

NEW LIGHT ON THE AEGEUS EPISODE
IN EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

The Aegeus scene in Euripides' *Medea*, notoriously denounced as “irrational” (ἄλογον) by Aristotle (*Poet.* 1461b 20) and a host of lesser names, has recently won a more sympathetic reception from scholars and critics, who have discerned its subtle thematic relevance to the play as a whole¹. But not everything has been said about the episode's place within the overall dramatic scheme. A comparison remains to be drawn with another masterpiece of the stage from antiquity, even though the two works differ from each other *toto caelo* in all other respects.

The surprising and unpredictable nature of Aegeus' intervention, long seen as a defect in the drama², is, on the contrary, actually put to good use by Euripides. His *Medea*, like all effective schemers in literature and life (Shakespeare's Iago springs to mind from the former category) knows how to be pragmatic and exploit the advantages unexpectedly thrown up in the course of events. The arrival of Aegeus decisively alters *Medea*'s position and attitude in one crucial particular: as Page puts it in his commentary³, “before this scene *Medea*'s plan for vengeance is vague and uncertain; after it her mind is made up”.

This way of summarising the scene's effect should surely remind us of an analogy from a very different play, Plautus' *Pseudolus*. There, at vv. 574ff., the cunning slave who gives the work its title has his plans radically altered for the better by the unexpected arrival on stage of Harpax. Before this character's advent, the preliminary plot hatched by *Pseudolus*, though boastfully floated forth with characteristic Plautine panache, remains, upon critical examination, obstinately vague and unspecific. After Harpax's exit, the

¹ See in particular U. Albin, “SCO” 19/20, 1970/1, 1ff. = *Interpretazioni teatrali* (Firenze 1972) 66ff.; H. Erbse, “WS” 79, 1966 (Donum Natalicium A. Lesky) 120ff. and E. Schlesinger, “Hermes” 94, 1966, 26ff. reprinted in English translation in *Euripides: a collection of critical essays*, ed. E. Segal (Englewood Cliffs N.Y. 1968), 85ff. and (without footnotes) in *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1983), 307ff. On Aristotle's criticism see e.g. T.V. Buttrey, “AJPh” 79, 1958, 1f.

² Especially by Corneille, who in his own *Médée* (1631) sought to correct the supposed flaw by supplying Egée with a more specific and satisfactory motive for his presence at Corinth (he is Jason's rival for the hand of Creon's daughter). On Corneille's criticisms of Euripides' play both explicit and (as embodied in his reworking) implicit see, for instance, K. von Fritz, “AuA” 5, 1959, 14f. = *Antike und moderne Tragödie* (Berlin 1962) 383ff., Erbse (as cited in n. 1) 122ff., and Schlesinger (as cited in n. 1) p. 33 ~ p. 86 [omitted in the second reprint].

³ Oxford 1938, Introduction p. xxix.

whole situation is transformed. It is, indeed, instructive to juxtapose the respective remarks of Medea and Pseudolus once their unanticipated benefactors have left the stage:

Med. 764ff.

ὦ Ζεῦ Δίκη τε Ζηνὸς Ἥλιου τε φῶς
 νῦν καλλίνικοι τῶν ἐμῶν ἐχθρῶν, φίλαι,
 γενησόμεσθα κᾶς ὁδὸν βεβήκαμεν·
 νῦν δ' ἐλπίς ἐχθροὺς τοὺς ἐμοὺς τείσειν δίκην.
 οὗτος γὰρ ἀνὴρ ἦι μάλιστ' ἐκάμνομεν
 λιμὴν πέφανται τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων·
 ἐκ τοῦδ' ἀνασόμεσθα πρυμνήτην κάλων,
 μολόντες ἄστυ καὶ πόλισμα Παλλάδος.

Pseud. 667ff.

