

The Riddle at Colonus

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THE RIDDLE with its solution is a familiar pattern in early Greek poetry.¹ Often enough it consists simply in a more or less complex periphrasis followed by the standard term explaining it, usually in apposition. A particularly elaborate and self-conscious example of this pattern occurs in the second stasimon of Aeschylus' *Septem* (720–23),² where the first strophe and antistrophe each open with a riddle. The riddle is first stated in general terms, then each clue is added in a separate colon until the answer is given at the end of the fourth line: in the strophe, the Erinys, in the antistrophe, Iron; the word *κίδαρος* corresponding exactly in position and shape to *Ἐρινύν*.

The same structure is illustrated also in the first stasimon of Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus* (694ff). Again each clue has a separate colon, marked off at 696 and 698 by hiatus and *brevis in longo* with pause. First clue: it is not to be found in Asia; second, it is not in the Peloponnese; fourth, it is vegetable; fifth, it is a terror to the enemy; sixth, it flourishes best (or grows biggest) in Attica; it is the grey, child-nurturing leaf of the *olive*. The rest of the stanza tells how its two patrons, Zeus Morios and Athena, continually watch over it. The fifth clue is difficult—at least, for us—and perhaps slightly misleading: in his invasion of Attica in 430, Archidamus had spared the sacred olives and sacrificed to Athena.³

The riddle in the strophe needs no Oedipus to guess the answer before it is made plain. Is there a riddle also in the antistrophe, as in the *Septem*? The stanza is corrupt, as a word is missing after *εἰπεῖν* and *παραπτομένα* is unmetrical, but the general sense is clear: “and I have another ground of praise for this my mother-city, a most excellent one, the gift of a great god, (giving us)⁴ a great glory, as good horse-

¹ Cf. Ed. Fraenkel's notes on *Agamemnon* 7 (p.9), 131 (p.81), 135 (p.82), 238 (p.136), 494f, 825, and especially 155 and 681ff.

² See Fraenkel, “Der Einzug des Chors im Prometheus,” *AnnPisa* 23 (1954) 278ff=*Kl.Beitr.* I 399ff.

³ Schol. *ad loc.*, quoting Philochoros (*FGrHist* 328 F 125) and Androtion (*FGrHist* 324 F 39).

⁴ Porson's *χθονός* is usually adopted; the gift is then the glory itself, presently explained. Also possible is e.g. *πόρον*: the gift is what furnishes the glory, viz. the *χαλινός*, etc.

men, good trainers, good seamen.⁵ For it was you, son of Kronos, who brought her to this glory, when you instituted that which subdues horses, the bridle (or bit), first in these ways; and the well-oared ship . . . speeds through the water, following the Nereids.” This is normally taken to mean simply that Poseidon gave Athens glory in two spheres, horses and the sea, in the one by inventing the *χαλινός*, in the other by letting ships cross the sea propelled by human hand. This looks straightforward enough, but there is one surprising feature. Poseidon *ἵππιος* has a wider interest in horses than as inventor of the bridle,⁶ which is in any case said elsewhere to be the invention of Athena.⁷ Why then is his gift, or its source, so narrowly specified?

The whole ode is an encomium of Athens and Attica, and so Sophocles no doubt meant it. But the local patriotism of the chorus—and perhaps of the poet—is centred most intensely on their own deme, Colonus. Colonus was famous for its cavalry, and Poseidon *ἵππιος* had a shrine there, as did Athena *ἵππία*. Besides being *ἵππιος*, Poseidon is *δαμαῖος* (Pind. *Ol.* 13.69); he is in particular the *tamer* of horses, as in the Homeric Hymn (22.5), where his prerogatives are *ἵππων τε δμητῆρ’ ἔμεναι σωτῆρά τε νηῶν*.⁸ So it is appropriate that Poseidon should be said to have instituted the bridle first at Colonus. It is appropriate, too, that he and not Athena should have the honour since, although any overt allusion to the rivalry of Athena and Poseidon for the possession of Attica would be out of place,⁹ his gifts must in this ode be clearly distinguished from hers.

