

Is Nothing Gentler Than Wild Beasts? Seneca, *Phaedra* 558

Hippolytus' declamation on the progress of human depravity brings him from the invention of weapons to the climactic horror of stepmothers (553-8):¹

tum scelera dempto fine per cunctas domos
iere, nullum caruit exemplo nefas:
a fratre frater, dextera gnati parens 555
cecidit, maritus coniugis ferro iacet
perimuntque fetus impiae matres suos;
taceo nouercas: mitius nil est feris.

The last four words present us with a difficult problem, best outlined by quoting the incompatible interpretations of the three most recent commentaries.

M. Coffey and R. G. Mayer (Cambridge, 1990) consider the text corrupt:

mitius . . . feris: this clause, which must offer a comment related specifically to stepmothers, has long caused difficulty since its most obvious sense is that 'there is nothing gentler than wild beasts'. The context however requires 'the very beasts are altogether gentler (than stepmothers)'. S. might have written either *melius ingenium est feris* (cf. *Ov. Am.* 2.10.26 *turpe erit, ingenium mitius esse feris*), or *nulla non melior fera est* (= *H.O.* 236). The desired sense is not to be found in the transmitted text, nor have emendations which stick closely to the paradosis proved satisfactory. The clause may therefore be severely corrupt.

I would add that 'there is nothing gentler than wild beasts' would be nonsense in any context. After such devastating remarks about the paradosis, it comes as a bit of surprise to turn back to their text and find neither obelus nor apparatus, despite the 'measure of editorial independence' (from Zwierlein) professed in the preface.

In referring to 'emendations which stick closely to the paradosis', Coffey and Mayer seem to be alluding to Scaliger, who tentatively suggested *mitior mens est feris*,² and F. Leo (Berlin, 1878-9), who emended to *taceo nouercam: mitior nil est feris* and adduced a parallel from Euripides for the adverbial use of *nil*: ἐχθρὰ γὰρ ἢ 'πιούσα μητριῶν τέκνοις / τοῖς πρόσθ', ἐχίδνης οὐδὲν ἠπιωτέρα (*Alc.* 309-10). Neither corruption seems

¹ My text is quoted from O. Zwierlein, *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae* (Oxford, 1986). There are no pertinent variants, and Zwierlein lists no conjectures. All references are *ad loc.* except as specified.

² Quoted in Scriverius' edition (Leiden, 1621): 'haec non capio. Si dicat *mitior mens est feris*, melius caperem. Aliquid tale poscit sententia. *Scal.*'

particularly likely, and Leo's conjecture has a more serious problem: it is incompatible with the context. As Zwierlein and others have argued, the following lines (*Sed dux malorum femina*, etc.) show that *mitius nil est feris* must refer not to Phaedra alone, or even to stepmothers in general, but to all of the human criminals on Hippolytus' list.³ In accordance with his interpretation, Zwierlein (who considers the *paradosis* sound) takes *nil* as the subject of the sentence:⁴

Nihil faßt hier ebenso all zuvor genannten Menschen zusammen ('nihil in humano genere' paraphrasiert deshalb Carlsson) wie in 353 (*nihil immune est*) alle aufgezählten Tiere. Dem *taceo novercas* an unserer Stelle entspricht dort *vincit saevas cura novercas* (357).

This does not convince. In the parallel passage, the negative takes up a preceding *omnes*, which makes the shift from the plural beasts to the generalizing neuter singular more explicit and far less ambiguous: *uindicat omnes / natura sibi, nihil immune est* (352-3). Our passage provides no such hint, and I do not see how any reader or member of the audience (if there was an audience) could be expected to realize that *nil* means *nihil in humano genere*, or even that it is the subject: *nil horum* might suffice, but *nil* alone will not.

Finally, A. J. Boyle (Liverpool, 1987) also finds the *paradosis* satisfactory, but sticks with Leo's interpretation of *nil*, glossing the phrase as follows:

mitius nil est feris: the subject of *est* is *nouerca* treated as neuter. *Nil* is adverbial accusative of extent (see 119n.). *Feris* is ablative of comparison (see 143n.). Lit. "she is a thing to no extent more gentle than wild beasts".

