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EURIPIDES *Telephus* fr. 149 (Austin) and the Folk-Tale Origins of the Teuthranian Expedition


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\'Αχιλλε(ύς) μὸν καὶ σὺ καινὸς ποντίας ἀπὸ χθονὸς ἥκετς. Ὀδυσσεύς: ποῦ ὅστις σύλλογος φίλων; τί μέλλετ'; ὃ χρὴν ἢσυχον κεῖσθαι πόδα.

\'Οδ(υσσεύς) δοκεὶ στρατεύειν καὶ μέλει τοῖς ἐν τέλει τάδ' ἐν δέοντι δ' ἢλθες, ὡ παῖ Πηλέως.

\'Αχιλλε(ύς) οὔ μὴν ἐπ' ἀκταῖς γ' ἐστὶ καψήρης στρατός, οὔτ' ὀν ὀπλίτης ἐξετάζεται παρῶν.

\'Οδ(υσσεύς) ἀλλ' αὐτίκα σπεύδειν γὰρ ἐν καθαρῷ χρεών.


The above fragment has been known for almost a century, but not everything it has to say about the significance of the story of Telephus has been wrung from it. And yet, we have only to combine its contents with one or two other considerations, to learn a great deal. Let us take things by easy stages.

(1) Achilles and Odysseus: a clash of personalities

The most obvious feature seems at first sight to have nothing to do with the story of Telephus. In vv. 11–24 Euripides juxtaposes two antithetical and incompatible characters: Achilles, ‘impatient of delay’, and Odysseus who displays his ‘traditional diplomatic’ skill. The younger hero is irascible and eager for action; the older and more experienced man is measured and meditative. The former wants to rush into the war straight away; the latter adopts a more cautious attitude. Other authors had already exploited a similar contrast between this pair of heroes. One thinks in particular of the episode at Il. 19.145ff. where Achilles, wracked with grief for the death of Patroclus, is eager to rush into battle immediately, while Odysseus pragmatically urges delay until the men have eaten. As Wolfgang Schadewaldt saw,

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1 Pap. Berol. 9908 = Austin, Nova Fragmenta Euripidea in papyris reperta fr. 149 = Diggle, Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta Eur. Tel. II (p. 133f.).

2 Since 1907. For a recent bibliography see C. S. M. Collard et al., Euripides: Selected Fragmentary Plays vol. 1 (London 1995), p. 17 (by M. J. Cropp, who also supplies a useful introduction to the play and its problems (pp. 17ff.), and a commentary (pp. 42ff.)). The fragment I am discussing is printed on p. 38 (with facing English translation).

3 I quote from Cropp (as cited in the previous note) p. 50. As Pearson noted (cited below n. 9, 1.99), v. 18 of our fragment (σπεύδειν γὰρ ἐν καθαρῷ χρεῶν) is virtually equivalent to the English proverb ‘more haste, worse’ (or ‘less’) ‘speed’. For the exact context in the play which precipitates Achilles’ impatience and Odysseus’ cautious diplomacy see, e.g., M. Heath, CQ 37 (1987) 279.

two contrasting and incompatible views of life are there set in confrontation: ‘Im Streit um das Essen kommt das “Leben wie es ist” zur Sprache, um eben im Gegensatz das höhere Leben des Heros um so tiefer fühlen zu lassen.’

But it is essential to realise that the contrast extends far beyond an Homeric and a Euripidean passage. The antithesis between Achilles and Odysseus as heroes (brute force against reason; might against intelligence) runs throughout the Iliad and indeed the pre-Homeric tradition about the Trojan War, and likewise colours post-Homeric literature. It also operates in the same way within the story of Telephus and the Teuthranian Expedition. Thanks to Proclus’ summary, we know that the Cypria already contained an account of how the Greek force put in at Teuthrania, mistaking it for their destination of Troy, and ravaged the land. Its ruler Telephus sallied forth and killed one of the Greek leaders (Thersander, son of Polyniceis) but was then seriously wounded by Achilles, after which the Greeks withdrew. Here we see Achilles again associated with force and strength, wounding Telephus with the famous spear (Πηλιάδα μελήν: II. 16.143 etc.) which looms so large in the Iliad. By contrast, Odysseus’ rôle in the story was characteristically concerned with resolution of the problem caused by Achilles’ aggression. In Euripides’ play, it would seem, Odysseus was instrumental in explaining the oracle which declared that Telephus would be cured by the very spear that had wounded him (ὁ τρόφασα ἰάσεσαι: Apollod. epit. 3.20 etc.: cf. Parke–Wormell, The Delphic Oracle 2.83) and that he would lead the Greeks to Troy. After the initial stichomythia which constitutes fr. 149.11–24 of the play, Odysseus persuaded an initially reluctant and objecting Achilles to heal Telephus with his spear and explained the oracle.

We have no direct evidence that Odysseus’ conciliatory rôle already occurred in the Cypria. And at this stage of the argument it is enough to observe (and emphasise) that the attitudes and behaviour of Achilles, man of action, and Odysseus, the reflective and conciliatory hero, are apparent in the story as a whole, where the entire situation anticipates their antithetical pairing in the actual Trojan War.

