TRAGIC DICTION IN HERODOTUS: SOME POSSIBILITIES

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T HE INFLUENCE exerted on Herodotus by contemporary Attic tragedians is a topic of significant interest[1] when we consider the historian's remarkable knowledge of Greek poetry,[2] the high visibility of Attic tragedy in fifth-century Greece, Herodotus' probable visit or visits to Athens,[3] and the production in 472 of Aeschylus' *Persae*, a play about the climactic event in the *Histories*, the Persian invasion of Greece under Xerxes.[4] The task of clearly defining such influence is a difficult one,

[1]The only detailed treatment is Hans Fohl, *Tragische Kunst bei Herodot*, Diss. Rostock 1913 (Borna-Leipzig 1913); but important discussions can also be found in Amédée Hauvette, *Hérodote: Historien des guerres médiques* (Paris 1894) 125–127; Wolfgang Aly, *Volksmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen: Eine Untersuchung über die volkstümlichen Elemente der altgriechischen Prosaerzählung* (Göttingen 1921) 279–286 and *passim*; Wilhelm Schmid and Otto Stählin, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, 1.2 (Munich 1934) 569–572; Max Pohlenz, *Herodot, der erste Geschichtsschreiber des Abendlandes* (Berlin 1937) *passim* esp. 116–118, 120–121, 184–185, 213–214; Charles Fornara, *Herodotus: An Interpretative Essay* (Oxford 1971); Hans-Peter Stahl, "Herodots Gyges-Tragödie," *Hermes* 96 (1968) 385–400; Rudolf Rieks, "Eine tragische Erzählung bei Herodot (*Hist.* 1, 34–35)," *Poetica* 7 (1975) 23–44; Albin Lesky, "Tragödien bei Herodot?" in *Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean in Ancient History and Prehistory: Studies Presented to Fritz Schachermeyr on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. K. H. Kinzl (Berlin 1977) 224–230. The relevance of the remains of the Gyges drama published by Edgar Lobel in 1950 will remain questionable as long as the date of the play remains so. For a full critical bibliography through 1978 see my 1980 Yale dissertation, "The Question of Tragic Influence on Herodotus" 4–20. The works listed above are subsequently referred to by author's name only.

[2]In addition to Homer (quoted in *Histories* 2.116, 4.29, 7.161; mentioned in 2.23, 2.53, 2.117, 4.32), Herodotus demonstrates familiarity with the cyclic poets (*Cypria*, 2.117; *Epigoni*, 4.32), Hesiod (2.53, 4.32), Archilochus (1.12), Solon (5.113), Sappho (2.135), Alcaeus (5.95), Simonides of Ceos (5.102), Pindar (3.38), Phrynichus (6.21), and Aeschylus (2.156). For further details see Schmid-Stählin 553–554.

[3]On Herodotus in Athens see Felix Jacoby, *RE* Supplementband 2 (1913) 226–237; Philippe-Emile Legrand, *Hérodote: Introduction* (Paris 1932) 29–37; and Kurt von Fritz, *Die griechische Geschichtsschreibung* (Berlin 1967) 1.123–135. I am not convinced by the arguments of A. J. Podlecki ("Herodotus in Athens?" in Kinzl, 246–265) that Herodotus' sojourn in Athens was nothing more than a fleeting visit or never even took place at all. Although much of the evidence for Herodotus' visiting Athens can be questioned, its cumulative weight seems to me overwhelming.

[4]There can be little doubt that Herodotus knew the *Persae*. Of the various verbal similarities between *Histories* 7–9 and the *Persae* cited by previous scholars (see especially Hauvette, 125–127; Pohlenz, 116, 121, 124), I note only two of the most striking.

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especially with regard to language. Any attempt to identify words used by Herodotus as borrowings from tragedy encounters several obstacles. Too little early Greek literature survives to reveal the distribution and stylistic level of many Greek words: what appears to us as a primarily or exclusively tragic usage may have been a poeticism common to several genres, or indeed a usage common to several levels of diction. A second complicating factor is the tragedians' use of Ionic words and forms to lend a slightly exotic flavor to the language of the stage, and so to differentiate it from everyday spoken Attic.[5] Words attested exclusively or mainly in Herodotus and the tragedians may thus be Ionic property borrowed by the dramatists as easily as dramatic property borrowed by Herodotus. Finally, Hermogenes suggests that Ionian writers like Herodotus used as common prose diction words that had a poetic coloring in other Greek dialects.[6]

