

INTRODUCTION

1) PLOT, CAST AND SETTING

1A) PLOT

Rhesus, a play that focuses on the problem of power in the military sphere, begins appropriately enough at the bivouac of the leader of the Trojan army, Hector, and this remains the setting until the end.¹ One of the eisodoi leads to the Thracian camp and beyond it to Troy and Mt Ida, the other to the Greek camp. Hector is the protagonist. He is on stage throughout except from 565 to 807, when Odysseus and Diomedes appear with Athena, and then Rhesus' charioteer enters: Hector cannot be allowed to encounter the enemy raiders, and Rhesus' charioteer must be free to level his hostile accusation against Hector in his absence. Otherwise, all the characters converse with him, or with him and the chorus – Aeneas 87–148, Dolon 154–223, Messenger 264–341, Rhesus 388–526, Rhesus' charioteer 808–78. The epiphany of the Muse, from 890, concludes the play, although the very last words (983–96) are spoken by Hector and the chorus.

In the **parodos** (1–51), the chorus of watchmen wake Hector to report that new fires have been lit in the Greek camp and to ask him to mobilise the army. The watchmen do not know the significance of the fires, but see them as a sign of danger. The **first episode** (52–223) begins with Hector interpreting the fires as a sign that the Greeks are trying to cover up their escape. He wants to launch an attack, but the chorus appear to doubt his interpretation. Aeneas intervenes in the debate, objecting to Hector's idea of a night attack, which would be very dangerous. He suggests sending a spy to find

¹ One may compare Soph. *Ajax*, another military play, but there the skene follows the protagonist Ajax. The play opens at his tent, but at 815 the scene shifts to a grove or the sea-shore, where he goes to hide his sword.

INTRODUCTION

out what the enemy intend to do. In a first sung **interlude** (131–6), with tragic irony, the watchmen praise this solution as a prudent one; in fact it will facilitate Odysseus' and Diomedes' raid, as the Trojans and their allies will remain asleep. Hector yields to what seems to be the opinion of the majority (137), and looks for a volunteer for the spy mission. When Dolon volunteers, Hector engages in a *stichomythia* with him concerning the reward to be assigned. After Hector has guessed incorrectly several times, this finally ends when Dolon asks for Achilles' horses. A second, antistrophic **interlude** follows (195–200): the watchmen celebrate, again with tragic irony, Dolon's future success. Next, in a long dressing scene, details are given of how Dolon is to be camouflaged as a wolf. At the end of it, in the **first stasimon** (224–63), the watchmen synthesise the perspectives of both interludes and celebrate Dolon's certain success in his mission and Trojan victory in the war.

The **second episode** (264–341) begins with a report delivered by a Trojan shepherd, who announces the arrival of the Thracian army led by Rhesus, and emphasises its military strength. The chorus hail it as a blessing for Troy. Hector on the other hand regards Rhesus as an opportunist: in his opinion, he is hoping to take advantage of a victory that Hector has effectively already won. But in the end he again yields to the opinion of those advising him, accepts Rhesus' alliance, and tells him where to camp. Now that Hector has accepted their views, in the **second stasimon** (342–87) the chorus celebrate Rhesus' greatness in a hymn which practically raises him to the level of a god.

The **third episode** (388–526) begins with a dialogue. Hector reprimands Rhesus for arriving too late to help Troy and accuses him of being a bad ally: with his delay, he has abandoned the bond of *ξενία* (guest-friendship) which had connected him to Hector at least since the time when Hector helped him to consolidate and extend his royal power in Thrace. In his long reply, Rhesus justifies himself: he had to defend his country from Scythian incursions and his journey to Troy involved logistical difficulties. He boasts that he can now win the war alone, and

1) PLOT, CAST AND SETTING

in a single day. The chorus express their agreement with these claims by celebrating his greatness again in a strophe serving as an **interlude** (454–66). Rhesus boasts that after winning the war, he will sail to invade Greece. He would like personally to face Achilles and his contingent on the battlefield; when Hector informs him that Achilles has withdrawn from the fighting, he promises to kill Odysseus, whose prior exploits Hector has described. Both Rhesus and Hector leave by the eisodos that leads to the allies' camp, to which Hector escorts Rhesus.

