

# Gnomic φεῦ

*Matthew Wright*

Φεῦ is a word of elastic meaning and variable nuance. Liddell and Scott define it as an exclamation of grief, anger, astonishment, or admiration;<sup>1</sup> translators typically render it as “Oh!,” “Ah!,” “Alas!,” or similar. It is utterly characteristic of tragic diction: in the classical period, at any rate, it is seldom found outside tragedy.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the word may appear *extra versum*, interrupting the rhythm of the dialogue; sometimes it may be repeated (φεῦ φεῦ), probably but not necessarily conveying extra emphasis.<sup>3</sup>

This article draws attention to one particular usage of the word φεῦ which has not been sufficiently acknowledged. In a relatively small but striking number of tragic passages it is used specifically to introduce or emphasize a moralizing maxim (*gnome*).<sup>4</sup> Such passages are interesting for a number of reasons,

<sup>1</sup> LSJ s.v. φεῦ (I) and (II). Cf. C. Collard, *Euripides: Hecuba* (Warminster 1991) ad 1238: “the exclamation φεῦ expresses any vehement emotion, from grief to delight.” Other nuances have been detected, e.g. commiseration or sarcasm: see J. Kamerbeek, *Sophocles: Electra* (Leiden 1974) ad 1021 (after Kaibel).

<sup>2</sup> Apart from tragedy, see Ar. *Ach.* 457, *Av.* 162, *Lys.* 198, 312, *Nub.* 41, *Plut.* 362, *Ran.* 141, *Vesp.* 309–310 (some of which may be paratragic); cf. Bacch. *Dithyr.* 3.119; Xen. *Cyr.* 3.1.39, *Ages.* 7.5; Pl. *Phdr.* 263D5, 273C7, *Hipp.Maj.* 287B4.

<sup>3</sup> See J. T. Allen and G. Italie, *A Concordance to Euripides* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1954) 644.

<sup>4</sup> Soph. *Ajax* 1266, *Tympanistai* F 636 Radt (cf. perhaps *OT* 316); Eur. *Alc.* 727, *Andr.* 183, *El.* 367, *Hec.* 864, 956, 1238, *Hipp.* 431 (cf. 925), *Ion* 1312, *Med.* 330, *Or.* 1155, *Suppl.* 463, *Aeolus* F 25 Kannicht, *Alcmeon* F 80, *Antiope* FF 211, 218, *Danae* F 329, *Dictys* F 333, *Ino* F 401, *Theseus* F 439, *Meleager* F 536, *Polyidus* F 645b, *Scyrioi* F 684, *Temenidai* F 739, *Philoctetes* F 800, incert. fab. F

not only in terms of tragic language and style but also because of what they suggest about ancient reading habits and quotation culture.

First of all, in these cases it seems that the word *φεῦ* does not invariably express a vehement emotion—or indeed any definitely discernible mental attitude—on the part of the speaker. Sometimes, of course, it is hard to deny the presence of emotion, and sometimes the sentiment expressed in the maxim does naturally give rise to grief, sorrow, or resignation. This is obviously the case when, for instance, Medea complains about the perils of love, or when Hecuba laments the servile state of humankind:<sup>5</sup>

φεῦ φεῦ· βροτοῖς ἔρωτες ὡς κακὸν μέγα.

φεῦ φεῦ· What a great evil love is for mankind! (Eur. *Med.* 330)

φεῦ·

οὐκ ἔστι θνητῶν ὅστις ἔστ' ἐλεύθερος·  
ἢ χρημάτων γὰρ δοῦλός ἐστιν ἢ τύχης  
ἢ πλῆθος αὐτὸν πόλεος ἢ νόμων γραφαὶ  
εἴργουσι χρῆσθαι μὴ κατὰ γνώμην τρόποις.

φεῦ· There is no person who is free: either he is a slave to wealth or fortune, or the multitude or the city's laws stop him from acting as he wishes. (Eur. *Hec.* 864–867)

Elsewhere, *φεῦ* may perhaps indicate an extreme of positive feeling:

φεῦ φεῦ· βροτοῖσιν ὡς τὰ χρηστὰ πράγματα  
χρηστῶν ἀφορμὰς ἐνδίδωσ' ἀεὶ λόγων.

