

Poisonous ‘Growths’ in *Trachiniae*

A. A. Long

ἐὰν γὰρ ἀμφίθρεπτον αἶμα τῶν ἐμῶν
σφαγῶν ἐνέγκῃ χερσίν, ἧ μελαγχόλους
ἔβαψεν ἰοὺς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας . . .

IN this much-debated passage (*Tr.* 572–4) Deianeira reports the instructions of the dying centaur, Nessus, who had offered her his mortal wound as the source of a treacherous charm to secure Heracles’ love. Doubt has been cast on the words, *μελαγχόλους ἰοὺς*, and they are not the only difficulty.¹ Jebb, I believe rightly, accepts the received text. What I would dispute in his interpretation, and that of Radermacher, Campbell and Kamerbeek, is the view that *θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας* is a periphrasis, meaning ‘monstrous Hydra’. The words are clearly a reference to the Hydra’s poison, which Heracles smeared on the tips of his arrows, but it is argued that Sophocles does not say so explicitly; that *θρέμμα* is not a word for ‘poison’ but an intensification of Hydra.

The periphrastic explanation goes back to the scholiast. It is supported by a number of “parallels.” One which is frequently adduced is *φάσμα* followed by *ταύρου* (*Tr.* 509) and *ὑδρας* (837). I postpone consideration of the second *φάσμα*, but one may remark immediately that what is true of *φάσμα* may not be true of *θρέμμα*. Moreover, *φάσμα ταύρου* is not a periphrasis, if by that we mean *merely* a round-about expression which may or may not be emphatic. The full sentence runs thus: *ὁ μὲν ἦν ποταμοῦ σθένος, ὑψίκερω | τετραόρου | φάσμα ταύρου*. When Sophocles writes *ποταμοῦ σθένος* he is using a Homeric device, and *φάσμα ταύρου* is clearly modelled on such expressions. But *φάσμα* is in no way redundant: Achelous is a river-god, whose physical manifestations varied.² Here he *appears* as a bull, and *φάσμα* concentrates attention on his visible aspect.³

¹ For new and drastic emendations in line 573, see S. G. Kapsomenos, *Sophokles’ Trachinierinnen und ihr Vorbild* (Athens 1963) 9 n.3.

² Cf. Ovid, *Met.* 9.1–100.

³ See further my *Language and Thought in Sophocles* (London 1968) 101f.

θρέμμα is strictly a verbal noun expressing the result of *τρέφειν*. It means 'that which grows or is nurtured' and hence commonly has the sense 'offspring'. It is unnecessary to look beyond Sophocles for illustration. He uses it with a noun in the genitive case denoting the parent (*Ph.* 243, *Tr.* 1099), which may be human or animal, and absolutely. In the latter usage *θρέμμα* may be derogatory if it refers to a person (*El.* 622), and it may also be applied to a monster like the Nemean lion (*Tr.* 1093). But 'monstrous' is not an association of the word itself. Like the English 'creature', *θρέμμα* can be complimentary (*Ph.* 243), abusive, or neutral (*OT* 1143), according to the context. The word itself has no emotional overtones, though it is more at home in tragedy than in prose.

The fact then that *θρέμμα* can refer to a monster is no reason for taking *θρέμμα ὕδρας* as a periphrasis. On the contrary, *θρέμμα* followed by a genitive should refer to the offspring of (or thing nurtured by) the second noun. *LSJ* offer three examples of the periphrastic use of *θρέμμα*. One is our passage. Another is Plutarch's *θρέμμασι παλλακῶν* (*Solon* 7). This is rendered 'kept mistresses', but that is impossible. The phrase means 'children of mistresses', and it is parallel to the words *παισὶν οἰκοτρίβων* which precede it. The third example is from Plato (*Lg.* 790D), *τὰ νεογενῆ παιδῶν θρέμματα*. This odd phrase appears to mean 'new-born infants', and Plato's use of it is probably influenced by the parallel-looking, though grammatically different, *ὀρνίθων θρέμματα* (789B) 'offspring of birds'. *παιδῶν* defines *θρέμματα*: it tells us what the 'nurslings' consisted in. Jebb cites Plato for his interpretation of *θρέμμα ὕδρας*, but this will hardly do. If Sophocles' phrase were parallel it would have to mean, 'creature, comprising the Lernaean Hydra'—in Jebb's translation, "Hydra, Lerna's monstrous growth." But it is surely not the Hydra's relationship with Lerna which Sophocles is stressing with the word *θρέμμα* but *what the hydra nurtured*. The Hydra does have a growth or nursling, namely the poison, and it is the poison, not the "monstrous Hydra," with which Heracles infects his arrows so that they become "black with bile" (*μελαγχόλους*).⁴

⁴ Apollodorus 2.7.6 and Diodorus 4.36.4–5 make no explicit reference to the Hydra's poison in their accounts of Nessus' instructions. The centaur's formula for the love-philtre is his (infected) blood plus *ὁ γόνος*. *γόνος* means his semen, and this unsavoury aspect of the episode is unmentioned by Sophocles. C. Dugas, "La mort du centaure Nessos," *REA* 45 (1943) 22, argues plausibly that Sophocles' account of the story is a later version. If Sophocles has emphasized the Hydra's poison at the expense of the *γόνος* motif, it is tempting to suppose that his use of the word *θρέμμα* has been influenced by a word like *σπέρμα* or *γόνος* in the different version.