Some fifty years ago Wilhelm Schmid compiled a list of words and phrases which he thought Herodotus had borrowed from tragedy;[7] however, Schmid offered no proof for his assertions and cited several words which probably do not manifest tragic influence on the historian.[8] This paper will focus on three usages previously noted by Schmid which do seem to be plausible examples of tragic diction in the *Histories*: πυρόω ("to set on fire"), θεήλατος ("heaven-sent"), and τὰ σκῆπτρα with the singular meaning "royal sceptre." We shall see that the suggested origin

Compare Artemisia's advice to Xerxes not to offer battle at Salamis (δειμαίνω μὴ ὁ ναυτικὸς στρατὸς κακωθεὶς τὸν πεζὸν προσδηλήσηται, 8.68γ) with Atossa's summary of the Persian defeat at Salamis (ναυτικὸς στρατός κακωθεὶς πεζὸν ὤλεσε στρατόν, *Pers.* 728). In addition, the only Herodotean instance of the metaphor δούλιον ζυγόν, "yoke of slavery"—in Xerxes' first speech to the Persian nobles (7.8)—probably recalls its use (the first in extant Greek literature) in a choral passage of the *Persae*: στεῦνται δ᾿ ἱεροῦ Τμώλου πελάται ζυγὸν ἀμφιβαλεῖν δούλιον Ἑλλάδι (49–50).

[5] See Antoine Meillet, *Aperçu d'une histoire de la langue grecque*[7] (Paris 1965) 218–219, 221.

[6] *De Ideis* 2.319 ἡ γὰρ Ἰὰς οὖσα ποιητικὴ φύσει ἐστὶν ἡδεῖα, apparently referring above all to the vocabulary of Ionic writers: see Herbert Weir Smyth, *The Sounds and Inflections of the Greek Dialects: Ionic* (Oxford 1894) 80–82. Other statements of Hermogenes (*De Ideis* 2.395, 399) imply that Herodotean diction is more poetic still than standard Ionic diction. See n. 8 below for three examples of apparently poetic words in Attic which Herodotus uses in prosaic contexts.

[7] Schmid-Stählin 569, n. 7.

[8] The particle δῆτα, for example, occurs more frequently in Aristophanes and Plato than in the tragedians, suggesting that δῆτα was a colloquial Attic (perhaps Attic-Ionic) usage. Herodotus' usage confirms this impression, since δῆτα is found (apart from the probably false reading at 4.69) in four notably conversational questions (2.22, 2.114, 3.6, 7.147). I also strongly doubt that tragedy is the source of the Herodotean *hapax legomena* Λιβυστικός (4.192), ἐπεικάζειν (9.32), and νωμᾶν meaning "to observe" (4.128): none of these words is found in a context conducive to or consonant with poetic diction.

of these words in tragedy is not merely a lexicographical curiosity, but in fact colors our perception of Xerxes' character and situation as he wrestles with the dilemma presented by the Greek expedition.

We may begin with πυρόω. Outside Herodotus, πυρόω occurs 18 times in the tragedians,[9] once in Pindar (*Pythian* 11.33), and once in a lyric fragment of unknown date and authorship (*PMG frag. adesp.* 989). The verb is otherwise unexampled in fifth-century prose, and after Herodotus is next attested (often with a slightly different meaning: see *LSJ* s.v.) in the Hippocratic περὶ διαίτης,[10] Plato, and Aristotle.[11] Herodotus' apparently self-conscious use of the verb strengthens the impression that πυρόω is not standard prose usage. Herodotus usually expresses the idea "to set on fire, to burn" with a compound of πίμπρημι; Powell records 36 instances of ἐμπίμπρημι and 4 of ὑποπίμπρημι (see also ἀντεμπίμπρημι at 5.102.1). Only twice does Herodotus resort to πυρόω; both instances are found in speeches that mark crucial stages in Xerxes' expedition against Greece.

Πυρόω first appears in Xerxes' first speech to the Persian nobles, an address distinguished by frequent use of poetic diction.[12] Xerxes makes a forceful statement of his intention to punish the Athenians: οὐ πρότερον παύσομαι πρὶν ἢ ἕλω τε καὶ πυρώσω τὰς Ἀθήνας (7.8.β2). (The sustained iambic rhythm of πρὶν ἢ ἕλω τε καὶ πυρώσω τὰς Ἀθήνας is remarkable, and may echo the rhythm of tragic dialogue.[13]) But Xerxes fails, and in the wake of the defeat at Salamis Artemisia advises the king to return home and leave Mardonius in charge of the troops. The queen caps her speech with words of encouragement that recall Xerxes' announcement of his goal: σὺ δέ, τῶν εἵνεκα τὸν στόλον ἐποιήσαο, πυρώσας τὰς Ἀθήνας ἀπελᾷς (8.102.3). Surely πυρώσας τὰς Ἀθήνας refers back to the king's proud boast πυρώσω τὰς Ἀθήνας. Xerxes is only too happy to heed Artemisia's advice; thus, Herodotus marks the beginning and the end of Xerxes' personal involvement in the invasion of Greece by using a verb that may well have had strong associations with tragedy for the historian's original audience.