The **third stasimon** (527–64) has a less boastful tone. The watchmen describe the coming of dawn while they wait for the next watch to take over, and express anxious doubts as to Dolon's fate as they leave the stage.

With the **fourth episode** (565–674), the second part of the play begins. This includes the deaths of Dolon (not described, as in *Il.* 10, but presupposed as having happened already while the debate between Hector and Rhesus was taking place) and of Rhesus (described as in *Il.* 10, but in a very different way) and continues with the accusation levelled at Hector by Rhesus' charioteer (totally absent from *Il.* 10). Odysseus and Diomedes come from the no-man's-land between the Trojan and Greek camps (i.e. by the eisodos that leads to the Greek camp) and are probably carrying spoils that they have stripped from Dolon. They are hoping to kill Hector in his bivouac, where of course they cannot find him. Just as they are on the verge of deciding to return to the Greek camp, Athena appears from above and suggests that they kill Rhesus instead. She draws attention to his strength and the danger that he poses for the Greeks, confirming the naïve impressions of the shepherd-messenger. When she sees that Alexander (Paris) is entering, Odysseus and Diomedes exit (Odysseus perhaps already after 626, Diomedes after 641), both towards the eisodos leading to the Thracian camp, by which Paris enters. Athena meets Alexander disguised as Aphrodite; with a false show of friendship, she distracts him so that he does not raise the alarm and alert the Trojans, while Odysseus and Diomedes take the opportunity

INTRODUCTION

to kill Rhesus. The treacherous raid against Rhesus and the treacherous use of disguise in the humiliation of Alexander are thus synchronous episodes in which different forms of deception are employed – in the former case, deception of a military kind, as in *Il.* 10; in the latter case, the deception of disguise, probably invented by the *Rh.* author in the wake of the comic tradition.

The chorus of watchmen re-enter in the **epiparodos** (675–727). They come across Odysseus and Diomedes while they are leaving the camp, but with one more act of jeering deception Odysseus fools them by pretending to be Trojan; he uses the password that Dolon had revealed to him when he was captured in the hope of being spared. In the final song (692–727), the watchmen comment on the deviousness of Odysseus. They sense that he is the individual who has given them the slip.

The **exodos** (728–996) opens with the report of Rhesus' charioteer, acting as a second messenger, on the slaughter of Rhesus and his Thracians. The charioteer reports that he had fallen asleep after seeing two suspicious shadows (Odysseus and Diomedes) close to Rhesus' horses and shouting at them to go away. But in his sleep he had a vision that precisely, though metaphorically, reflected what was happening in reality: he saw wolves riding away with the horses. When he woke up, he was wounded, while Rhesus was actually murdered. He could not however identify Odysseus and Diomedes as Greeks, and was convinced that Hector was behind the killing of Rhesus and the stealing of the horses. At 808 Hector enters, having been informed of these events, and accuses the chorus of having allowed Greek spies into the camp. In a final lyric **interlude** (820–32, corresponding to 454–66), the watchmen assure Hector that they had always been alert and had never fallen asleep. A dialogue follows, in which the charioteer now openly accuses Hector of having stolen the horses, and Hector argues that he had no part in Rhesus' killing. Finally, the Muse appears *ex machina*, carrying Rhesus' body in her arms. She reveals that Odysseus and Diomedes were responsible for Rhesus' death,

1) PLOT, CAST AND SETTING

thus absolving Hector from responsibility. She explains that she became the mother of Rhesus by the river god Strymon when she and the other Muses had gone to Thrace to compete against Thamyris, who had hubristically boasted that he was a better musician than the Muses; and Rhesus had been killed because of his military ambitions, although the Muse and Strymon had warned him of the risks of his campaigns. She curses Athena as the principal in her son's murder, and Athens as the beneficiary of Athena's protection. But the Muse's threat not to return to Athens in the future, despite her past visits, is an aition of Athens' cultural stature, and also perhaps (if *Rhesus* was composed in the fourth century) mirrors the contemporary cultural ambitions of Macedon.² She concludes her lament by announcing Rhesus' immortality as a cult hero (another aition, this time of the cult of Rhesus in Thrace).

