Poisonous ‘Growths’ in *Trachinae*

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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 ίοὺς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὃδρας...*

...I...'{

€αυ yap αμφίθρεπτον αλμα τῶν ἐμῶν
σφαγίων ἐνέγκη χερσίν, ἣ μελαγχόλους
ἐβαψεν ίοὺς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὃδρας...

Neb 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 ίοὺς*, and they are not the only difficulty. Jebb, I believe rightly, accepts the received text. What I would dispute in his interpretation, and that of Radermacher, Campbell and Kamerbeck, is the view that *θρέμμα Λερναίας ὃδρας* 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 *ταύρον* (Tr. 509) and *棰ας* (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 ταύρον* 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: *ὀ μὲν ἢν ποταμοῦ σθένος, ψῆκερω | τετραδρόυ | φάσμα ταύρον*. When Sophocles writes *ποταμοῦ σθένος* he is using a Homeric device, and *φάσμα ταύρον* is clearly modelled on such expressions. But *φάσμα* is in no way redundant: Achelous is a river-god, whose physical manifestations varied. Here he appears as a bull, and *φάσμα* concentrates attention on his visible aspect.

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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 Nemaean 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 υδρας 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 παιδῶν οικοτρίβων which precede it. The third example is from Plato (Lg. 790b), 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, ὦρνιθῶν θρέμματα (789b) ‘offspring of birds’. παιδῶν defines θρέμματα: it tells us what the ‘nurslings’ consisted in. Jebb cites Plato for his interpretation of θρέμμα υδρας, 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” (μελαγχόλοιος).

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 δ’ γόνως. γόνως 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 γόνως motif, it is tempting to suppose that his use of the word θρέμμα has been influenced by a word like σπέρμα or γόνως in the different version.
This way of taking \( \varphi \varepsilon \mu \mu \alpha \), supported by Dobree, does not require his emendation, \( \mu \varepsilon \lambda \gamma \chi o\lambda o s \ \iota \xi o s \). \( \varphi \varepsilon \mu \mu \alpha \ \varphi \varepsilon \alpha s \) picks up \( \alpha \mu \phi \iota \beta \rho \varepsilon \tau \tau \sigma \tau \tau o n \ \alpha \iota \mu a \), 'the blood clotted round the wound'. For the sense of \( \varphi \varepsilon \mu \mu \alpha \) (which means \( \tau o \ \tau \varepsilon \vartheta \varphi \rho \alpha \mu \mu \varepsilon \nu o n \)) we may compare \( \mu \dot{\iota} \sigma \sigma m a \ \chi \omega \rho a s \), \( \dot{\iota} \sigma \tau \varepsilon \vartheta \varphi \rho \alpha \mu \mu \varepsilon \nu o n \ \chi \theta o u i \ (O T \ 97) \) and \( \tau \rho \varepsilon \varphi \omega t e \ \tau \iota \varepsilon \dot{\iota} \varepsilon \ \tau \iota \nu \ \nu \sigma o n \ (Ph. \ 795) \). 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.

\[
e \ \gamma \rho \ \sigma f e \ \ K e n t a \beta r o u \ f o n i a \ \nu e \phi \ell a s \\
\chi \rho i e \ \d o l o p o i o s \ \alpha \acute{a} \gamma c k a \\
\pi \lambda e u r \acute{a} \ \pi r \sigma \tau \alpha k \acute{e} n t o s \ \iota \xi o s, \\
\circ \nu \ \tau \acute{e} k e t o \ \tau \acute{a} \nu \acute{a} t o s, \ \tau \acute{e} \kappa e \ \delta \acute{e} \ \alpha i \acute{o} l c s \ \delta \acute{r} \acute{a} k c o n s \\
p \acute{o} \acute{w} s \ \delta \acute{e} \ \o n \ \alpha \acute{e} \acute{l} i o n \ \dot{\iota} \tau \acute{e} r o n \ \# \tau \acute{a} \nu \acute{\iota} \ \iota \iota i, \\
\delta e i n o t a t \acute{w} m e n \ \dot{\iota} \dot{\iota} \rho a s \ \pi r \sigma \tau \sigma t e \tau a k c o s \ \\
f \acute{a} \acute{\sigma} \acute{m} a t i; \]

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 \( \delta e i n o t a t \acute{w} m e n \ \dot{\iota} \dot{\iota} \rho a s \ \pi r \sigma \tau \sigma t e \tau a k c o s \ \phi \acute{a} \acute{m} a t i \). Those who defend them argue that \( \dot{\iota} \dot{\iota} \rho a s \ \phi \acute{a} \acute{m} a t i \), like \( \varphi \varepsilon \mu \mu \alpha \ \dot{\iota} \dot{\iota} \rho a s \), mean 'monstrous Hydra'. The only literary parallel is \( \phi \acute{a} \acute{m} a \ \tau \acute{a} \nu r o u \), 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. \( \pi r \sigma \tau \tau \sigma t e \sigma \tau t a i | \pi \lambda e u r \acute{a} \acute{\iota} \varsigma \varsigma \alpha n \ \alpha \acute{r} \acute{t} \iota \kappa o l l o s \ldots | \chi \iota \tau \lambda \varsigma \varsigma o n \ \acute{a} \pi a \nu \ \kappa a t i \ \acute{a} \acute{r} \acute{h} \acute{r} \acute{o} n \ 767-9 \)). Pearson ingenuously emends \( \phi \acute{a} \acute{m} a t i \) to \( \nu \acute{\iota} m a t i \). We are thus to suppose that \( \nu \acute{\iota} m a t i \) was glossed by \( \dot{\iota} \dot{\iota} \rho a m a t i \) and thence corrupted into \( \phi \acute{a} \acute{m} a t i \), which fits the metre. 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 \( \phi \acute{a} \acute{m} a t i \) is glossed by \( \iota \xi o s \) and \( \phi \acute{a} \acute{m} a k o n s \). The majority of conjectures have been words for poison, e.g. \( \chi \rho \acute{i} \sigma \acute{m} a t i \) (Blaydes), \( \phi \acute{l} \acute{e} \acute{g} \acute{m} a t i \) (Heimreich), \( \sigma t \acute{a} \acute{g} \acute{m} a t i \) (Wake-
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 ὑδρας is a poetic description of the Hydra’s poison. This is “the child of death and the Hydra’s offspring” (834). Whether we read ἑτεκε or ἑτρεφε 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 ἑτρεφε. Sophocles’ language in this stanza is deliberately repetitive (cf. δολοποιός—δολιόμυθα, προστακέντος—προστετακός). 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 ὑδρας in this play may have prevented the easiest and most natural correction of ὑδρας φάσματι.

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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 ἱοῦ.