Fear of the Army (E. Ba. 302-305 and Gorg. Hel. 16-17)

In Euripides' *Bacchae*¹ an army is frightened by a terrible fear:

"Ἄρεώς τε μοῖραν μεταλαβὼν ἔχει τινά:  
στρατὸν γὰρ ἐν ὀπλοῖσι δόντα κάπι τάξεσιν  
φόβος διεπτόησε πρὶν λόγχη θιγεῖν:  
μανία δὲ καὶ τούτ᾽ ἐστὶ Διονύσου πάρα. (Ba. 302-305)

And he has taken and continues to have a share in Ares: for an army in arms and in battle formation may be scattered in fear before touching a spear. This too is frenzy from Dionysus.

Dionysus is compared to Ares because he is able of causing panic in armed and disciplined troops. A few ancient texts are usually compared.² Here we can add one more text, a fifth-century one:

αὐτίκα γὰρ ὅταν πολέμια σώματα καὶ πολέμιον ἐπὶ πολεμία ὀπλίσει κόσμον  
χαλκοῦ καὶ σιδήρου, τοῦ μὲν ἀλεξητήριον τοῦ δὲ προβλήματα, ἐπιθεάσηται ἡ  
ὀψις, ἐταράχθη καὶ ἐτάραξε τὴν ψυχήν, ὥστε πολλάκις κινδύνου τοῦ μέλλοντος  
<ὡς> ὄντος φεύγουσιν ἐκπλαγέντες· ἰσχυρὰ γὰρ ἡ ἀλήθεια τοῦ πόνου διὰ τὸν  
φόβον εἰσῳκίσθη τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς ὄψεως, ἥτις ἐλθοῦσα ἐποίησεν ἀμελῆσαι καὶ τοῦ  
καλοῦ τοῦ διὰ τὴν δίκην γινομένου καὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ διὰ τὴν δίκην γινομένου.  
(Gorg. Hel. 16)

---

¹ I use *Bacchae*’s text as edited in Dodds 1960²; trans. mine; Herodotus as edited in Bowie 2007; trans. mine; Thucydides as edited in Smith 1920; trans. in Hammond 2009; Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen* as edited and translated in MacDowell 1982, with slight changes; in particular, I reject his conjecture ἀμέλεια for the transmitted ἀλήθεια, I accept Donadi’s emendation πόνου for the transmitted νόμου. For Gorgias I have also consulted Untersteiner 1949; Donadi 1982; Buchheim 1989; Maso and Franco 1995; Cáffaro 1997; Spatharas 2001; Paduaano 2007²; Ioli 2013. Cf. n. 9.

For instance, when the sight surveys hostile persons and a hostile array of bronze and iron for hostile armament, offensive array of the one and shields of the other, it is alarmed, and it alarms the mind, so that often people flee in panic when some danger is imminent as if it were present. So strong is the truth of trouble which is implanted in them because of the fear caused by the sight; when it befalls them, it makes them disregard both the honour which is awarded for obeying the law and the benefit which accrues for doing right.

The Gorgian paragraph presents several textual problems. Nevertheless, we can reasonably describe the situation as follows: armed and disciplined troops are a fearful sight. It seems to be the opposite of the Euripidean lines. Troops are terrified in Euripides, in Gorgias they terrify. The power of Dionysus is frightening in the former case, but who is frightened in the latter? It may be the audience of a dramatic show (in this case the army would be on stage) or, better, unidentified observers. Why could they not be different troops, facing the enemy lines? If we interpret the situation as real—and not as acted in theater—it is possible to see here a war scenario, where enemy troops are facing each other.

If we consider the passage in detail, we find that ‘the sight surveys hostile persons’ (πολέμια σώματα...ἐπιθεάσηται ἡ ὄψις) and ‘it is alarmed’ (ἐταράχθη), so that ‘people flee in panic’ (φεύγουσιν ἐκπλαγέντες). These ‘people’ are abruptly introduced and appear to be unspecified; translators are always vague on this point, recurring to impersonal forms or generic subjects. Trying to solve the problem, MacDowell suggests that πολλοί may have been lost from the text by haplography before πολλάκις but no conjecture is really needed here. The transmitted text enables us to identify these people as soldiers. Also, why should not they run away, if they were not soldiers? Their escape would not be irrational—as it is supposed to be—if they were common people. It is predictable that people with no weapons and no war experience flee in panic in front of armed troops. In this case the Gorgian example would be pointless, for it must illustrate the irresistible power of persuasion. If sight provokes a predictable reaction, the example simply does not fit. It only makes sense if

5 MacDowell 1982, 42.