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Οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην: A Euripidean Novelty

ABSTRACT

This article studies a Euripidean innovation: the introduction into tragic language and the subsequent (selective) usage of the expression οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην by Euripides. This negative potential optative appears sixteen times within the surviving Euripidean corpus, as a stereotypical syntactic structure that is intertwined with dramatic content and meaning. But, surprisingly, this expression is absent from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and all other tragedians. Through close reading of the sixteen Euripidean cases, the article traces and defines the conspicuous context of this expression: οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην is uttered by high-status individuals (for example, members of a royal family), when they envisage the *impossible/unattainable* in present and future within an intensely emotional atmosphere (ranging from hatred and loathing to agonising grief and despair), during pivotal moments of the play. Metrical convenience is also served, as the expression covers the first five elements of the iambic trimeter.

Euripides is commonly acknowledged as the most innovative of the three tragedians of the Alexandrian Canon. The various aspects of his avant-garde *modus scribendi* have repeatedly been – and still are being – analysed:[1] his groundbreaking role in dramatising the power of Eros, described as ἀμαχός, his penetrative insight into the human psyche,[2] his penchant for philosophising,[3] his pioneer staging of self-sacrifice plays[4] – to mention but a few.[5]

The present article aims to study a new, distinct aspect of Euripides' novel dramaturgic style, an aspect that simultaneously encompasses the

[1] See e.g. J. de Romilly, *L'évolution du pathétique d'Eschyle à Euripide* (Paris 1961) 135-41; *La modernité d'Euripide* (Paris 1986) *passim*.

[2] See e.g. Medea's vacillation between reason and emotion in *Med.* 1019-80; cf. de Romilly (n. 1, 1961) 18; and Agave's gradual advancement towards consciousness in *Ba.* 1263-301; cf. G. Devereux, 'The Psychotherapy Scene in Euripides' *Bacchae*', *JHS* 90 (1970) 35-48.

[3] Cf. Medea's soliloquy about the helplessness of women (*Med.* 214-51) or Phaedra's generalisations about what makes people abandon their sense of duty (*Hipp.* 373-90).

[4] See J. Wilkins, 'The State and the Individual: Euripides' Plays of Voluntary Self-Sacrifice', in A. Powell (ed.), *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality* (London and New York 1990) 177-94.

[5] In R. Rutherford's recent work, *Greek Tragic Style: Form, Language, and Interpretation* (Cambridge and New York 2012), Euripides' contribution and innovation (in relation to both Sophocles and Aeschylus) regarding various aspects of the tragic style (e.g. spoken verse, lyric) are highlighted and meticulously analysed; see *passim*, but esp. chaps 5, 6, and 7. For example, regarding the technique of stichomythia, Rutherford speaks of Euripides' 'bold experiments' that have extended stichomythia to 'its most extreme lengths' (p. 175).

parameters of both syntax and semantics, thus emphasising the dynamic relation between them. My particular focus will be on the expression οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην. As we shall see, in Euripides' dramas this negative potential optative functions as a stereotypical syntactic structure, occurring within a largely similar semantic context. But this is not the only remarkable aspect of the case. What really captures the reader's attention is the peculiar fact that this expression is conspicuously absent from not only Aeschylus and Sophocles (at least, from what survives of them), but also from the rest of the tragic corpus which has survived to us. That is to say, it is Euripides who – as early as his *Alcestis* – introduces this expression into the linguistic register of tragedy[6] and is the only tragic poet who ever uses it thereafter.[7] Within the surviving Euripidean corpus οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην occurs a total of sixteen times; nine times the phrase is spoken by men and seven times by women. It is remarkable that this is not a gender-related expression,[8] but a status-related one. Despite being uttered equally by both men and women, it is spoken exclusively by characters of a certain distinct status; that is, by royals (Hecuba), a demigod (Heracles), a hero (Iolaus), and a seer (Teiresias); never by some minor/secondary person, like a nurse, a messenger or even the chorus. This expression is normally followed by a final infinitive in present or aorist tense. On those occasions where it seems to be standing absolutely, the infinitive δρᾶσαι τάδε/τόδε (or similar) is to be understood by the context.

Nevertheless, before proceeding any further, a vital *caveat* is in order: as has already been noted above, and just as in any other study of ancient Greek literature, our knowledge is limited only to that small percentage of

[6] If we are not misled by the accidental survival of tragic material, this is not the only Euripidean first, and Rutherford (n. 5) is right in noting that 'many words appear in Euripides which were not used by the other two' (p. 407, with further bibliography). Also, S.D. Sullivan (*Euripides' Use of Psychological Terminology*, Montreal and Ithaca, 2000) has collected some forty-four new adjectives that Euripides introduces and uses for the term *phrēn* (pp. 36-8, Appendix 3).

[7] Comedy's usage of this expression is discussed at the end of this article.

[8] Women's speech in tragedy has recently received much scholarly attention. Although gender is rather peripheral to the present study's argument, basic bibliography includes: H.P. Foley, *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York 1981) esp. 127-67; P.E. Easterling, 'Women in Tragic Space', *BICS* 34 (1988) 15-26; C. Segal, *Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow* (Durham 1993); L.K. McClure, 'Female Speech and Characterization in Euripides', in F. de Martino and A.H. Sommerstein (eds), *Lo Spettacolo delle Voci* (Naples 1995) II.35-60 (despite communicating pathos, οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην would not qualify as what McClure considers 'Pathetic Expressions', pp. 45ff.); *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton 1999); D.J. Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides. Dramatic Technique and Social Context* (Cambridge 2010) 207-45; J.M. Mossman, 'Women's Speech in Greek Tragedy: The Case of Electra and Clytemnestra in Euripides' *Electra*', *CQ* 51 (2001) 374-84 (arguing that women may speak differently when men are present; yet, in cases of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην, the sex of other characters, if any, present on stage does not affect the usage or the meaning of this expression); M. Griffith, 'Antigone and Her Sister(s): Embodying Women in Greek Tragedy', in A. Lardinois and L.K. McClure (eds), *Making Silence Speak. Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society* (Princeton and Oxford 2001) 117-36; J.M. Mossman, 'Women's Voices', in J. Gregory (ed.), *A Companion to Greek* Tragedy (Malden MA and Oxford 2005) 352-65.

