

THE PROLOGUE OF THE *CHRISTUS PATIENS* AND EURIPIDEAN PROLOGUES

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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The *Christus patiens* is a dramatic representation of the Passion of Christ, in which the literary conventions of classical tragedy, and especially the style and diction of Euripides, are extensively copied. In the printed tradition, it is generally described as a tragedy.¹ However, the definition *ὑπόθεσις δραματική* ('dramatic plot'), which occurs frequently in the manuscript tradition, seems to give a more accurate description of the nature of this poem. It is traditionally attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus, but its authenticity has been disputed by many scholars since the late sixteenth century.² Even after the detailed defence of the attribution to Gregory by Tuilier (1969:11–74), many dissenting voices still remain. The present author (Swart 1990) regards the authorship of Gregory as probable, though not irrefutably proven, while the date of composition must be considered to be much earlier than the eleventh to twelfth century as suggested by some scholars. External evidence strongly suggests that the poem was composed before the sixth century. Thus it is a product of the early Byzantine period, and as such an interesting example of the way in which literary practices of Classical Antiquity were imitated by the Byzantines.

The metre, style, and diction of the *Christus patiens* quite clearly and consciously reflect Euripidean usage.³ So also, to a considerable extent, does its dramatic structure. Some elements of Euripidean tragedy (e.g. the *parodos* and

¹ The *editio princeps* was published at Rome in 1542, by Antonius Bladus, with the bilingual title Τοῦ ἁγίου Γρηγορίου Ναζιανζηνῶ ἰτραγωδία Χριστὸς πάσχων. *Sancti Gregori Nazianzeni ... tragoedia Christus Patiens*. The most recent critical edition, by André Tuilier (1969), is titled Grégoire de Nazianze. *La Passion du Christ. Tragédie*.

² A detailed discussion of the history of this dispute was published by Trisoglio (1974). The arguments forwarded by exponents of the opposing points of view regarding this issue are systematically presented by G.J. Swart, in chapter 2 (pp. 18–74) of an unpublished D.Litt. (University of Pretoria) dissertation titled "A historical-critical evaluation of the play *Christus patiens*, traditionally attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus".

³ Cf. the programmatic introductory words of the *ὑπόθεσις* of the play:

Ἐπειδ' ἀκούσας εὖσεβῶς ποιημάτων
ποιητικῶς νῦν εὖσεβῆ κλύειν θέλεις,
πρόφρων ἄκουε· νῦν τε κατ' Εὐριπίδην
τὸ κοσμοσωτήριον ἐξερῶ πάθος, κτλ.
(Since—having listened respectfully to poetry—you now
want to hear of the revered things in poetic fashion,
listen attentively; and in the manner of Euripides
I will now tell you of the Passion which saved the world.)

Cf. also the detailed analysis of the prologue by the present author (Swart 1992). In fact, almost 50% of the 2 600 iambic trimeter lines of the *Christus patiens* reveal at least some relation to passages or lines of verse from *Bacchae*, *Hippolytus*, *Medea*, *Rhesus*, *Hecabe*, *Orestes*, and *Troades*.

stasima) are absent in the *Christus patiens*,⁴ but others are present, and display largely comparable features (e.g. the prologue and messenger scenes). The purpose of the present comparison between the prologue of the *Christus patiens* and the prologues of Euripidean plays is to illustrate to what extent the author has imitated the methods of the famous fifth-century tragedian and adhered to the conventions of classical tragedy, thereby presenting to the reader an example of the 'Nachleben' of Euripidean plays in the Byzantine era.

The prologue to be discussed in this study should not be confused with the *ὑπόθεσις* or introduction which is transmitted with the text of the *Christus patiens* and which contains an indication of the play's centonic nature as well as a short summary of the opening scene. The prologue in question is the dramatic prologue proper—a monologue, spoken by the protagonist, explaining the essence of the tragic situation, indicating the identity of the speaking character (the Mother of Christ—line 23), as well as the precise moment, within the course of the 'mythical' events, at which the dramatic action commences, and ending with an indication of some external event which will bring about the progression of the dramatic action.⁵

The following translation of this monologue is provided for readers who may not have access to the Greek text. It was prepared by the present author, since there is no other English translation available. The best Greek text available is that of Tuilier (1969), while the prologue appears also in Swart 1992.

