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## The mortal heroines: tragic metamorphosis of a Homeric line

On page 92 of *The Mortal Hero*, Seth reflects upon the role of Thetis in the characterization of Achilles. « Always, whether she mourns for Achilles or simply mentions his death, she accentuates by her own immortality the pathetic brevity of his life. What would be moving enough were she a human mother lamenting her son's inevitable death is still more affecting owing to the infallibility of her divine knowledge. Similarly, her power as a goddess to whom Zeus owes the continuation of his rule and to whom he will grant what she asks contrasts strongly with her powerlessness to help Achilles when it really counts. » This idea of powerlessness appears line 62 of *Il.* 18, but I would like to back a little in the goddess's speech. The line I want to discuss, as well as the remarkable hapax it contains, is 18, 54, which comes a little earlier, following an appeal to the Nereids to form a chorus and actually starting the goddess's dirge.

αἰ δ' ἅμα πᾶσαι (50)  
στήθεα πεπλήγοντο, Θέτις δ' ἐξῆρχε γόοιο·  
κλύτε κασίγνηται Νηρηΐδες, ὄφρ' ἐὺ πᾶσαι  
εἶδεν' ἀκούουσαι ὅσ' ἐμῶ ἐνὶ κήδεα θυμῶ.  
ὦ μοι ἐγὼ δειλή, ὦ μοι δυσαριστοτόκεια,  
ἦ τ' ἐπεὶ ἄρ τέκον υἱὸν ἀμύμονά τε κρατερόν τε (55)  
ἔξοχον ἠρώων· ὃ δ' ἀνέδραμεν ἔρνεϊ ἴσος·  
τὸν μὲν ἐγὼ θρέψασα φυτὸν ὥς γουνῶ ἀλωῆς  
νηυσὶν ἐπιπροέηκα κορωνίσιν Ἴλιον εἴσω  
Τρωσὶ μαχισόμενον· τὸν δ' οὐχ ὑποδέξομαι αὖτις  
οἴκαδε νοστήσαντα δόμον Πηληϊῶν εἴσω. (60)  
ὄφρα δέ μοι ζώει καὶ ὄρᾳ φάος ἠελίοιο  
ἄχνηται, οὐδέ τί οἱ δύναμαι χραισμῆσαι ἰοῦσα.

As Thetis's cry opens the *goos*, the interesting and unique noun *dusaristotokeia* encapsulates the theme of her lament, which is her complex relationship to Achilles. The compound already attracted the scholiasts's attention. First of all, it has three parts (*dus*, *aristo*, *tokeia*), an exceptional feature in Homeric poetry. Second and more importantly, its meaning is disputed. While it is often translated in English as a kind of commentary on the link between mother and son (I the mother, so sad it is, of the very best), scholia offer two types of paraphrase: either "the one who gave birth to the best of heroes to his misfortune" (ἡ ἐπὶ κακῶ ἄριστον τεκοῦσα Apollonios the Sophist) or "I who am miserable for having given birth to the best of heroes" (δύστηνος ἄριστον τεκοῦσα Apollonios the Sophist). Both interpretations are supported by several passages of the *Iliad*.

The first one, that puts the load of suffering on Achilles's shoulders, originates in book I, when the hero complains to his mother about Agamemnon's refusal to acknowledge his greatness. He ends his plea for help and restoration of his *timè* by defining himself as the best of the Achaeans (I, 412). Thetis then expresses regrets for having raised him and even for giving birth to him (I, 418). At this point, the goddess addresses her son, pitying his exceptional but brief destiny :

ὦ μοι τέκνον ἐμόν, τί νύ σ' ἔτρεφον αἰνὰ τεκοῦσα;  
 αἴθ' ὄφελος παρὰ νηυσὶν ἀδάκρυτος καὶ ἀπήμων (415)  
 ἦσθαι, ἐπεὶ νύ τοι αἴσα μίνυνθά περ οὔ τι μάλα δήν·  
 νῦν δ' ἅμα τ' ὠκύμορος καὶ δῖζυρὸς περὶ πάντων  
 ἔπλεο· τῆ σε κακῆ αἴση τέκον ἐν μεγάροισι.