φεῦ φεῦ· How true it is that fine actions always provide people with the basis for fine speeches! (Eur. *Hec.* 1238)

961, F 1034; Critias, *Tennes* F 21 Snell (= Eur. F 695 Nauck); Apollonides F 1 Snell. This usage is briefly noted, without further discussion, by J. D. Denniston, *Euripides Electra* (Oxford 1939) ad 367; cf. K. H. Lee, *Euripides Ion* (Warminster 1997) ad 1312.

<sup>5</sup> Other cases where gnomic content *and* strong emotion seem to combine after *φεῦ* include Eur. *Alc.* 727 and *Ion* 1312; but most of these instances (cited in n. 4) are more ambivalent.

Here the speaker is expressing approval of the general principle that good deeds give rise to good speeches (“Admirable!” is the translation offered by the play’s most recent commentator),<sup>6</sup> though it is open to doubt whether the tone is really one of vehement emotion. Also positive, though still ambivalent, is a passage from Sophocles’ *Tympanistai* (F 636 Radt):

φεῦ φεῦ· τί τούτου χάρμα μείζον ἄν λάβοις,  
 τοῦ γῆς ἐπιψάσαντα κᾶιθ’ ὑπὸ στέγηι  
 πυκνῆς ἀκούσαι ψακάδος εὐδούσηι φρενί;

φεῦ φεῦ· Could there be any greater pleasure than this, to reach dry land and then to hear heavy rain outside when you are sleeping beneath a roof?

No doubt it is pleasant to sleep indoors when it is raining, but the content of this maxim does not quite seem to require any exclamatory force implied by the repeated φεῦ, and it is hard to believe that any emotion stronger than relief is being expressed.

Other examples of φεῦ-plus-maxim seem to be more neutral or ambiguous in tone. This tends to be especially true of cases where the maxims in question are very conventional in their content—such as Eur. *Or.* 1155–1157:

φεῦ·  
 οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν κρεῖσσον ἢ φίλος σαφής,  
 οὐ πλοῦτος, οὐ τυραννίς· ἀλόγιστον δέ τι  
 τὸ πλῆθος ἀντάλλαγμα γενναίου φίλου.

φεῦ· There is nothing greater than a true friend—not wealth, not tyranny—no, a genuine friend has an exchange value that is incalculably large.

In these alliterative and quotable lines, as elsewhere in the same play, Orestes affirms the value of true friendship. The theme of *philia* is undoubtedly important in this tragedy as a whole, but the sentiment as expressed here is blandly unexceptional, which means that the exact nuance is hard to

<sup>6</sup> Collard, *Euripides: Hecuba ad loc.*

judge.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that neither the exclamation φεῦ nor the maxim itself marks a direct reaction to anything that has already been said. (The lines that immediately preceded were a comment, from the chorus, on Helen's hateful nature.) Thus φεῦ can be proleptic and anticipatory, introducing a new idea rather than, as one might expect, responding to something that has already been said or done.

The same could perhaps be said of a passage from *Hippolytus* (431–432):

φεῦ φεῦ· τὸ σῶφρον ὡς ἀπανταχοῦ καλὸν  
καὶ δόξαν ἐσθλὴν ἐν βροτοῖς καρπίζεται.

φεῦ φεῦ· What a good thing is virtue everywhere, and how fine a reputation it enjoys among humans!