If only the serpent had never crept into the garden,
 and the dragon had never made its home in its valleys—
 that wily-coiled dragon! For then the one born of a rib,
 the wretched mother of the human race, would not have been beguiled
 into daring that most dreadful of daring deeds— 5
 her mind struck dumb with desire for that tree,
 convinced that she would obtain divinity from it.
 Then also she would not have persuaded her husband to eat of the fruit
 which brought them no benefit then, and would not
 have been banished from that most bountiful garden, 10
 condemned to doom and pitiful death;

⁴ The chorus in this play has a function much more closely resembling that of a third actor than that of the *χοροί* of classical tragedy. Although in classical tragedy the chorus—or an individual acting as its mouthpiece—frequently enters into the dialogue in the same manner as the other actors, this type of direct participation in the dialogue remains a minor aspect of the chorus' role. Its main contribution consists of the *parodos* and *stasima*, that is, the lyrical elements in the structure of classical tragedy. In the *Christus patiens*, however, the lyrical elements are wholly absent, and the chorus functions simply as a participant in the dialogue. Accordingly, the chorus is presented as a collective personality, whose speech is not distinguished from that of the individual characters by any metrical or dialectal means. In fact, the entire play, with the exception of a short passage in anapaests, consists of dialogue in the iambic metre.

⁵ Tuilier (1969:20) describes this passage as a "long monologue qui sert d'introduction dramatique à la pièce", while he uses the term 'prologue' in referring to the passage of 30 lines preceding this one, that is, to the *ὑπόθεσις*.

nor would she, the mother of children born of woe, have heard
 that she was to give birth with difficulty and labour pains;
 nor would she with toil have dwelt on this earth—accursed
 by that last curse—with her husband and the children 15
 to whom she was destined to give birth with woe and wailing,
 to bring into the world an offspring
 and thereby to obtain the ultimate reconciliation.
 Then also the entire human race would not have been lost and would not
 have moved the only One who could somehow bring salvation 20
 to descend upon the earth in His kindness,
 to become man in an inexplicable way, and to bear suffering.
 Then also, I would not have been both mother and virgin
 and would not have heard that my Son is being dragged before the court
 —the heavenly one who dwells on earth, the one of pure birth— 25
 and I would not have feared to see Him being insulted,
 bearing, alas, with bare hands, as it were, the fearsome flame
 that violently scorches me and disturbs my mind
 and pierces my heart like a giant sword,
 just as the aged Symeon has precisely prophesied 30
 when with far-seeing eyes he saw everything in advance.
 This indeed is the greatest of saving conditions,
 when a wife is not at odds with her husband,
 but is supporting him in everything as is right;
 when she does not secretly listen to the counsel of another, 35
 but is of one concern with her own husband.
 Now, however, there is but enmity, and it is a time of sickness,
 since she has betrayed her husband and his good repute.
 Yes, ancient hybris tends to produce hybris anew;
 from tears ever flow more tears, 40
 of which there is no count or measure;
 evil is always in competition with evil.
 That is why the noble nature which has been disgraced
 keeps mourning and weeping about a mixture of misfortunes
 and a succession of the most unbearable toils, 45
 dwindling away in tears, all that time
 since becoming aware of having been treated unjustly by the enemy,
 by the transgression of her mother, the first sinner,
 and of her father who lent his ears to her mother—
 those two of whom we all on earth are descendants. 50
 She cries out about those promises, recalls the solemn pledge,
 the greatest guarantee of faith, and calls God as witness;
 for the poor woman has learnt through her misfortunes
 what excellent a thing it is not to have left one's native land.
 She despises the world; has no pleasure in seeing it. 55