We can notice the polyptot *teknon/tekousa/tekon* which will ultimately be condensed into the compound element *tokeia*. Note also the apostrophe and the use of the second person pronouns that point to her son, the *aristos Achaion*. Thetis here presents herself mostly as the mother responsible for bearing a doomed child whose destiny has reached its turning point and is about to unfold. She introduces and emphasizes the inextricable relation between Achilles's superiority as a warrior, which she is about to warrant by answering his prayer to ask for Zeus's help, and the supreme (*peri panton*) "swiftness" of his life as well as the supreme suffering that awaits him now that the action of the poem has been triggered. Yet there is no doubt that the goddess is foremost expressing compassion towards her mortal son's woes, as we can see in the word order of τῆ σε κακῆ αἴση, and not yet lamenting the loss she will ultimately experience.

Book 18 as well, the idea is present, as the causal phrase

ἦ τ' ἐπεὶ ἄρ τέκον υἱὸν ἀμύμονά τε κρατερόν τε (55)  
 ἔξοχον ἠρώων·

develops the second part of the compound, *-aristotokeia*, soon to be followed by an allusion to Achilles's imminent death at Troy (« yet I will not welcome him on his return home », 18, 59-60).

In this respect, *dusaristotokeia* synthetizes the tension and the causality underlying her motherhood: Achilles's unique greatness derives from and matches that of the goddess, who according to other sources than Homer might have been the most powerful mother in the cosmos had she given birth to Zeus's child. But the negative twist that *dus-* gives to the word indicates that, because she gave birth to a mortal son instead, her lineage also condemns her son to be the greatest suffering figure among men. Furthermore, the *achos* that Achilles experiences is the source of his anger, and Thetis is thus the indirect cause of Achaean and

Trojan sufferings. In this perspective, it is worth noting that the only other occurrence in the *Iliad* of an apostrophe where a noun is compounded with *dus-* relates to Paris. *Duspari* is the name used by Hector to rebuke his brother (III, 39) as the latter tries to avoid confronting Menelaos. Meant as an insult, *Duspari* refers both to the hero's inadequate qualities (his beauty is that of a womanizer, not a warrior), and to the fact that his wedding caused the Trojans to suffer a catastrophe, a *mega pèma* (III, 50). Achilles expresses the same thought about his mother's disastrous marriage a few lines after 18, 54 while grieving over Patroclus:

αἴθ' ὄφελος σὺ μὲν αἴθι μετ' ἀθανάτης ἀλίησι  
ναίειν, Πηλεὺς δὲ θνητὴν ἀγαγέσθαι ἄκοιτιν.

When Hector uses *Dusparis* for the second and last time (XIII, 769), it is to announce the pending fall of Ilion and link it to Paris's doomed fate. The element *dus-* thus has the same ominous quality as in the word referring to the goddess whose own marriage preceded Paris and Helen's in the causal sequence of the Trojan war. In a way, *dus-* has a resultative meaning and signals that, being who they are ("the mother of the very best" or Paris), the two characters brought harm to their next of kin and triggered the woes of the two armies. Symmetrically, Thetis and the Priamid are bound by the fact that Paris will be the one to end Achilles's life, the one to actualize his *kakè aisè* and to separate divine mother from mortal son.

This brings me to the second interpretation of *dusaristotokeia*. In book 18, the situation is different from book I, and this other meaning emerges, for Thetis is not only pitying her son: she is lamenting her own fate.

ὦ μοι ἐγὼ δειλή, ὦ μοι δυσαριστοτόκεια,  
ἦ τ' ἐπεὶ ἄρ τέκον υἱὸν ἀμύμονά τε κρατερόν τε (55)  
ἔξοχον ἡρώων· ὃ δ' ἀνέδραμεν ἔρνεϊ ἴσος·  
τὸν μὲν ἐγὼ θρέψασα φυτὸν ὡς γουνῶ ἀλωῆς  
νηυσὶν ἐπιπροέηκα κορωνίσιν Ἴλιον εἴσω  
Τρῳασὶ μαησόμενον· τὸν δ' οὐχ ὑποδέξομαι αὐτίς  
οἴκαδε νοστήσαντα δόμον Πηληϊῶν εἴσω. (60)  
ὄφρα δέ μοι ζῶει καὶ ὄρᾳ φάος ἠελίοιο  
ἄχνηται, οὐδέ τί οἱ δύνamai χραισμησαι ἰοῦσα.