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texts that have survived through the centuries until today, through either direct or indirect tradition, whether on some expensive and calligraphic parchment books or as papyri scraps underneath piles of dust and rubbish on Egyptian soil. Accordingly, our conclusions can never be conclusive; they remain open to potential challenge and review.

From within Euripidean texts οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην emerges as a loaded and complex phrase that communicates a correspondingly loaded and complicated meaning. It can express intricate notions that originate from three distinct parameters: the potential optative (in present tense), the verb δύναμαι, and the negation (οὐκ). By combining these three elements Euripides manages to intertwine syntax with content in an unprecedented way. Before proceeding to the analysis of individual passages, let us briefly examine these three elements.

First, the potential optative with ἄν by its very nature refers primarily to future. But when the verb is in present tense, the connection with present time is not lost. Hence, such an expression, as οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην, can simultaneously function within and refer to two temporal frames: present *and* future. Therefore, the actions or feelings/emotions expressed through this syntactic form are automatically assigned both a present and a future validity; but since it is impossible for this future temporal frame to be precisely fixed, the future duration of what is being expressed remains indefinite and – potentially – infinite. Interestingly, this effect generated by syntax interacts with the content in the Euripidean passages we shall study, and especially with the speakers' devastatingly intense emotions.

Secondly, the verb δύναμαι, when employed in the potential optative,[9] emphatically highlights the notion of future possibility to such an extent that it eventually transforms it into a powerful and – almost inescapable – probability; and here becomes relevant the effect of the third element, the negation. This strong future probability receives a negative force and becomes a potent improbability, communicated in an assertive style, as if what is being said was not to be denied.[10]

As far as syntax is concerned, the potential optative with ἄν can by and large stand independently. However, there is always a protasis, though in most cases it is implied, not stated. Among the following sixteen Euripidean passages, in only three cases is the protasis explicitly stated. In all other cases the implied protasis can be understood as conveying the meaning of 'whatever were to happen' or 'under these circumstances'. And this dormant protasis becomes an additional way of expressing emphasis. In the analysis of each individual case we shall attempt to discern the protasis, if it is not explicit.

This negative potential optative (οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην) operates as a stereotypical structure within the Euripidean corpus, as a rhetorical tool that is reserved for high-status individuals of either sex. Euripidean

[9] See H.W. Smyth (rev. G.M. Messing), *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge MA 1956) §1824b.

[10] See Smyth (n. 9) §1826a.

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characters use οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην sparingly, in order to envisage the *impossible* and *unattainable* in both the present and the future during significant or otherwise culminating dramatic moments of the play (for example, plot evolution), and always in intensely emotional circumstances. This '*impossible*' may refer either to something that cannot be carried out for material reasons (the character is helpless; for example, case no. 6 from *Hecuba*) or to something that cannot happen because the character's emotions will not allow it (for example, case no. 1 from *Alcestis*). In either case, the speaker's situation is exceptional, since his or her emotions are running high. These heightened emotions can range from extreme grief or hatred to utmost despair or awe. In all cases the future associations introduced by the potential optative form constitute a key element in defining the speaker's style. Its usage removes any momentary effect and assigns both a synchronic and a diachronic validity and duration to the speaker's words and the pathos he or she conveys. Thus, the speaker's extreme emotions are assigned a strong possibility (almost a reality) of an infinite temporal value. The royal – or otherwise distinct – status of the characters who use this expression may be directly relevant, since the characters in question often show signs of balancing between the pathos they express and their noble status (compare case no. 5 from *Hecuba*). As far as metre is concerned, οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην serves the poetic speech nicely, for it forms an excellent introduction for the iambic trimester, covering the first foot (– – ∪ –) and the first element of the second (–).

One might have reasonably expected that this Euripidean structure and usage would be somehow reflected in – or be imitated by – prose, given especially the established relationship between the tragic and the rhetorical genre in particular.[11] However, no such impact can be detected in our sources. The prose occurrences of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην amount to well below a total of one hundred and occur as follows: Antiphon Sophist (fr. 49.22 DK), Xenophon (*Mem*. 2.3.8), Isocrates (6.4, 12.20, 12.168, 15.13, 15.54), Demosthenes (50.9, 59.26; both speeches are believed to be spurious), Plato (*Tht*. 148b6, 158b1, 207a4; *Smp*. 201c6), Lucian (*DMort*. 23.2, *DD* 1.2), Dionysius Halicarnassus (19.18.7), plus a number of later writers (for example, Ioannes Chrysostomus, Dioscorus, Michael Psellus, etc.). Apart from Antiphon's case, all other prose instances postdate Euripides, and an assumption of intertextuality or, at least, some kind of

[11] The multi-dimensional interaction of tragedy with rhetoric in general has been extensively explored: see e.g. G. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (London 1963) esp. 3-51; C. Collard, 'Formal Debates in Euripides' Drama', *G&R* 22.1 (1975) 58-71; D.J. Conacher, 'Rhetoric and Relevance in Euripidean Drama', *AJP* 102 (1981) 3-25; P.J. Wilson, 'Demosthenes 21 (*Against Meidias*): Democratic Abuse', *PCPS* 37 (1991) 164-95; M. Lloyd, *The Agōn in Euripides* (Oxford 1992); V. Bers, 'Tragedy and Rhetoric', in I. Worthington (ed.), *Persuasion: Greek Rhetoric in Action* (London and New York 1994) 176-95; P.J. Wilson, 'Tragic Rhetoric: The Use of Tragedy and the Tragic in the Fourth Century', in M.S. Silk, *Tragedy and the Tragic. Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford 1996) 310-31; and, most recently, Rutherford (n. 5) 52-5, 190-200.

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communication between the genres cannot help but suggest itself. Nevertheless, I have looked into every prose occurrence of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην and confidently report that the prose usage of this expression bears no hidden meaning between-the-lines; it is not charged with any distinct emotions; and the context is not of any exceptional nature. It simply – and indifferently – means 'I could not (say or do something)' either in a past time or in the present (equalling οὐ δύναμαι). It should also be noted that, as we move forward chronologically, the frequency of occurrences of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην increases; for example, it occurs seventeen times in Libanius alone.

