WHERE IS AEGISTHUS' HEAD?

The question sounds facetious. So does what I take to be the correct answer, that alike in death and in life, on the tragic stage or off, the Aegisthean head is firmly attached, by means of the Aegisthean neck, to the Aegisthean shoulders. But facetious-sounding or not, the question has not often received, at least as regards Euripides, the answer given above. The notion is widespread that in Euripides' *Electra* Orestes, after killing Aegisthus, decapitates him.[1] Since this has become the basis for further assumptions and since I believe it to be mistaken, it seems time to show that the evidence for it is nonexistent and the evidence against it substantial.

The source of this idea is *Electra* 854–58:

> στέφουσι δ' εὐθὺς σοῦ κασιγνήτου κάρα
> χαίροντες ἀλαλάζοντες. ἔρχεται δὲ σοὶ
> κάρα 'πιδείξων οὐχὶ Γοργόνος φέρων
> ἀλλ' ὃν στυγεῖς Αἴγισθον. αἷμα δ' αἵματος
> πικρὸς δανεισμὸς ἦλθε τῷ θανόντι νῦν.

If we read these lines carefully rather than impressionistically, it emerges clearly that the head of the Gorgon is being opposed not to the head of Aegisthus but to Aegisthus himself, whole and undivided. It is clear that κάρα belongs only to the negative half of the statement and cannot by any sleight of hand be imported into the positive.[2] And unfortunately for holders of the usual view, it is impossible to read ἀλλ' οὗ στυγεῖς Αἰγίσθου because the last syllable of Aegisthus' name occupies an element that must be metrically short, and in any case the next word begins with a vowel.[3] The meaning of the whole is "He comes bringing to display to you not the head of the Gorgon [a sight to fill you with horror] but instead Aegisthus, the object of your hatred [a sight to make you glad]." There is a perfect parallel at *Phoenissae* 455–56 "οὐ γὰρ τὸ λαιμότμητον εἰσορᾷς κάρα / Γοργόνος, ἀδελφὸν δ' εἰσορᾷς ἥκοντα σόν." It is therefore a mistake to translate it "not the Gorgon's head but that of Aegisthus whom you hate."[4]

The mistranslation of this pair of lines constitutes the only evidence in the play for the supposition that Aegisthus' head is severed from his body. Evidence

1. See J. D. Denniston, ed., *Euripides: "Electra"* (Oxford, 1939), on verses 856, 894–95, and 900 ff.; E. M. Blaiklock, *The Male Characters of Euripides* (Wellington, 1952), p. 173; M. Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie* (Göttingen, 1954), p. 311; H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* (London, 1966), p. 336; D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto, 1967), p. 207; T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London, 1967), p. 145; D. Sider, "Two Stage Directions for Euripides," *AJP* 98 (1977): 16–17; and most recently M. R. Halleran, *Stagecraft in Euripides* (London and Sydney, 1984), p. 22. To his credit, M. J. O'Brien, "Orestes and the Gorgon: Euripides' *Electra*," *AJP* 85 (1964): 23, n. 16, expresses hesitation on this question. A. Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*[3] (Göttingen, 1972), p. 399, n. 202, dissents tentatively from the usual view. I find some of my arguments anticipated by G. Gellie, "Tragedy and Euripides' *Electra*," *BICS* 28 (1981): 11, n. 12.

2. Indeed, as this journal's anonymous reader points out, the phrase "Gorgon's head" in Greek literature practically equals "Gorgon," and there would be little temptation, even if grammar did not absolutely forbid it, to divide this essentially unitary notion and then apply the word "head" elsewhere.

3. F. W. Schmidt's ἀλλ' οὗ στυγεῖς μέγιστον is the only attempt I know to make room for a genitive here.

4. The line is mistranslated in A. S. Way's Loeb of 1912, in M. Hadas and J. McLean, trans., *Euripides: Ten Plays* (New York, 1936), in P. Vellacott's Penguin of 1963, and by D. Ebener (Berlin, 1977). Correct renderings are given in L. Parmentier's Budé and E. T. Vermeule's Chicago translation. In the 1821 Glasgow variorum edition, the translation is, on this point, correct, but the note reads

against it is plentiful. Consider the staging. If Aegisthus is brought on in one piece, all is well, for two mute extras carry on a third mute extra dressed in Aegisthus' mask, as happens, for example, at *Andromache* 1166–72, where the dead Neoptolemus is brought on. Alternatively, Euripides might have anticipated his *coup de théâtre* of the *Bacchae* and had just the head brought on. But from 959 it is clear that the body is lying on the stage. Aegisthus, we are therefore asked to suppose, was brought on in two parts. What is the point of such redundancy? Furthermore, how was it managed? Did two mutes carry on a headless dummy with the head perched upon its chest? Did two mutes handle the torso while a third, or Orestes himself, like a mover with the piano bench, carried the head? Neither, to say the least, is entirely satisfactory.