This way of taking *θρέμμα*, supported by Dobree, does not require his emendation, *μελάγχολος ἰός. θρέμμα ὕδρας* picks up *ἀμφίθρεπτον αἷμα*, ‘the blood clotted round the wound’. For the sense of *θρέμμα* (which means *τὸ τεθραμμένον*) we may compare *μίασμα χώρας, ὡς τεθραμμένον χθονὶ* (*OT* 97) and *τρέφοιτε τήνδε τὴν νόσον* (*Ph.* 795).⁵ Two factors are involved in Nessus’ instructions: his blood and the Hydra’s poison are linked by using a word for the latter which refers back to the former.

εἰ γάρ σφε Κενταύρου φονία νεφέλα
 χρίει δολοποιὸς ἀνάγκα
 πλευρὰ προστακέντος ἰοῦ,
 ὃν τέκετο θάνατος, ἔτεκε δ’ αἰόλος δράκων
 πῶς ὄδ’ ἂν ἀέλιον ἕτερον ἢ τανῦν ἴδοι,
 δεινοτάτῳ μὲν ὕδρας προστετακῶς
 φάσματι;

Lines 831–7 are related to the passage just discussed in language and subject-matter. In them the Chorus comment on the news given by Hyllus of Heracles’ sufferings, especially lines 765–71. Much of the text of this chorus is clearly corrupt, but few words have caused more trouble than *δεινοτάτῳ μὲν ὕδρας προστετακῶς φάσματι*. Those who defend them argue that *ὕδρας φάσματι*, like *θρέμμα ὕδρας*, mean ‘monstrous Hydra’. The only literary parallel is *φάσμα ταύρου*, and that, as we have seen, emphasizes the ‘appearance’ of Achelous as a bull. But Sophocles can hardly be saying that Heracles is “glued fast to the Hydra’s shape or appearance.” The periphrasis is even less appropriate here than at *Tr.* 576. The Hydra’s effects are at work but not its shape. Some scholars have felt the need for a word denoting the infected robe to which Heracles is fastened (*cf.* *προσπτύσσεται | πλευραῖσιν ἀρτίκολλος . . . | χιτῶν ἅπαν κατ’ ἄρθρον* 767–9). Pearson ingeniously emends *φάσματι* to *νήματι*. We are thus to suppose that *νήματι* was glossed by *ὑφάσματι* and thence corrupted into *φάσματι*, which fits the metre.⁶ But, as Jebb rightly remarks in his appendix on the passage, the scholiast must have understood what Sophocles wrote as denoting the Hydra’s venom, since *φάσματι* is glossed by *ἰός* and *φάρμακον*. The majority of conjectures have been words for poison, *e.g.* *χρίσματι* (Blaydes), *φλέγματι* (Heimreich), *στάγματι* (Wake-

⁵ *Cf.* Hom. *Il.* 11.741, ἢ τόσα φάρμακα ἤδη ὅσα τρέφει εὐρεῖα χθών.

⁶ *Cf.* A. C. Pearson, “Notes on the *Trachiniaiæ*,” *CR* 39 (1925) 4.

field). The right word, I suggest, is *θρέμματι*.⁷ Palaeographically it corrupts easily into *φάσματι*, and some scholars take the words to be synonymous. This is incorrect, and I hope to have proved that *θρέμμα ὕδρας* is a poetic description of the Hydra's poison. This is "the child of death and the Hydra's offspring" (834). Whether we read *ἔτεκε* or *ἔτρεφε* in this line it is clear that we need a word which denotes that offspring and also means poison. *θρέμμα* does both these jobs and adds some confirmation to Lobeck's *ἔτρεφε*. Sophocles' language in this stanza is deliberately repetitive (cf. *δολοποιός—δολιόμυθα, προστακέντος—προσ τετακώς*). After the poison has been treated very emphatically as an "offspring" it is extraordinary that Sophocles should abandon this image (pointed by repetition) and refer to the Hydra's shape. Misinterpretation of the first *θρέμμα ὕδρας* in this play may have prevented the easiest and most natural correction of *ὕδρας φάσματι*.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

June, 1967

⁷ Blaydes in his edition of 1871 mentions *θρέμματι* as a possibility. I discovered this after discussing the emendation with various colleagues. I have not been able to understand Blaydes' objection in his addenda that *θρέμματι* would require the addition of *ιοῦ*.