The apostrophe is self-addressed, verbs are in the first person. Thetis is now experiencing pain herself as Achilles's cries of mourning reach her ears and foreshadow his imminent death. Yet her grief is of a very different nature from a mortal's, as when we can see if we compare with the beginning of Hecuba's *goos* over Hector book XXII:

Τρῳῆσιν δ' Ἐκάβη ἀδινού ἐξήρχε γόοιο· (430)  
τέκνον, ἐγὼ δειλή· τί νυ βείομαι αἰνὰ παθοῦσα

σεῦ ἀποτεθνηῶτος;

Here Hector's death directly affects Hecuba's life, as we can see in the clash of *teknon* and *ego*, the opposition of *beiomai* and ἀποτεθνηῶτος and the passive meaning of παθοῦσα: the burden of grief might kill the hero's mother and if it doesn't, she will in any case be left exposed to all sorts of life-threatening dangers, while Thetis's life, by definition, can not be altered. She will survive her son forever, without the hope of either meeting the same fate as his and thus finding consolation in this shared lot, or of forgetting about her loss.

Yet that is not the focus of her speech. What she laments is rather the way the mortal condition of her son affects her power. She gave birth to mighty Achilles (*teknon*), she raised him (*threpsasa*), she sent him to Ilion (*epiproēka*) to meet his glorious fate, yet she can not make him return home safely and his sufferings (*achnutai*, with a dramatic enjambment) leave her powerless (*oude ti oi dunamai...*). Though she knew from the start that she couldn't prevent her son from dying, what Thetis seems to realize is that she does not even have control over his well-being while he is alive. The divine world is the only one where she can act, and though that is temporarily useful to Achilles, it is not the world where he lives, a world of death, loss and pain. Frustration induced by the limitations of the goddess's powers thus dominates the expression of *penthos*, and the *dus-* element points to the way the deity is contaminated and diminished by extreme human suffering, a rare situation that the poet signals as a threat to the cosmos –think of Zeus and Sarpedon. Yet Sarpedon is not "the very best", Achilles is. Therefore *o moi dusaristotokeia* can also be taken as a bitter exclamation about the specific, unique price Thetis has to pay as "the mother of the *aristos*". The combination of the two readings of the word, "I, the unfortunate mother of the very best", and "I, who gave birth to the very best and as a result caused his suffering and that of many others", thus reveal the complex nature of the oxymoric tension between the compound's elements.

What I want to discuss now is the way Euripides uses this epic intertext in his *Hecuba* to create tragic heroines and to emulate epic poetry. As you saw, the *goos* of Thetis and that of Hecuba, however different in tone and meaning, share formulaic elements and other common features in the *Iliad* : two mothers leading a chorus to lament over the actual or upcoming death of their child. That situation, obviously, makes the stuff of many a tragedy and it is no surprise that the V<sup>th</sup> century dramatic poets would have referred to these passages. Cries expressing the sorrow of a mother abound in *Hecuba*, as in lines 172-73

ὦ τέκνον, ὦ παῖ

δυστανοτάτας ματέρος

186

τέκνον τέκνον μελέας ματρός

or 197-98

ὦ δεινὰ παθοῦς', ὦ παντλάμων,  
ὦ δυστάνου, μάτερ, βιοτᾶς,

But I would also suggest that the discussion over the hapax *dusaristotokeia* was already running by the time Euripides composed that play, for he offers what seems to be the first extant paraphrase of the word.

Lines 581-582, as he concludes his report about Polyxena's noble behaviour at the moment of death – the last word of that narrative being ἀρίστη –, Talthybios, the Greek herald, turns back to Hecuba and defines her with what I would call an intertextual hendiadyn:

εὐτεκνωτάτην τέ σε  
πασῶν γυναικῶν δυστυχεστάτην θ' ὀρῶ.

It so happens that one of the scholia to *Il.* 18, 54 paraphrases *dusaristotokeia* with *epi dustuchia euteknos*. Euripides offers a different but no less effective syntax and coordinates the two superlative and opposite adjectives, *eu-* and *dus-* occupying the same metrical position in the line. The result is an emphasis on the oxymoron but also a disambiguation of the original compound, for both adjectives apply to Hecuba: she is the one most blessed in her children as well as the one whose misery surpasses all others, because her motherhood and the valor of her offspring expose her to exceptional loss. Significantly, there is no room for the idea that Hecuba caused the death of her children. Only the Greeks, and first of all Achilles's ghost who asked for her blood, are responsible for the murder of Polyxena. At this moment of the play, the enslaved Hecuba is an even more passive character than in the *Iliad* and the words of Talthybios portray a pathetic more than a tragic figure.

The herald's narrative manages to soothe the bereaved mother's sorrow. True, she says, she does not know how to face all of her misfortunes, and there is no way she might forget her grief, but at least Polyxena has prevented her pain from reaching an unbearable paroxysm by acting according to her aristocratic birth, *gennaios* (585-592).

