

EURIPIDES *HERACLES* 581

ἢ τί φήσομεν καλὸν
 ὕδρα μὲν ἔλθεῖν ἐς μάχην λέοντί τε
 Εὐρυσθέως πομπαῖσι, τῶν δ' ἐμῶν τέκνων
 οὐκ ἐκπονήσω θάνατον;

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THIS passage is interpreted by all commentators and translators as follows: 'Or how shall we call it glorious that I went out to fight the hydra and the lion at the command of Eurystheus—and shall I not labour to shield off death from my own children?' The purpose of my note¹ is to suggest (1) that we have here a very remarkable use of the verb *ἐκπονεῖν*, and (2) that Euripides used it here with a precise and subtle intention.

1. *The use of the verb ἐκπονεῖν*

It occurs first in Sappho 124 D (= 110 LP):

τὰ δὲ σαμβάλα . . . / πίσσυγγοι δέκ' ἐξεπόναισαν

'ten cobblers toiled to make your shoes' (transl. Page). This sense 'to produce carefully, to put the finishing touch to' is found as well in e.g. Aristoph. *Aves* 379: *ἐκπονεῖν ὑψηλὰ τείχη*, cf. Thuc. 3. 38, 6. 31. 3. The case of Pind. *Pyth.* 4. 236 is interesting because the element of *πόνος* seems to have been actualized by the neighbouring *βιατός*: *βιατὸς ἐξεπόνησ' ἐπιτακτὸν ἀνὴρ μέτρον* 'that man of strength finished full measure the task assigned' (transl. Ruck-Matheson).

The same shade of meaning (this time made explicit by *μόλις*) is perceptible in a fragment of the *Chirones* of Cratinus (22 Meineke, 237 Edmonds):

ταῦτα δυοῖν ἐτέον ἡμῖν μόλις ἐξεπονήθη.

The chorus speaking for the poet declare not without pride: 'it took us two years' hard work to finish the play.'

In Agathon fr. 11 (N) the meaning is not so strong:

τὸ μὲν πάρεργον ἔργον ὥς ποιοῦμεθα,
 τὸ δ' ἔργον ὥς πάρεργον ἐκπονούμεθα.

In Aeschylus the verb occurs only once: *Suppl.* 367

τὸ κοινὸν δ' εἰ μιαίνεται πόλις,
 ξυνῇ μελέσθω λαὸς ἐκπονεῖν ἄκη.

'the people must work out the cure.'

In Sophocles it does not occur, but it is one of Euripides' favourites: not less than 23 (or 24) instances are recorded. The most famous is *Hipp.* 380/1

τὰ χρήστ' ἐπιστάμεσθα καὶ γινώσκομεν,
 οὐκ ἐκπονοῦμεν δὲ κτλ.

The same meaning 'to do, to execute' is found in *Phoen.* 1648: *τὰ ἐντεταλμένα*

¹ Dr. Colin Austin, of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, read an earlier draft of this paper, and kindly made some suggestions.

ἐκπονεῖν; also in *Ion* 1040, *Phoen.* 979, and *Erechtheus* 65, 98 (*Nova Frg. Eur.* ed. C. Austin). Another Euripidean example is important for my argument:

εἰκὸς δὲ παντὶ καὶ λόγῳ καὶ μηχανῇ
πατρίδος ἐρῶντας ἐκπονεῖν σωτηρίαν (*frg.* 729).

There are thirteen more instances in Euripides in which the verb has an object in the accusative which is the thing done, the thing sustained, the thing searched after or found out, the thing brought to perfection and finished off: *Androm.* 1052 (see Stevens *ad loc.*); *Helen* 735, 1514; *Hipp.* 467, 632; *Ion* 375, 1355; *Iph. Aul.* 209; *Med.* 241; *Or.* 122; *frg.* 525, 4; 909, 8; 1083, 1. There are three (or four) instances where the verb, having no object, must be taken to mean: 'to toil, to exert oneself': *Iph. Aul.* 367, *Or.* 653, *Suppl.* 319, *Telephus* 102, 14 (*Nova Frg. Eur.* ed. Austin: ἐκπονῶν is the probable conjecture made by Grégoire, while Austin gives the papyrus reading †εκπονων†).