I, in my grief, have now reached the point
 where I was overcome by the desire to come out here
 and to tell heaven and earth about the injuries to my soul.
 For this poor woman has not yet ceased from crying, having given birth
 though not having given birth—having escaped the pangs of childbirth. 60
 Wretched one! Yes, I am talking about myself when I say that you
 have given birth though not having given birth, illogical as it sounds;
 for I have known birth which was no birth—how shall I explain it?—
 when now I have escaped labour pains, as I escaped corruption before.
 Of intimacy with any man, or of the topic of malicious gossip, 65
 I know even less than of the coppersmith's trade:
 no-one has destroyed my virginity.
 How, then, did I give birth to a child? What great miracle!
 But how will I now bear it to see him being insulted?
 Having escaped labour pains, how do I suffer mentally! 70
 How I shouted with joy before,
 when the bringer of good news came to announce his coming birth,
 speaking of salvation for the race of wretched mortals
 and bringing me great, joyful happiness!
 I did not seem to be easily led astray by his words, 75
 when I was convinced by him who brought the divine message
 which ran that I was to give birth, not to a sacrificial lamb,
 but to the lord of the earth and all heaven.
 Accordingly, I sacrificed and in a way fitting for women
 I sent forth a shout of joy from my innermost soul, 80
 hailing the annunciation as a blessing,
 while carrying the burning incense offerings
 which the prophets tell us to offer to God:
 burning zeal, a humble spirit,
 and irresistible, very warm love 85
 —the things we know to be blessed offerings.
 And now—how does the sharp arrow wound my heart!
 I intended to run there, though it is still dark,
 to see the maltreatment my Son is to suffer;
 but these women have persuaded me to wait until daybreak. 90

Apart from the characteristics of this passage which have been mentioned above, what are the grounds for regarding it as the 'dramatic prologue proper' and for considering it comparable to the prologues of Euripidean plays?

Owing to its being spoken by one of the characters—in this case the protagonist—this passage is not a preface or introduction, but an integral part of the play. On the other hand, it does not form part of the dialogue, since it is a monologue in the stricter sense of that term, being addressed directly to the reader (or to the audience), while no other characters are present—or, at least, none of the

characters is referred to as being addressed. If one bears these facts in mind, lines 1–87 of the play⁶ may be compared to the opening lines of classical tragedies. In that context, the term ‘prologue’ is used when referring to that part of a play—whether monologue or dialogue—preceding the *parodos* or introductory lines of the chorus.⁷ In this play, which lacks any part comparable to the lyrical *parodos* of ancient tragedy, the term ‘prologue’ is applicable to the opening lines in as far as the dramatic function of these lines resembles that of the *prologos* of classical tragedy.

An examination of the dramatic function of the prologues in some Euripidean plays may be of value for the interpretation of lines 1–87 of the *Christus patiens*. Therefore, the following series of questions will now be asked, and answers attempted, with reference to those plays of Euripides which feature most prominently among the poetic sources which the author of the *Christus patiens* used:

- What form does the prologue take, and why?
- What information is given about the mythological background to the events of the play?
- What information is given regarding the point where the action commences?
- Who speaks the prologue, and why?
- Which emotions could the prologue elicit from the audience?

First, then, the form of the prologue: Euripides seems to have preferred a monologue, but showed great diversity in his application of this form. In the *Bacchae*, the opening monologue (1–63) is followed directly by the *parodos* (64ff.); in other words, the prologue consists of one uninterrupted monologue. The prologue of *Hecabe* consists of two monologues: first the one spoken by the ghost of Polydorus (1–58), who leaves the stage when Hecabe enters, and then Hecabe’s speech (59–97), which is also a monologue in the stricter sense of that term, although the implicit stage direction in the text requires the presence of two mute characters on stage. In the *Troades*, Poseidon’s monologue (1–47) is followed by a dialogue between him and the goddess Athena (48–97), after which follow the lyrical lines of Hecabe (98 ff.), eventually developing into dialogue between her and the chorus. A similar pattern is found in *Hippolytus*, where the monologue of Aphrodite (1–57) is followed by a dialogue between Hippolytus and his Servant (58–120), including a hymn to Artemis by the secondary chorus of Huntsmen who accompany Hippolytus. In *Medea* the opening monologue of Medea’s Attendant (1–48) is followed by a dialogue between her and the Tutor (49–110). This is

⁶ Lines 88–90, though spoken by the same character as the previous lines, do not form part of the rhetorical structure of the prologue. The function of these lines is to provide a transition from the contemplative to the dramatic—that is, from a discussion of events to a representation thereof. Thus in these three lines the time of day—just before dawn—is indicated, and the entry of a second character is announced, marking the point where the dialogue commences.