Let us now proceed to the analysis of the sixteen cases from the Euripidean corpus.[12] For this, I shall follow the chronological order of the plays.[13]

ALCESTIS (438 BC)

Admetus employs this expression during his address to Heracles, when he refuses to take in the strange woman presented to him. Admetus' sorrow for his dead wife reaches its climax just before the disclosure of the woman's true identity. In lines 1045-7 the king of Pherae says:

(1) . . . μή μ' ἀναμνήσῃς κακῶν.
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην τήνδ' ὁρῶν ἐν δώμασιν
ἄδακρυς εἶναι . . .

Do not remind me of my troubles.
For if I were to see this woman in my house,
I could not hold back my tears.
(trans. D. Kovacs)

οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην ἄδακρυς εἶναι: Here Admetus envisages the impossibility of holding back his tears, in the light of the devastating grief and pain he suffers for the loss of his wife. The protasis is explicit and can be extracted from the participle ὁρῶν, that is 'if I were to see (her)'. The potential optative assigns an infinite duration to Admetus' emotions; he cannot hold back his tears now nor will he be able to do this in the future. The presence of the verb δύναμαι is also vital for communicating to the spectators the exact state of Admetus' psyche; for there is a palpable difference in intensity, when compared with the possible alternative options of saying, for example, οὐκ ἂν ἄδακρυς εἴην, or of using a conditional clause εἰ τήνδ' ὁρῷμι ἐν δώμασι δακρύοιμι ἂν – options that would sound flat and lukewarm, or – at least – less powerful. Instead, Euripides deliberately chooses to employ this elaborate periphrasis, since the usage of the specific verb (δύναμαι) in the specific mood (negative potential optative)

[12] With perhaps only one exception (n. 21), the commentaries corresponding to Euripidean plays mentioned in this article do not comment on οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην.

[13] For an overview of Euripidean chronology, see C. Collard, *Euripides* (Oxford 1981) 2.

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transforms and elevates the linguistic register of the speech. The connotations generated thereby do not simply translate as 'I could not hold back my tears', but rather allude to something much more intense and much more powerful that corresponds to Admetus' heightened emotional state: 'I would not have the strength to exceed human standards and hold back my tears'; 'I would not possess the energy to handle such a situation.' By combining δύναμαι with the negative potential optative Euripides constructs a strong and intense expression that fits perfectly within the rest of Admetus' speech (1037-69), which likewise is meticulously structured and cumulatively interspersed with terms denoting pathos (cf. 1039: ἄλγος ἄλγει; 1047: νοσοῦντι μοι νόσον; 1065: μή μ' ἔλῃς ἠρημένον, 1069: πένθους γεύομαι πικροῦ, etc.). The potential optative simultaneously refers both to the present and, emphatically, to a chronotope other than that of the here-and-now; hence, it automatically clothes Admetus' intense pathos with connotations of both present and an infinitely future time. On the contrary, the alternative, οὐ δύναμαι ἄδακρυς εἶναι, would have a merely immediate, present reference, whose impact would be predestined to swiftly fade away – from both Admetus' heart and the audience's memory.[14]

MEDEA (431 BC)

In *Medea* Euripides employs οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην twice; in line 464 (uttered by Jason) and in line 1044 (uttered by Medea). In Jason's case, οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην occurs at the end of his verbal attack on Medea, which he concludes with what I read as an affectionate statement (463-4):

(2) . . . καὶ γὰρ εἰ σύ με στυγεῖς,
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην σοὶ κακῶς φρονεῖν ποτε.

Even if you hate me,
I could never bear you ill will.
(trans. D. Kovacs)

Jason faces the impossibility of ever developing harsh feelings towards Medea and being ill-disposed towards her. The protasis here is explicit: εἰ στυγεῖς. The dramatic atmosphere is immersed in emotions. Despite criticizing Medea's intemperate behaviour (cf. 447: τραχεῖαν ὀργὴν ὡς ἀμήχανον κακόν), Jason closes with an unexpectedly tender and caring statement that reveals his deep sympathy and consideration for her.[15]

[14] L.P.E. Parker, *Euripides: Alcestis* (Oxford 2007) 258, comm. on 1045-56, highlights the asyndeton and the short sentences, which reveal Admetus' agitation, while D.J. Conacher, *Euripides: Alcestis* (Warminster 1988) 195, comm. on 1042-69, speaks of a 'highly dramatic passage'.

[15] Note that Jason's cold and cynical dismissal of Medea's motives, esp. 526-31 (i.e. that she was only motivated by lust) occur only *after* Medea has delivered her long speech (465-519),

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Medea, at the same moment, is in a diametrically opposite emotional state. Indicative of the intense emotional climate is the fact that Medea not only hates (μισεῖ) Jason, but she also loathes (στυγεῖ) him. The verb στυγέω is semantically stronger than μισέω, for it means to *show* hatred, not merely to *feel* it (cf. *LSJ* s.v.). There is an unbridgeable emotional gap between Jason and Medea. Medea feels *and* shows hatred for Jason (cf. the superlatives in her reply:[16] 465: ὦ παγκάκιστε; 467: ἔχθιστος; 471-2: ἡ μεγίστη τῶν νόσων/ἀναίδεια). Simultaneously, Jason – though acknowledging Medea's inimical disposition towards him – avows that he could never imagine himself feeling enmity towards her. In this particular passage the future associations introduced by the potential optative (οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην σοὶ κακῶς φρονεῖν) combine nicely with the adverb ποτε and together generate a stylistic overtone of oath; that is, the semantics of 'I could never feel . . .' resemble those of 'I swear I will never feel . . .' Jason admits the affectionate feelings that he has now and that he will always have for Medea (cf. the reiteration in line 620: πάνθ' ὑπουργεῖν σοί τε καὶ τέκνοις θέλω).

The second example of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην from Medea originates from Medea's great monologue in the play's fifth episode. Having confronted Creon, Jason, and Aegeus in the preceding episodes and having duped every one of them, Medea finally confronts herself, whom – alas! – she cannot dupe (1041-5):

(3) τί προσγελᾶτε τὸν πανύστατον γέλων;
αἰαῖ· τί δράσω; καρδία γὰρ οἴχεται,
γυναῖκες, ὄμμα φαιδρὸν ὡς εἶδον τέκνων.
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην· χαιρέτω βουλεύματα
τὰ πρόσθεν.

Why do you smile at me this last smile of yours?
Alas, what am I to do? My courage is gone,
women, ever since I saw the bright faces of the children.
I cannot do it. Farewell, my former designs!

