“YOU CAN GET NEW CHILDREN. . .”

Turkish and other parallels to ancient Greek ideas in
Herodotus, Thucydides, Sophocles and Euripides

BY

ROBERT S. P. BEEKES

1. ‘You can get new children. . .’: Thuc. II 44,3.

1.1 Thucydides relates how, at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War, the dead were officially buried in Athens. He gives at length Pericles’ funeral in which he praises Athens and Athenian democracy, which is rightly regarded as one of the high-points of human civilization. Here we find the well-known passage where, trying to console the parents of the dead (τοὺς τοιχαίς...παθομουθήσομαι), he says (II 44,3): ‘You should also take courage from the hope of other children, if you still have the age to get children.’ (Χαρτερέιν δὲ χρή καὶ ἄλλων παιδιών ἔλπιδι, σιὰ ἐτὶ ἡλικίᾳ τέκνωσιν ποιεῖσθαι). This idea baffled the modern reader, all the more because of the context in which it is found. The commentaries are not very helpful. Classen-Steup have the interesting remark: “τεκνωσιν ποιεισθαι nach der überwiegenden Neigung des Th. zur Umschreibung der einfachen Verba.” Gomme, II p. 142, points out his (and our) embarrassment, but adds the equally embarrassing remarks: “for not only very few parents of sons killed in war are likely to have more, however philoprogenitive the Greeks were (sic!), but many must actually have had other sons who would help forgetfulness of the loss (sic!), and these are ignored;”. I need not comment on these comments. As far as I know, no parallels have been found to the idea which Thucydides puts in the mouth of Perikles. I came across one in a Turkish poem to which I wish to draw attention. But let me first point out four parallels in Greek literature, for even those are not mentioned in the commentaries on Thucydides.
1.2 We find the same thought in Herodotus III 119, where the Persian king Darius, who has arrested the whole family of Intaphrenes on suspicion of revolt, allows Intaphrenes’ wife to choose one of the arrested ‘whom you want most of all’ (τον βουλε αι εκ παντων). She asks for her brother, for ‘I can get another man, if it is god’s will, and other children, if I were to lose them; but as my father and mother are no longer alive, I can in no way get another brother.’ (ἀνθρ μεν αν μοι ἄλλος γένοιτο, ει δαίμων ἐθέλοι, και τέχνα ἄλλα, ει ταῦτα ἀποβάλομι πατρός δὲ και μητρός οὐκέτι μευ ξωόντον ᾧδερεός ἄν ἄλλος οὐδένι τρόπῳ γένοιτο.) We shall return to her choice in section 2, but here we note that she argues that she can still get new children.

1.3 Exactly the same thought is expressed in Sophocles’ Antigone 909-912:

πόσις μὲν ἂν μοι κατθανόντος ἄλλος ἦν
καὶ παῖς ἂν ἄλλοι φωτός, εἰ τοῦτ’ ἡμιλαχον.
μητρὸς δ’ ἐν “Ἄιδου καὶ πατρός κεκευθότουν
οὐχ ἦστ’ ᾧδερφός ὥστις ἄν βλάστοι ποτέ.

‘I might have another husband if mine would die, and a child from another man if I were to lose him. But as my mother and my father are hidden in Hades, it is impossible that ever a brother would sprout (be born).’ It has been supposed, for several reasons, that the passage is not original (e.g. Jebb ad loc. and App.), though Aristotle already knew it, and that it was taken over from Herodotus in any case.

1.4 We find the same thought in Euripides’ Alkestis. Admetus must face an untimely death unless he can find somebody else to die in his place. Everybody refuses, even his old parents, but then his wife Alkestis offers herself. In Euripides’ play she says (290-294):

καίτοι α’ ὁ φύσας χή τεκούσα προύδισαν,
καλός μὲν αὐτοῖς κατθανεῖν ἥκον βίου,
καλός δὲ σώσαι παῖδα κευκλέως βασάνειν.
μόνος γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἧσαν κούτις ἔλπις ἦν
σοῦ κατθανόντος ἄλλα φιτύσειν τέχνα.

‘And even who begot you and who brought you forth did forsake