⁷ Cf. the definition of Aristotle *Poet.* 1452b (12.5): Ἔστιν δὲ πρόλογος μὲν μέρος ὄλον τραγωδίας τὸ πρὸ χοροῦ παράδου (“A prologue is the whole of that part of a tragedy which precedes the entrance of the chorus”).

interrupted by Medea's first cry of anguish from behind the scene, after which follows another short monologue by the Attendant (115-130).

Thus, in terms of form, the Euripidean models provided the author of the *Christus patiens* with a large variety of examples to choose from. His reasons for preferring a long, uninterrupted monologue will be revealed when some further aspects of the prologue are examined.

Concerning the second question, the mythological setting of the plays: the prologues of the Trojan plays contain little reference to the legendary cause of the Trojan War, probably because this was the best known of all Greek myths. Instead, in each case an episode is recounted which has more immediate relevance to the events of the play. In *Hecabe* it is the story of how king Priam's youngest son, Polydorus, was treacherously murdered by his father's guest-friend Polymestor (4-34), while in the *Troades* it is the episode of the wooden horse (9-22), relevant both because of Athena's part in the victory of the Greeks and because the sacking of Troy immediately precedes the situation at the beginning of that play. In the prologues of both the *Bacchae* and *Medea*, the very beginnings of the underlying myths are recalled, though for different reasons. The denial by Semele's sisters of the supernatural birth of Dionysus provides the main reason for that god's conduct as dramatized in the *Bacchae*, whereas in *Medea* the reference to the Argonauts' expedition as the first source of Medea's troubles (1-15) serves to elicit pity for the protagonist on the part of the audience.

In the *Christus patiens*, mythology is replaced by the history of mankind as it is portrayed in Scripture. Accordingly, from a dramaturgical viewpoint, scriptural events are to the author of the *Christus patiens* what the Greek myths were to Euripides.

When the prologue of the *Christus patiens* is viewed from this perspective, it reveals how closely the poet followed the example of Euripides' *Medea*; but it also reveals in what respects he went beyond that example, to produce an original work of art. The opening lines (1-7) recall the very beginning of the underlying 'myth', namely the events in the garden of Eden. Those events are then portrayed as initiating an endless series of troubles, which culminates in the present suffering of the protagonist (23-31). Thus the reader (or audience) is led to feel pity for the protagonist, and to become interested in the events of the play, primarily considering the effect these have upon her. Up to this point, the method and result of the author of *Christus patiens* closely resemble those of Euripides in his *Medea*; but the prologues of both these plays go beyond this point, and that is where they differ most conspicuously.

In the *Medea* the second emotion which the prologue elicits—next to pity—is that of fear.⁸ Thus Medea is portrayed as an awe-inspiring person; the audience is

⁸ Both pity (ἔλεος) and fear (φόβος) were identified by Aristotle as emotions released by tragedy; cf. *Poet.* 1449b (6.2). Obviously there are others too, but pity and fear are most characteristic of tragedy; cf. *Poet.* 1452b (13.2).

led to expect that her reaction to the wrongs she suffers will be terrible and disastrous. That seems to be the reason why Medea herself does not speak the prologue, and why it does not consist of an uninterrupted monologue: Euripides could achieve greater effect by having another character first hint at Medea's awesome nature, before confirming this by her own backstage cries, and eventually by her actions. The protagonist of the *Christus patiens* is to be awe-inspiring in a different way. She is the one who can interpret events which her companions do not understand; who can bring herself to accept the inevitable, even if it is the death of her divine Son; who can overcome her own grief and intercede on behalf of others. But all of this is to be revealed as the play proceeds, so the prologue can focus upon inspiring pity—and what better way is there to inspire pity than by presenting to an audience the living embodiment of maternal grief?

Towards the end of the prologue, a more recent event within the 'myth' is recalled, namely the Annunciation (71–86). This serves the purpose, mainly, of contrasting the great joy which that message elicited with the present grief of the protagonist. Thus it heightens the sustained emphasis of the prologue upon the suffering of the virgin mother.