The last words of Hector to the chorus (986–96) are an order to mobilise the army. This mirrors the request with which the watchmen had approached Hector at the beginning (23–33). The similarity of beginning and end lays further emphasis on the idea of military decision-making as the specific issue with which the play is concerned. It also highlights the fact that all the discussions about Rhesus' alliance, the military actions, and the deaths that occurred in the tragedy have not changed anything. It is as if nothing had happened: Rhesus was not there to help at the beginning, and he is not there at the end.

1B) CAST AND SETTING

The actor who plays Hector may also have played Odysseus. A second actor would have played Dolon, Athena and the Muse. A third actor may have played all the other characters. A fourth actor was probably required: see below 627–41n.

² See below p. 27, 46–8.

INTRODUCTION

The Thracian camp is some distance from the Trojan camp, and this contributes to the verisimilitude of the action (the Trojans do not perceive the massacre) both in *Rh.* and in *Il.* 10.434. Rhesus must have crossed the Propontis at the Bosphorus (428b–9), and not at the Hellespont, closer to Troy (cf. 282–3n., 428b–9n.). He proceeded to Troy along the southern coast of the Propontis (437) and arrived at Hector’s bivouac from Mt Ida (282–3, 290–3). The plain between Troy and the sea must have been largely occupied by the moored Greek ships, the Greek camp, and Trojan bivouacs. Hector says (519–20) and Athena confirms (613–15) that the Thracian bivouacs are separate from those of the Trojans, and Athena states that they are close to Hector’s bivouac (613); the Greek raiders could only reach the Thracians’ bivouac by crossing the Trojan camp (696–8, 808–13, 843–6). The Thracian bivouacs must then have been on the opposite side of Hector’s bivouac. Thus the stage represented Hector’s bivouac in the middle; eisodos B, on the left for the audience, led to the Thracian camp, the city of Troy and, at a distance, Mt Ida, while the right-hand eisodos, A, led to the Trojan camp, the Greek camp and, after it, the sea.³

2) RHESUS IN LEGEND, EPIC AND NOVEL

Many epic heroes were fictional characters who did not become cult heroes. Rhesus is one of those few epic heroes who were also cult heroes of some importance in local religion; others include Achilles, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Helen and Menelaus.⁴

As a literary character, however, Rhesus has no backstory when he first appears in *Il.* 10.⁵ When the Trojan spy Dolon first mentions him in *Il.* 10, he is a new arrival. He is not mentioned in

³ Cf. Battezzato (2000b) 367–8.

⁴ Antonaccio (1995) 147–69. A neat distinction between the epic hero and the religious hero is drawn by Ekroth (2007) 100–6.

⁵ Leaf (1915) 1–2.

2) RHESUS IN LEGEND, EPIC AND NOVEL

the Cyclic *Cypria* or elsewhere in the *Iliad*. Dolon simply suggests Rhesus and the Thracians as an easy and profitable target: they are camped out of the way, and Rhesus has a precious chariot of gold and silver and incomparably fast horses (10.433–45).

In the seventh century, Hipponax (*IEG* 72 = 72 Degani) refers to Rhesus as ‘king of the inhabitants of Ainos’ (Αἰνειῶν πάλμυς), who was killed near his white Thracian horses (ἐπ’ ἀρμάτων τε καὶ Θρεϊκίων πώλων / λευκῶν †δείουσ κατεγγύστ’ Ἰλίου πύργων / ἀπηναρίσθη). This recalls the Iliadic narrative: the white horses and beautiful chariot and their proximity to the place where Rhesus was slaughtered are familiar from *Il.* 10. But it also suggests that there was an extra-Iliadic tradition. The city of Ainos, near the mouth of the river Hebrus and perhaps the only city with this name in Thrace, is never mentioned in Homer as the seat of Rhesus’ kingdom: he is regularly king of ‘the Thracians’ (*Il.* 10.434–5) and the leader of the Thracian contingent at Troy (*Il.* 10.464, 470, 506).⁶ Strabo (Book 7 F 16a Radt) situated his kingdom among the Odomantes, Hedoni, and Bisaltae, and thus closer to the river Strymon. The Homeric patronymic ‘son of Eioneus’⁷ may point to the same area: Eion is a city on the east bank of the Strymon’s mouth. Both Hipponax and Strabo seem to presuppose Thracian sources. This cannot be said of the more generic references to ‘Thracians’ in Homer.

