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Scepter and Spear in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*

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Abstract: This article argues that Euripides' use of Orestes' epithet σκηπτοῦχον at *IT* 235 invites the audience to identify the scepter in question as Pelops', through an allusion to a passage from the *Iliad* (2.100–108). This scepter serves as a symbolic counterpart of Pelops' spear mentioned at *IT* 822–826, which is connected to many other passages of the play.
Keywords: Euripides, Iphigenia, Orestes, spear, scepter, Homer.

A symbolic object, namely a scepter, is mentioned twice in the *parodos* of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris.* The first mention of this is in the chorus' lament for Orestes' death (*IT* 187–188):

> ἔρρει φῶς σκῆπτρόν ‹τ'›, οἴμοι,
> πατρίων οἴκων.
>
> Gone is the light and the scepter – ah me! –
> of the ancestral house.[1]

The transmitted reading φόως σκήπτρων at *IT* 187 provides a crux of interpretation. Accepting Heath's φῶς for φόως, most editors have adopted Burges' conjecture σκῆπτρόν ‹τ'› for σκήπτρων. Diggle, in accepting Burges' conjecture, argues that σκῆπτρον at *IT* 187 refers to Orestes, whereas Cropp is sceptical.[2] But all commentators agree that the "σκῆπτρον which Zeus puts into the hand of the Homeric king is the essential adjunct and symbol of his rule".[3]

Orestes' relation to the scepter is ascertained at the end of the *parodos.* At *IT* 229–235, Iphigenia ends her lament for the death of her brother:

> καὶ νῦν κείνων μέν μοι λάθα,
> τὸν δ' Ἄργει δμαθέντ' ἀγκλαίω
> σύγγονον, ὃν ἔλιπον ἐπιμαστίδιον
> ἔτι βρέφος, ἔτι νέον, ἔτι θάλος
> ἐν χερσὶν ματρὸς πρὸς στέρνοις τ'
> Ἄργει σκηπτοῦχον Ὀρέσταν.

1 The text cited in this article is J. Diggle, *Euripidis fabula* (Oxford 1981), unless otherwise indicated; translations are taken from M. Cropp, *Euripides:* Iphigenia in Tauris (Warminster 2000), with modifications. I would like to thank the *MH* editorial board for helpful suggestions. An earlier version was read in a lecture delivered at Peking University, in December 2018, and I thank Dr. Wei Cheng for inviting me.

2 J. Diggle, *Studies on the Text of Euripides:* Supplices, Electra, Heracles, Troades, Iphigenia in Tauris, Ion (Oxford 1981) 78–79; Cropp *loc. cit.* (n. 1) 187.

3 L. P. E. Parker, *Euripides:* Iphigenia in Tauris (Oxford 2016) 96.

> And now I no longer think of these:
> it is the one dead in Argos that I weep for,
> my brother, whom I left at his mother's breast,
> still a tender shoot, a young babe,
> in the arms and embrace of his mother,
> Orestes, Argos' scepter-bearing king.

Kyriakou, commenting on this passage, has made some good points. First, the participial form δμαθέντ' at *IT* 230 "echoes the mention of the unfortunate previous generations of the Tantalid family (198–202)". Second, "the detail that Orestes was a nursling when Iphigenia left Argos increases the pathos of the lament" (ἔτι βρέφος, ἔτι νέον, ἔτι θάλος, *IT* 232).[4] Third, and more pertinently to my argument, the repeated occurrence of the local dative Ἄργει (*IT* 230, 235; cf. *IT* 189) "stresses the irony in Iphigenia's lament for the death of her brother back home",[5] while "Orestes is about to appear before her alive in Tauris".[6] As Parker perceptively puts it, "[t]he name 'Orestes' ends the song almost like an announcement of his return to the story".[7]

Scholars have emphasized that Orestes' epithet σκηπτοῦχον at *IT* 235 is "often jointed with βασιλεύς in the epic formula 'sceptre-bearing king'".[8] However, a Homeric allusion crucial to our understanding of the attestation of σκηπτοῦχον at *IT* 235 has not yet been recognized. I argue that, through the placement of this epithet at the end of the *parodos*, Euripides invites the audience to identify the scepter in question as Pelops', by alluding to a passage from the *Iliad* (2.100–108):[9]

4 Cf. Iphigenia's self-portrayal as a young shoot (πρωτόγονον θάλος, *IT* 209), a motif which connects the siblings.

5 Iphigenia's insistence on Orestes' dwelling at Argos is brought out in her dialogue with Orestes immediately after the brother has recognized that the priestess should be his own sister (*IT* 803–805).