These considerations seem to explain the reasons for the poet's choice of a monologue by the protagonist. He aimed at focusing attention solely upon her person, in order to elicit—from the very beginning of the play—the highest possible degree of compassion and involvement from the audience.⁹

The classical dramatic convention of a prologue referring to the mythological background of the play—either recalling the very beginning of the underlying myth, or recounting some particular episode within the cycle, or both—resulted in another convention, namely that of explicitly indicating the precise moment in the course of events at which the dramatic action commences. This necessary item of the prologue is not always introduced with the same measure of success. From a dramaturgical point of view, it can be regarded as most acceptable when least conspicuous; that is to say, when the audience is almost unaware of being given this information. Thus in *Hippolytus* the audience learns from the goddess Aphrodite that it is the day of the hero's impending death, at the very moment when his entry is announced (51–57). In similar fashion, Dionysus in the *Bacchae* introduces the chorus of Oriental women, inviting them, as it were, to invade the city of Thebes with their music (55–61), directly after sketching the probable reaction of Pentheus to the Bacchantes. In *Medea* it is revealed early in the prologue (9–11) that the scene is set in Corinth, where Medea has learned of her husband Jason's infidelity (17–19), without any

⁹ Even after deciding upon the monologue form for his prologue, the author did not further exploit the contents of the monologue which forms the prologue of the *Bacchae*. The self-assured, challenging spirit which prevails in that monologue simply does not suit his portrayal of the suffering Mother of Christ. Thus he drew inspiration mainly from the prologue of *Medea*. He would find occasion to draw from the prologue of the *Bacchae* later, at lines 1530ff. of the *Christus patiens*, where the tone changes from lament to exultation as the virgin mother expounds the consequences of Christ's victory over death.

more specific information being provided; for the audience is to become well acquainted with Medea's character before the moment when she is struck by the final blow, the order of banishment pronounced by Creon.¹⁰

In the prologue of *Christus patiens* the first indication of specific time and circumstance occurs in line 24, immediately after the identity of the speaking character is made known. Some more indications, though less specific, occur in lines 56-58, 69, and 87. Then, in lines 88-90, the precise time of day is indicated.¹¹ It is noteworthy that every one of these indications coincides with a focusing of attention upon the suffering of the virgin mother, in such a way that the audience would scarcely notice that conventional information is being provided.

Another aspect of these indications, which is important for the characterization of the protagonist, is this: never once in the prologue does she mention that death is part of what her son is to suffer. The content of line 24 is amplified by the parallel *ιδεῖν τ' ἔφριπτον τόνδε καθυβρισμένον* ("and I [would not have] feared to see him being insulted") in line 26. The same thought is expressed in line 69: *ὑβρισμένον δὲ τανῦν πῶς οἶσω βλέπειν;* ("But how will I now bear it to see him being insulted?") where distinct echoes of line 26 occur. In line 89—*ιδεῖν τε Παιδὸς ἦν κακωσύνην πάθοι* ("to see the maltreatment my Son is to suffer")—different words are used, but the meaning is essentially the same.¹²

This prepares the way for the protagonist's rebuke of the chorus in lines 111-119, while together with that passage it serves to explain her reaction to the news that her son has been sentenced to death—a reaction which is at first equally perplexing to the chorus and to the reader or audience. The important point to note, however, is that part of the virgin's suffering, and also part of her tragic interest, is her struggle towards a full understanding of the events which she is to witness, and with which she is so deeply involved.

The next question by which a comparison between the plays of Euripides and the *Christus patiens* can be approached, is, Who speaks the prologue, and why? This question has already been partially answered regarding the latter play, with reference to the central position of interest which the protagonist is to occupy. However, if the

¹⁰ In both Trojan plays from which the author of the *Christus patiens* also drew some poetic inspiration—though much less than from the plays discussed above, if this could be measured by counting allusions and quotations—the description of the sacked city which is given early in the prologue is soon amplified by a more specific indication of time and circumstance. In the *Troades* the audience is told that Hecabe does not yet know of her daughter Polyxena's death (39-40). In *Hecabe* the ghost of Polydorus explains his mother's distress as resulting from the vision of him she has seen in a dream, after revealing to the audience that his body is soon to be found and brought to her for burial (45-48).

