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EURIPIDES, PHOENISSAE 1427-8

ἀκούε δὴ νυν καὶ τὸ πρὸς τούτοις κακά:
ἐπεὶ τέκνω πεσόντ’ ἐλειπέτην βίον κτλ.

In line 1428 ἐπεὶ is attested only in a part of the mediaeval tradition. A variant reading ὦς γάρ is found in the manuscripts OAApRRfRvWA1), and also occurs as a gloss in MB. There are no relevant papyri. Modern editors of the play (Wecklein 1901, Pearson 1909, Murray 1909, Powell 1911, Craik 1988, Mastronarde 1988 and 1994, Diggle 1994, Kovacs 2002) unanimously prefer the majority reading ἐπεὶ. Mastronarde justifies his decision by saying of ὦς γάρ that it “avoids asyndeton and so is probably secondary” (1994, 547 ad loc.). I have not found a discussion of the line by any of the other editors.

These lines come at the beginning of the scene’s fourth messenger speech. There are many such speeches in Euripides,2), and the great majority of them begin with a sentence in asyndeton; these are introduced by ἐπεὶ (e.g. Hel. 1526, Bacch. 1043)3) or, less often, with a simple μέν (cf. Hipp. 1173, Bacch. 677). By contrast, Sophoclean messenger speeches regularly eschew asyndeton by beginning with γάρ (cf. Aj. 285, 749, Ant. 249, 407, OR 1241, El. 681, 893, OC 1587); only at Tr. 750 and 900 is γάρ absent4). The reasons for this striking difference between the approach of the two tragedians to the beginnings of these narratives have been well analysed by De Jong 1997, 180-1. She points out that in Sophocles, messengers precede their speeches with “a brief preamble in which they announce that they are about to recount a (truthful or shocking) tale” (p. 181; cf. e.g. Aj. 284 ἄπαν μαθήσῃ τῷ ὁργῷ, ὦς κοινωνῶς ὤν, El. 680 καπεμπόμην πρὸς ταῦτα καὶ τὸ πᾶν φράσω). These declarations are followed by γάρ because this particle is commonly found
“after an expression denoting the giving or receiving of information” (Denniston 1954, 59; cf. Braswell 1988, 161-2 on Pind. P. 4.70a). But in Euripides messengers rarely make such prefatory announcements: rather, they plunge straight into their narrative. Hence the absence of γόρ.

Three passages in Euripides diverge from this trend by using γόρ to open a messenger narrative. These are Alc. 158, Hcld. 800 and IA 1543. Yet these exceptions only serve to confirm the validity of De Jong’s analysis: for in each of these cases, the line with γόρ is immediately preceded by a ‘declaration of intent to narrate’ such as regularly occurs in the Sophoclean examples above. This preceding statement has caused Euripides to abandon his usual asyndetic practice at the opening of the speech. There is, however, a further instance of such a preceding declaration in a Euripidean messenger speech: namely Phoen. 1427-8, the passage which we are discussing here. Here the imperative ἀκοῦε fulfils exactly the same function as the second person future indicatives in Soph. Aj. 284, Eur. Alc. 157 and so on: it directs the listener’s attention to the narrative which is to follow. As such, the typology of the openings of such speeches strongly suggests that we need a γόρ in 1428 to follow this imperative.

Defenders of the vulgate could object that the three Euripidean exceptions all begin ἐπεί γόρ, not ὡς γόρ. Yet the crucial point is not the ἐπεί (which, as we have seen, does not even begin all the ‘regular’ Euripidean messenger speeches), but the presence of the connecting particle. ὡς in a temporal sense is unremarkable (cf. Schwyzzer 1934-71, ii. 665 §8), and is common in Euripides (cf. Allen and Italie 1954, 684 col. i. II(d)). As we would expect, there are many instances from messenger speeches (cf. e.g. Hec. 546, Andr. 1152, HF 991, Phoen. 1143, Bacch. 691). Soph. OC 1587 has ὡς μὲν γόρ in a messenger speech after an initial indication of the messenger’s intent to narrate, while Ant. 407 and OR 1241 use ὡς ἃ γόρ in the same function. ὡς γόρ is also used to introduce narratives in comic drama: cf. Ar. Plut. 653, Eubulus fr. 112.1
Hunter = 111.1 Kassel–Austin. There it tends to be preceded not by a ‘declaration of intent to narrate’ proper, but by a gnome or brief summary of the action which is about to be narrated (cf. Fraenkel 1912, 48-52). Yet given the strong influence that tragic messenger speeches have on these comic narratives\(^5\), it is at least possible that the comic examples point back to some tragic instances of ως γάρ at the beginning of now-lost messenger speeches. We can conclude that the presence of ως instead of ἐπεί is no argument against the adoption of this reading.

There is only one passage in Euripides which could lend support to the vulgate text. In Orestes’ messenger-like speech at Eur. IT 939-86 we find at 940 a clause opening with ἐπεί but without γάρ, which comes after a line that expresses Orestes’ ‘intent to narrate’. If the text of this passage is secure, then it provides an exception to the pattern outlined above, and keeps the possibility open that ἐπεί is the right reading at Phoen. 1427. On the other hand, the weight of the evidence still points strongly in the other direction. We may not be dealing with an unbreakable rule: but unbreakable rules are rare in textual criticism, and there is certainly a powerful tendency here which makes γάρ the more likely alternative in our passage. Furthermore, we must not forget that the text of the IT relies on a single manuscript. If the textual tradition of that play were as rich as that of the Phoenissae, we could easily have found a ως γάρ variant in that passage too. After all, corruption of ως γάρ into ἐπεί would not be difficult: ἐπεί is so often used to introduce messenger speeches in Euripides that it could easily have ousted the less familiar ως γάρ.

Mastronarde objected to ως γάρ (1994, 547 ad 1427) on the grounds that it was probably a later alteration designed to avoid asyndeton. Yet if this were true, we might expect to find the phrase as a minority variant in at least some of the many Euripidean messenger speeches which open with ἐπεί in asyndeton. Yet we never do. It seems more than coincidental that such a variant could have arisen in the one instance where a γάρ would in fact make sense according to De Jong’s
analysis as outlined above. The reverse corruption of ὀς γὰρ to ἐπεί seems in fact the easier to account for, as noted above in connexion with IT 940.

The above argument can scarcely claim to have far-reaching consequences for our interpretation of Euripides’ play. But if correct, it provides a small but nevertheless satisfying instance of how an advance made by a scholar best-known for her work on the relatively new field of narratology may help to shed light on an ancient and venerable discipline such as textual criticism.  

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1) The list of manuscripts is taken from Mastronarde and Bremer 1982, 351. Mastronarde 1988, 106 (abbreviated at id. 1994, 119) lists all of these apart from At, which he does not regularly cite (cf. 1988, XLVI). Diggle 1994, 160 lists OPRfW, since he does not regularly cite At, Aa or Rv (cf. 1994, 72). On the importance of some of these manuscripts, many of which sometimes preserve the truth against the majority of the tradition, see Mastronarde and Bremer 1982, 74-5.
2) See De Jong 1991, 179 for a list.
3) See Rijksbaron 1976, 294 for more examples and brief discussion.
4) Schaefer’s conjecture ἐπεὶ γὰρ ἠλθε for transmitted ἐπεὶ παρῆλθε would make this instance conform more closely to the usual Sophoclean pattern: see however Davies 1990, 212 ad loc. for a defence of the paradosis.
6) I am grateful to Professor Christopher Collard and to Mnemosyne’s anonymous referee for helpful comments.
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