This two-line maxim is delivered by the chorus, and once again it is hard to read this as an outpouring of powerful emotions, despite the repeated φεῦ. (In fact, there is no discernible difference in nuance or degree of intensity between single or double φεῦ, either in this passage or anywhere else.) The maxim might be seen as a very general sort of reflection on the situation in hand, but it is highly conventional both in its content and in its dramatic function. The lines are there chiefly to mark a formal separation or pause between the end of Phaedra's speech and the beginning of the Nurse's speech. Choral couplets of this sort (with or without φεῦ) are an extremely common rhetorical device in Euripidean *agon* scenes.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> W. Biehl, *Euripides Orestes* (Berlin 1965) *ad loc.*, interprets φεῦ as “Ausdruck der Rührung, zugleich Einleitung zu allgemeinen Reflexion”; but he does not specify (and I find it impossible to decide) what *sort* of feeling is being conveyed. C. W. Willink, *Euripides Orestes* (Oxford 1986), finds the tone “admiring” (comparing the non-gnomic *IA* 977).

<sup>8</sup> See C. Collard, “Formal Debates in Euripides' Drama,” *G&R* 22 (1975) 58–71, at 60 (where it is noted that such interjections “tend to have a flatly neutral or sententious character”). Cf. Eur. *Andr.* 182–185, where a gnomic couplet from the Chorus is followed immediately by another *gnome* from Andromache (introduced by φεῦ φεῦ, which itself seems to act as a means of separating the two unrelated maxims). For strings of consecutive maxims cf. *Phoen.* 390–407 and *Erechtheus* F 362 Kannicht.

It would be hard to imagine sentiments any more conventional than those expressed in the following Euripidean fragments:

φεῦ φεῦ· βροτείων πημάτων ὅσαι τύχαι  
ὅσαι τε μορφαί· τέρμα δ' οὐκ εἴποι τις ἄν.

φεῦ φεῦ· How many are the accidents, and how many the forms, of human woes: no one could say where they will end. (*Antiope* F 211 Kannicht)

φεῦ· τοῖσι γενναίοισιν ὡς ἀπανταχοῦ  
πρέπει χαρακτήρ χρηστὸς εἰς εὐψυχίαν.

φεῦ· How true it is that well-born people are distinguished in all situations by a fine, courageous character. (*Danae* F 329)

φεῦ· τοῖσι γενναίοισιν ὡς ἅπαν καλόν.

φεῦ· As far as the well-born are concerned, everything is fine. (incert. fab. F 961)

φεῦ φεῦ· τὸ νικᾶν τᾶνδιχ' ὡς καλὸν γέρας,  
τὰ μὴ δίκαια δ' ὡς ἀπανταχοῦ κακόν.

φεῦ φεῦ· What a fine reward it is when just deeds prevail, and how evil it is in all circumstances when unjust deeds do so. (incert. fab. F 1034)

Such truisms about human character, the uncertainty of life, and the mutability of fortune may strike the reader as either profound or banal, but it is clear that they are extremely common throughout Greek tragedy.<sup>9</sup> Because these are fragments without a dramatic context, it is even harder than usual to judge the precise nuance. The fact that they have been preserved and handed down in the form of autonomous, universal maxims is bound to make their tone seem more authoritative and neutral to a modern reader (perhaps misleadingly so). Nevertheless, given the bland nature of the sentiments being expressed, one suspects that φεῦ is here not as an expression of

<sup>9</sup> See R. Rutherford, *Greek Tragic Style* (Cambridge 2012) 368–381, on the apparent banality of many tragic *gnomai* on these topics; cf. G. Vogt-Spira, *Dramaturgie des Zufalls: Tyche und Handeln in der Komödie Menanders* (Munich 1992) 1–10, on the theme of *tyche* in Greek drama and literature.

intense emotion but simply as a way of drawing attention to the maxim.

In a couple of other instances this signalling function is particularly notable:

φεῦ φεῦ· παλαιὸς αἴνος ὡς καλῶς ἔχει·  
 γέροντες οὐδέν ἐσμεν ἄλλο πλὴν ψόφος  
 καὶ σχῆμ', ὄνειρων δ' ἔρπομεν μιμήματα·  
 νοῦς δ' οὐκ ἔνεστιν, οἰόμεσθα δ' εὖ φρονεῖν.

