

NOTES

The Chorus of *Prometheus Pyrphoros* and Hesiod *Th.* 563

M. L. West in *JHS* xcix (1979) 132–3 speculates that the Chorus of *Prometheus Pyrphoros* may have been the Meliai. There is, however, only one reference that might just possibly link the Meliai with the gift of fire to men: Hesiod *Th.* 563,

οὐκ ἐδίδου μελίησι πυρὸς μένος ἀκαμάτοιο.

Unfortunately, the very word which West most needs to support his speculation—μελίησι—is subject to variant readings. Some manuscripts give μελίοισι, and one manuscript carries a superscription εἰοισι (giving μελέοισι). Also, the reading μελίησι involves very great difficulties of sense, context and grammar. Admittedly, in his edition of the *Theogony* West discusses the textual problem at some length; but he makes no mention of it in his *JHS* article, and readers of that article are left with the impression that μελίησι is the undisputed, correct text in *Th.* 563.

If μελίησι is correct in 563, then 563–4 together read:

οὐκ ἐδίδου μελίησι πυρὸς μένος ἀκαμάτοιο
θητοῖς ἀνθρώποις οἱ ἐπὶ χθονὶ ναιετάουσιν.

The double dative after ἐδίδου is admitted by West to be ‘awkward’. To me, it is much worse than awkward; I cannot feel any clear sense coming out of the Greek. The following explanations have been suggested; we note first that, in these explanations, no one is quite sure whether the meaning is ‘ash-trees’ or ‘Meliai’.

(1) Zeus did not give fire *to* the Meliai *for* men—but why not, equally, *for* the Meliai *to* men?

(2) Zeus did not give fire *to* ash-trees *for* men.

(3) Zeus did not give fire *to* men *by means of* ash-trees.

A further suggestion is to cut out 564, and translate:

(4) Zeus did not give fire *to* ash-trees.

Of the above, (2) is preferred by West in his edition, though he also allows (4) as a possibility. In his article, he seems undecided between (1) and (2). (3) is of uncertain parentage, and I only heard of it privately.

Double datives with nouns of equal standing (I mean, neither of them a pronoun) seem logically difficult, because we do not know whether it is ‘to A for B’ or ‘for A to B’. The only parallel presented by West is *fr.* 43a.53 ὡς οὐ οἱ δοῖεν Γλαύκῳ γένος Οὐρανίωνες, ‘that the gods were not giving him [Sisyphus] offspring for Glaucus’. Here one of the nouns is a pronoun, and besides, the meaning is really: ‘The gods did not grant to Sisyphus *that there should be offspring to Glaucus.*’ This is hardly a parallel for two datives of equal standing, or for West’s postulated sense ‘put fire in trees for men to find’ (or ‘gave it to the Meliai for them to pass on to men’). Admittedly, lack of parallel is not an immediate disproof, but the double dative is a real stumbling block here, because we get no clear apprehension of the sense as we read the two lines.

There are, in fact, great difficulties of sense. The multiplicity of renderings given above reveals the ambiguity: how could any hearer of these lines know

which, if any, of the suggested meanings was intended? ‘Give fire to ash-trees’ is not a plausible way, even for Hesiod, of saying ‘put it in ash-trees for men to find’. The word is ‘give’; and the only group of people to whom Zeus might have been (but was not) *giving* fire in the context of Hesiod’s simple story was mankind. The sudden interposition of ash-trees (or Meliai) as intermediaries turns this simple story into something hopelessly complicated and confused. All we want here is a simple statement to the effect that Zeus was refusing to give fire to man. To say that he was refusing to give it in some specified way (i.e. via trees, or Meliai) is to imply two things. First, it implies that he might have been giving it to man by some other means (the Prometheus story itself shows that he could have given it to man directly); and this would be contrary to the story. Second, it implies another myth to the effect that Zeus at some stage gave fire to man in the specified way; and this would be inconsistent with the story of the bringing of fire to man by Prometheus.