⁵ Hermann’s distinction between *εὐἵππος* and *εὐπωλος*. Wunder thought *εὐἵππος* referred to the art of riding, *εὐπωλος* to having good horses. The words may be just synonyms. The expression seems unbalanced, but cf. Simmias, fr.14 (Powell) *εὐἵππος, εὐπωλος, ἐγγέσπαλος* | *δῶκεν αἰχμᾶν Ἐννάλιος εὐσκοπον ἔχειν*. Schol. *εὐφορος* is probably due to a false etymology of *εὐπωλος*, cf. Eustath. 385.33 and 581.14, cited by Stephanus s.v. *εὐπωλος*.

⁶ According to later legend (see J. G. Frazer, ed. *Apollodorus* II [LCL, London 1921] 78) Poseidon produced the horse as an answer to Athena’s olive, to press his rival claim to Attica; but this may be Hellenistic (cf. Verg. *G.* 1.12 and Servius *ad loc.*). Tzetzes on Lycoph. 767 connects Poseidon’s creation of the horse with Colonus, perhaps an inference from this passage.

⁷ Hence she is *χαλινίτις*: she bridled Pegasus (Paus. 2.4.1,5, cf. Pind. *Ol.* 13.65).

⁸ Ar. *Eq.* 551–55 *ἵππ’ ἀναξ Πόσειδον, ῥῆ | χαλκοκρότων ἵππων κτύπος | καὶ χρεμετικὸς ἀνδάνει | καὶ κυανέμβολοι θοαὶ | μισθοφόροι τριήρεις* may celebrate the more general aspect of Poseidon *ἵππιος*, *χαλκόκροτος* referring to the beat of horses’ hooves, after the Homeric *χαλκόποδ’ ἵππων*. But the word could also refer to the rattle of harness (cf. Aesch. *Sept.* 122–23), as it does to the clash of ritual instruments when applied to Demeter (Pind. *Isth.* 7.3).

⁹ The allusion Jebb sees in *εὐθάλασσαν* to the *θάλασσα*, the seawater well produced by a blow of Poseidon’s trident in the Erechtheum on this occasion (Hdt. 8.55; Paus. 1.26.5), is therefore unlikely.

The gift of Poseidon which gave Athens glory as horsemen is then the χαλινός. But χαλινός has another meaning besides bridle: in the context of ships it means anchor or mooring-cable. So in Pind. *Pyth.* 4.25 the bronze-jawed anchor of the Argo is called her χαλινός, and the χαλινοὶ λινόδετοι at *IT* 1043 are the hawsers for mooring the ship, like χαλινωτήρια at *Hec.* 359. The usage might be just a poetical metaphor—ships are ἄλος ἵπποι in Homer—but this is unlikely, as the word occurs in an inscription of the early fourth century meaning some special kind of rope, as part of a ship's gear (*IG* II² 1610.11). Poseidon is nowhere credited with the invention of anchors, any more than he is with that of bridles. He has, of course, a general interest in ships (*cf. h.Hom.* 22.5, *Ar. Eq.* 551–54, cited above), but he is not the inventor of ships:¹⁰ the first ship, the Argo, though finally dedicated to him (*Apollod.* 1.9.27), was built to the instructions of Athena. Again, the poet's problem is to link Poseidon's gift to Athens with Colonus in particular. The link is made by attributing to him the invention of the χαλινός, which makes him not only the inventor of the bridle but also, through the ambiguity of the word, of the anchor or mooring-cable. This sounds like a trivial word-play; but word-plays are the stuff of riddles as they are of oracles, and in an age when words are still felt to have a real as well as a conventional significance, word-plays are not trivial. Nor is it beneath the poetical level of this ode that the gift of Poseidon is located in the invention of a technical device. The *πρῶτος εὐρετής* looms large in the Greek idea of progress, and Sophocles has raised the matter, as the scholiast says, to the highest level of dignity (ἐπὶ τὸ σεμνότατον ἄγει).¹¹ The question "what is the gift of Poseidon which gives Athens glory in the sphere of horses and the sea?" has then as its answer "the χαλινός"; the word corresponds exactly to ἐλαίαια in the strophe, as εἶδαρος does to Ἐρινύν in the *Septem*, and similarly it has the same metrical value.

