua-

⁷ See my remarks in “Prometheus” 30, 2004, 185 f.

⁸ See, for instance, the article cited in n. 2 above, 278 f., and my remarks in “ZPE” 133, 2000, 9 f.

⁹ For her help to Paris in the *Cypria* see my remarks in “CQ” 53, 2003, 36, for her help to Aeneas in *Aen.* 1.305 ff. see my remarks in “Rh. Mus.” forthcoming.

¹⁰ See Fenik 18 n. 3.

sion are the contrasting poles whereby the helper figure is encouraged to aid the hero¹¹ and Odysseus and Diomedes respectively employ both (vv. 383 ff. and 446 ff.). As for the associations with metamorphosis or disguise mentioned above in connection with Athena, the donning of a wolf's pelt by Dolon (whose very name is redolent of deceit and trickery) is very suggestive in this context¹².

Helper figures sometimes occupy the role of anticipatory doublets of the hero's climactic adversary, in quests of the sort we are examining. Heracles' tenth labour, for instance, has a 'preliminary adventure' whereby Nereus, Old Man of the Sea, is mastered and compelled to yield information about the quest's goal, and this looks forward to the final encounter with Geryon: both characters represent the primeval figure of herdsman of the dead¹³. In other stories we can point to an actual identity between helper and adversary, the former being the latter in disguise¹⁴. Our next task, therefore, is to discover whether there is a similar relationship between Dolon and Rhesus.

Another form this inquiry might take is to ask whether Dolon and Rhesus, like Nereus and Geryon, share an original status as death-demons. For heroic quests of the type which underlie our story often represent, in more or less transparent disguise, mortal conquests of death¹⁵. To begin with Dolon, his associations with the wolf are highly relevant: on Etruscan wall paintings and sarcophagi, death-demons are sometimes represented as wolf-headed or wolf-shaped¹⁶. In one case – bringing the likeness to Dolon into even sharper focus – the demon wears a wolf-cap¹⁷.

Association with the night conveniently allows for the transition from Dolon to Rhesus. The former, like a wolf, operates nocturnally and the latter, rather oddly, arrives at night to help his Trojan allies. The nocturnal setting of the quest to kill Rhesus and abduct his horses, with its perilous penetration to the enemy camp, is reminiscent of Priam's expedition to Achilles' hut in *Iliad* 24 to recover his son's corpse (here, incidentally,

¹¹ See the second of the articles cited in n. 8 above, 9.

¹² On such metamorphosis see e.g. the article cited in n. 2, 278 ff.

¹³ See the article cited in n. 2, 280 ff.

¹⁴ See the article cited in n. 2, 282 ff.

¹⁵ See, for instance, the article cited in n. 2, 284 ff.

¹⁶ See in particular Karl Meuli's remarks on "Gefesselter Götter", *Ges. Schr.* 2, 1079 f. with plate 57.

¹⁷ Meuli as cited in the previous note 1080 and the middle of the three illustrations that constitute plate 57. For further associations between the wolf and death see D.E. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-god* ("Journal of Indo-European Studies", Monograph 8, 1991), 98 ff. (for Greek evidence), and 113 ff. (on the Italian and Germanic material). Cf. 105 on the links between Diomedes and the wolf.

Hermes plays the part of helper figure)¹⁸. His wondrous horses occupy a central role in the story of Rhesus, and here too there is a clear link with death and the Underworld. Hades is lord of horses (think of his abduction of Persephone)¹⁹, the Thracian king Diomedes with his man-eating horses²⁰ and Laomedon ruler of Troy²¹ also share in this association. It has been pointed²² out that, as a surprisingly late-arrived ally of the Trojans, Rhesus recalls several figures of the Epic Cycle: Penthesileia and Memnon from the *Aethiopis*, Eurypylus from the *Ilias Parva*. Of these the third and last is most relevant to the present context since, as I have observed elsewhere²³, this hero, with his etymologically significant name, has various connections with the Underworld. This is less obviously true of Memnon and Penthesileia, though the former's origins in the remote East, regular locale of Otherworlds and Underworlds²⁴, may be relevant. That allies of kings who originally had associations with the Underworld should themselves share such associations is perfectly reasonable.