6 P. Kyriakou, *A Commentary on Euripides'* Iphigenia in Tauris (Berlin 2006) 106–107.

7 Parker *loc. cit.* (n. 3) 105.

8 Cropp *loc. cit.* (n. 1) 190.

9 To the best of my knowledge, no commentators have referred to this Homeric passage. More generally, Euripides' borrowings from Homer have been studied from different perspectives. Scholars have mainly focused on the construction of plot as an important lesson Euripides learned from Homer; see esp. T. A. Tarkow, "The Scar of Orestes. Observations on a Euripidean innovation", *RhM* 124 (1981) 143–153; M. Cropp, "Euripides, Ion 247–8", *CQ* 36 (1986) 261; K. Lange, *Euripides und Homer: Untersuchungen zur Homernachwirkung in* Elektra, Iphigenie im Taurerland, Helena, Orestes *und* Kyklops (Stuttgart 2002); and C. Michel, *Homer und die Tragödie: zu den Bezügen zwischen Odyssee und Orestie-Dramen; (Aischylos: Orestie; Sophokles: Elektra; Euripides: Elektra)* (Tübingen 2014). Euripides' subtle allusions to Homer have also been suggested by B. Goff, "The Sign of the Fall: the Scars of Orestes and Odysseus", *ClAnt* 10 (1991) 259–267; I. Torrance, "Andromache αἰχμάλωτος: Concubine or Wife?", *Hermathena* 179 (2005) 39–66; and R. Lämmle and C. Scheidegger Lämmle, "Homer on Kithairon: Dramatic and Narrative Representation in the Bacchae", *CJ* 108 (2012–2013) 129–158.

ἀνὰ δὲ κρείων Ἀγαμέμνων
ἔστη σκῆπτρον ἔχων, τὸ μὲν Ἥφαιστος κάμε τεύχων.
Ἥφαιστος μὲν δῶκε Διὶ Κρονίωνι ἄνακτι,
αὐτὰρ ἄρα Ζεὺς δῶκε διακτόρῳ ἀργεϊφόντῃ·
Ἑρμείας δὲ ἄναξ δῶκεν Πέλοπι πληξίππῳ,
αὐτὰρ ὁ αὖτε Πέλοψ δῶκ' Ἀτρέϊ, ποιμένι λαῶν
Ἀτρεὺς δὲ θνήσκων ἔλιπεν πολύαρνι Θυέστῃ,
αὐτὰρ ὁ αὖτε Θυέστ' Ἀγαμέμνονι λεῖπε φορῆναι,
πολλῇσιν νήσοισι καὶ Ἄργεϊ παντὶ ἀνάσσειν.

Then among them lord Agamemnon stood up,
holding in his hands the scepter which Hephaestus had toiled over making.
Hephaestus gave it to lord Zeus, son of Cronos,
and Zeus gave it to the messenger Argeïphontes;
and Hermes, the lord, gave it to Pelops, driver of horses,
and Pelops in turn gave it to Atreus, shepherd of men;
and Atreus at his death left it to Thyestes, rich in flocks,
and Thyestes again left it to Agamemnon to carry,
to be lord of many isles and of all Argos.[10]

In Book 2 of the *Iliad*, before the passage above quoted, Agamemnon is said to reach out to the Achaeans with the scepter inherited from his father's house, which is imperishable ever (εἵλετο δὲ σκῆπτρον πατρώιον, ἄφθιτον αἰεί, *Il.* 2.46). The phrase σκῆπτρον ἔχων at *Il.* 2.101 stresses Agamemnon's inherited royal power, with which he reigns over many isles and all of Argos (πολλῇσιν νήσοισι καὶ Ἄργεϊ παντὶ ἀνάσσειν, *Il.* 2.108). Iphigenia's lament for Orestes, Argos' scepter-holder (Ἄργει σκηπτοῦχον Ὀρέσταν, *IT* 235), resonates with the audience familiar with the Iliadic passage quoted above. Not only is the epithet σκηπτοῦχον reminiscent of σκῆπτρον ἔχων at *Il.* 2.101, but the rule over the whole of Argos is underlined in both passages.

How can this Homeric allusion, if accepted, shed new light on our understanding of the play? I shall like to suggest that the mention of the scepter referring to Orestes provides a symbolic counterpart of Pelops' spear, which is Orestes' clinching proof in the recognition scene, *IT* 822–826:

ἃ δ' εἶδον αὐτός, τάδε φράσω τεκμήρια·
Πέλοπος παλαιὰν ἐν δόμοις λόγχην πατρός,
ἣν χερσὶ πάλλων παρθένον Πισάτιδα
ἐκτήσαθ' Ἱπποδάμειαν, Οἰνόμαον κτανών,
ἐν παρθενῶσι τοῖσι σοῖς κεκρυμμένην.