The closing lines elaborate the maritime aspect of Poseidon's gift. They do not seem a very cogent illustration of the χαλινός, since although the anchor-rope is an essential piece of the seaman's equipment as the bridle is of the horseman's, the anchor is not in use when

¹⁰ In a hymn of uncertain date by Pamphos, who "composed the most ancient hymns for the Athenians" (*Paus.* 7.21.3), he is described as δωτήρα νεῶν. It is probably Hellenistic; see P. Maas in *RE* 18.2 (1949) 352 s.v. Pamphos.

¹¹ The repetition of αὔχημα in 710 and 713 is certainly possible but could be wrong, and the corruption in 710 deeper than the missing word; *e.g.* χθονὶ τέχνημα μέγιστον, with εὐἵππον etc. with δῶρον.

the ship is speeding through the water in the wake of the Nereids. But there is I think a more subtle allusion here.

πλάτα, as often, means ‘ship’ rather than ‘oar’; not because of the tautology with εὐήρετος, which is in order (see Elmsley, Jebb *ad loc.*), but because θρώσκει suits the sense ‘ship’ much better. παραπτομένα cannot be right; the sense ‘taking to flight’ is just possible (not ‘fitted to’, Jebb), and Porson’s αἰέν for εἰκαιέν in 704 gives correspondence, but the paradosis there is surely sound, giving a king-size asclepiad¹² exactly matching 694–97. A present participle with appropriate sense, e.g. παραῖσσομένα (Meineke), seems the obvious correction, but the aorist παραπτομένα does not look like a gloss on it nor a graphical error. A plausible solution can, I think, be found if these lines are taken not as a general statement about ships but as an oblique allusion to a mythical incident. The ‘well-oared ship’ *par excellence* is the first ship, the Argo.¹³ The Nereids, who in the standard interpretation are simply decorative, if not synonyms for waves as Jebb has it, played an important part in one of the Argo’s adventures: they brought her safely through the Planctae—not the Clashing Rocks of the outward voyage, where Phineus’ advice saved her, but the Wandering Rocks, now towering to the sky, now deep beneath the sea, through which she had to pass on the homeward voyage from Hesperia. As the ship neared danger (Ap.Rhod. 4.930–32),

ἔνθα σφιν κοῦραι Νηρηίδες ἄλλοθεν ἄλλαι
ἦντεον, ἦ δ’ ὄπιθεν πτέρυγος θίγε πηδαλίου
δίᾳ Θέτις, Πλαγκτῆσιν ἐνὶ σπιλάδεσσιν ἐρύσσαι.

In Apollonius’ version the Nereids convoy the ship like dolphins, and then, as she is just about to foul the rocks, ὅτε δὴ Πλαγκτῆσιν ἐνι-
χρίμψεσθαι ἔμελλον (939), tucking up their dresses, as girls do to play

¹² Dale calls this “a monster unknown to Greek metric” without noticing that the catalectic version of just such a monster occurs shortly before. Her conclusion, that “on metrical grounds . . . the case for taking L’s reading in the strophe as correct and devising a longer substitute for †παραπτομένα† to match it seems a weak one” (her italics), is therefore unjustified. She herself gives sufficient metrical grounds for not altering the strophe to suit the antistrophe (“Lyrical clausulae in Sophocles,” in *Greek Poetry and Life: Essays presented to Gilbert Murray* [Oxford 1936] 203–04=A. M. Dale, *Collected Papers* [London 1969] 22ff).

¹³ ἔκπαγλα may in fact qualify εὐήρετος, ‘wonderfully well-oared’, rather than θρώσκει. Such displacement is not uncommon in Sophocles, cf. 714 ἵπποιον τὸν ἀκεστήρα, *El.* 133 τὸν πατέρ’ ἄθλιον, 792 τοῦ θανάτου ἀρτίως. ἔκπαγλος is used particularly of heroes: by Homer generally of Achilles, by Pindar of Jason and Ajax.

on the beach with a well-rounded ball, they stood in line along the rocks and passed her through.