What I hope emerges from the preceding paragraphs is that Rhesus may very well have original connections with the Underworld, being in this respect a sort of doublet of Laomedon, Priam and Hector²⁵. We must now turn to the roles of Odysseus and Diomedes: if their night-time sally was originally one of those heroic quests which symbolise a conquest of death, is there any particular propriety in their involvement in the tale? That Odysseus should feature as one of the heroes in such a tale comes as no surprise at all. Both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* supply parallels for such a pattern. It has been shown elsewhere²⁶ how the former poem may ultimately reflect another heroic expedition to an eastern locale characteristic of Other- or Underworld, with Odysseus and his wooden horse as the vestiges of hero and magical agent which are idiomatic in such narratives. The *Doloneia* on this interpretation would be a doublet within the *Iliad*'s, larger reflection of that theme, just as the *Nekyia* again represents the heroic journey to the Other- or Underworld reflected in several portions of the *Odyssey* at large.

It is interesting that Odysseus should occupy the relevant role not only in, as it were, his own epic, but also in the poem where Achilles is the main

¹⁸ See my remarks in "Eikasmos" 11, 2000, 22 f.

¹⁹ See, for instance, my observations in "CQ" 38, 1988, 288 n. 62.

²⁰ See Fontenrose above (n. 5), 345 for Diomedes as death-demon.

²¹ See, for instance, my remarks in "WS" 115, 2002, 17 n. 52.

²² By Fenik 8 ff.

²³ In "ZPE" 113, 2000, 9 n. 16.

²⁴ See my remarks in "CQ" 38, 1988, 280 f.

²⁵ On Hector's role as ruler of the kingdom of the dead see "ZPE" forthcoming.

²⁶ "WS" 115, 2002, 5 ff.

hero. Interesting likewise that his companion should be Diomedes who, in the first half of the *Iliad*, may be regarded as a sort of substitute for Achilles, during that hero's withdrawal²⁷. Odysseus and Diomedes collaborate in several other adventures. Perhaps the most relevant of these (as being most closely analogous) is their combination to fetch back Philoctetes from Lemnos, a story whose pattern has several points of contact with the type of heroic quest lying at the back of Rhesus' story²⁸.

The propriety of Diomedes' participation in the nocturnal adventure is both less predictable and more paradoxical. We saw above that the story of King Diomedes of Thrace and his man-eating stallions could be regarded, from one angle, as a parallel to the sort of quest underlying the theft of the Thracian prince Rhesus' steeds. And a very strong case can be made out for the original identity of the two figures named Diomedes²⁹. The son of Tydeus is linked with horses not only in the present episode but also at *Il.* 23.400, where he wins the chariot race during Patroclus' Funeral Games, and in several other extra-Homeric traditions (his wife is called Euippe, he founds Ἄργος ἵππιον and so on). There are also indications of a link between Diomedes and Thrace³⁰.

Now it seems initially puzzling that one figure associated with horses should kill and rob another figure similarly associated. The puzzle is only superficial, however, and the paradox transpires to be positively appropriate to the type of tale in question. Heracles' pilfering of the cattle of Geryon provides a good analogy, with its sequel whereby Cacus in turn steals some of the cattle already stolen by Heracles³¹. The role of Argonauts and the Seven against Thebes is also comparable: both groups of heroes have been identified with beings from the Underworld³² and we may, then, be dealing with the dead attacking the dead.

St John's College, Oxford

MALCOLM DAVIES

²⁷ See in particular Ø. Andersen, *Die Diomedesgestalt in der Ilias* (Symbolae Osloenses Suppl. 25, 1978).

²⁸ See my remarks in "PP" 332, 2003, 355 n. 35.

²⁹ See in particular Bethe's *RE* article s.v. Diomedes 5¹ (1905), 817.66 ff.

³⁰ See Bethe as cited in the previous note, 816.23 ff.

³¹ See the article cited above (n. 2), 286 ff.

³² See the article cited above (n. 26), 39 ff.