(trans. D. Kovacs)

Although οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην ostensibly stands absolutely here, the infinitive δρᾶσαι τόδε is easily understood as a complement; but no other concrete protasis can be detected than the categorical 'whatever were to happen'. Despite Medea's initial determination at the beginning of her monologue

where she openly declares her hatred of Jason. Mastronarde (n. 8, 2010, 226-7) describes this speech as 'a small masterpiece of rhetorical invective'. And, even after this, Jason concludes his second speech in this episode by repeating his willingness to help (620).

[16] D.L. Page, *Euripides: Medea* (Oxford 1938) 106, comm. on 465ff., notes another singularity of this passage: 'Medea . . . is the only exception to Euripides' rule that in these scenes of quarrel the *"sympathetic"* character speaks second: cf. Iolaos in *Hkld*., Hippol. in *Hipp*. . . . normally the sympathetic character is also the *defendant*, so naturally speaks second; here, however, the sympathetic character is *prosecutor*.'

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(1019: δράσω τάδε), the smile of her children makes her change her mind abruptly and incites her to abandon her plans.[17] Medea has so far in the play exhibited an admirable resolution and dynamism: she has adopted the male code of honour (383: θανοῦσα θήσω τοῖς ἐμοῖς ἐχθροῖς γέλων); she has been using military and athletic language (393: αὐτὴ ξίφος λαβοῦσα); and she has been promoting the virile characteristics of her nature (403: ἕρπ' ἐς τὸ δεινόν· νῦν ἀγὼν εὐψυχίας). Yet, she collapses at the smile of her boys and tersely confesses in an outburst of immense pathos: οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην, 'I could never do it'; 'I would never have the willpower of even thinking of myself doing it.' Medea's emotional status has reached its zenith, as she confronts her inability to slay her own children. The potential optative enables her to assign both a present and a future validity to her words. Medea has so far displayed her decisiveness in an exclusively positive way through frequent usage of the future indicative (cf. 394: κτενῶ σφε, τόλμης δ' εἶμι πρὸς τὸ καρτερόν; 399: λυγροὺς θήσω γάμους; 1019: δράσω τάδε, etc.); but she has not used direct negation (in indicative). Thus, the negative potential optative – rather than the negative indicative – harmonises much better with her attitude so far. Nonetheless, the infinite duration introduced by the potential optative does not last long. In fact, Medea's usage of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην is of special interest, for it is the one of only two cases from within the total of sixteen where the act dreaded and envisaged as impossible by the speaker is subsequently carried out within the play. The other such case is Pentheus in *Bacchae* 836: οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην θῆλυν ἐνδῦναι στολήν. In both cases the speakers undergo a drastic and unprecedented change of mental state (for Pentheus, see further below). Medea abruptly experiences a swift change of heart and mind immediately after expressing her resolution not to proceed with the killing of her children (1048-55):

> . . . χαιρέτω βουλεύματα.
> καίτοι τί πάσχω; βούλομαι γέλωτ' ὀφλεῖν
> ἐχθροὺς μεθεῖσα τοὺς ἐμοὺς ἀζημίους;
> . . .
> χεῖρα δ' οὐ διαφθερῶ.
>
> Farewell my designs!
> But what is coming over me?
> Do I wish to suffer mockery,
> letting my enemies go unpunished?
> . . .
> I shall not weaken my hand.
> (trans. D. Kovacs)

[17] D.J. Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea* (Cambridge 2002) 337, comm. on 1044, notes that the following verses reveal Medea's faint-heartedness; she now believes that killing her children is absurd and unthinkable, thus echoing the chorus' hopeful anticipation in 862-5: οὐ δυνάσῃ . . . τέγξαι χέρα φοινίαν/τλάμονι θυμῷ ('you will not be hardhearted enough to drench your hand in their blood').

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The Children of Heracles (430 BC)[18]

In this play the expression is uttered by Iolaus in his reply to Macaria's request to be present in her sacrifice (560-4):

(4) (Μα.) ἔπου δέ, πρέσβυ (σῇ γὰρ ἐνθανεῖν χερὶ
θέλω) πέπλοις δὲ σῶμ' ἐμὸν κρύψον παρών,
ἐπεὶ σφαγῆς γε πρὸς τὸ δεινὸν εἶμ' ἐγώ,
εἴπερ πέφυκα πατρὸς οὗπερ εὔχομαι.
(Ἰόλ.) οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην σῷ παρεστάναι μόρῳ.

(Mac.) But come with me, old man (for I wish to die in your arms) and stand by me and cover my dead body with my garments (for I am going to the terror of slaughter), if indeed I am sprung from the man I claim as father.
(Iol.) I could not stand by as you are killed.

(trans. D. Kovacs)

Iolaus experiences immense pathos at the prospect of Macaria's voluntary sacrifice. The implied protasis is easily discernible: 'if you were being killed'. The request put forward by Macaria is unbearable for Iolaus, who, being overwhelmed with grief, envisages the impossible and acknowledges his absolute unwillingness to carry out her request. That this is an out-of-the-ordinary emotional moment for Iolaos is made manifest by his previous behavior. Although Iolaus at this time denies Macaria his psychological and material support, in the past he had assisted Heracles in his labors and his bravery had been universally acknowledged ever since; compare Iolaus' own statements in lines 88-9: τὸν Ἡράκλειον ἴστε που παραστάτην/Ἰόλαον· οὐ γὰρ σῶμ' ἀκήρυκτον τόδε ('You know, I am sure, of Iolaus, the man who stood at Heracles' side. I am not unknown to fame.'); he had even volunteered (lines 451ff.) to surrender himself and die (though the offer is turned down in lines 464ff.). Nonetheless, this man, acclaimed for his valour, yields and proves powerless, as he envisages being present at Macaria's sacrificial killing.

Hecuba (424 BC)

The play's extensive engagement with the art of rhetoric[19] has long been – and is still being – recognised. Despite the fact that Euripides' contemporary and later oratory did not adopt the Euripidean usage of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην, it so happens that in *Hecuba* this expression occurs a total of

[18] On the performance date see G. Zuntz, *The Political Plays of Euripides* (Manchester 1955) 81-8, and W. Allan, *Euripides: The Children of Heracles* (Warminster 2001) 54-6.