φεῦ φεῦ· How well the old saying holds true: we old men are nothing except a sound and a shape; we creep along, mere semblances of dreams, and there is no sense in us, though we imagine we are wise. (Eur. *Aeolus* F 25)

φεῦ φεῦ· παλαιὸς αἴνος ὡς καλῶς ἔχει·  
 οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο χρηστὸς ἐκ κακοῦ πατρός.

φεῦ φεῦ· How well the old saying holds true: there can never be a good son born of a bad father. (Eur. *Dictys* F 333)

These are not the only tragic passages which self-consciously draw our attention to their status as the embodiment of traditional wisdom by explicitly labelling themselves as maxims (using terms such as αἴνος, λόγος, παροιμία, or μῦθος).<sup>10</sup> But it is extraordinary that both passages above use exactly the same opening line, combining the self-labelling phrase and φεῦ φεῦ to constitute an emphatic marking device. In effect, Euripides is doing the job of a commentator, saying: “This is a good maxim: take note.” But it is obvious that we are dealing with a conventional formula, which might accompany any general reflection at all.

It is extremely telling that ‘gnomic’ φεῦ is never found in the surviving plays of Aeschylus (including *PV*), and only two or three times in Sophocles. The overwhelming majority of examples come from the works of Euripides.<sup>11</sup> This fact corresponds with what we know about Euripides’ especial

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Soph. *Trach.* 1–3, Eur. *Hec.* 294–295, *Hel.* 513–514, *Med.* 964–965, *Danae* F 321, *Melanippe Sopho* F 508, etc.

<sup>11</sup> See n.4 above.

penchant for quotable maxims.<sup>12</sup> Many readers in antiquity approached tragedy as a repository of moral teaching and wisdom, and the selective excerption of key passages was a popular reading practice from the classical period onwards.<sup>13</sup> It seems clear that Euripides, anticipating that his plays would be treated in this way, deliberately designed his work to be susceptible to quotation and excerption. As others have observed, he employed a number of framing devices in order to make certain lines seem to stand out from their context, such as aphoristic brevity, metrical simplicity, the inherent detachability of verses that are complete in themselves, the frequent lack of connection between maxims and their immediate narrative or dialogic context, and the careful positioning of key verses at the beginning and end of speeches.<sup>14</sup>

This use of  $\phi\epsilon\upsilon$  can be seen as another such framing device. In this specific usage, as we have seen,  $\phi\epsilon\upsilon$  eludes straightforward interpretation or translation. But I suggest that its *meaning* as an exclamation is less important than its formal *function*. In the passages cited above, its main use is to act as a signal to the audience or reader, announcing that a gnomic utterance is to follow.

In linguistic terms,  $\phi\epsilon\upsilon$  is functioning here as a *pragmatic marker* (conventionally defined as “those constructions ... that are present in speech to support interaction but do not gen-

<sup>12</sup> Pointed out by writers in antiquity, e.g. Ar. *Ran.* 841, schol. Eur. *Phoen.* 388, Aeschin. *In Tim.* 153, Quint. 10.1.68. See J. de Romilly, “Les réflexions générales d’Euripide,” *CRAI* 127 (1983) 405–418, who links this tendency to late fifth-century intellectual developments, including the rise of rhetoric.

<sup>13</sup> See esp. D. Konstan, “Excerpting as a Reading Practice,” in G. Reydams-Schils (ed.), *Thinking Through Excerpts: Studies on Stobaeus* (Turnhout 2011) 9–22; cf. R. Hunter, *Hesiodic Voices* (Cambridge 2014).

<sup>14</sup> See H. Friis Johansen, *General Reflection in Tragic Rhetoric: A Study of Form* (Copenhagen 1959) 32–34, 100, 151–153, on Euripides’ preference for simple, ‘detachable’ maxims (in contrast to Aeschylus’ more complex, paratactic constructions); cf. G. Most, “Euripide Ο ΓΝΩΜΟΛΟΓΙΚΩΤΑΤΟΣ,” in M. Funghi (ed.), *Aspetti di letteratura gnomica nel mondo antico I* (Florence 2003) 141–166 (esp. 151–153).