[9]Aesch. *frag.* 281. 4N², *Ag.* 440, 481, *PV* 497; Soph. *Ant.* 286; Eur. *HF* 244, *Cycl.* 594, 600, *Or.* 1543, *Hel.* 1354 (*locus corruptus*), *Rhes.* 61, *Phoen.* 575, *Andr.* 400, *Med.* 1190, *Tro.* 1283, *Antiope* 76 (see Denys Page, ed., *Select Papyri*² 3[Cambridge, Mass. 1942] 60–70), *IT* 685, *frag.* 781.52 N². See also Soph. *frag.* 1027.8 N² (Sophoclean authorship is dubious) and *frag. adesp.* 118.3 N².

[10]1.20, 2.40, 2.56 *bis*. The treatise apparently belongs to the fourth century; the traditional date ca 400 may well be too early: see Hans Diller, "Der innere Zusammenhang der hippokratischen Schrift *de victu*," *Hermes* 87 (1959) 55–56.

[11]Plato *Timaeus* 51b, 52d; also in the spurious *Axiochus* 372a. The verb is attested 25 times in Aristotle.

[12]For a stylistic assessment of this speech see Aly, 281–282.

[13]Aly, 282.

Θεήλατος would also seem to have had primarily tragic connotations in the fifth century. Outside Herodotus, θεήλατος is found only in tragedy (11 times[14]) and, several centuries later, in Plutarch (twice[15]); in the *Histories* the word occurs only once, in a conspicuous passage, and in a conspicuous position within that passage. Artabanus' opposition had induced Xerxes to abandon his plans for an expedition against Greece, but threatening dreams warned the king to reverse his decision yet again or suffer grave consequences. When the same vision appears to Artabanus and threatens to burn his eyes with hot irons for discouraging Xerxes, both king and advisor are convinced that it is heaven's will for Greece to be subjugated. Artabanus announces his change of heart with the following words: ἐπεὶ δὲ δαιμονίη τις γίνεται ὁρμή, καὶ Ἕλληνας, ὡς οἶκε, φθορή τις καταλαμβάνει θεήλατος, ἐγὼ μὲν καὶ αὐτὸς τράπομαι καὶ τὴν γνώμην μετατίθεμαι ... (7.18.3). θεήλατος, which expresses the reason for Artabanus' reversal, receives strong emphasis by being deferred to final position in its clause and separated from its noun (φθορή). Both grammar and meaning, form and content call attention to θεήλατος. Moreover, just as πυρόω is not the standard Herodotean verb meaning "to burn," so too θεήλατος is not the standard Herodotean adjective meaning "divine" or "heaven-sent" (θεῖος, found 33 times in the *Histories*; Herodotus can also express divine origin with a prepositional phrase, e.g., ἐκ θεῶν.) Finally, while the process of decision-making which Herodotus here represents with such dramatic elaboration can scarcely be said to occur in tragedy alone in extant Greek literature, the agony of αἵρεσις is certainly an outstanding characteristic of many tragedies. Hence, the use of specifically tragic diction in this episode would be particularly appropriate.

Lastly, the tragic poets may well have suggested Herodotus' use in 7.52 of τὰ σκῆπτρα with the meaning "royal sceptre," a usage not attested in pre-tragic poetry and one especially associated with tragedy,[16] where it appears no fewer than 26 times.[17] We find it as well, however, in lines 510 and 636 of Aristophanes' *Birds*, and these passages are crucial for judging whether the plural form is strictly poetic (and tragic) or colloquial as well. On closer examination, the first of these examples may in fact be a straightforward plural, and need not require a special explanation:

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[14]Aesch. *Ag.* 1299; Soph. *Ant.* 278, *OT* 255, 992, *frag.* 619.3 N²; Eur. *Or.* 2, *Ion* 1306, 1392, *Andr.* 851, *Cretes* 30 (see Page, *Select Papyri* [above, n. 9] 70–76), *frag.* 444.2 N².

[15]*Moralia* 418e, 830e.

[16]"Der Plural nach Weise der Tragiker" is Heinrich Stein's comment *ad loc.*

[17]Aesch. *Eum.* 626, *PV* 761; Soph. *El.* 651, *OC* 425, 449, 1342; Eur. *El.* 11, 321, *HF* 213, 1104, 1167, *Andr.* 1223, *Antiope* 104, *Or.* 437, 1058, *IA* 1194, *Phoen.* 52, 73, 80, 514, 591, 601, 1253, *Ion* 660, *IT* 187, *Melanippe the Wise* 5.