Most of the known versions of the myth attempt to make Rhesus more heroic than he is in the *Iliad*. But his heroism remains ephemeral or unrealised: he dies almost immediately, as in the *Iliad*. The version adopted or invented by Pindar F 262, from which we have not a single word of text, and the folkloric

⁶ But ‘inhabitants of Ainos’ may stand for Thrace by synecdoche, as suggested by Degani (1991) 87: Ainos is the largest and oldest city of Thrace.

⁷ *Il.* 10.435. In Conon, *Narr.* 4 Eioneus is said to be a river, later called Strymon, whose sons were Brangas, Rhesus (Ρῆσσοσ in Conon) and Olynthus. Conon was probably trying to synthesise the Homeric tradition with later sources that made the river Strymon Rhesus’ father, like *Rh.*

INTRODUCTION

so-called ‘oracle version’, which does not appear ever to have surfaced in literature, are found together at Σ D *Il.* 10.435:

διάφορος δὲ τῶν καθ’ αὐτὸν γενόμενος ἐν πολεμικοῖς ἔργοις ἐπῆλθε τοῖς Ἕλλησιν, ὅπως Τρωσὶ συμμαχήσῃ, καὶ συμβαλὼν πολλοὺς τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἀπέκτεινεν. δείσασα δὲ Ἥρα περὶ τῶν Ἑλλήνων Ἀθηναῖν ἐπὶ τὴν τούτου διαφθορὰν πέμπει, κατελθοῦσα δὲ ἡ θεὸς Ὀδυσσεΐα τε καὶ Διομήδῃν ἐπὶ τὴν κατασκοπὴν ἐποίησεν προελθεῖν. ἐπιστάντες δὲ ἐκεῖνοι κοιμωμένῳ Ῥῆσῳ αὐτὸν τε καὶ τοὺς ἑταίρους αὐτοῦ κτείνουσιν, ὡς ἱστορεῖ Πίνδαρος.

ἔνιοι δὲ λέγουσιν νυκτὸς παραγεγονέναι τὸν Ῥῆσον εἰς τὴν Τροίαν, καὶ πρὶν γεύσασθαι αὐτὸν τοῦ ὕδατος τῆς χώρας φονευθῆναι. χρησμὸς γὰρ ἐδέδοτο αὐτῷ φασιν, ὅτι εἰ αὐτός τε γεύσεται (v.l. γεύσῃται) τοῦ ὕδατος καὶ οἱ ἵπποι αὐτοῦ τοῦ Σκαμάνδρου πίουσιν (v.l. πίωσι) καὶ τῆς αὐτόθι νομῆς, ἀκαταμάχητος ἔσται εἰς τὸ παντελές.

As he was distinguished among the people of his age in warlike activities, he went against the Greeks to be an ally of the Trojans and, engaging them, he killed many of the Greeks. Worried about the Greeks, Hera sent Athena to destroy him; the goddess went down and made Odysseus and Diomedes go forth to spy. They approach Rhesus while he is asleep and kill both him and his companions, as Pindar narrates (F 262; a summary of this version, including the mention of Pindar, is found at Σ exeg. *Il.* 10.435).

Some say that Rhesus arrived at Troy in the night and was murdered before he could taste the water of the land. For an oracle had been given to him, they say: if he tastes the water and his horses drink from the Scamander and the pasture there, he will be utterly invincible.