10 For the interpretation of the Homeric passage, see the recent study by G. Danek, "Agamemnon's Ancestors and Ruïa's Bridegroom: *Il.* 2.99–109 and a Bosnian Parallel", *Trends in Classics* 2 (2010) 226–230.

> And now I will tell you these proofs, which I saw myself:
> the ancient spear of Pelops our ancestor in the house
> – which he brandished in his hands and won the maid of Pisa,
> Hippodamia, when he killed Oenomaus –
> hidden in your bedroom.

Orestes' claim of autopsy (ἃ δ' εἶδον αὐτός, *IT* 822) in the presentation of his clinching proof stands in sharp contrast to his account of the other tokens, which is acquired by hearsay from Electra (ἀκοῇ, *IT* 811).[11] The contrast between autopsy and hearsay certainly increases the pathos at the end of the recognition.[12]

However, critical opinion has long wrestled with what to make of Pelops' spear.[13] For one, scholars have noted a parallelism between Pelops' and Iphigenia's stories. In examining the symbolism of Pelops' spear, O'Brien points to "the correspondence of form between its story and the plot of I.T.: both are escapes from a barbarous pursuer, and both end happily".[14] Also worthy of comment is

11 In the absence of any direct memories of her brother, Iphigenia has no chance of recognizing Orestes herself, who was still a tender child when she left Argos (cf. *IT* 230–235). Since no recourse to memory and no physical signals are available, Orestes needs to convince his sister of his identity by means of verbal proofs. As I. Torrance, "Writing and Self-conscious Mythopoiesis in Euripides", *CCJ* 56 (2010) 227 nicely puts it: "There is no weaving produced (as in Aeschylus' Libation Bearers), no ring (as in Sophocles' Electra), no scar (as in Euripides' Electra). Familial recognition proofs are discussed orally only in *IT*".

12 This line of interpretation can be reinforced by two further observations. Firstly, Orestes' presentation of his last proof contains five lines, which is thrown into relief by the quickfire stichomythia between the siblings in the preceding passage (*IT* 812–821). Secondly, the use of alliteration in *IT* 823–824 (Πέλοπος παλαιὰν ἐν δόμοις λόγχην πατρός / ἣν χερσὶ πάλλων παρθένον Πισάτιδα) brings out the strong emotion of the speaker, which goes hand in hand with Iphigenia's emotional response (*IT* 828–830). Such stylistic features have been well noted by Parker *loc. cit.* (n. 3) 226–227, who also points to "the sound play on ἐκτήσαθ' ... κτανών" at *IT* 825.

13 From a narratological perspective, the references to the past events in Orestes' presentation of his proofs appeal to the *curiosity* of the audience, who are eager to know them in further detail, while *surprise* also comes to the fore, since Pelops' spear is almost certainly an *ad hoc* mythical invention of Euripides, which is unknown to the tradition. Furthermore, the *suspense* of the recognition scene is generated by the mention of the spear, since its pre-history – in the Pelops' slaying of Oenomaus – evokes the possibility of murder, which contradicts the convention of 'escape tragedies'. Cf. the first proposal made by Orestes in the planning-scene, who suggests, "Might we perhaps be able to kill the ruler?" (ἆρ' ἂν τύραννον διολέσαι δυναίμεθ'ἄν, *IT* 1020). As rightly pointed out by Cropp *loc. cit.* (n. 1) 234, in Euripidean 'escape tragedies' "other planning-scenes are enlivened by extreme proposals like this, so that unacceptable or impractical ideas are rejected before the ideal scheme is hit upon" (cf. *Ion* 971–997; *Hel.* 809–811, 1041–1046). For the distinction between *curiosity*, *surprise* and *suspense*, see esp. R. Baroni, *La tension narrative: suspense, curiosité et surprise* (Paris 2007). In the most popular version, it is said that Oenomaus was dragged to his death in the chariot-race with Pelops, who had bribed Myrtilus, Oenomaus' charioteer. Recent commentators agree that Pelops' spear and its story are Euripides' *ad hoc* invention conforming to the need of the plot; see esp. Parker *loc. cit.* (n. 3) 226. Cropp's observation *loc. cit.* (n. 1) 223 that "Pelops was regularly portrayed heroically with a spear, e.g. on the east pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia" is unsubstantiated. On Euripides' mythological innovation at the level of such details, see A. Konstantinou, "Tradition and Innovation in Greek Tragedy's Mythological Exempla", *CQ* 65 (2015) 476–488.