Intertextuality here allows Euripides to deepen the Iliadic contrast between Thetis and Hecuba. The lines I quoted come at the end of a dramatic action during which the fate of the Trojan queen mirrors that of the Iliadic goddess, but in an altered, pathetic way that suits both a mortal character and a tragic play. Like her, she is warned that her daughter will not live much

longer; unlike her, she acquires this knowledge in a complex sequence of revelations, first in a dream, then through a message delivered by the chorus, which points to the limits of human perception. Then she must share this knowledge with her child. The spreading of the news gives rise to elaborate songs, first a worried monody as Hecuba attempts to grasp the meaning of her dream, then a beautiful and moving duet between mother and daughter, in which the latter manages to grieve more about the pain awaiting her surviving mother than about her own death. Tragic performance and music thus allow the poet to materialize the shared humanity, pain and love of the two women and to give it emotional preeminence over the male forces that are about to separate them. Achilles is not to be seen, but his ghost, a grim caricature of the flamboyant Iliadic hero, exerts his power from beyond the stage and through other characters' voice. One of them is Odysseus who enters to take Polyxena away. Just as, in the *Iliad*, Thetis prays Zeus for the sake of her son, in memory of a past favor, Hecuba begs the Greek king, reminding him of the time she saved his life, but unlike the goddess, she fails. In the grim metamorphosis of the Iliadic intrigue into a strained agon-scene, Achilles's unmotivated want for Polyxena's blood, which Odysseus presents as legitimate *timè* (309), prevails over the bond that exists between him and Hecuba. In contrast to the Homeric scene, the Trojan queen's failure to persuade as well as the Odyssean perversion of both pious gratitude and sacrifice emphasize the limitations of mortals and the unreliable nature of human norms, including heroic ones. *Charis* towards the Peleid's tomb takes over loyalty to the living, as if clinging to the Homeric set of values had become problematic and destructive in the present.

And yet Hecuba, now a slave entirely submitted to the victors' decisions and whims, does not give up on these epic values. She finds consolation in her daughter's ultimate empowerment. For by choosing to face her death, however gruesome, Polyxena has regained control over her life. In the human world where defeat, loss and death are inevitable, such an act of will is the only possible expression of freedom. And by allowing her mother to be named *euteknotatè*, the Trojan princess has offered her everlasting *kleos* in compensation for her loss. Thetis, on the other hand, does not need *kleos* to be eternal and can not hope for any compensation when Achilles dies. The goddess lost something of her divine prerogatives when she gave birth to him, however glorious a hero, while Hecuba's name will be forever attached to Polyxena's heroic deed – to other things too, of course, but in this first part of Euripides's play, the fallen queen has not yet become the vengeful woman she will turn out to be.

By making Hecuba a mortal version of Thetis, Euripides also turns Polyxena into a new Achilles, or should I say a new challenger to Achilles. The challenge may be a direct one, as in lines 551-552 where the princess proudly declares that she would never be called a slave among

the dead when she was a *basilis* among the living. But this reversed allusion to Achilles's ghost in the *Odyssey* only serves her assimilation to the Peleid's greatest adversary, Hector. Everything Polyxena says and does is closely related to her being Hector's sister, as she constantly defines herself. Like her brother (22, 99-108), she decides to face her inevitable ending and earn a *kalos thanatos*, first to avoid public reproach (people might see her as *philopsuchos*, 348), then because she deems life as a slave unworthy of her birth (357). When she is led to sacrifice, she confronts Neoptolemos with a choice: will he hit her breast or cut her throat? This detail draws attention, among other things, to the fact that the son of Achilles kills her by hitting the same spot as was hit by his father on Hector's body (*Il.* 22, 324-325).

And yet everything is different: while Hector plays on the battlefield the part that befits the best of the Trojan heroes, Polyxena, as a female, should not be facing a sword and her *arete* should reveal itself in the domestic realm; as a human being, she should not be slain like an animal, and the cutting of her throat is a monstrous perversion both of her brother's glorious epic ending and of a normal sacrifice; the funeral care and eulogy she receives from the Greeks reveal the shame they feel at the dignified spectacle of her death and recall how the Homeric Achaeans, on the contrary, defiled Hector's body, gathering to poke at it with insulting words. As for the way she justifies her decision and noble behaviour, it answers Hector's words as he explained to Andromache why he had to fight: that is, first of all to prevent her from being enslaved. But the fact that Polyxena has to make such a choice proves that he failed to protect the Trojan women.