[19] See C. Collard, *Euripides: Hecuba* (Warminster 1991) 28ff.; J.L. Kastely, 'Violence and Rhetoric in Euripides' *Hecuba*', *PMLA* 108.5 (1993) 1036-49; J.M. Mossman, *Wild Justice. A Study of Euripides' Hecuba* (Oxford 1995) esp. 94-141; Mastronarde (n. 8, 2010) 227-34. Regarding the relation between the tragic and the rhetoric genres in general, see n. 11.

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five times (four instances uttered by the Trojan queen herself and one by Agamemnon). Far from being coincidental, this evidence corroborates the argument put forward above, that is, that οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην was not meant as a disinterested way of saying 'I cannot', but as a forceful rhetorical tool. In lines 585-92 *Hecuba* addresses her dead daughter:

(5) ὦ θύγατερ, οὐκ οἶδ' εἰς ὅ τι βλέψω κακῶν,
πολλῶν παρόντων· ἢν γὰρ ἅψωμαί τινος,
τάδ' οὐκ ἐᾷ με, παρακαλεῖ δ' ἐκεῖθεν αὖ
λύπη τις ἄλλη διάδοχος κακῶν κακοῖς.
καὶ νῦν τὸ μὲν σὸν ὥστε μὴ στένειν πάθος
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην ἐξαλείψασθαι φρενός·
τὸ δ' αὖ λίαν παρεῖλες ἀγγελθεῖσά μοι
γενναῖος …

Daughter, I do not know which of my misfortunes to look at,
so many surround me. If I put my hand to one of them,
these forbid me to do so, and some other misfortune,
relieving the burden of grief by other grief, calls me away
from it again.
And now I could not, to be sure, wipe from my mind
what has befallen you and grieve for it no more.
but the report of your nobility has taken away the excess
of my grief.
(trans. D. Kovacs)

οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην ἐξαλείψασθαι φρενὸς τὸ σὸν πάθος: This elaborate formulation is distinctive, in that it brings together, in the actual text, pathos and the impossibility of enduring it. The implied protasis equals the generic 'in any circumstances'. Hecuba is overwhelmed with successive calamities,[20] which, however, she has so far managed to bear by keeping herself distracted throughout their numerous occurrences. Nonetheless, the killing of her daughter is a source of grief that she considers impossible to eradicate from her mind. The Trojan queen acknowledges her inability ever to become reconciled with her daughter's loss. But Hekabe is always a queen and her status dictates a certain conduct; immediately after admitting to her deep grief (589-90), she finds relief in her daughter's nobility (591-2). As Mossman notes (n. 19, 1995, 119), 'Here Hecuba . . . is in two minds: she is torn between irrepressible grief . . . and pride in her nobility.' That this is an unmatchable blow of misfortune for Hecuba is evident from what the queen says earlier to Talthybius, who has just announced Polyxena's death (511-14):

οἴμοι, τί λέξεις; οὐκ ἄρ' ὡς θανουμένους
μετῆλθες ἡμᾶς ἀλλὰ σημανῶν κακά.

[20] Collard (n. 19, 1991) 162, comm. on 585-6, detects an intertextuality with *Hamlet* IV.7.135-6: 'One woe doth tread upon another's heel, so fast they follow.'

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ὄλωλας, ὦ παῖ, μητρὸς ἁρπασθεῖσ' ἄπο,
ἡμεῖς δ' ἄτεκνοι τοὐπὶ σ'· ὦ τάλαιν' ἐγώ.

Ah, what terrible news! So it was not to take me to my death
that you have come but to tell me of misery!
You are dead, my daughter, torn from your mother's embrace,
and where you are concerned I am a childless woman!

(trans. D. Kovacs)

Hecuba's unparalleled pathos is revealed (a) through her παρὰ προσδοκίαν response; the option of her being sacrificed was categorically ruled out earlier in the play (cf. 389-90: οὐ σ', ὦ γεραιά, κατθανεῖν Ἀχιλλέως/ φάντασμ' Ἀχαιοὺς ἀλλὰ τήνδ' ἠτήσατο); and (b) through her self-description as childless; her other surviving children (Cassandra, Helenus) do not suffice to recompense for Polyxena's loss. It is within such a state of mind that Hecuba utters οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην ἐξαλείψασθαι φρενὸς τὸ σὸν πάθος. The alternative option οὐκ ἂν ἐξαλείψαιμι would be roughly equal to the actual text only syntactically, but not at all semantically, since it would misrepresent the implications intended for the audience. For this is not a simple thought incidentally spoken by Hecuba, but rather a profound assertion that provides insight into her inner world. The sorrow is unbearable for the queen; this is a given. Euripides' artistry is revealed by the fact that he manages – through the usage of the potential optative – not only to highlight her grief further, but also to anticipate the unremitting effect of this pathos in the future. Instead, a straightforward and plain οὐ δύναμαι would merely assign an ephemeral effect to the feeling.

Later in the play Hecuba employs the same expression in relation to her material inability to provide her dead daughter with the proper funeral rites (609-17):

(6) σὺ δ' αὖ λαβοῦσα τεῦχος, ἀρχαία λάτρι,
βάψασ' ἔνεγκε δεῦρο ποντίας ἁλός,
ὡς παῖδα λουτροῖς τοῖς πανυστάτοις ἐμήν,
νύμφην τ' ἄνυμφον παρθένον τ' ἀπάρθενον,
λούσω προθῶμαί θ' – ὡς μὲν ἀξία, πόθεν;
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην· ὡς δ' ἔχω (τί γὰρ πάθω;)
κόσμον γ' ἀγείρασ' αἰχμαλωτίδων πάρα,
αἵ μοι πάρεδροι τῶνδ' ἔσω σκηνωμάτων
ναίουσιν …

You, old servant, take an urn, fill it with seawater and
bring it here so that I may give my daughter her last
bath – bride that is no bride, virgin that is virgin no
more – and lay her out for burial. I could not give her a funeral
as she deserves, impossible! But only as best I may (for what am I to do?),
gathering adornment from the captive women
who share this tent with me.