14 M. J. O'Brien, "Pelopid History and the Plot of *Iphigenia in Tauris*", *CQ* 38 (1988) 113.

the spatial significance of the spear. The location of the spear endows it with more evidential value, since "it was kept in quarters that unrelated men would not have access to".[15] More importantly, in the prologue Iphigenia recounts her dream as beginning in the girls' apartments, where Pelops' spear is supposed to have been preserved. While Iphigenia's interpretation of her dream led her to the false belief that her brother had died, she rightly recognizes the token of the spear, which leads in this scene to her recognition of Orestes. In addition, there is a resemblance between Iphigenia's dream and the story evoked by the spear in terms of movement.[16] In her dream Iphigenia is said to be removed from the barbarian land and to be living in Argos, whereas Hippodamia is said to be brought to Argos from Pisa as Pelops' bride after her father had been killed by the spear.[17] It has also been remarked that the violence involved in Pelops' episode with the spear is significant to the plot insofar as it is reversed at the end of the drama, in which Thoas, obeying Athena's command to let the siblings return home, lays down his spear (*IT* 1484–1485).[18]

The aforementioned interpretations evince how Pelops' spear is thematically connected to other passages of the play. In this article, arguing for *IT* 235's allusion to *Il.* 2.100–108, I should like to suggest another such connection, a parallel of symbolic objects pertaining to a gendered dichotomy, which squares well with the play's overall plot concerning the siblings' respective fates. The scepter, which is first endowed to Pelops by Hermes, symbolizes royal power in the world of men; the same ancestor's spear, stored in the girls' apartments, testifies to Hippodamia's successfully becoming a *gunē* in contrast to Iphigenia's earlier experience of failed female transition.[19] While the symbolism of the former is highlighted at the end of

15 Kyriakou *loc. cit.* (n. 6) 274. A similar interpretation has been proposed by M. Mueller, *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Chicago 2016) 87–88, who compares Pelops' spear to Odysseus' bed in the *Odyssey:* "Like the bed in the Odyssey, the *tekmēria* mentioned by Orestes reunite two long-separated family members by reminding them of their intensely private yet shared past" (88).

16 For the dramatic function of Iphigenia's dream in the prologue, see C. Trieschnigg, "Iphigenia's Dream in Euripides' *Iphigenia Taurica*", *CQ* 58 (2008) 461–478.

17 Cf. also *IT* 1–2 where Pelops' story as a travel narrative is underlined by the verbal form μολών at the end of the first line. Recently, E. Hall, *Adventures with* Iphigenia in Tauris: *A Cultural History of Euripides' Black Sea Tragedy* (New York 2013) 47–68 has interpreted *Iphigenia in Tauris* in the light of the type 'travel tragedy'.

18 Cf. esp. I. Torrance, "In the Footprints of Aeschylus: Recognition, Allusion, and Metapoetics in Euripides", *AJP* 132 (2011) 177–204 with particular reference to the motif of reversal in the recognition scene. The spear plays a pivotal role in enabling the travel. While Pelops' wielding of the spear (ἣν χερσὶ πάλλων, *IT* 824) enables him to return with the girl, Thoas' laying down of the spear (παύσω δὲ λόγχην, *IT* 1484) ultimately ensures the return of Orestes and Iphigenia.

19 On Iphigenia's failed female transition in the play, see L. Swift, *The Hidden Chorus: Echoes of Genre in Tragic Lyric* (Oxford 2010) 197–201. In response to O'Brien's *loc. cit.* (n. 14) 113 observation that "[u]nlike the sacrifice at Aulis, the courtship of Pelops and Hippodameia is no part of Iphigenia's personal experience and seems at first sight an unlikely cause of strong emotion in her or in Orestes", I argue that the Pelopid story is rather highly relevant to Iphigenia's personal experience in

the heroine's lament, the hero's mention of the latter opens "a new chapter as the play's turning-point is reached".[20]

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terms of the motif of female transition central to the play's plot. While Orestes' first three proofs – a piece of weaving and two objects pertaining to Iphigenia's feigned marriage and sacrifice – allude to the heroine's failed transition from *parthenos* to *gunē*, Orestes' clinching proof, Pelops' spear, tells the story of the hero's return with Hippodamia, which testifies to the successful transition of an ancestral heroine into a marital home. One notes the emphasis put on παρθένον at *IT* 824 and the strong emotion generated by the effect of alliteration. This emphasis is visible in comparison with Pindar *Ol.* 1.70 (Πισάτα παρὰ πατρὸς εὔδοξον Ἱπποδάμειαν), which, whilst essentially recounting the same myth, is as rich in alliteration and association with π as our passage in *IT*, but contains no mention of Hippodameia as παρθένος.

20 Cropp *loc. cit.* (n. 1) 222.