¹¹ See n.6.

¹² Tuilier (1969:135) translates this line "pour voir la Passion de mon Fils"—showing more piety than accuracy. It should not be forgotten that the supposed time is the morning of the day on which Christ is to be crucified, or rather, of the day on which his mother is to witness his death by crucifixion. Thus the term 'Passion' (*sic*) is anachronistic, apart from being much more comprehensive in meaning than what the immediate context requires.

comparison with Euripides is further pursued, it may reveal some more aspects of the poet's method.

In the plays of Euripides, the prologues may be spoken by Olympians, other (semi-)divinities, and mortal characters such as royals or domestic slaves, or even by apparitions from the world of the deceased. The divine characters normally have foreknowledge of the outcome of events, which they impart to the audience. Thus in the *Bacchae* and in *Hippolytus* we learn from the opening monologue that Pentheus and Hippolytus are to pay for their scornful attitude towards the divine forces involved. There is a marked difference, however, in the poet's presentation of the gods in these two plays: whereas in the *Bacchae* Dionysus becomes the character who dominates the action, in *Hippolytus* the goddess Aphrodite does little more than provide the background to a tragic interplay of human ideals and emotions. Accordingly, the monologue of Dionysus occupies the entire prologue of the *Bacchae* (1-63), while in *Hippolytus* the monologue of Aphrodite (1-57) is followed by the entry of Hippolytus (58 ff.), who reveals himself as a truly fanatical devotee of Artemis. Hippolytus' words also provide a transition from the divine to the human world, for his disdain of Aphrodite implies the same attitude, on his part, towards all humans who yield to, or even acknowledge, the power of love. Regardless of the particular way in which Euripides in each play represents the gods, though, the prologues spoken by gods do not tend to elicit much pity for the protagonists.

Supernatural foreknowledge is combined with genuine human compassion in the ghost of Polydorus, who speaks the first monologue in *Hecabe* (1-58). This monologue is immediately followed by that of the captured queen Hecabe (59-97)—a monologue which elicits pity for the protagonist if ever Euripides achieved that effect. The fact that in the second half of the play this compassion will be obliterated by the repulsive cruelty of Hecabe's revenge upon Polymestor, does not diminish the effect of the prologue; on the contrary, it reveals a recurring pattern which seems relevant to the comparison between the prologue of the *Christus patiens* and the methods which Euripides applied in the prologues of his plays.

In those Euripidean plays where the prologue serves primarily to elicit pity for the protagonist, this normally must yield to some contrary emotion during the course of the action. Thus both *Hecabe* and *Medea* contain an act of revenge which cancels pity for the protagonist because it is more wicked than the crime by which it was provoked. The author of the *Christus patiens* created a similar pattern, also eliciting pity at the beginning of the play and then causing it gradually to be replaced, though the reaction by which pity is replaced differs sharply from that produced in the Euripidean plays discussed. In the *Christus patiens* the protagonist is also the victim of treason; but she prays for divine retribution, not personal revenge. She earns our admiration by her concern for others—for the descendants of the Jews, and for Peter, on behalf of whom she begs for pardon—even in the midst of her own grief.

This study admittedly is not an exhaustive discussion of all Euripidean prologue conventions. It does, however, take cognisance of those conventions which are demonstrably present in the *Christus patiens*. Some others, for example misleading

prophecies, may have been imitated by the author of this play (cf. *Christus patiens* 75-78), but their presence in the play could also be sufficiently accounted for on the basis of the Scriptural text.

The point of this analysis, then, is to demonstrate that a better comprehension and evaluation of the prologue—and, by implication, of the whole—of the *Christus patiens* can be attained by a comparison with the plays of Euripides. When regarded from this perspective, the prologue of the *Christus patiens* reveals the extent of the poet's knowledge of Euripides—knowledge not only of his poetical and lexical means of expression, but also of his dramatic method: of the ways in which he combined theme and structure, content and form, into a dramatic work of art. It also reveals with what remarkable measure of success the author copied the methods of the famous tragic poet.

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