(trans. D. Kovacs, adapted)

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Hecuba, mourning her daughter, faces yet another issue that causes her distress: her material incapacity to adorn her daughter's corpse as she deserves (ὡς μὲν ἀξία) and accomplish the proper funerary rites.[21] Though there is no definite implied protasis, 'under these circumstances (that is, of slavery)' is again felt as an appropriate supplement. Here οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην can be understood as being complemented by the infinitives λοῦσαι and/or προθῆσθαι. The emotional atmosphere is very intense, for Hecuba's material incapacity is excruciating since it brings shame and dishonour on both herself and her dead daughter. Observe Hecuba's consecutive usage of colloquialisms: πόθεν; and τί γὰρ πάθω;.[22] The Trojan queen experiences utmost grief and despair, for not only has she been deprived of her daughter, but she also realises that she does not have the capacity to offer her what she deserves. The syntactic pattern of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην is employed in order to bring out more vividly Hecuba's helplessness and desolation, as despair and shame are propelled upwards along the pathos-scale.

Further on in the play, Hecuba seeks to secure Agamemnon's assistance in her plan to take revenge from Polymestor (749-51):

(7) οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην τοῦδε τιμωρεῖν ἄτερ
τέκνοισι τοῖς ἐμοῖσι. τί στρέφω τάδε;
τολμᾶν ἀνάγκη, κἂν τύχω κἂν μὴ τύχω.

I cannot have vengeance for my children
without his help. Why do I keep pondering this question?
I must be brave whether my request is successful or not.

(trans. D. Kovacs)

The overriding emotion here is the desire for vengeance, which has now been added to Hecuba's grief. The implied protasis here is more specific: 'if Agamemnon were not to help'. In contriving her plan to take revenge on Polymestor,[23] Hecuba acknowledges the crucial role of Agamemnon's assistance. Euripides' adroit use of this stereotypical syntax brings out Hecuba's real and undeniable inability to act on her own and to embark alone on a venture that means so much for her. Upon the outcome of this scheme rest not only Hecuba's hopes for vengeance, but also the continuation of the plot. Right at the moment when Hecuba's desire for

[21] Collard's (n. 19, 1991) 163, comm. on 613-4, provides the only – yet tangential – comment that I found regarding οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην: 'Hec.'s near collapse from sudden emotion is shown both by the sudden staccato phrasing and its colloquial register.' The present occurrence of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην forms part of this arresting 'staccato phrasing'.

[22] See P.T. Stevens, 'Colloquial Expressions in Euripides', *Hermes* Suppl. 38 (1976) 38, 57-8.

[23] Both Collard (n. 19, 1991) and K. Matthiessen, *Euripides 'Hekabe': Edition und Kommentar* (Berlin and New York 2010) draw attention to the plural (τέκνοισι), pointing out that Hecuba means to avenge not only Polydorus but also all of her dead children (Polyxena, Hector, Paris, Deiphobus).

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vengeance becomes overpowering and the play needs to move forward, the negative potential optative precisely illustrates Hecuba's acknowledgement of her own incapacity as well as Agamemnon's indispensable role in the accomplishment of her plan of vengeance.

Next, when Polymestor arrives at Hecuba's tent, she avoids eye-contact with him (968-72):

(8) αἰσχύνομαί σε προσβλέπειν ἐναντίον,
Πολυμῆστορ, ἐν τοιοῖσδε κειμένη κακοῖς.
ὅτῳ γὰρ ὤφθην εὐτυχοῦσ', αἰδώς μ' ἔχει
ἐν τῷδε πότμῳ τυγχάνουσ' ἵν' εἰμὶ νῦν,
κοὐκ ἂν δυναίμην προσβλέπειν ὀρθαῖς κόραις.

Shame prevents me, Polymestor, from looking you
in the face since I have been put into such calamity.
I am embarrassed, before someone who has seen me in prosperity,
to be in my present state of misfortune,
and I could not look at you with steady glance.

(trans. D. Kovacs, adapted)

This is another instance when Hecuba's emotional status is of extreme tension. The implied protasis here is equivalent to 'under these circumstances'. At the sight of her most hated enemy, the killer of her son, Hecuba is understandably overwhelmed by an irresistible desire for retribution and the yearning to fall upon him instantly. The only way to control herself is to avoid looking him directly in the eye;[24] hence she feigns shame and embarrassment by lowering her eyes.[25] The potential optative functions on two levels here. On one level it enables Hecuba to simulate present and future modesty and humiliation in front of Polymestor; on a second level it genuinely expresses the queen's inability to look the Thracian king in the eye and still do nothing, at a moment when her wayward emotions risk compromising her entire scheme.[26]

The last instance of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην in *Hecuba* is uttered by Agamemnon, when he is summoned to judge Polymestor's killing of Polydorus (1247-51):

(9) τάχ' οὖν παρ' ὑμῖν ῥᾴδιον ξενοκτονεῖν·
ἡμῖν δέ γ' αἰσχρὸν τοῖσιν Ἕλλησιν τόδε.
πῶς οὖν σε κρίνας μὴ ἀδικεῖν φύγω ψόγον;
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην. ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ τὰ μὴ καλὰ
πράσσειν ἐτόλμας, τλῆθι καὶ τὰ μὴ φίλα.

[24] Matthiessen (n. 23) 379 detects an implicit 'Regieanweisung' in 968-75, i.e. the fact that Hecuba avoids eye-contact with Polymestor.

[25] This is the well-known custom of lowering one's eyes because of shame; see Collard (n. 19, 1991) 182, comm. on 968-75. For a full list of such passages from tragedy, see J. Gould, 'Hiketeia', *JHS* 93 (1973) 88 n. 74.

[26] So D. Kovacs, *The Heroic Muse* (Baltimore 1987) 106.

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> Perhaps in your country it is a small thing to kill guests,
> but to us Greeks this is an abominable deed.
> If I pronounced you not guilty, how shall I escape blame?
> I could not. So since you could bear to commit disgraceful
> deeds, you must bear to suffer unwelcome consequences.
>
> (trans. D. Kovacs, adapted)

Here it is Agamemnon's emotions that reach a climax before the monstrous deed of ξενοκτονία committed by Polymestor. The implied protasis is the vigorous notion of 'in any circumstances'. One possibility of complementing οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην is the infinitive φύγειν (ψόγον), meaning that Agamemnon could not possibly escape blame. Alternatively, the following syntax is also valid: οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην κρῖναι σε μὴ ἀδικεῖν, meaning that Agamemnon could not envisage the possibility of acquitting Polymestor, an interpretation that credits the Achaean king with a more profound moral sense, rather than with the mere worry that he could not escape blame for his judgment. Though both interpretations are valid, I am tempted to adopt the latter. Agamemnon clearly experiences revulsion and horror at Polymestor's deed, which offended both human nature and Greek custom. Hence, he employs the negative potential optative as a way of explicitly conveying the absolute unthinkability of ever justifying or rationalising Polymestor's crime. The thought of acquitting Polymestor is so abhorrent to Agamemnon that he can liken it to a task impossible to undertake.