*di immortales, conservavit me illic homo adventu suo.
 suo viatico redduxit me usque ex errore in viam.
 namque ipsa Opportunitas non potuit mi opportunius
 advenire quam haec allatast mi opportune epistula.
 nam haec allata cornu copiaest, ubi inest quidquid volo:
 hic doli, hic fallaciae omnes, hic sunt sycophantiae,
 hic argentum, hic amica amanti erili filio.
 atque ego nunc me ut gloriosum faciam et copi pectore.*

The first point that strikes one here is the near equivalence⁴ between κᾶς ὁδὸν βεβήκαμεν (766) and *redduxit me usque ex errore in viam* (668), which in itself suffices to defend the Euripidean paradosis against von Blumenthal's ὁδόν⁵. Of this conjecture, Page's note *ad loc.*⁶ remarks that its author "observes that εἰς ὁδὸν βαίνω is an unusual phrase, but does not show that it is at all an unnatural one". The scholia's paraphrase εἰς τὴν τῆς νίκης ἀρχὴν ἐληλύθαμεν quoted by Page is perfectly adequate as explanation.

Next, we should note that each passage begins with an apostrophe to the gods (764 ~ 667), specific in the case of Euripides, generalised in the Plautine instance. Furthermore, each poet goes on to introduce, using the same particle (γάρ 768 ~ *nam* 669), a metaphorical allusion to the salvation that has so unexpectedly appeared. In the Euripidean passage, "Aegeus", to

⁴ Near equivalence, because Plautus' *redduxit me... ex errore* presupposes that his slave hero (unlike Medea) did have an initial plan, now thrown out of the window in favour of the prospects raised by Harpax's appearance. For this initial plan as Plautus' own addition to the plot of his New Comedy model see below, nn. 14-15.

⁵ "Hermes" 69, 1934, 457.

⁶ See above, n. 3.

quote Page⁷, “is the *harbour* in which Medea will find *safe anchorage*”. For Plautus, the letter brought by Harpax is the *cornucopia*⁸ which supplies all he can wish for if his schemes are to prosper.

At first blush, this comparison of an Attic tragedy with the product of a Roman farce by ‘scurrile Plautus’ is bound to jar, if not offend. But further reflection brings – it is to be hoped – enlightenment. After all, the Plautine masterpiece, like all his works, is an adaptation of a comedy by Menander or some other New Comedy poet, and the general indebtedness to Euripides of the genre represented by the latter is well known⁹: in matters of plot and motif it can hardly be overestimated. Eduard Fraenkel wrote an outstanding article under the title “Ein Motiv aus Euripides in einer Szene der Neuen Komödie”¹⁰. In the present case we may have to do with something similar. The role of chance or *tyche* in several of the tragedies by Euripides cannot be gainsaid and seems strongly to have influenced Menandrian Comedy. Τύχη, be it remembered, spoke the prologue to the *Aspis*¹¹. Chance is equally one of the outstanding themes of Plautus’ *Pseudolus*, a theme neatly encapsulated in vv. 669f. cited above: *namque ipsa Opportunitas non potuit mi opportunius / advenire quam haec allatast mi opportunius epistula*. The language here is unmistakably Plautine, but the theme will have featured, albeit in less exuberant form, in the Roman poet’s New Comedy model.

The positions of Medea and Pseudolus are, on initial examination, so enormously different that it is hardly surprising that the two passages have never before been brought together. And yet reflection suggests greater simi-

⁷ Above, n. 3, on v. 770 of the *Medea*.

⁸ Given the context’s emphasis upon *Opportunitas*, or good luck personified, it is striking that representations of the goddess *Tyche* sometimes display her holding a *cornucopia*: see, for instance, the volume edited by S. B. Matheson cited in n. 11 below, pp. 81f. and 89f.; and the statues or statuettes illustrated on pp. 26, 45, 116, and the coin illustrated on p. 42.

⁹ “Seit dem Erscheinen von Leos *Plautinischen Forschungen* (1895) ist der ungemein starke Einfluss des Euripides auf die dramatischen Technik der Neuen Komödie allgemein anerkannt”: Fraenkel as cited in the next note, p. 297 = p. 493. For a more recent general assessment of Euripides’ influence see N. Zagagi, *The Comedy of Menander* (London 1994), Index s.v. (p. 207).

¹⁰ *Studi in onore di U.E. Paoli* (Firenze 1955), 293ff. = *Kl. Beitr.* 1. 487ff. with reference to the opening expository scenes of *IA* and what can be inferred of the source for Plautus’ *Pseudolus*.

