“HERW[ERDEN] BESSER FORT”: SHOULD HE ‘GO’, OR IS HE ‘BETTER’? EUR. MEDEA 109

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This note discusses one of the largely superfluous conjectures unearthed by J. Diggle and given an honourable place in his otherwise very succinct and efficient *apparatus criticus*. Reported by none of the recent editors, and earlier by Prinz–Wecklein and Verrall, Herwerden’s μελανόσπλαγχνος in Euripides’ *Medea* 109 is an undesirable change of the sound, if idiosyncratic, mss. reading μεγαλόσπλαγχνος. Diggle, however, having (independently) conjectured the same word, patched together arguments for it. An additional attraction this conjecture gained in his eyes was due to his misreading of the remark (quoted in the heading) Wilamowitz made proofreading the first volume of Murray’s OCT in 1901. While Wilamowitz discouraged Murray from reporting this conjecture with his usual “besser fort”, Diggle, on passing acquaintance with the letters, took it to mean “Herw. besser fort[,]” thus corroborating his point.

*Keywords:* Euripides, Medea, Diggle, conjectures, critical apparatus.

(Τρ.) τόδ’ ἐκεῖνο, φίλοι παίδες· μήτηρ
kinei kradiais, kinei de χόλον.
steipdeste thásson dýmatos eisw 100
kai mi peiásis’ ὁμιάτος ἐγγύς,
μηδὲ προσέλθητ’, ἀλλὰ φυλάσσεσθ’
ἀγριον ἥθος στυγερὰν τε φύσιν
φρενός αὐθάδους.

Itε νῦν, χαρεῖθ’ ὡς τάχος εἰσώ. 105
dēlon ἀπ’ ἀρχής ἐξαιρόμενον
νέφος οἰμωγῆς ὡς τάξ’ ἀνάψει
μείξονι θυμώι· τί ποτ’ ἐργάσει

109 μελανόσπλαγχνος Herwerden.

A foreign language can defeat even a most experienced of souls. Discussing one of the forceful adjectives with which the Nurse describes Medea about to be driven to further ruin by new private woes, J. Diggle dashingly disposes of the ms. reading μεγαλόσπλαγχνος in favour of his own conjecture μελανόσπλαγχνος (“anticipated” by Herwerden), which, to Diggle’s mind, ticks all the right boxes. It seems he has been a trifle overconfident and has, moreover, through *Lesefehler* of his own, made Wilamowitz endorse this conjecture.

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1 I humbly offer this trifle to Prof. A. K. Gavrilov on the day of his 75th birthday.

2 I cite Diggle’s text and his *apparatus criticus* (Diggle 1984) every time, if not otherwise mentioned.


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Medea is inside the house and her wrath is ripening (92 ff.). The Nurse, knowing that once out, it will come down hard and without discrimination, is busy tucking the children away in the safety of the house (we shall not see them again alive): “for what will this haughty (or else, “heaving, or bursting”), difficult to check soul dare when stung by these troubles?” The wording is intricate, though.

The intractability of μεγαλόσπλαγχνος was pointed out by D. Page, “a medical technical term …its use in poetry is extremely venturesome”, who, however, did not resort to conjecture, but inclined to the metaphorical usage, with further references to σπλάγχνα as ‘soul’ or ‘depth of the heart’ in Aeschylus⁴. Diggle harps rather tastelessly and unsympathetically on this medical condition and its inapplicability to Medea’s case, concluding that “Medea’s ailment⁵ is not even metaphorical great-heartedness; rather it is a fit of melancholy, an ailment induced by minimal change of μεγαλό- to μελανό-⁶. He provides loci for “the image μελανόσπλαγχνος” — mostly combinations with φρήν, καρδία and θυμός, and this with good reason, for the conjectured compound never occurs by itself and is no real gain for our passage. For one thing, Medea is not “melancholic” (κινεῖν χόλον in 99 means she is angry), and μελανόσπλαγχνος would not mean ‘melancholic’ even if pressed. μελανόσπλαγχνος, literally, ‘with black viscera’, is a state induced by fear (which can well be the case in Aesch. Ch. 412–413 σπλάγχνα δέ μοι κελαινοῦται πρὸς ἕπος κλυόσαι, ‘my blood is curdling’⁷ and several other passages quoted every time this perplexing ‘blackness’ is discussed), or, less often, by sordid ‘black’ deeds⁸. What is important here is that the emotion, be it ‘fear’, ‘anxiety’, or ‘grief and hopelessness’ (at Aesch. Ch. 412–413 I would rather suggest ‘fits of despair and frustrated eagerness’, and not ‘grief’), is not rage. But Medea is overweeningly proud⁹, willful and unstoppable (103–104)¹⁰. The Nurse has good reasons to be afraid (93–94): οὐδὲ παύσεται / χόλου, σάφ’ οἶδα, πρὶν κατασκῆψαί τινι (and to moralise on the excesses of royals), she must know her mistress’ temper.