We do not know from Homer when Rhesus had come to Troy as he is never mentioned before Book 10; but his contribution to the war turns out to be insignificant. His heroic status differs in Pindar’s version, in the oracle version, and in *Rh.* It cannot be determined whether the oracle version predated *Rh.* or not. Prophecies and oracles are, however, a common motif in the Epic Cycle, which dealt with several allies of the Trojans and may have included a flashback on Rhesus.⁸ In Pind. F 262,

⁸ Kullmann (1960) 221–3, Fenik (1964) 10–12. Fenik (1964) 7–16 tried to demonstrate that both the version followed by Pindar and the oracle ver-

2) RHESUS IN LEGEND, EPIC AND NOVEL

Rhesus fought for one day and inflicted severe damage on the Greek enemy (μία νύκτα πολεμήσας πρὸς Ἑλλήνας μέγιστα αὐτοῖς ἐνεδείξατο κακά). But in the oracle version, as in *Rh.*, he had just arrived at Troy on the night when he was slain. There is also no mention in *Rh.* of the invincibility promised by the oracle, though it may be suggested by Rhesus' boastful promise at 447–50 and Athena's alarmed prediction at 600–4 (εἰ διοίσει νύκτα τήνδ' ἔς αὔριον ...⁹). The reference to the charioteer feeding Rhesus' horses just before Rhesus is killed (770–2) may also be inspired by the oracle. If the author and some of those in the audience had heard of that story, Rhesus will have seemed extremely unfortunate: his horses did eat fodder, but apparently not from the Scamander pastures, and they are not said to have drunk from the river.

The tragic Rhesus is thus neither the totally insignificant character of the *Il.*, nor the Pindaric hero who has his own aristeia. The play gives him an expressive identity and a virtual heroism based on promises and boasts, but no actual deeds;¹⁰ although he does not become invincible as in the oracle version, the Muse indicates (962–73) that he will obtain heroic immortality after his death, and announces his cult at Mt Pangaeum, in the context of Orphic-Dionysiac mysteries. The epic hero who dies prematurely is thus compensated with immortality of a sort as a cult hero. As has been aptly stated, 'the dramatist has selected his motifs so as to leave the fate of Rhesus as open as possible, while he yet reminds his audience of the alternative possibilities offered by the lyric and the epic traditions'.¹¹

Both the cult evidence and the literary treatments give us an image characterised by 'the absence of any common bond of

sion are filled with motifs and details that connect them to Cyclic epic, and should thus be older than *Il.* 10.

⁹ Cf. Fenik (1964) 26.

¹⁰ Cf. below p. 15.

¹¹ Burnett (1985) 184 n. 74.

INTRODUCTION

locality or legend'.¹² There is no evidence for any cult of Rhesus in archaic Greece (or for many other cult heroes, who mainly proliferate in the seventh and sixth centuries). But he is comparable to and may perhaps be identified with the deity or hero whom modern scholars call 'the Thracian Horseman' or Heros equitans, whose simple iconography is ubiquitous in Thrace. ἥρωας is one of the most frequent inscriptional theonyms used of this obscure deity. We also find κύριος and δεσπότης. These suggest the name of Rhesus, which linguists take to mean 'king' in Thracian.¹³ The Heros equitans is a healing deity and a god who could be identified with Apollo and Asclepius;¹⁴ similarly, the Rhesus worshipped in the Rhodope mountains was thought to keep pestilence away. Both are hunters, both go around clad in armour and on horseback; Rhesus is destined to be immortal but he is confined to an underground abode, and the Heros equitans is frequently associated with the underworld. Rhesus is the prophet of Bacchus (*Rh.* 972), and the Heros equitans has strong Dionysiac associations.¹⁵

Evidence for a cult of Rhesus first appears in the fifth century. According to Polyæn. 6.53, the Athenian general Hagnon, after several unsuccessful attempts to found a colony in Thrace, managed to found Amphipolis. An oracle had indicated that the bones of Rhesus first had to be transferred from Troy to his native soil (πατρίηι ... ἀρούρηι). Hagnon therefore had the presumed bones of Rhesus fetched from Troy to the Strymon, buried them by the side of the river (κατώρυξε παρά τὸν ποταμόν), and defended himself and the bones against the local people with a ditch and palisades. This was the beginning of the foundation of the city.¹⁶ Transferring the bones of

¹² Leaf (1915) 2 (perhaps somewhat too negative about the reality of a heroic cult of Rhesus).

¹³ Wathelet (1989) 222, Liapis (2011b) 99 n. 26.

¹⁴ Extensive bibliography in Liapis (2011b) 101 n. 33.

¹⁵ Seure (1928), Liapis (2011b) 102–3.

¹⁶ Cf. Malkin (1987) 81–4.