But suppose we say that though the difficulty just described is real, Euripides was willing to have Aegisthus brought on in two pieces for the sake of the scene to follow. When we examine that scene, however, we notice no sign of any dramatic use of these two remarkable props. Would Euripides have contrived this effect and then made so little use of it?

Even more striking is the lack of any reference to the severed head in the course of the scene. It is an axiom of modern criticism of Greek tragedy that any significant stage-business is referred to in the text.[5] But imagination is allowed to run free, unhampered by the text, in some proposed reconstructions of the scene. Denniston has Orestes fling the head down on the ground. Sider has Electra hold the head aloft as she speaks. But no one on stage is allowed to advert to it by so much as a τόδε.

Just how unparalleled this dumb-show would be can best be seen by comparing the severed-head scene in the *Bacchae*. At 1139–42 the messenger says explicitly that Agave is coming with Pentheus' head impaled on her thyrsus. In the Agave-scene itself, the head is mentioned or alluded to unmistakably by means of deictic pronouns at 1173, 1185, 1196, 1200–1201, 1203, 1209, 1214, 1238, 1277, 1280, and 1284. Set this against a putative scene in which Euripides' most striking prop by far is not mentioned at all. Such mentions as are made of Aegisthus suggest the whole body: 895, 896 (the whole Aegisthus would make a better feast for the birds and beasts), 898–99 (where Aegisthus himself is identified with his remains).

His exit is not less difficult than his entrance for holders of the usual view. Again we have a choice between two porters and three. In addition, 959, "you must bring this man's body indoors," would suggest momentarily (but a moment's reflection would correct the impression) that Aegisthus' head is to be left on stage and only his trunk stowed within.

Both *ratio et res ipsa,* therefore, and the *codex unicus* of Euripides' *Electra* speak with a single voice. So too do the other poets and mythographers and also

"Αἴγισθον, i.e. Αἰγίσθου." The attempt made there to show that grammar allows this meaning is a failure.

Murray's apparatus calls 856 a *versus vix sanus,* perhaps because he wanted it to mean decapitation but saw it could not. (Cf. his translation, which is literally correct but tries to suggest Aegisthus' severed head.) Diggle repunctuates, putting a comma after ἐπιδείξων, a remedy I confess I do not understand.

5. See, e.g., O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1977).

the iconographic tradition, now easily accessible in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae,* which shows no trace of such a memorable production as the one usually imagined. There is no reason to contradict their united witness. I suspect that the widespread adoption of the notion of decapitation owes little to inherent probabilities and much to certain preconceived notions about Euripides' art. Ever since Schlegel we have all been taught to believe that this play is satirical, antimythological, and unheroic. Aegisthus' decapitation seemed of a piece with the items in this description. It is high time to reexamine the play without these inherited preconceptions.[6]

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6. W. Steidle's essay in his *Studien zum antiken Drama* (Munich, 1968), pp. 63–91, should be required reading for all who write on this play. In another article, "Castor in Euripides' *Electra* (*El.* 307–13 and 1292–1307)," *CQ* 35 (1985): 306–14, I discuss two other passages in this play where the gratuitous assumption of satirical intent has been responsible for editors' rejecting the witness of our manuscript and printing patent nonsense on the grounds that it is mordant satire.

I would like to thank *CP*'s anonymous reader for several helpful suggestions.

ON CATULLUS 95

Gooldio meo
olim magistro
sodali nunc atque collegae
lustrum tertium decimum explenti

Smyrna mei Cinnae, nonam post denique messem,
  quam coepta est nonamque edita post hiemem,
milia cum interea quingenta Hatriensis in uno
  <versiculorum anno putidus evomuit,>
Smyrna cavas Satrachi penitus mittetur ad undas,
  Smyrnam cana diu saecula pervoluent:
at Volusi annales Paduam morientur ad ipsam
  et laxas scombris saepe dabunt tunicas.
parva mei mihi sint cordi monumenta <sodalis>:
  at populus tumido gaudeat Antimacho.

This is the text of Catullus' ninety-fifth poem as printed in the new edition by G. P. Goold,[1] and it is, I believe, the closest we can come to what the poet wrote. In virtually all other recent editions, by contrast, we find instead some mutilated or dismembered version, neither as sharp in sense nor as elegant in expression as we expect a poem of Catullus' to be—especially one that is itself a piece of literary criticism and ought therefore to exemplify no less than preach. I do not fuss over the spelling of Cinna's title (though I agree that Priscian's authority [*GL* 2:23, 42] should prevail over the manuscripts') or over the supplement in the fourth verse (though Munro's does seem to me by far the most attractive),

1. *Catullus* (London, 1983).