Scholars run into a quagmire of error when they impose something they have got from general anthropology upon particular passages where it does not fit. There may have been ‘archaic’ myths about fire being somehow stored in wood. But in this passage Hesiod does not say ‘stored fire in wood’, even if the reading is correct; he says ‘gave it to ash-trees’. It is the merest assumption to suppose that ‘ash-trees’ is used generically for ‘firewood’ in this passage; West himself admits that such an association of ideas is not attested. The word ‘gave’ is not the same as ‘put in’ or ‘stored’; on the contrary, ‘gave’ in this context immediately suggests the idea of Zeus not *giving* fire to man. Furthermore, in this particular story, fire was actually brought to man as a direct gift by Prometheus. In this context, it is most implausible that Hesiod should refer, a little earlier on in the same story, to a wholly different, indirect method of giving fire to men, by putting it in ash-trees for them to find. How would they have found it, without Forethought, of which they then had none? Underlying all these incongruities of sense and context, there is also the very great difficulty of the double dative.

There are limits to the defence which (in effect) West and other scholars put up: ‘Anything goes in Hesiod. He was capable of the most awkward constructions, anomalies of sense, confusion of myths.’ Maybe one can defend a *single* point in this way; but anomalies of sense and context, ambiguity, confusion of myths, awkwardness of construction, all simultaneously? I think not. C. J. Rowe, in ‘Archaic thought in Hesiod’, *JHS* ciii (1983) 124–35, mentions some examples of confusion of myths in Hesiod; but these involve inconsistencies 700 lines apart (*Th.* 217, *Th.* 904), or even in different poems, and that is not at all the same thing as mixing myths within the same story, only a few lines apart. The inconsistencies involved in Pandora’s dress are closer together; but these can be either shown to be understandable (as is done by Rowe), or emended away by fairly drastic surgery (as by some editors), or else shown not to be inconsistencies after all (for example, if it is justifiable to suppose that Hesiod uses *kosmos* with special reference to ‘dress’, as opposed to jewellery and garlands, then there would be no inconsistency in

ascribing *all* the *kosmos* to Athena, and assigning gifts of necklaces and flowers to other deities).

I submit, therefore, that *μελίησι* (in this sense) is to be regarded as wrong. Then try *μελίησι* (or *μελίοισι*) taken in the sense 'men'. I agree with West that such a meaning is unattested and implausible. A suggested explanation is given by a scholiast: *μελίοισι δὲ ἦτοι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἢ ὅτι ἐκ Μελίων ἐγένοντο νυμφῶν ἢ ὅτι γεννωμένοι ἐρρίπτοντο ὑπὸ ταῖς μελίαις κτλ.* I find this singularly unconvincing, though it cannot be absolutely ruled out. The scholion suggests that in antiquity the meaning was thought to be 'men', and not ash trees or nymphs.

There remains *μελέοισι*. West's rejection of this is ill-founded. He says: '*μελέοισι* is obviously a mere conjecture. *μέλεος* is Homeric only in the sense "idle, useless".' Obviously? It is true that *εοισι* is a suprascript in just one late MS (Z), but it is still possible that some of the variants in the second hand of Z represent a genuine alternative tradition. Even if *μελέοισι* is a conjecture, conjectures are not always wrong, and the fact that they are made suggests an ancient dissatisfaction with the text. Further, when West complains that *μέλεος* ought to mean 'idle, useless', he is evidently thinking of LSJ's interpretation of the word as 'unhappy, miserable' in 563.¹ But LSJ are wrong; if *μελέοισι* is correct in 563, it will certainly mean 'idle, useless'. Men without fire were indeed idle and useless. Our minds turn immediately to Aesch. *PV* 441 ff., where Prometheus stresses how useless and idle men were before he gave them fire:

*ᾧσ σφας νηπίους ὄντας τὸ πρὶν
ἔννουσ ἔθθηκα καὶ φρενῶν ἐπηβόλους.*

If *μελέοισι* were correct, it would fit well with this passage of the *PV*.

μελέοισι makes good sense. After the 'might of tireless fire', the helplessness of mortal men living on earth is a likely contrast, and thus every word in 563–4 has force. It eliminates 'ash-trees' and confines the meaning to a plain statement, 'Zeus was not giving fire to men', which is exactly what is wanted here. Add in its relevance to *PV* 441 ff., and we see that there exists at least one highly viable alternative to *μελίησι*. Perhaps *μελέοισι* (previously read by Paley) might be right.

