**The Noose of Words in Herodotus’ Persians and Euripides’ *Hippolytus***

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The title of this talk is drawn from Euripides’ *Hippolytus*. The phrase is used by Phaedra when she is explaining what it is that is going to kill her (671, cf.781). There is a knot of words around her neck, it is there justly, and it is a fate from which she cannot escape. On examination it turns out that the noose is one word, a word that she does not even say until after the secret of the word is out, and the word is simply a name, Hippolytus. Others have to say it for her. But once said, the word has a kind of fateful necessity to it and illustrates the binding quality that words may have. An oath, for example, is like that, or a curse (such as that of Theseus later in the play), or a promise (about the future perhaps), or simply a statement about a fact (whether about the present or the past), as opposed to a lie, which one might call an attempt to escape from the “bonds of speech.”

These “bonds” are based upon a presumed necessity or “rightness” of the connection between deeds and speeches, and also, at the next remove, thoughts. It is a rightness or necessity not inherent in the modes themselves, or in their connections with each other, but is based on custom (not law). We expect that what people think, they say, and what they think and say, when the time for action comes, they do.

Herodotus, the great student of custom, shows us this, that custom is authoritative to the extent that one does not question, within one’s own society, the linkage between what one thinks, says, and does, such that “law” is unnecessary. We do not have to be told what is right—we simply think, say, and do it. Our customs have been made by us so that they feel as if they fit us like a glove, but in fact we have been made by our customs so that we feel that we fit them like a hand, that is to say, we think our customs natural, and we do not even suspect that there might be a difference between custom and nature.

Herodotus shows us the linkage between thinking, saying, and doing in his account of the Persians, the great believers in the truth of speech. The Persians have three customs that are the foundations of their way of life and their habits of thinking. They teach their children three things: to ride a horse, to shoot an arrow, and to tell the truth (Book I, chapter 136). The consequence of this education, particularly the last lesson, is that, when it takes full effect, they do not lie, and therefore everything they say is true, and all their actions are in accord with this principle such that there are no exceptions. For example, patricide and matricide are wrong and therefore can never have occurred in Persia. Indeed, upon examination of presumed instances it would be proven that they were committed by supposititious or illegitimate children (I.137). The connection between speech and action is so close that the Persians are not allowed even to mention the things that it is not lawful for them to do (I.138). But there is a difficulty about the relationship of principles of action to each other. Herodotus tells an anecdote revealing the difficulty. In Persia one principle is that the king rewards those who benefit the realm; another is that he punishes those who harm it. When Xerxes was returning in haste from Greece in 480 having failed to conquer her, he encountered a storm at sea that threatened to cause his ship to founder. Alarmed, Xerxes asked the captain what could be done to save them. The captain said that they needed to lighten the load the ship was carrying. The bulk of the cargo consisted of Persian nobles who were accompanying Xerxes. To save their king the nobles jumped overboard, and the ship reached harbor safely. In gratitude for rescuing him Xerxes awarded the captain a golden crown, but as punishment for having lost so many Persian nobles, he cut off his head. Two principles were at work in what he did. Each principle, once put into action, is responsible for a causal chain. Two causal chains independently may make sense; when they intersect they may not, but life is about the intersection of causal chains. The consequence, in Herodotus’ account, is that the supremely rational Persians are constantly doing things that are irrational. The supreme tellers of truth are supremely vulnerable to liars (v. the story of Darius and his accession to the throne in Book III).

To return from Herodotus to Euripides: what, then, are the connections in the *Hippolytus*, between thoughts, words, and deeds? This is at root an ethical question. Hippolytus is the paradigmatically good man. He represents the pristine, strict, simple equation between the three, such that he is pure in mind, word, and body. That is to say, he thinks only thoughts that are clean, and true, and good; his speech is free of impurities, of falsehoods, and of ugliness, and his actions are completely chaste, virtuous, and beautiful. This coincidence is symbolized by his special relationship with Artemis, whom he cannot see, but with whom he alone is privileged to be able to converse. He does so in an inviolate meadow, which is watered by *aidos* (a word that is usually translated as “shame”), and wherein only those may enter who do not need to be taught but who naturally possess *sophrosyne* towards all things alike (v. 73-87). Hippolytus’ wish is to go through all his life in this state of purity without being stained by the world. For him of course his word is his bond. It is the tie that binds his thoughts with his actions. What he thinks and says and does are the same. Implicit in this bond is the view that knowledge and virtue are coterminous, and this identity is contained within the word *sophron*, meaning both wise/sensible and chaste/good. It is similar to our word “prudence,” which also combines “sensible” and “good”.

Phaedra, set by Euripides in juxtaposition to Hippolytus, represents the opposite and more common view that there is a manifest disjunction between knowledge and virtue. When the Nurse has finally extracted the secret from her, Phaedra recounts to the Chorus of Troezenian women the fruit of her reflections as she lies awake in the long hours of the night (373-429): the mind knows what is right and noble (χρ ῆστα καὶ καλόν ), but cannot do it. She cites several reasons why it can’t: laziness, and various forms of pleasure, specifically, long conversations, leisure (a τερπν ὸν καλόν ), and a third strange reason, shame (α ἰ δώς), which is of two kinds. One is not bad, the other is a burden upon houses. The distinction, roughly speaking, is between what we might call innocent shame as opposed to guilty shame: the first prevents us from doing something we would be ashamed of and the second results from our having done something we are ashamed of. But the two are not so easy to keep entirely separate. Otherwise, as Phaedra remarks, they would not be spelled the same. The problem is that “shame” as a concept illustrates the tendency of the good and the bad to blend into each other. Only an act of will is what enables Phaedra to keep them apart. She makes three resolves to help her separate them. Her first is to keep silent, her second is to conquer desire with *sophrosyne*, her third is to kill herself. She is at stage three when we see her at the beginning of the play.