This pretty picture, after Nausicaa's ball game, could be Apollonius' own invention—the Nereids' tucking their skirts up scarcely has an epic ring. The word *ἐρύσσαι* (932) perhaps points to a version in which they simply pulled or towed the ship through. Homer says of the Argo's passage through the other Planctae, the Symplegades¹⁴ (*Od.* 12.69–70),

οἷη δὴ κείνη γε παρέπλω ποντοπόρος νηῦς
Ἄργῶ πασιμέλουσα, παρ' Αἰήταο πλέουσα,

and Euripides of the same incident (*Med.* 1–2),

Εἶθ' ὤφελ' Ἄργους μὴ διαπτάσθαι κκάφος
Κόλχων ἐς αἶαν κυανέας Συμπληγάδας.

'Flying' is a common enough metaphor for a ship's motion, whether in virtue of oars (*cf.* Page *ad loc.*), sails, as in *Hipp.* 759 *ἔπτατο κλεινὰς Ἀθήνας* (*cf.* *λευκόπτερος* in 752), or just speed. The verb in codices at *OC* 717 is thus entirely suitable if the reference is to this incident; only the form does not fit the metre. But if the reference is to this incident, and to the very moment when the Nereids have joined the ship and it is about to pass through, the participle needed is neither aorist nor present but future: *παραπτησομένα*. "The well-oared ship runs marvellously through the water by the aid of the Nereids' hands, which it follows as it is about to fly through." The Greek word order is more closely rendered: "the well-oared one, marvellously (or, 'the marvellously well-oared one'), through the sea by hands does it run, as it is about to fly through, the ship, the hands of the Nereids, as it follows them." *χερσὶ* comes early in the sentence because it is emphatic; it is understood first as an instrumental dative 'by hand', then made more precise by *τῶν Νηρηίδων*, and finally *ἀκόλουθος* gives it a fresh construction.

An allusion to the first ship, inspired by Athena and dedicated to Poseidon, is in itself a fitting conclusion to the stanzas celebrating these two patrons of Athens and of Colonus. What follows is pure

¹⁴ So the context there seems to indicate. But Carl Robert (*Die griechische Heldensage*⁴ II.3 [Berlin 1921] 826–27) pointed out that the verb *παρέπλω*, and *παρέρχεται* in 62, suit the Planctae (as described by Apollonius) rather than the Symplegades, and concluded that Homer has contaminated the two episodes from the original *Argonautica*. Apollonius alone preserves the original distinction.

speculation. Bridles are used to lead horses as well as to rein them in; and the natural way to tow an ancient ship is by the anchor-rope, which was fastened at the prow, as the *πρυμνήσια* attaching it to land were fastened to the stern. My guess is that in the original *Argonautica* the Nereids towed the Argo through the Planctae, and that in some version they did so with ropes called *χαλινοί*, with Thetis, as in Apollonius, at the helm,

πολλῶν χαλινῶν ἔργον οἰάκων θ' ἄμα,

as Sophocles says in an unknown context (fr.869 P.; possibly just a mixed metaphor, but it could describe this very situation¹⁵). If this is right, the allusion would certainly be very obscure. But tragic lyric admits obscure allusion, provided it is purely ornamental and has no dramatic import, so that if the audience misses it no harm is done. And here if anywhere obscure allusion is justified; for the audience to whom in the dramatic context the ode is addressed is Oedipus—in this department an acknowledged master of craft.

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¹⁵ Plutarch quotes the line twice. In *Amat.* 21, 767E, it illustrates the fact that in a marriage without love, decent behaviour of the partners towards each other is not voluntary but motivated by fear and shame. It is not clear whether the *χαλινοί* drag or restrain them. In *V.Alex.* 7, Alexander, recognising that he is naturally resistant to compulsion but ready to be led by reason, chooses the best available philosopher to educate him rather than the usual teachers, *ὡς μείζονος οὐδ' ἔστιν πραγματείας*, and in Sophocles' words *πολλῶν χαλινῶν ἔργον*, etc. This fits the Planctae perfectly: Aristotle's reason and persuasion is to draw him past and steer him through the hidden rocks. If so, the *Colchides* is a possibility; but the line may anyhow be just a junction of tired metaphors.