¹¹ On this and the role of *Tyche* in Menander’s *Aspis* in particular and Menandrian comedy more generally see e.g. the Gomme-Sandbach commentary on Menander (Oxford 1973) p. 74, and the book by Zagagi cited above (n. 9) pp. 143ff. There are a number of essays on different aspects of *Tyche* in art and literature in *An Obsession with Fortune: Tyche in Greek and Roman Art* (ed. Susan B. Matheson), the catalogue of an exhibition held in Yale University Art Gallery in 1994.

larities between the pair of schemers than would at first seem remotely plausible. Medea as a woman and Pseudolus as slave are both in a weak position within society, for which they must compensate by resorting to cunning and guile, the weapons of the helpless throughout the ages¹². Pseudolus' specification of his weapons as *doli... fallaciae... sycophantiae* (672) may seem to belong to a different world from the βουλευματα which Medea refers to in her corresponding passage (769). But if we cast our minds back to that heroine's speech to the chorus at 364ff., and its characterisation (v. 368f.) of her treatment of Creon (δοκεῖς γὰρ ἄν με τόνδε θωπεῦσαι ποτε, / εἰ μὴ τι κερδαίνουσιν ἢ τεχνωμένην) the gap between the two worlds narrows perceptibly (compare further βουλεύουσα καὶ τεχνωμένη at 402). Medea's allusion to her enemies in 765-7 and her determination to exact punishment for the implied breaking of vows surely distinguishes her as a tragic being remote from the comic slave? And yet Pseudolus is engaged in a plot against a pimp who has shamelessly broken his oath (362: *sociofraude*) and the slave's personal enmity against Ballio is crucial to the play: Plautus' "imagination has transformed everything... creating a formidable figure out of Ballio, a gigantic object of hatred for the audience"¹³, but the original must have had some equivalent point.

It can further be demonstrated (or at least made highly plausible) that the match between Plautus' Greek original and the *Medea* of Euripides in the relevant scenes was even closer than now appears from the extant Latin comedy. This is because the Roman playwright has, with typical brio, enlarged and expanded the role of his cunning slave. The initial plan entertained by Pseudolus, and instantly jettisoned once the potential in Harpax is scented, can be shown to represent, in all likelihood, Plautus' own invention and addition to the original¹⁴. Its aim? To emphasise the slave's cunning resourcefulness, his infinite adaptability. The extraordinarily vague and unrealised nature of this preliminary and provisional plan, so unlike anything in the plots of Athenian New Comedy, has long been recognised¹⁵, though it is, in the play itself, effectively disguised by Pseudolus' uninhibited boasting at vv. 574ff.:

¹² Cf. K. Synodinou, *On the Concept of Slavery in Euripides* (Ioannina 1977), 61ff.

¹³ G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford 1968), 287.

¹⁴ See in particular G. Jachmann, "Philol." 88, 1933, 443 = *Ausgew. Schr.* (Beitr. z. kl. Phil. 128, Königstein 1981), 114.

¹⁵ "Die vage Unklarheit... entspricht nicht der attischen Kunstweise": Jachmann as cited in the previous note p. 456 = p. 117. Compare his characterisation of 574ff. as "hochtönende Worte, doch ohne allen greifbaren Inhalt" and constituting a "chimärisches Trugbild" (p. 455 = p. 116f.). Cf. A.R. Sharrock, "CQ" 46, 1996, 166.

*pro Iuppiter, ut mihi quidquid ago lepide omnia prospereque eveniunt:
neque quod dubitem neque quod timeam meo in pectore conditumst consilium.
nam ea stultitiast, facinus magnum timido cordi credere, etc.*