With these intertextual dynamics, then, Euripides achieves several goals. First of all, he gives Polyxena a heroic stature, and through the diverse dramatic means of song, dialogue, and messenger speech he rivals the Homeric poet in building up her *kleos* as she is called *kalè*, *eleutherè* and finally *aristè* by Hecuba, Talthybios and the Greek army. The assimilation of Polyxena to her brother balances the fact that her glorious deed is a passive one, a gesture of acceptance assigned to female characters. Yet her *aristeia* is constantly undermined by the fact that it is a response to an abnormal situation, to the extreme usage of force, to an arbitrary and cynical murder – not to the unescapable necessities of war. What is specifically tragic in Polyxena's characterization as a heroine, and ultimately in the consolation Hecuba finds in her so-called beautiful death, is the absurdity of the context.

Secondly, the tragic poet's reworking of Iliadic matter and the parallels he draws between his suffering heroine and the male heroes shed new light on epic values, revealing the core of sheer brutality exerted by the victors on their victims. Not only does Polyxena's sacrifice remind us of Achilles disturbingly slaying twelve Trojans on Patrocles's pyre, it also points to the



problems surrounding the definition and manifestations of *timè*. Female slaves are at the heart of the Iliadic narrative but only as *geras*, as a measure of the heroes' valor. In his tragedy Euripides gives them the central role. He has them endure and thus reveal the unbearable cruelty of Achilles's ghost as well as the sly opportunism of Odysseus. The change of perspective draws attention to the powerlessness of the Trojan women (see 336), which is also enhanced by the comparison with Thetis and the reminder of Hector's unfulfilled promise to protect Ilion.

Yet this state of victim turns into a new power: that of raising tragic emotion through sight and performance - and I would like to remind you that in the lines I first examined, Talthybios used the word ὀπῶ to define his perception of Hecuba's fate. Each blow suffered by the Trojan women and turned into song, each failure to make sense of the situation or to convince the victors in speech, each physical gesture made to separate the body of daughter from her mother's only focus the audience's attention on them, until finally the mortal heroines overcome the mortal - or should I say the dead - hero. Their presence on the tragic stage ends up pervading the offstage and in a way the epic past. For Achilles's tomb will now forever be associated with Polyxena's name, murder and courage, that is with her *aristeia* and *dustuchia*.

Euripides here makes remarkable use of another intertext (this will be my last point). At the beginning of *Iliad* 7, Zeus provokes a confrontation between Hector and the champion of the Achaeans. At the thought of the imminent fight, the Trojan prince imagines his victory and the *sèma* that his victim will receive by the sea. He pictures sailors in the future passing the monument and remembering :

σῆμά τέ οἱ χεύωσιν ἐπὶ πλατεῖ Ἑλλησπόντῳ.  
καί ποτέ τις εἶπῃσι καὶ ὀψιγόνων ἀνθρώπων  
νῆϊ πολυκλήϊδι πλέων ἐπὶ οἴνοπα πόντον·  
ἄνδρὸς μὲν τόδε σῆμα πάλαι κατατεθνηῶτος,  
ὅν ποτ' ἀριστεύοντα κατέκτανε φαίδιμος Ἴκτωρ.

"This is the memorial of a man who died long ago, and whom glorious Hector once killed as he demonstrated his valor".

Euripides reverses this mnemonic relation between victim and victor. In his play Achilles's tomb is now a significant landmark on the coast, whether Trojan or Thracian. It is the ominous location where Polyxena's tragedy starts and ends, the mound that will be covered with her blood. But by taking control over her death, the Trojan princess also takes control over the memories attached to the place. One could write on the *sèma* something like "This is the memorial of a man who died long ago, who once was the *aristos* and killed glorious Polyxena". It is no longer the property of the best of Danaeans - for she has shamed the hero and his son,

who acts as his substitute. She has been acknowledged by her own enemies, and no doubt by Euripides's awe-stricken audience, as the very best, the *aristè*.

Polyxena's triumph over force, though, will turn out to be but a short relief before violence contaminates her mother and the tragic poet brings even the value of justice into question. Soon Hecuba's sorrows will culminate in the mourning of Polydoros who, unlike her daughter, did not get the chance to become an *aristos*, nor meet an honorable death. The link between *euteknotatè* and *dustuchestatè* will then be severed and her suffering will surpass Achilles's, leading her to anger and revenge, and ultimately to the building of a symmetrical *sèma*. The blood-thirsty wolf of her dream will be matched, according to Polymestor's prediction, by the bitch she will turn into. Only the word *talaina*, stripped of any superlative, of any connection to her famous children, will remind sailors that she once shared the common human lot of misery.