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A study of Pelasgus' speech in *Hiketides* by Aeschylus

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**Pelasgus' speech (277-290) in *Hiketides* by Aeschylus
and the meaning of the term 'κύπριος χαρακτήρ'
in the light of the dramatic articulation of the speech**

A truly different study of Pelasgus' speech in *Hiketides* by Aeschylus, in verses 277-290, aiming at capturing the dramatic utterance of the speech, that is the acting of the role, may bring us closer to the poet's spirit. **The main tool for such a study**

is the verbal structure, the text's fabric. An indispensable means is the group of explicit or implicit elements of the staging of the play, which exist in the verses preceding or following the excerpt under review and which relate to the person speaking. Through such a tool and such means, the meaning of each segment as well as the more general meaning of the excerpt may be better understood while the temper of the person speaking and the intonations and rhythm of his speech may be identified. This requires, of course, on behalf of the examiner, respect for the syntax of the text and appreciation on the established lexicography of the ancient Greek language.

The ancient text set out below is divided in two with seven underlinings, in order to demonstrate its exact structure, its fabric. Some minor changes are made in the Teubneriana edition of 1990 (by Martin L. West):

1. **Ἄπιστα** μυθεῖσθ', ὦ ξένοι, κλύειν ἐμοί,
ὅπως τόδ' ὑμῖν Ἀργεῖον γένος. (277-278)
- α) **Λιβυστικάις γὰρ** μᾶλλον ἐμφερέστεραι
γυναιξίν ἐστε κούδαμῶς ἐγχωρίαις. (279-280)
καὶ Νεῖλος ἂν θρέψετε τοιοῦτον φυτόν·
κύπριος χαρακτήρ τ' ἐν γυναικείοις τύποις
εἰκῶς πέπληκται τεκτόνων πρὸς ἀρσένων
Ἰνδὰς τ' ἀκούω νομάδας ἵπποβάμοσιν
εἶναι καμήλοις ἀστραβιζούσας χθόνα
παρ' Αἰθίοψιν ἀστυγειτονουμένας. (281-286)
- β) **Καὶ τὰς ἀνάδρους κρεοβότους Ἀμαζόνας,**
εἰ τοξοτευχεῖς ἦστε, κάρτ' ἂν ἦκασα
ὑμᾶς. (287-289)
2. **Διδαχθεῖς** ἂν τόδ' εἰδείην πλέον,
ὅπως γένεθλον σπέρμα τ' Ἀργεῖον τὸ σόν. (289-290)

In part 1 Pelasgus expresses (in 12 verses) distrust for the words of the Coryphaea, while in part 2 he asks (in 2 verses) for specific information. This distrust is expressed firstly in a general manner (*Ἄπιστα μυθεῖσθε... γένος*) and later with two justifications, a) *Λιβυστικάϊς γὰρ... ἀστυγειτονουμένας* and b) *Καὶ τὰς ἀνάδρους κρεοβότους Ἀμαζόνας... ὑμᾶς*. The first justification is firstly explained generally (*καὶ Νεῖλος ἂν θρέψειε τοιαῦτον φυτὸν*) and analysed in a two-fold manner (*κύπριος χαρακτήρ τ' ... ἀρσένων Ἰνδὰς τ' ἀκούω... ἀστυγειτονουμένας*). It is evident that the speech follows a rigidly logical structure. Moreover, it is also compact, since the word Ἀργεῖον (*γένος* or *σπέρμα*) is found both in the first and the last period of speech, therefore forming a circular pattern.

The translation of the excerpt, in prose, is as follows:

1. You speak unbelievable things, strangers, claiming that (or how) your ancestry is Argive:
 - a) Because you look more like Libyan than native women;
the Nile too can nurture such a plant;
the copper feature has been appropriately stamped on women by masterly males
and I hear of camel-backed Indian nomads living in a land near the Ethiopian.
 - b) I would have also thought you were the unwed meat-eater Amazons, if you were armed with bows.
2. If you gave me proof, I would know better that (or how) the sperm of your ancestry is Argive too.

If we adopt the meaning '*κύπριος* = copper' and respect the syntactic use of *τε...τε*. without comma or other punctuation mark in between, we may perceive the meaning of verses 281-286 as follows:

The Nile too can nurture such a plant;

the copper feature has been appropriately stamped on women by masterly males

and I hear that Indian nomads living in a land near the Ethiopian are available for mating.

In other words:

You must be creatures of the Nile and probably sown by virile swarthy Ethiopians, mating with Indian nomads.

Hence, according to this perception, Pelasgus' spontaneous denial of the suppliants' boasts evolved into insult and arrogance.

Indeed, what but denial could the linguistic elements of *ἄπιστα* or *οὐδαμῶς ἐγγχωρίαις* mean? What but an insult are the phrases *τοιούτον φυτόν or χαρακτήρ ἐν γυναικείοις τύποις εἰκῶς πέπληκται τεκτόνων πρὸς ἀρσένων or ἀστραβιζούσας or καὶ τὰς ἀνάνδρους κρεοβότους Ἀμαζόνας κάρτ' ἂν ἦκασα ὑμᾶς?* Or what but irony is *τόδ' ὑμῖν γένος* (showing)? What but arrogance is the word *Ἀργεῖον* (used both at the beginning and the end of the speech)?

Pelasgus' spontaneous denial of the suppliants' boasts (*ἄπιστα*), its justification (*γὰρ*) and its development with one general argument (*καὶ*) and two specific ones (*τε... τε*) and the addition of another hypothetical argument (*καὶ*) signify a vividness of speech expressed with a certain quickness and rise in the tone of voice.

The pertinent emphatic intonations of *ἄπιστα*, *λιβυστικαῖς*, *οὐδαμῶς*, *Νεῖλος*, *Ἀμαζόνας*, *διδαχθεῖς* and *χαρακτήρ τε, Ἰνδάς τε* contribute to this vividness. The quickness and rise in the tone of voice are reinforced by the sequence of the six brief thoughts - expressions, *ἄπιστα* (2 verses), *Λιβυστικαῖς γὰρ* (2) *καὶ Νεῖλος* (1), *κύπριος χαρακτήρ τε* (2), *Ἰνδάς τε* (3), *καὶ τὰς ἀνάνδρους κρεοβότους Ἀμαζόνας* (2) and the brief conclusion '*διδαχθεῖς...*' (2 verses).

Another instance which shows Pelasgus losing his calm is found in verses 911-953. Once again, he is insulting sarcastic and arrogant and in a quarrel with the insolent herald of the Egyptians he threatens and chases him out. The king does not

receive any 'lesson' (διδαχή) from this deviation (at least in this part of the trilogy), perhaps because this time he strongly supports what is fair, the salvation of the suppliants:

You there! What is done? By what insolence	911
Dare you insult this land of Pelasgian men?	
Think you you have come to a woman's land? You are	
Barbarians, and you trifle insolently	
With Greeks.....	
You shall regret it,.....	925
If you touch them.	
Now get out of my sight!	949
And men is what you'll find here, who don't	952
Guzzle a brew of barley-beer!	