Without this Plautine swagger, Pseudolus' dilemma at vv. 566ff. (*atque etiam certum, quod sciam, / quo id sim facturus pacto nihil etiam. scio, / nisi quia futurumst*) would be much closer to the ἀπορία of Medea at vv. 374ff. (τρεῖς τῶν ἐμῶν ἐχθρῶν νεκρούς / θήσω, πατέρα τε καὶ κόρην, πόσιν τ' ἐμόν. / πολλὰς δ' ἔχουσα θανασίμους αὐτοῖς ὁδοῦς, / οὐκ οἶδ' ὅποια πρῶτον ἐγχειρῶ, φίλοι)¹⁶, and this presumed closeness is what I take to have characterised the relationship between the lost New Comedy and the Euripidean tragedy. It has plausibly been suggested¹⁷ that, in the lost model of the *Pseudolus*, the resourceful slave declared he had no idea how to go about achieving his goal but that he would arrive there in the end... and then caught opportune sight of Harpax. Such a scenario is remarkably similar to what we find in Euripides' *Medea* if we leave out the *agon* between the heroine and Jason (446-626) and the stasima at either end of this episode (410-45; 627-62). At 401ff., Medea, having, as we saw above, declared her intention of killing her three principal enemies, and admitted her uncertainty as to the means, turns to self-encouragement:

ἀλλ' εἴα· φείδου μηδὲν ὧν ἐπίστασαι,
Μήδεια, βουλευούσα καὶ τεχνωμένη·
ἔρπ' ἐς τὸ δεινόν· νῦν ἀγὼν εὐψυχίας.

Provided we bear in mind that the cunning slave of Plautus' Greek original is unlikely¹⁸ to have briefly left the stage, as he does in the Roman adaptation, these lines are the equivalent of *Pseudolus* 674ff.

Unlike the *Pseudolus*, Euripides' *Medea* does not make the unpredictability of Fortune an explicit theme of the play. But there is the final comment

¹⁶ Medea's ἀπορία at this point in the play (A 'How shall I carry out the murder? Set fire to the bride's house or use a sword? But if I'm caught and killed my enemies will laugh' [378-83]. 'Better to use φάρμακα' [383-4]. B 'But what place or person will receive me after the murder?' [386-8]) is remarkably similar to that of Ajax at an equivalent part of Sophocles' drama (B 'After the murder of the cattle and sheep, who will receive me? My father Telamon? Unthinkable' [457-66]. A 'Shall I die in a single-handed onslaught on the Trojans? But my enemies the Atreidae will be gladdened by that' [466-93]). Compare in particular Medea's οὐκ ἔστι (389) with Ajax's οὐκ ἔστι ταῦτα (470): in each case the phrase brings to an end the preceding discussion of possibilities now recognised as impossible. The two passages should be added to those cited by Bernard Knox, "YCS" 25, 1977, 196 = *Word and Action* (Baltimore 1979) 297 in his discussion of the similarities between the presentation of the two tragic figures (there are further correspondences between the "Trugrede" of *Ajax*, 646ff., and that of *Medea*, 869ff.).

¹⁷ Jachmann as cited above (n. 14) p. 456 = p. 127.

¹⁸ Jachmann as cited in the last note.

of the chorus (1415-19):

πολλῶν ταμίας Ζεὺς ἐν Ὀλύμπῳ,
 πολλὰ δ' ἀέλπτως κραίνουσι θεοί,
 καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ' οὐκ ἐτελέσθη,
 τῶν δ' ἀδοκίμων πόρον ἦρε θεός·
 τοιόνδ' ἀπέβη τόδε πρᾶγμα.

Deleted by Hartung, not even translated by Wilamowitz in his rendering, deemed “a little inapposite” by Page, in fact it beautifully encapsulates one of the play’s major themes.

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APPENDIX

A further unexpected link between the techniques of Attic tragedy and Plautine farce is to be found in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, of all places, and the *Rudens*. In two separate scenes of the latter, 220-258 and 485-558, Palaestra and Ampelisca, and then Labrax and Charmides, stagger on land after a shipwreck. Each pair of characters has suffered the same misfortune; but whereas the girls dwell in paratragic mode upon the unpredictable vicissitudes of fortune, the episode involving the pimp and his acquaintance emphasises the purely physical and comic aspects of their dip in the sea: vomiting and teeth that chatter with cold. One is reminded of the two consecutive scenes in the *Agamemnon* (503ff. and 810ff.) which convey in divergent modes the effects of war: the ordinary soldier recalls the physical hardships of uncomfortable bivouacs, extremes of heat or cold, and clothing infested with lice. The returning leader’s account has a different and more elevated emphasis (on the contrast see esp. Fraenkel, *Der Agamemnon des Aeschylus* (Zürich-Stuttgart 1957) p. 19 = *Kl. Beitr.* 1.338f.).

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