

ABSTRACT

ΠΑΙΑΝ ΑΠΑΙΩΝ:

OXYMORONIC REFERENCES TO PAEANS IN AESCHYLUS, *SEPTEM* 870
AND EURIPIDES, *ALCESTIS* 424

The primary purpose of the paper is to analyze the oxymoronic references to the paean in *Septem* 870 and *Alcestis* 424, where the word *παίαν* is used to describe the song of funerary lament (*θρήνος*), thereby creating a striking paradox which hinges on the supposedly irreconcilable nature of these two genres of lyric composition. The kind of oxymoron is a well recognized tragic topos, most likely originating with Aeschylus and inherited by Euripides. However, as it has been pointed out by Rutherford the term oxymoron is very often unable to provide an adequate explanation of the complex relationship between the genre of *παίαν* and death: paeanic allusions in tragic laments may reverberate far beyond the mere verbal and conceptual paradox that the description of the *θρήνος* as a *παίαν* inevitably entails.¹ *Septem* 870 and *Alcestis* 424 seem to be the most complex and therefore interesting cases of this kind of relationship.

The two passages are similar in that the paeanic element appears to be an important factor in determining either the form or the tone of the choral song that immediately follows the reference to the *παίαν*. In the case of *Septem* 870 the chorus outline the procedures to be followed in singing the song of lament and assign to themselves the task of accompanying the song of the sisters with a *παίαν*, which in this case seems to refer very specifically to the quasi-refrain performed by semi-chorus A in 875ff. However, it is not only the use of quasi-refrains that brings up paeanic association, but also the use of metaphors strongly evocative of at least two occasions of paeanic performance: *θεωρία* (v. 857) and military victory (vv. 951-960). In fact the whole lyric section in vv. 847-960 is but a continuation of the *ἀπορία* announced by the chorus at the very outset (vv.826-828): *πότερον χείρω κάπολολύξω | σωτήρι πόλεως ἀσινείαι, | ἢ τοὺς μογεροὺς καὶ δυσδαίμονας | †ἀτέκνουσ† κλάυσω πολεμάρχους*.

The case of *Alcestis* 424 is somewhat more complicated, since the chorus (vv. 435-475), instructed by Admetus to sing the paean to the god below, does not perform the usual kind of funerary lament, which one expects to be markedly emotional and excited, but the song that many scholars went so far as to call an actual paean sung in honor of Alcestis. The question that will be addressed in this part of the paper is whether any characteristics of the poem may support this claim. It will be argued that the main feature of the song that places it astride the *prima facie* clear-cut boundary between the paean and the *θρήνος* seems to be its tone as communicated by the language (e.g. abundance of musical terms not applicable to the *θρήνος* but quite normal in paeanic contexts and the imagery of light) and the ode's predominantly encomiastic overtones.

¹ Rutherford, *Pindar's Paeans* (Oxford, 2001), 119ff.