Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 188

In Page’s text of the *Eumenides*, Apollo’s abuse of the Erinyes includes the following lines (185-90):1

οὔτοι δόµοι τοῖσδε χρήµπτεσθαι πρέπει· 185
ἀλλ’ οintValue µοὶσι τὸισδε σπέρµατος τ’ ἀποφθοραῖ
παίδων κακοῦται χλοῖνις ἡδ’ ἀκρωνίαι
λευσµοὶ τε καὶ µύζουσιν οἰκτισµοῦ πολὺν
ὑπὸ ἄχριν παγέντες. 190

As generally interpreted, one of the practices described in this unpleasant list does not fit with the rest: οὐ . . . σπέρµατος . . . ἀποφθοραῖ / παίδων κακοῦται χλοῖνις (186-88).

Commentators and translators are quite consistent in their renderings. I offer a representative cross-section. K. O. Müller translates: »wo Entmannung auch / Der Knaben Blüthe schändet«. Smyth’s Loeb is more literal: »where, by destruction of the seed, the manhood of youth is ruined«. Latimore, aiming perhaps at euphemism, falls into unintelligibility: »where . . . by the spoil of sex the glory of young boys is defeated«. Mazon is nearly as vague, and quite inappropriately florid: »où, pour tarir leur fécondité, la fleur de leur jeunesse est ravie aux enfants«. Young is the most explicit, and the most succinct: »where boys are maimed into eunuchs«. Though Young’s version is rather clearer than the rest, all seem to imply what Sommerstein’s commentary makes explicit: »As the victims are boys, castration is here being thought of not as a punishment but as a means of securing a supply of eunuchs«. It seems then that we must assume that Aeschylus, or perhaps Apollo, has gotten carried away by his list of revolting things that people do to each other and inserted an example that does not suit the argument. I find it

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difficult to believe that either can have been so illogical. In fact, I see two problems with
the phrase παίδων κακούται χλοῦνις:

1. The problem with παίδων is that the context demands judicial and punitive, not
commercial, castration, and that would not be confined to males who were young enough
to be described as παιδες. This point can be put more strongly. Although the ancients
had no special courts or punishments for juveniles, we would expect that those who had
committed crimes serious enough to merit castration as a punishment would in nearly
every case be ἄνδρες or ἑφήβοι rather than παιδες.2 The fact that παιδες are not necessarily
masculine is not so much a point against the usual interpretation as a useful hint: the
word is too broad in gender, as well as too narrow (or simply wrong) in age.3

2. The problem with χλοῦνις is its meaning. This may seem an unreasonable objec-
tion: the word is a ἅπαξ λεγόμενον, and we can therefore feel free, within fairly broad
limits, to define its meaning so as to suit the context. However, Sommerstein notes that
χλοῦνις appears to be related to χλοῦνης, which means »eunuch« elsewhere and is even at-
tested with that meaning in a fragment of Aeschylus’ Edonoi (Fr. 62 Radt).4 Thomson
worries about the ending, which seems to him more appropriate to an adjective than to a
noun, and tentatively suggests a lacuna. It would certainly be a very odd coincidence if a
word that looks as if it ought to be an adjective meaning »castrated« (or a noun meaning
»eunuch« — it makes little difference which) were to turn up quite by chance in a passage
where men (or boys) are in fact being castrated, and turn up as a noun with an entirely dif-

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2 Aeschylus does not specify particular classes of victims for any of the other punishments, and I do not
see why he should do so here. Castration would surely be nearly as terrible a punishment for grown men
as for boys. I say «nearly» because it deprives a man of any hope of future children, and that would be
worse for those who do not yet have any, who are likely to be the younger men and the boys. More on
this point below.

3 I do not mean to suggest that all of the criminals would necessarily be male, though most would be.
However, some other punishment would obviously have to be found for condemned women.

4 Doubts about the meaning of χλοῦνης are possible, and L.S.J.9 provides four different ancient inter-
pretations, with «castrated» first on the list. However, P. Chantraine (Dictionnaire Étymologique de la
Langue Grecque, 4 vols., Paris, 1968-80, s.v. χλοῦνης) notes that Aristotle’s explicit testimony for this
meaning (H.A. 578 b 1) «est un témoignage ancien et sérieux» and provides further arguments and refer-
ences.
ferent — indeed entirely opposite — meaning: »virility«. That would truly be a *lucus a non lucendo*.

As a first step towards a solution, we may note that children do have a place in punishment *σπέρματος ἀποψῳφρᾶ*, though not as the victims.\(^5\) It seems to me likely that *παίδων* in 188 refers not to the men who are being castrated, but to their hypothetical offspring, the children who will never be born because of their fathers’ punishment. In that case the word’s gender (common) and age (young) would be perfectly appropriate.\(^6\) Although L.S.J.\(^9\) lists no parallel for the use of *κακοῦν* with the genitive, Kühner-Gerth’s account of the genitive of separation (1.396-399, § 421.2) lists numerous verbs with broadly similar meanings. Perhaps the best parallel is A. *Ag.* 120, where, as Fraenkel puts it, *βλαβέντα λοισθίων δρόμων* means »prevented from running the final course«: if Aeschylus can use *βλάπτειν* with a genitive of separation in the first play of his trilogy, I see no reason for him not to use *κακοῦν* in much the same way in the third. In sum, I take *οὗ . . . σπέρματος . . . ἀποψῷφρᾶ / παίδων κακοῦται χλοῦς* to mean »where, by destruction of seed, the (new-made) eunuch is prevented from (producing) children«.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) In Herodotos’ account of Hermotimos’ vengeance on Panionios (8.104-06), the castration of the sons by their own father forms a part, but only a part, of the father’s punishment. Aeschylus’ words are quite inadequate to imply anything along those lines in our passage. Other than the Erinyes, no interested spectators are mentioned.

\(^6\) Perhaps I should add that in this case the meaning of *παίδων* is slightly different: they are »children« as the sons and daughters of particular fathers (L.S.J.\(^9\) s.v. *παῖς* I) rather than boys and girls generally, or just boys, as in the usual interpretation of this passage (L.S.J.\(^9\) s.v. *παῖς* II).

\(^7\) I wish to thank Profs. Benedetto Marzullo and David Kovacs for their comments on this paper, which were very helpful even when not heeded.