

"Why not the Nurse?"--Is she the main character in Euripides' *Hippolytus*?

Bernard Knox points out that it is difficult to say which character the play *Hippolytus* is about: Hippolytus has 271 lines, the Nurse 216, Phaedra and Theseus, 187. He notes, "The attempt to make Phaedra the central figure of the play seems perverse--why not the Nurse?" (205). Knox continues that the play is about the relationship of all four main characters, but he has little to say about the Nurse.

The tendency to trivialize the Nurse is illustrated by Harry: "(Euripides) deserved the reproof of Aristophanes that in his dramas even the old women philosophized" (xxxii). Barrett (note on ll. 170-266) calls her "this old miscreant" and claims that she is "deeply attached to Phaedra, but impatient, domineering, and with no moral scruple." The point of this paper is to establish that the philosophizing of the Nurse is to be taken seriously, and that the moral stance of the Nurse is one of adjusting to the situation, what Nussbaum calls "the fragility of goodness."

The Nurse does indeed "philosophize," but what she has to say is relevant to the action of the play, and she couches her arguments in the language of Thucydides, the medical writers, and the philosophers. In line 256-7, she says, "and the heart's affection should be easily loosed, easy alike to thrust aside and to brace tight" (all translations are from Barrett's commentary). "Easily loosed" (*euluta*) is found here for the first time, also the only appearance in Euripides, and eleven times in the Hippocratic corpus. In the next lines she observes: "That one's behaviour (*epitedeuseis*) in life should be ever unswerving (*atrekeis*) brings a fall, they say, more often than gladness, and is more at war with health" (Barrett, 258-60 n.). "Behaviour" (*epitedeusis*) is first clearly attested here and appears only here in tragedy, often (nine times!) in Thucydides, otherwise only in later prose. The pairing of this word with "health" suggests a medical usage.

The charge that the Nurse is "immoral" is not deserved, and it leads us to demote her arguments. The Nurse gives a long speech about the power of love (433-481), which Knox describes as "stripped of any restraint of morality or religion, . . . a masterpiece of sophistic rhetoric" (210). The power of this speech is obvious. However, the Nurse defends herself against this charge of immorality in the lines that follow: "If your life were not in such straits as this, and your passion were in your control, never for the sake of your bed and its pleasure would I have led you on to this; but as it is there is much at stake, the saving of your life, and none should look askance at this" (493-7). That is, she is pleading necessity, and does so in terms that find echoes in Simonides, Thucydides and Aristotle.

After her overture to Hippolytus has led to his exile, she remains true to her realist thinking: "Success is the measure of our wit" (πρὸς τὰς τύχας γὰρ τὰς φρένας κεκτήμεθα, 701). Barrett comments "she is indifferent to the moral issues," but this realism is not immoral. Her line is reminiscent of a comment of Thucydides about civil war: "war . . . makes the passions of the many equal to their circumstances" (πόλεμος . . . πρὸς τὰ παρόντα τὰς ὀργὰς τῶν πολλῶν ὁμοιοῖ, 3.82.2).

The viewpoint of the Nurse, that morality is to be subject to conditions, is found elsewhere in the play. Kypris means that Hippolytus has reached above his mortal status when she says he has "a companionship more than mortal" (19). After Hippolytus is exiled, the chorus adopt the Nurse's view: "and may my thoughts within me be neither unswerving nor yet false-coined" (1115-16). Barrett in his comment on this line illustrates that this is not immorality but realism: "if you . . . stick to principles through thick and thin, no good will come of it."

We must see the reality of Phaedra's situation and the pressure it places on the Nurse. If Phaedra dies, the Nurse loses the woman she loves and the meaning in her life. Nothing

illustrates this better than the scene in Dassin's film of the Nurse sitting, alone, after Phaedra has literally turned out the lights. We cannot speak here of philosophizing old women. Rather, we should rank the Nurse with the *sophoi* in Thucydides who died trying to help others in the plague, to no avail and at the cost of their own lives (2.47.4).

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