The blending of good and bad is reflected in the ambiguity of speech. Especially in this play this blending is illustrated by words that have several different senses—such as *aidos* and *sophrosyne*and *sophron*. In action this ambiguity is reflected in the fact that people may seem to be good but in fact be bad, or vice versa. The radical solution to the dilemma of seeming, as proposed by Theseus, is for everyone to have two voices, one that is the just voice and the other as chance would have it. The different voices would mark the division between the true and the false. The treacherous, scheming voice would be confuted by the just voice, and we would never be deceived (925-931). Curiously, because of his confusion, he does not make clear that what he wants is not two voices in one person, but two worlds, one for those who speak the truth, the other for those who speak falsely. (Comment on other references in the play to the desirability of there being two worlds.)

Phaedra is on the cusp between these two worlds. After her death, Hippolytus says, paradoxically, that she was chaste (prudent) although she was not able to be chaste (prudent) (1034). She didn’t commit the deed although she wanted to, but because she resisted doing it until death, she was chaste in an ambiguous sense, both wanting and not wanting.

Hippolytus is at one end of the spectrum, Phaedra is in the middle, and the Nurse is at the other end—where fine words are rejected for those that are effective in action, that produce results in this world of chance. Initially, when she has finally pried the secret out of Phaedra, she is shocked, she speaks of suicide herself (358-9), and she observes: “the chaste (prudent), though not willingly, nonetheless they love things that are bad.” But when she returns, she has changed her original response, which was an instinctive reaction based on customary opinion, into another one that she supposes will save Phaedra’s life. She says the famous lines: “ second thoughts somehow are wiser” (436). When we hear what she says, we conclude that thinking corrupts, because she argues that there is no conquering of love (Aphrodite); therefore, submit to it as Zeus did, when he submitted to Semele; be satisfied with the laws of this world; don’t be too exacting; among the wise sayings of mortals is the following—disregard, don’t notice, what is not beautiful.

Phaedra recognizes the danger immediately (as does the Chorus): she fears the art of words that are too “beautiful” (ο ἱ καλο ὶ λίαν λόγοι, 487), but the Nurse persists and straightway, as a plain speaker, takes the argument down to the level of the low: “what you need are not fine sounding words but the man.” She is willing to disregard the noble completely to save Phaedra’s life, to preserve the body at all costs in preference to the mind. She represents the complete corruption of the good through the decline of speech that obscures distinctions and mixes all things together in the interest of the survival of the body at the expense of reputation, that is, at the expense of fine words, not to say of a clean mind.

These words of the Nurse are the words that lead to the hanging of Phaedra, but not just these words. Hippolytus contributes some words too. To return to him. His wish to be pure in body, speech, and mind starts with the mind, with a resolve to have no ugly thoughts, no “pictures of lust,” no need to conceal what is in his mind, because it is clean. His “shame” is completely innocent. We might call this form of shame “modesty.” But what happens when the Nurse propositions him on behalf of Phaedra? He is shocked to the point of being driven mad, senseless, *aphron*. The very words of the Nurse, once they have entered into his mind, pollute him. He conceives of washing the stain out by pouring water into his ears, as if in so doing he could cleanse his mind. His extreme reaction of hostility and revulsion causes the Nurse to fear that he will break the oath of silence that she extracted from him before revealing to him Phaedra’s secret desire. She reminds him of his oath, and in response he says the words that get him killed: “the tongue swore but the mind remains unsworn” (612). Phaedra, who is still on stage, but out of Hippolytus’ sight, hears him, and immediately envisions how he will fill the town with the story of her betrayal of her husband, Theseus. She doesn’t hear Hippolytus saying later in his speech how he will honor his oath. In a few moments he affirms unconditionally that he will, but under the initial stress of hearing the offensive words, he breaks the chain that connects his thoughts, words, and deeds. He actually tells a lie—that though his tongue swore, his mind did not. For that one instant his *sophrosyne* (in the sense of both his purity and his self-control) failed him and he lied. But these few words are the ones that Phaedra heard and believed, not his later reaffirmation of his promise not to speak. The noose of words that kills him is partly his oath of silence, but in greater part his one misspoken lie, and then subsequently the noose of words that Phaedra ties to her wrist in death, the lie that he raped her. That lie Theseus cannot see through, because she sealed it with the truth of her death. Actions speak louder than words. She would only have killed herself out of shame if Hippolytus had raped her. Nothing that Hippolytus can say can refute the fact of her death.

In Phaedra’s turn the noose of words that killed her was a noose of one word, the name Hippolytus, but also the noose of many words, woven by the Nurse, that played upon her love for Hippolytus and made her think there was a way to solve her problem other than the three ways she had thought of herself.

The play illuminates many dimensions of the problem of the relationship of thought, word and deed, but here is one of its tragic consequences: knowledge of the good alone does not defend one from evil. Purity cannot protect itself from the stains of the world. Knowledge of the evil of the world is therefore necessary, but does it not also stain one, corrupting one’s speech and leading eventually, now and then, to actions that are evil? If this happens in the case of the “perfect” youth, can any of us avoid the same decline? Does eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil constitute original sin from which none can escape? Nowadays we call this confusion and this sad consequence “the slippery slope.”