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⁴ Page 1938, 76.
⁵ This “ailment” will send four innocent people to an early grave. Medea is no blunderer in her wish καὶ πᾶς δόμοι ἔρροι (114).
⁶ Diggle 1994, 10 = Diggle 1969, 38. — This (mechanical) corruption of ΜΕΛΑΝΟ- to ΜΕΓΑΛΟ- is in itself suspect. In uncials it is improbable, and in minuscule would involve a curious instance of ‘looking-glass’ writing.
⁷ Along with Suppl. 785, Pers. 115–116. — The commentators vary: “the emotion is fear” (Jocelyn 1970, 42), “the emotions of grief and hopelessness” (Sullivan 1997, 65), or “black is a natural symbol for anxiety” (Garvie 1986, 154, ad loc.).
⁸ For the discussion of these passages, as well as a useful overview of the controversy over the “black” inner organs, see Sullivan 1997, 59–67. See Jocelyn 1970, 42 for a neat explanation of the ‘physiopathological processes’ behind the blackness of internal organs. Each time the blackness of clotted blood was the most probable point of departure. Quite against the blackness as caused by clotted blood, Kudlien 1973, 54 ff. suggests „daß man sich die Schwarzfärbung im allgemeinen sehr konkret durch einen bestimmten „Stoff“ (und nicht durch Blutandrang) verursacht vorstellte“. But why introduce some “specific black stuff” (not identified by the author) when blood is at hand?
⁹ On “psychological terminology” in Euripides in general and on Medea 104 see Sullivan 2000, 13. Her exhaustive and orderly approach is marred at times by facile judgement, as, for instance, on Medea 104: “Euripides introduces a new adjective with phren”.
Now, literally, μεγαλόσπλαγχνος is indeed a condition of an ‘enlarged abdomen’\textsuperscript{11}, but σπλάγχνον in Euripides is used in its literal meaning ‘inner parts’ only once, in \textit{Elec}tra 828, when Aegisthus is reading his doom in the ἱερά, whereas used metaphorically it occurs in \textit{Alc.} 1009 (χρόνοι μαλάξεισ ς δ’ οὖχ υπὸ σπλάγχνοις ἐχειν σιγώντει meaning ‘not to harbour a grudge’), \textit{Med.} 220 (δόστις πρὶν ἀνδρός σπλάγχνον ἐκμαθέιν σαφῶις στυγεῖ δεδορκώς ‘judges prematurely of a man’s worth before getting to know his innermost self’), \textit{Hipp.} 118 (εἴ τις σ’ ἱππ’ ἕβης σπλάγχνον ἐντονον φέρων ‘if one is tense with arrogance of youth’), \textit{Or.} 1201 (χρόνωι μαλάκειν σπλάγχνον ‘his anger will gradually wear off’). Moreover, σπλάγχνος enters into brave compounds, the best and closest parallel being \textit{Hipp.} 424: δουλοῖ γὰρ ἄνδρα, κἂν θρασύσπλαγχνος τις ἦι, certainly used metaphorically to mean ‘even if courageous’. D. Mastronarde simply takes μεγαλόσπλαγχνος to be “a poetic coinage, variation on μεγάθυμος, μεγαλήτωρ, μεγαλόφρων”\textsuperscript{12}. Thus, μεγαλόσπλαγχνος has good reasons to stay, and was, \textit{pace} Diggle, preferred by Wilamowitz in his letters to G. Murray\textsuperscript{13}.

References


\textsuperscript{11} Induced by (excessive) drinking of sweet wine, Hipp. \textit{De diæt. in morb. acut.} 50.

\textsuperscript{12} Mastronarde 2002, 183. Before him Weil 1914, 14 \textit{ad loc.: magnanima} and Valgiglio 1959, 27, \textit{ad loc.: “Il primo agg. signifìca ‘dale grandi viscere’ (con valore tecnico, in Ippocrate), in senso metaforico”}.

\textsuperscript{13} See Bierl \textit{et al.} 1991, 37: „109 Herw. besser fort: ich weiß nicht, daß dies medicinisch ist, cf. Hippokrates π. διαίτης ὀξέων 53 (15 Littré)“. The letter itself is typed, but the appendix is in hand, and Murray, who must have reported Herwerden’s conjecture in the proofs, withdrew it from the \textit{apparatus}. What happened is that Diggle had read it as “Herw. besser fort[asse]” and was happy to learn that the great man had “commended” his idea back “in 1894” (in fact some seven years later, for the appendix came with the letter of 16, June 1901). When editing his miscellany to publish in the \textit{Euripidea}, Diggle introduced this as an additional proof, see Diggle 1994, 11. I thank my reviewers for bringing to my attention the drawbacks of this hasty sketch and for helpful suggestions which I have done my best to adopt, and Mikhail M. Pozdnev who met this nuisance with sympathy and encouragement.
“HERW[ERDEN] BESSER FORT:
«УБРАТЬ» ЕГО ИЛИ ОН «ЛУЧШЕ»?” (EUR. MEDEA 109)

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