erally add any specific semantic meaning to the message”).<sup>15</sup> Linguistic theorists have observed that interjections can often act as pragmatic markers in a variety of contexts, independent of their primary semantic (emotional) meaning: they frequently act as ‘turn-indicators’ (that is, they occupy the initial position of an utterance, signalling a contrast or transition between one topic and another), and they can also be an attention-grabbing device.<sup>16</sup> It seems clear that, in its ‘gnomic’ usage, the interjection φευ is to be understood in just this way.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, there are many other cases of detachable maxims where φευ is *not* found, but it seems that φευ could be used from time to time to add a further level of emphasis, perhaps denoting sentiments which we are invited to regard as especially trenchant or memorable. Note that ‘gnomic’ φευ is seen exclusively in dialogue rather than lyrics, and in every instance the gnomic utterance consists of one or more complete iambic verses: this allows the lines to stand alone as apparently self-contained, decontextualized quotations. All maxims with φευ are also conveniently detachable in the additional sense that they contain no specific reference to speaker, addressee or dramatic context: the same cannot be said of all other tragic maxims. Note also that when used in iambic dialogue (whether in conjunction with a maxim or not) φευ always appears at the beginning of a verse or *extra metrum*.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> J. Romero-Trillo, “Pragmatic Markers,” *Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (Malden/Oxford 2013).

<sup>16</sup> See N. R. Norrick, “Interjections as Pragmatic Markers,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 41 (2009) 866–891, where it is noted that “many primary interjections function in the participation and information frameworks of discourse, *rather than marking emotional involvement*” (888: my italics).

<sup>17</sup> There is room for further investigation into the linguistic relationship between the ‘emotional’ and other uses of φευ, but that is beyond the scope of the current article.

<sup>18</sup> The sole exception in dialogue seems to be *Soph. Phil.* 234 (not gnomic). In lyric passages φευ normally appears at the beginning of a verse or period (contrast e.g. *Aesch. Eum.* 781, 841, 874; *Soph. Trach.* 987; *Eur. Hipp.* 365, *IT* 651, *Phoen.* 246), though of course colometry is often un-



In view of this last fact, it is conceivable that φεῦ or φεῦ φεῦ would have acted not just as an audible signal in performance but also as a visual marker in written texts, assisting readers to locate verses that were particularly ripe for excerption. In this sense it could be seen, perhaps, as broadly analogous to the various systems of ‘gnomic pointing’ used in early manuscripts and later printed texts.<sup>19</sup> Of course one must beware of anachronism, and it is almost impossible to imagine the physical appearance of fifth-century bookrolls, but I assume that Euripides, more than any other tragedian, was writing (at least in part) for a reading audience. The fact that so many surviving examples of ‘gnomic’ φεῦ come down to us in the form of fragments—i.e. selected quotations—indicates the frequency with which Euripides’ ancient readers took note of these signals and duly responded with their scissors and paste.<sup>20</sup>

July, 2016

Dept. of Classics and Ancient History  
The University of Exeter  
Amory Building, Rennes Drive  
Exeter EX4 4RJ, UK  
m.wright@ex.ac.uk

certain.

<sup>19</sup> Highlighting and marginal symbols, e.g. γνω (for γνώμη, γνωμικόν, or γνωμικῶς), ὄρ(αίον), and ση(μείωσαι), are often used in Byzantine MSS. to draw attention to notable passages: see G. Zuntz, *An Inquiry into the Transmission of the Plays of Euripides* (Cambridge 1965) 133; A. Turyn, *The Manuscript Tradition of the Plays of Aeschylus* (New York 1943) 123. Cf. also G. K. Hunter, “The Marking of *Sententiae* in Elizabethan Printed Plays, Poems, and Romances,” *The Library* 5–6 (1951) 171–188.

<sup>20</sup> See A. Compagnon, *La seconde main, ou le travail de citation* (Paris 1979), esp. 1–37, for the ways in which the act of citation is analogous to the reading process more generally (and for the metaphor of *ciseaux et pot à colle*).

It is a pleasure to thank John Wilkins and the *GRBS* referee for their helpful and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this article.