It is possible now to survey the history of the verb ἐκπονεῖν. Used for the first time by Sappho, it does not recur in lyric poetry except for the single instance of Pindar recorded above: not at all in Alcaeus, Bacchylides, nor in any of the Poetae Melici Graeci. Nor is it found in early prose (Herodotus, Antiphon, Andocides); the two instances of Thucydides are the only exceptions. It is in Attic drama, and there mainly in Euripides, that the verb occurs frequently. The common feature of all instances of ἐκπονεῖν examined so far (except Eur. *Heracles* 581) is that the element ἐκ- never¹ denotes removal, always completion. One might put this observation in a more abstract formula: ἐκπονεῖν + X = to inject πόνος into X so that X is realized. LSJ (A. II and B. II. 2) point out that πονέω / πονέομαι are seldom used in a transitive sense; from our observations it seems as if the preverb ἐκ- makes the verb more fit for transitive use, and stresses the element of finality.

It is necessary here to make a short digression into the field of linguistics. As far as I can see, there are only two monographs available on the subject, the one from a purely linguistic point of view, the other more stylistic. J. Brunel, in *L'aspect verbal et l'emploi des préverbes en grec* (Paris 1939), makes the point that besides the tripartite aspectual system present-aorist-perfect there is another aspectual opposition 'indéterminé'-'déterminé'. He takes 'déterminé' almost etymologically: a verbal expression is 'déterminé' when it denotes a 'procès dont le terme est envisagé' ('indéterminé': 'le terme n'est pas envisagé'). He shows that the Greek language realizes this opposition by exploiting the resources of verbal compounds: the compounds denote the action as 'déterminé'. He points out that in a considerable number of ἀπο-

¹ There are some later instances, viz. in Xenophon, in which the verb, occurring within a context of food and digestion, seems to have an eliminative sense; but on closer inspection this view is not correct. In *Comm.* 1. 2. 4 ἐκπονεῖν is 'to digest', i.e. to assume food into the body by (the labour of) digestion. In *Cyrop.* 1. 2. 16 ἐκπονοῦντες is intransitive: 'by physical exercise' (for then the ὑγρόν will disappear in another way, by perspiration). Similarly, in *Oecon.* 11. 12 ἐκπονοῦντι has to be taken in an intransitive sense; 'provided he takes physical exercise'. In *Cyrop.* 1. 6. 17 it is the context which

gives the suggestion of an eliminative sense: ἐκπονῶιό τὰ εἰσίσοντα. A survey of the instances given in Sturz' *Lexicon Xenophonticum* makes it clear that the verb normally means either 'to produce by labour' (transitive) or 'to labour' (intransitive); and this corresponds exactly to the semantic value of the verb in fifth-century drama and earlier. A clear case of the first category in Xenophon is *Hippiarchicus* 9. 1: δεῖ πρὸς τὸ παριστάμενον σκοποῦντα τὸ συμφέρον ἐκπονεῖν 'one must think of the present situation and carry out what is expedient in view of it.'

and ἐκ- compounds the idea of 'éloignement' and 'sortie' is completely forgotten. After the model of (A) compounds like ἀποστερῶ and ἐκφεύγω where the meaning of the prepositional element still persists, compounds (B) like ἀποκτείνω and ἐξόλλυμι have been formed in which this original meaning is recessive; and finally a large group (C) of compounds has come into use where the function of the preverb is entirely aspectual, viz. to indicate 'une idée d'aboutissement/achèvement' (sometimes, not always this element is already contained in the verb itself 'before' being strengthened by the preverb): e.g. ἀφικνέομαι, ἀποτελέω, ἐξεργάζομαι, ἐκπύμπλημι, ἐκδιδάσκω, ἐξαπατάω, ἐξοῖδα, ἐξαμαρτάνω. The use of ἐκπονέω as a verb with the aspect 'déterminé' [i.e. compared with πονέω, the action is envisaged as (transitive and) effective] is perfectly in line with this representation and analysis of the facts of Greek language as given by Brunel.¹

The other monograph is a doctoral dissertation of Miss E. Tsitsoni, *Untersuchungen der EK-Verbalkomposita bei Sophokles* (Munich 1963). She starts from Wilamowitz's claim that Sophocles was the first to make a wide use of ἐκ-compounds for the aim of pomp and sonority only: 'besonders bei Sophokles zur Manier geworden'. She argues that this generalization is true not for Sophocles but for Euripides by analysing the evidence from the viewpoint of expressivity, style, and metre. Her treatment of the instances in Euripides (7 pp.) is, however, on the superficial side, compared with the 23 pages given to Sophocles. Her linguistic basis is very slight: the simple enumeration of 'fünf Bedeutungs-möglichkeiten der EK-Verbalkomposita' on p. 11 is not argued, nor does she refer to it in the rest of her discussion. And as far as ἐκπονεῖν is concerned, she signals the instance in Sappho as 'nur verstärktes Simplex' (p. 46) but abstains from discussing the crucial instance Eur. *Heracles* 581.