The Suppliant Women (c. 423 BC)[27]

The expression οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην is employed by Theseus, when he expresses his skepticism about the possibility that someone might give a perfectly accurate account of a battle (846-56):

(10) ἓν δ' οὐκ ἐρήσομαί σε, μὴ γέλωτ' ὄφλω,
ὅτῳ ξυνέστη τῶνδ' ἕκαστος ἐν μάχῃ
ἢ τραῦμα λόγχης πολεμίων ἐδέξατο.
κενοὶ γὰρ οὗτοι τῶν τ' ἀκουόντων λόγοι
καὶ τοῦ λέγοντος, ὅστις ἐν μάχῃ βεβὼς
λόγχης ἰούσης πρόσθεν ὀμμάτων πυκνῆς
σαφῶς ἀπήγγειλ' ὅστις ἐστὶν ἀγαθός.
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην οὔτ' ἐρωτῆσαι τάδε
οὔτ' αὖ πιθέσθαι τοῖσι τολμῶσιν λέγειν·
μόλις γὰρ ἄν τις αὐτὰ τἀναγκαῖ' ὁρᾶν
δύναιτ' ἂν ἑστὼς πολεμίοις ἐναντίος.

> One thing I will not ask or I'd be laughed at:
> whom each of these men stood facing in the battle
> and by what foeman he was wounded.

[27] On the play's date, see J. Morwood, *Euripides: Suppliant Women* (Oxford 2007) 26-30.

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> Such a recital wastes the time of both hearers
> and speaker: can a man stand in battle
> as the spears fly thick and fast before his eyes
> and tell us clearly who was brave?
> I could not ask for such a report
> nor believe anyone who ventured to give it.
> When a man stands face to face with the enemy,
> he is barely able to see what he needs to see.
> (trans. D. Kovacs)

It has often been argued that Euripides – through Theseus – practises literary criticism of Aeschylus' detailed accounts of battle in his *Seven against Thebes*.[28] Evidently, Theseus' chief feelings here are disbelief, skepticism and, arguably, even cynicism. That these feelings are intense is made evident by the fact that he devotes ten lines to expatiate on and vindicate his conviction that no one can perceive clearly – let alone remember to chronicle afterwards – what is going on during the chaos of battle and in its deadly environment. This, Theseus argues, is materially impossible; therefore, he considers it equally impossible that he could ever either ask for such a narration (ἐρωτῆσαι) or believe one (πιθέσθαι) when he listens to it. 'In any circumstances' would be the meaning of the implied protasis. The negative potential optative marks the king's present and – infinitely – future firm attitude on this issue. Instead, what Theseus needs to hear is the origin of their prowess (841-2): πόθεν ποθ' οἵδε διαπρεπεῖς εὐψυχίᾳ/θνητῶν ἔφυσαν ('how did it happen that these men were so superior to other men in bravery'). This is again a culminating moment in the play; that is, just before Adrastus' funeral speech (857-917), in which Adrastus eulogises the dead, focusing on their civic conscience, and thus reflecting Theseus' eulogy of the *polis* in the first half of the play (mainly lines 349-441).[29]

HERACLES (416 BC)

In this play we are able to discern clearly the difference between the implications engendered by δύναμαι in the potential optative and δύναμαι in the indicative. Early in the play the chorus bewails the imminent death of Heracles' wife and children at the hands of Lycus (449-50): δακρύων ὡς οὐ δύναμαι κατέχειν/γραίας ὄσσων ἔτι πηγάς ('I cannot check the tears flowing from my old eyes'). The present tense and indicative mood reflect reality straightforwardly: the old men of Thebes are indeed weeping. Later

[28] C. Collard, *Euripides: Supplices* (Groningen 1975) 321, comm. on 846-56 (with further bibliography), thinks otherwise, while more recently Morwood (n. 27) does not even acknowledge that interpretation. Cf. P. Burian, 'Logos and *Pathos*: The Politics of the *Suppliant Women*', in P. Burian (ed.), *Directions in Euripidean Criticism* (Durham 1985) 129-55, esp. 147-8.

[29] See further Collard (n. 28, 1975) 308-10.

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in the play, after Heracles' abominable act has been accomplished, Theseus stirs Heracles up and urges him to cease his lamentations (1394-7):

(11) (Θησ.) ἀνίστασ', ὦ δύστηνε· δακρύων ἄλις.
(Ἡρ.) οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην· ἄρθρα γὰρ πέπηγέ μου.
(Θησ.) καὶ τοὺς σθένοντας γὰρ καθαιροῦσιν τύχαι.
(Ἡρ.) φεῦ· αὐτοῦ γενοίμην πέτρος ἀμνήμων κακῶν.

(Thes.) Get up, unhappy man: enough of weeping!
(Her.) I could not: my joints are frozen fast.
(Thes.) Yes, for even the mighty are brought low by misfortune.
(Her.) Ah! How I wish I might here and now become a rock,
insensible of calamity.
(trans. D. Kovacs, adapted)

The accompanying infinitive to be understood after οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην is ἀνίστασθαι, and the implied protasis is 'whatever were to happen'. Heracles is utterly shattered and devastated. The shock has left him paralysed; he wishes he could turn into insensible stone.[30] Again, the expression οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην ἀνίστασθαι entails both present and future repercussions. Heracles is currently in a state of shock, unable to move his limbs. At the same time, the potential optative designates Heracles' inability to picture himself ever again regaining his former energy and *joie de vivre*. The present sorrow will haunt him ever after; and this is also reflected in what he thinks a little earlier about keeping or letting go of his weapons (1377-82):

λυγραὶ δὲ τῶνδ' ὅπλων κοινωνίαι.
ἀμηχανῶ γὰρ πότερ' ἔχω τάδ' ἢ μεθῶ,
ἃ πλευρὰ τἀμὰ προσπίτνοντ' ἐρεῖ τάδε·
Ἡμῖν τέκν' εἶλες καὶ δάμαρθ· ἡμᾶς ἔχεις
παιδοκτόνους σούς. εἶτ' ἐγὼ τάδ' ὠλέναις
οἶσω;

How painful that I still have about me these weapons!
I do not know whether I should keep them or let them go,
since they will hang at my flanks and say to me,
'By means of us you killed your children and your wife:
us the slayers of your children, you still keep.'
Shall I then carry them on my arm?
(trans. D. Kovacs)

By uttering οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην (ἀνίστασθαι) in line 1395 Heracles acknowledges and – most importantly – confesses to himself both his overwhelming sorrow and his inability to imagine how he could ever go on with his life. The tone of his statement is different from the Chorus' earlier

[30] Since stone is proverbial of insensitivity: see G.W. Bond, *Euripides*: *Heracles* (Oxford 1981) 409, comm. on 1397.