There is one serious objection. It is not common for an adjective to be so far separated from the noun which it qualifies, as is *μελέοισι* from *ἀνθρώποις* here. There are of course cases where adjectives are separated from their nouns for emphasis, e.g. Hom. *Il.* i 1–2, *Od.* i 1, and Aesch. *PV* 399–400, 404–5.² But these are not exact parallels for the present case. The usage involved is just

¹ It should be noted that in Homer, while *μέλεος* certainly means 'idle, useless', there is only one passage in which (possibly) it is used in this sense of a person: *Il.* x 480. Even there it is probably a neuter adjective used adverbially. However, quotations in LSJ from early literature (including an oracular hexameter from Herodotus) attest the application to persons from an early date. LSJ interpret the word as 'miserable' in these cases, but in view of the earlier meaning in Homer I would infer a basic meaning of 'vain, missing the mark', with implications of futility, uselessness and unhappiness (or lucklessness) according to context. Hesiod's poetry had a very different purpose from Homer's, and his use of words must be expected to include innovations, which may then be followed by later writers.

² It is arguable that *μελέοισι* here is in emphatic position in order to point the contrast between feeble mortals and mighty fire, or to stress the shiftlessness of men without fire.

as unparalleled as is West's double dative. The honest subjective opinion of a fine scholar is as follows: 'Neither the syntax nor the order seems to me any more characteristic of early epic than West's way of taking *μελίησι*.' I too feel some difficulty about *μελέοισι*, in a subjective way.³ Nevertheless Paley read *μελέοισι* in his text without wincing. It is pertinent to ask: was Paley 'insensitive', or am I and the other scholar 'over-fussy'? In the absence of more evidence about early Greek idiom, can the judgment be other than subjective?

The arguments against West's interpretation are based not just on subjective ideas about the possibilities of Greek idiom, but on sense and context. By these arguments I feel driven⁴ to the conclusion that, whether *μελέοισι* is right or not, the answer cannot be to revert to nymphs and ash-trees. Other readings are conceivable (e.g. excise 564 and read *θηητοῖσι* for *μελίησι* in 563), but involve considerable violence to the text. It would seem sensible, therefore, at least to consider the possibility that worries about word order may be over-fussy and that *μελέοισι* may after all be right.⁵

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³ The real trouble is that one has to wait till the next line before getting the application of it.

⁴ Others may feel less driven. The point I make here is that my view is based on argument and evidence, and shows a healthy regard for imperatives of sense and context.

⁵ I am indebted for some helpful advice to Mr T. C. W. Stinton.

Aeschylus' ὕμνος δέσμιος (*Eum.* 306) and Attic judicial curse tablets

When the Erinyes catch up with Orestes in Athens they find him clutching the archaic wooden statue of Athena and invoking her aid along with that of Apollo (*Eum.* 235 ff.). The Erinyes scorn his prayers and bid him hear their 'binding song': ὕμνον δ' ἀκούσῃ τόνδε δέσμιον (306). Wecklein in his 1888 edition of the play remarked 'erinnert an magische Künste' and quoted *Laws* 933a, where Plato, discussing murder by poison, makes brief mention of the popular belief in sorcerers, incantations and binding spells (*καταδέσεις*). Subsequent commentators repeat Wecklein's brief note nearly verbatim and then elaborate it along two different lines, either claiming some vague Orphic source (Thomson 1938) or citing Wuensch's *Defixionum Tabellae Atticae* (Blass 1907; Groeneboom 1952). More recently, Lebeck argued that the ostensible title ('binding song') is incompatible with the actual content of the stasimon (Apollo's encroachment on the Erinyes' power); she concluded that the title is irrelevant or at best only of secondary importance.¹ Thus on the whole, this ὕμνος δέσμιος has been treated as a remnant of magical or chthonic lore too obscure to have any real bearing on our understanding of the immediate dramatic situation in *Eumenides*. I shall argue to the contrary that the song is closely related to a specific kind of curse tablet used to affect the outcome of law cases in Athens as early as the 5th century BC, and as such it is important to the dramatic context of a tragedy which depicts the mythical foundation of Athens' first homicide court.

¹ A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia* (Cambridge, Mass. 1971) 150.