It seems best, therefore, to interpret the use of ἐκπονεῖν before and in Euripides as a clear case of the group (C) discussed by Brunel. His conclusions have been taken over by Schwyzler: 'ἐκ- häufig eine blosze, verstärkende Bezeichnung des Abschlusses, Zieles der Verbalhandlung geworden' (ii. 462; on p. 445 a similar remark on ἀπο-).

After having seen the evidence concerning the use of ἐκπονεῖν and having fitted it into some more general linguistic frame, one finds the case of Eur. *Heracles* 581 puzzling. The Athenian audience, having followed the argument from line 561 onwards (especially 574 ff.), must have expected in 581 either a phrase like οὐ κωλύσω θάνατον; or οὐκ ἐκπονήσω σωτηρίαν; (compare Eur. *frg.* 729 recorded *supra*). Wilamowitz (*ad loc.*) explains ἐκπονεῖν as πονοῦντα ἐκπόδων ποιεῖν (his interpretation is taken over by Tsitsoni, 63), but this does not accord with any of the other instances of ἐκπονεῖν in Euripides, or before him, for that matter. Paley² perceives the problem but does not explain it.

¹ In a concluding chapter (253-80) Brunel analyses the relation between the present-aorist-perfect system and the 'déterminé-indéterminé' opposition, and observes that in many cases the effectivity of an action is expressed in three ways: by the meaning of the verb itself, by the preverb, by the aorist. High scores are found for compounds in the aorist (or praesens historicum), and for uncomposed verbs in the present tense.

² He refers to 581 in the context of his note

on lines 309-10 τὰς τῶν θεῶν γὰρ ὅστις ἐκμοχθεῖ τύχας, / πρόθυμός ἐστιν, ἢ προθυμία δ' ἄφρων. which can, in this context, esp. 311 with Porson's *χρεῶν*, only mean: 'whosoever tries to struggle out of the fatalities imposed by the gods is unwisely eager.' The two verbs are indeed birds of a feather: ἐκμοχθεῖν, too, occurs once in Aesch., not at all in Soph., and ten times in Euripides. It is synonymous with ἐκπονεῖν: ἐ. κερκίσαν πέπλους 'to toil in the process of weaving peploi' (*El.* 307), ἐ.

Owen (*ad Eur. Ion* 375) dryly notes: 'In *HF* 581 the verb is given yet another sense.' It is odd that no one has fully realized the importance of what the Thesaurus observes: '*HF* 581 diversa significazione: Amoliar'. This must be one of the cases referred to by Brunel (p. 281): 'Il arrive, en prose comme en poésie, qu'un sens concret paraisse restitué [my italics] au préverbe dans un composé auquel le langage courant donne une valeur qui relève essentiellement de l'aspect.'

I submit that the poet wanted the audience to be taken by surprise for a moment; they were meant to understand initially the verb in its usual sense and to hear Heracles affirming that he was going to accomplish (by *πόνος*) the killing of his children. But by the dramatic context they were presently made to understand *ἐκπονήσω* as *κωλύσω*.

2. Euripides' intention

I suggest that Euripides contrives this effect on purpose; that it is part of his technique displayed so skilfully in this tragedy. In vv. 1-822 he presents a Heracles, benefactor of mankind in general and of his own *φίλοι* in particular: *ἥρως ἀλεξίκακος*, only to let this splendid figure become an evil-doer by an incomprehensible and unjustifiable stroke of the gods (823-end). He binds these two parts closely together not only by the identity of the main character and by important thematic consistency¹ but also by a series of small but meaningful verbal links and recurrent motifs.²

HF 581 is an item in a series of phrases, all pointing to the way in which Heracles 'carried out' his works:³

- 22 ἐξεμόχθησεν πόνους
 425 δρόμων ἀγάλματα διῆλθε (lyrics)
 575 (πόνους) ἤνυσσα
 827 ἄθλους ἐκτελευτήσαι πικρούς
 830 μόχθους διεπέρασε
 1270 μόχθους ἔτλην
 1273 (ποῖον) πόλεμον οὐκ ἐξήνυσσα;
 1276 μυρίων πόνων διῆλθον ἀγέλας
 1279 τὸν λοίσθιον δὲ τόνδ' ἔτλην τάλας πόνον⁴ παιδοκτονήσας
 1383 τὰ κάλλιστ' ἐξέπραξ' ἐν Ἑλλάδι.