That is a lot of explaining for four little words, and the switch from the feminine plural before the colon to the collective neuter singular after it is very harsh, particularly as the subject of *est* is only implied and there is another neuter singular loitering in the vicinity looking like a subject (and taken as such by Zwierlein), though it is an adverbial accu-

³ The distinction is a bit artificial. Obviously, the final position of the stepmothers in the list — not to mention the *praeteritio* — makes them the most prominent class of criminals, while Phaedra is by far the most important member of that class in Hippolytus' eyes. Perhaps we should say then that the following words (*sed dux malorum femina*) refer to all human criminals, especially stepmothers, and most especially Phaedra.

sative. It is also unclear whether Boyle's implied singular *nouerca* is Phaedra or a generic wicked stepmother. If the former, his interpretation is open to the same objection as Leo's conjecture. If the latter, why the awkward change of gender?

I have quoted the most recent commentators at some length because each has contributed something to my proposed solution. I believe that Coffey and Mayer are right in arguing that emendation is necessary, since the required sense cannot be extracted from the *paradosis* without violence. At the same time, Zwierlein is right in making the words apply to the whole list of human criminals, not just Phaedra, and Leo and Boyle in taking *nil* as an adverbial accusative. What we need is a conjecture that will produce a clear shift from the feminine plural to the neuter singular, while preventing the reader from taking *nil* as the subject, since that would leave us with the nonsensical meaning quoted in my title.

Following the principle that one must start from the sense, I often find the less scrupulous translators useful, those who translate what the Latin ought to mean rather than what it must mean.⁵ In this case, the required sense is expressed most clearly and succinctly by Segal's version:⁶

‘As to stepmothers I am silent: they are a thing no gentler than beasts.’

This is an excellent translation of just what Seneca must have written:

taceo nouercas: mitius nil *sunt* feris.

⁴ *Kritischer Kommentar zu den Tragödien Senecas* (Abh. Akad. Mainz, Geistes- und Sozialwiss. Klasse, Einzelveröffentlichung 6, Stuttgart, 1986), 168. The interpretation of R. Giomini (*Phaedra*, Rome, 1955) is similar. Both provide references to the other scholars who have argued along the same lines.

⁵ I mean no moral judgment here. The other class of translators, which includes those quoted (note 8) below, can also be useful, since nonsensical English (or French or German) may strike the eye more clearly than nonsensical Latin, and cause one to question the latter. The same division applies to commentators: both impugners (Coffey-Mayer) and defenders (Zwierlein and Boyle) of the *paradosis* have their uses.

⁶ C. Segal, *Language and Desire in Seneca's 'Phaedra'* (Princeton, 1986), 90. The interpretation, which is roughly the same as Boyle's and not entirely different from Leo's, is no doubt much older, though I have not attempted to trace it further back. Segal's translation is identical to F. J. Miller's Loeb (London/Cambridge², 1929), if we ignore — and it's not easy — the latter's irritatingly archaic style, which must have been hopelessly out of date the day it was published: ‘I say naught of stepmothers; they are no whit more merciful than beasts.’

The singulars and plurals are now in the right places, just where they are in Segal's version, while the rules of Latin concord prevent the reader from taking *nil* as the subject (with Zwierlein), leaving an adverbial accusative as the only thing it can be (so Leo and Boyle). The shift from feminine plural to neuter singular is still rather bold, but clearly signposted, as in Zwierlein's parallel passage. Corruption would have been inevitable, as with Juvenal's *quota portio faecis Achaei?* (3.61), 'what proportion of the dregs (of Roman society) are Greeks?', where nearly all manuscripts mistake the nominative plural for a genitive singular and 'correct' the gender to *Achaeae*.⁷ After *mitius nil*, plural *sunt* would have been equally vulnerable. The fact that 'there is nothing gentler than wild beasts' is nonsense in any language has not deterred some modern translators from glossing it with vernacular nonsense.⁸ Why should a mediaeval scribe have been more fastidious about copying such nonsense, or even (in at least one case) 'correcting' *mitius nil sunt feris* so as to so as to produce it?

⁷ Those few scribes who preserved *Achaei* may be suspected of not knowing the gender of *faex*.

⁸ For instance, L. Herrmann (Budé, Paris⁴, 1968): 'quant aux marâtres, je les passe sous silence. Les fauves ne sont rien moins que doux'. Similarly, T. Thomann (Artemis, Zürich-Munich², 1978): 'Ich rede nicht von Stiefmüttern: nicht Milderer gibt es als wilde Tiere.' No doubt the facing-text format encourages literalism.