The Teuthranian Expedition, then, anticipates, serves as a doublet of, the Trojan War itself, especially if we consider the rôles of Achilles and Odysseus. The next step is to make sense of these similarities. Do they merely suggest that, in the rather unsympathetic words of a recent critic, the Telephus story is a pastiche [my italics] derived from other more central episodes of the Trojan saga, perhaps developed as late as the seventh century? Or is there any alternative interpretation?

5 So, for the Iliad as the poem of βία, the Odyssey the poem of μήτις (symbolised by the two respective heroes), see, e.g., P. V. Jones in the Introduction to Homer: German Scholarship in Translation (Oxford 1997) p. 37f.; cf. J. Griffin, Homer on Life and Death (Oxford 1980) pp. 15 and 100f, etc. For Strength and Guile as antithetical values in the world of Folk-Tale see, e.g., K. Horn’s article in Enzyklopädie des Märchens s.v. ‘List’ (8.1097ff.), where she quotes Hegel’s dictum (from Jenenser Realphilosophie), ‘die breite Seite der Gewalt wird von der Spitze der List angegriffen’.


7 Note, in particular, Sophocles’ Philoctetes, where one of the play’s central themes, the antithesis between βία and δόλος, is associated with the contrast between Achilles and Odysseus, and the latter offers the former’s son the intoxicating prospect of becoming a super-hero who will combine the distinctive qualities of both (v. 119: σοφός τ’ ἄν αὐτός κάργαθος κεκλήθη ἂμω).

8 See my EGF p. 32.47ff.: ἐπειτα ἀναχθέντες Τηθυρναι προσέσχοιτι καὶ ταύτην ἡ Ἰλιον ἐπάρθουν. Τήλερος δὲ ἔχειθε Θερσανδρὸν τε τὸν Πολυνείκους κτείνει καὶ αὐτός ὑπὸ Ἀχιλλέως τιτρόσκεται.

9 See Heath (as cited in n. 3). Pearson (Fragments of Sophocles 1.95) writing in the days when our fragment was thought to be Sophoclean, already put his finger on the key issue: ‘the ingenuity of [Euripides] . . . was taxed to solve the dramatic difficulty of converting Telephus, a declared foe, into a trustworthy friend.’ The phrasing here inadvertently suggests the dilemma of heroes faced with extracting information from reluctant Old Men of the Sea and the like, and, as we shall shortly discover, this is no coincidence.

10 Cropp (as cited above n. 2) p. 22. Other scholars too have detected shared details with the actual invasion of Troy (initial repulse of the Greeks; intervention of Greek hero Protesilaus who drives enemy off until he is killed; restoration of Greek fortunes by Achilles’ pursuit of native champion etc: see Cypria EGF p. 32.68ff.) from which they have deduced that the first episode is a doublet: see Ernst Howald, Der Dichter der Ilias (Zurich 1946) p. 125f., Rhys Carpenter, Folk-Tale, Fiction, and Saga in the Homeric Epics (Los Angeles 1946) pp. 55ff. etc.
I have shown elsewhere, in a quite different context, that Greek myths depicting the ‘quest’ of a hero or heroes often involve him or them in a Vorabenteuer or ‘preliminary adventure’ with a demon or demon-like being. When Heracles, on his quest for the cattle of Geryon, encounters Nereus; when Perseus, on his quest for the head of Medusa, encounters the Graeae; when Jason and the Argonauts, on their quest for the Golden Fleece, encounter Phineus; they are all typifying this adventure. And the being they encounter performs a very specific (and crucial) rôle within the story: he (or she) ‘is endowed with relevant knowledge concerning the hero’s route, and this must be extracted . . . against his will by force or cunning’. Furthermore, this being regularly acts as a sort of ‘doublet’ or Doppelgänger of the adversary whom the hero defeats at the climax of his quest. Thus, in the labour of Heracles referred to above, Nereus, in his rôle of Old Man of the Sea, is an analogue of Geryon, the death-demon; and Heracles’ encounter with him anticipates, in a minor key as it were, his climactic battle against Geryon.

Do these story-patterns cast any light on the story of Telephus? I believe they do; although I think the argument works better in terms of similarities between situations than between individuals. Still, even if we adopted the latter approach, a good case could be made for supposing that Telephus was originally a demon-like being endowed with relevant knowledge concerning the route which the Greek heroes must take to Troy. And Achilles’ wounding of him with the famous spear derived from his
father Peleus would surely rank as an anticipation (in the minor key) of the climactic killing of Hector with that same weapon, when the expedition’s goal is finally reached and the Trojan War is underway.

However, it is the similarity in terms of situation that is most illuminated by the approach I am recommending. The Teuthranian expedition has all the signs of being a ‘preliminary adventure’, but one based rather on doublets or anticipations of circumstance. Are goals in war best achieved by force or cunning, strength or intelligence? These crucial questions, which are examined in the context of the Trojan War by means of the Achilles/Odysseus dichotomy, receive an advance exploration with the Teuthranian Expedition as background and the same two heroes to the front. And, foreshadowing the outcome of the war, Achilles’ aggression ultimately comes off second best against Odysseus’ wit and resourcefulness.

It might still be argued that this sophisticated technique proves the Teuthranian expedition to be a secondary accretion, a late addition to the story of the Trojan War. But the frequency with which ‘quest’ stories feature the ‘preliminary adventure’ suggests to me that the episode might after all be early and integral.

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