The hero has performed all labours he was assigned to do, and the last and most gruesome one is the infanticide. This is the dramatic climax of the play; and to this *ἀπροσδόκητον* line 581 is a well-placed pointer.

πόνους 'to sustain, to complete' (Aesch. *Prom.* 825; Eur. *Troad.* 646, *I.T.* 84, 1455, *Heracles* 22); 'to win by labour' (*Troad.* 64, *Heracles* 1369, *Suppl.* 451). Consequently the use of *ἐκμοχθεῖν* in *Heracles* 309 is equally remarkable as the use of *ἐκπονέειν* in 581; but the dramatic importance of 581 is much greater.

¹ Compare the essay of D. J. Conacher on the *Heracles*, pp. 78-90 in his *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme and Structure* (Toronto 1967).

² These thematic and verbal links

between the 'separate' parts of the play have been discussed by J. C. Kamerbeek, 'Unity and Meaning of Euripides' *Heracles*', *Mnemosyne* xix (1966), 1 ff.

³ Note the four 'effective' *ἐκ*- compounds. It can hardly be called an accident that the man who composed the hypothesis of the *Heracles* wrote αὐτὸς εἰς Ἄργος ἦλθεν Εὐρυσθεὶ τοὺς ἄθλους ἐκπονήσων.

⁴ Reiske's *πόνον* (MSS. *φόνον*) in 1279 is probable. Wilamowitz and Murray have taken it into their text.

It is necessary to make explicit exactly how Euripides uses the verb here. To apply the label 'ambiguity' is not enough. Ambiguity¹ can be phonological (an aim / a name) or syntactic (they are flying planes) or lexical (bank: 'of a river' and 'place to deposit money'). In the matter of lexical ambiguity (it is clear that this applies to our case), further distinctions can be made. Most words have a certain vagueness of referential applicability, many words are polysemous (words for which more than one meaning is given in the lexicon, and these meanings are in some evident way related to each other), and some are homonymous (different senses, having no relevant components in common: the example of 'bank', given above). 'The use of a lexically homonymous word in a sentence where both meanings could be present, and the use of that sentence in a context where both interpretations are possible, will have a communicative effect that is known as punning, and can be explained by the high diversity of meaning.'² The listener's or reader's mind oscillates between the two (or sometimes even more) possible meanings of the word in question, until the context and/or the situation provide(s) definitive clarity: 'disambiguation'.

Ambiguity is used in literary texts, in the first place, to catch the reader's (or listener's) attention: he will be puzzled by the possibility of interpreting the word (phrase) in two or more ways and oscillate between them. Secondly, there is, at least often, no definitive 'disambiguation', it being the poet's intention to use both meanings and to leave the reader in a state of suspense. This subject is amply discussed in Empson's famous monograph.³

When I try to apply these elements of linguistic and literary theory to our present case, I feel that *ἐκπονήσω* in *Heracles* 581 is *not* a simple case of a verb that has a certain vagueness of referential applicability and is specialized to one particular meaning in this context. The reason why I deny this is the entire absence of parallels; *ἐκπονέειν* normally denotes completion, not removal. The most one can say is that in *ἐκ-* the notion of removal is latent, potential; and that in *Heracles* 581 Euripides actualizes this potentiality. It is a borderline-case between homonymy and polysemy. He wants to bring the public into a momentary state of being puzzled; presently they are helped out of this perplexity by the immediate context ('of course *ἐκπονήσω* must mean *πόνω κωλύσω*'), but subconsciously their first understanding perseveres, and so their mind is prepared for what is to follow: that Heracles, by exerting himself, realizes the killing of his own children, unwittingly: *ἐξεπόνησε τῶν τέκνων θάνατον*. And this 'verbal trick' is part of the overall design of the play.

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¹ I follow the theory and terminology of J. G. Kooy, *Ambiguity in Natural Language*, diss. Amsterdam 1971, 119-126.

² Kooy, op. cit. 126.

³ *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930¹), Penguin paperback (1965), 235.