Πι. ἦρχον δ' οὕτω σφόδρα τὴν ἀρχήν, ὥστ' εἴ τις καὶ βασιλεύοι
ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν τῶν Ἑλλήνων Ἀγαμέμνων ἢ Μενέλαος,
ἐπὶ τῶν σκήπτρων ἐκάθητ' ὄρνις μετέχων ὅ τι δωροδοκοίη.

Ευ. τουτὶ τοίνυν οὐκ ἤδη ἐγώ· καὶ δῆτα μ' ἐλάμβανε θαῦμα,
ὁπότ' ἐξέλθοι Πρίαμός τις ἔχων ὄρνιν ἐν τοῖσι τραγῳδοῖς,
ὁ δ' ἄρ' εἱστήκει τὸν Λυσικράτη τηρῶν ὅ τι δωροδοκοίη.

(*Birds* 508-513)

The general nature of Pisthetairos' statement may adequately explain
the plural form τῶν σκήπτρων (cf. ταῖς πόλεσιν in the previous line).
Alternatively, or in addition, however, the mention of Agamemnon and
Menelaus, staple figures of the tragic stage, could motivate the use of
the plural number: note the explicit reference to "the tragedies" in 512.
Later in the play, the chorus, inspired by Pisthetairos' rhetoric, looks
forward to recovering σκῆπτρα τἀμά (636) from the Olympians. Here
tragic diction would be admirably suited to the new-found confidence—
even smugness—of the birds as they envision the re-establishment of
their rule. (We find further evidence of stylistic elevation in 631-633,
where the chorus uses the solemn language of the treaty: σὺ παρ' ἐμὲ
θέμενος/ὁμόφρονας λόγους δικαίους ἀδόλους ὁσίους.[18])

Herodotus uses σκῆπτρον only 6 times, and in 4 of these instances
(1.195 *ter*, 6.75) the meaning is not "sceptre" but "staff." Internal
evidence for the significance of the plural form in 7.52 is thus meager.
Nonetheless, Herodotus does use the singular σκῆπτρον at 3.142.3, where
Maeandrius informs the Samians that he now wields Polycrates' "sceptre
and all his dominion" (σκῆπτρον καὶ δύναμις πᾶσα ἡ Πολυκράτεος). Moreover,
tragic diction would be entirely appropriate in 7.52, as Xerxes and Arta-
banus end a conversation that immediately precedes the king's crossing
of the Hellespont and underscores the fatal significance of that step.
Xerxes confidently brushes aside Artabanus' final arguments and sends
his uncle home with a fond farewell and heavy responsibilities: θυμὸν
ἔχων ἀγαθὸν σῷζε οἶκόν τε τὸν ἐμὸν καὶ τυραννίδα τὴν ἐμήν· σοὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ μούνῳ
ἐκ πάντων σκῆπτρα τὰ ἐμὰ ἐπιτρέπω (7.52.2). Xerxes thus reaffirms his
decision to proceed with the expedition in a speech made the more
poignant by his use of tragic language.

The distribution of πυρόω, θεήλατος, and τὰ σκῆπτρα in the *Histories* is
striking: they all occur in the account of Xerxes' decision to invade
Greece and related passages. Indeed, *Histories* 7.8–18 contains a remark-
able cluster of plausible tragic borrowings, for in addition to the usages
cited above the metaphor δούλιον ζυγόν (7.8.γ3) is an apparent remini-
scence of Aesch. *Persae* 50,[19] and the ominous use of ἐπαίρω (7.9γ, 10.η1,

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[18]Cf. Thuc. 5.18.9, 23.2, 47.8, etc.
[19]See n. 4 above.

18.4) has parallels in tragedy and paratragedy.[20] (The evidence for tragic origin of ἀντιόομαι, 7.9.α2, γ, as suggested by Schmid, is less compelling.[21]) If I am right to detect specifically tragic echoes in these usages, their cumulative effect will have been to emphasize the similarity between Xerxes' fate and that of many characters in tragedy who make a difficult decision in concert with the gods, only to provoke their anger as a result of that decision, and to suffer the inevitable consequences.

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[20]Harry Avery, "A Poetic Word in Herodotus," *Hermes* 107 (1979) 1–9, argues convincingly that Herodotus' use of ἐπαίρω is influenced by tragedy.

[21]Although Herodotus often uses ἀντιόομαι in dramatic or central episodes (as in 7.9, where Mardonius exhorts Xerxes to attack Greece), the verb appears only once in extant tragedy (Aesch. *Supp.* 389)—at best a weak foundation for the conclusion drawn by Schmid.