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οὐ δύναμαι δακρύων κατέχειν, the effect of which died away soon after its utterance. On the contrary, in line 1395 the elaborate syntax resulting from the adept usage of negative potential optative drives Heracles' grief *ad infinitum*.

Iphigenia among the Taurians (c. 414-412 bc)

Iphigenia exclaims οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην as she realizes that she cannot perform *voluntarily* the same appalling act she has been coerced to perform in the barbaric land: the act of killing. In lines 1020-3 Orestes suggests that they should eliminate Thoas:

(12) (Ὀρ.) ἆρ' ἂν τύραννον διολέσαι δυναίμεθ' ἄν;
(Ἰφ.) δεινὸν τόδ' εἶπας, ξενοφονεῖν ἐπήλυδας.
(Ὀρ.) ἀλλ', εἰ σὲ σώσει κἀμέ, κινδυνευτέον.
(Ἰφ.) οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην· τὸ δὲ πρόθυμον ἤνεσα.

(Or.) Could we kill the king?
(Iph.) Foreigners murdering their hosts? What an appalling thing you said!
(Or.) But if it will save your life and mine, we must make the attempt.
(Iph.) I could not do it, though I praise your enterprising spirit.

(trans. D. Kovacs, adapted)

Iphigenia experiences revulsion for and abhorrence at Orestes' suggestion. The accompanying infinitive to be understood is διολέσαι (τὸν τύραννον) or, else, ξενοφονεῖν. The implied protasis can be easily supplied from Orestes' words: εἰ σώσει (that is, 'even if killing Thoas were to save us'). 'It was not the Athenian custom to disguise hatred',[31] and we have no reason to doubt Iphigenia's unwillingness to slay the local king. It is important to remember that the task assigned to her was to have victims prepared for sacrifice; cf. line 40 and especially line 53: κἀγὼ τέχνην τήνδ' ἣν ἔχω ξενοκτόνον ('and I have this office of killing foreigners'). Yet, she accomplished it against her will. Hence, even though assisting her brother in killing Thoas would comply with the Greek moral view of 'helping friends and harming enemies',[32] Iphigenia rejects the thought of willingly performing this appalling act, an act that evokes barbaric associations for her (31, 35-40). Ξενοφονεῖν, that is, what Orestes suggests they should now do (1021), is what Iphigenia has been doing in Tauris for some time (τέχνην ξενοκτόνον); and *this* she cannot do, not anymore and not of her own will. Yet she praises Orestes' bravery and courage (τὸ δὲ πρόθυμον ἤνεσα). But she realizes that she would never have been able to carry out a murder

[31] K.J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford 1974) 182.

[32] See Dover (n. 31) 180-4; M.W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge and New York 1989) *passim*.

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willingly – even if this could have meant her own and her brother's salvation. Again, the effect of this stereotypical phrase spans both present and future time.

ORESTES (408 BC)

The speaker here is Electra, who denies Helen the favour of carrying an offering to Clytemnestra's tomb (104-5):

(13) (Ἑλ.) σύ νυν χάριν μοι τὸν φόβον λύσασα δός.
(Ἡλ.) οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην μητρὸς ἐσβλέψαι τάφον.

(Hel.) Then free me of my fear and grant me this favour.
(El.) I could not bear to look upon my mother's grave.

(trans. E.P. Coleridge)

Six days have gone by since Electra and Orestes have slaughtered Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Ever since, Orestes has been withdrawn, impassive. Electra's grief is equally inexpressible; for she cannot even confront the possibility of visiting and laying eyes upon her mother's tomb. The implied protasis that can be discerned here is 'if I were to take the offerings to the tomb'. Again, we may attempt to compress Electra's periphrasis to: οὐκ ἂν ἐσβλέψαιμι μητρὸς τάφον. Nevertheless, it is needless to say that this alternative equals the original text only syntactically, and certainly not on the level of meaning and style. It is a deliberate strategy on Euripides' part that Electra employs this phraseology, for this phraseology has concrete implications on Electra's character (ἦθος). She is of royal blood; she has been wronged by her royal family; and she has in turn wronged this royal family of hers. Her grief is immeasurable and, certainly, beyond what could possibly be endured by humans. Hence, Electra, in replying to Helen, unreservedly admits her pathos; at the same time she does admit her incapacity ever to be able to handle it, since she cannot bear to look upon the most conspicuous manifestation of this grief, Clytemnestra's grave.[33]

BACCHAE (405 BC)

In this play οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην occurs twice. In lines 272-4 the seer Teiresias, addressing Pentheus, says the following with reference to Dionysus:

(14) οὗτος δ' ὁ δαίμων ὁ νέος, ὃν σὺ διαγελᾷς,
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην μέγεθος ἐξειπεῖν ὅσος
καθ' Ἑλλάδ' ἔσται.

[33] C.W. Willink, *Euripides: Orestes* (Oxford 1986) 99, comm. on 105, detects the parallelism with only one other Euripidean case ('the phrasing is like *Ba.* 836 οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην θῆλυν ἐνδῦναι στολήν'), but he does not make any further comment.

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> This new god, whom you ridicule,
> I would not be able to explain the greatness
> which he will obtain throughout Greece.
> (trans. R. Seaford)

Pentheus has just concluded his speech (215-62), in which he delivered an irate invective against Dionysus as well as against both Cadmus and Teiresias on account of their disgraceful – according to his judgment – behaviour; the two old men have dressed up in full maenadic gear, wearing fawnskins and carrying a *thyrsos*. Teiresias employs οὐκ ἄν δυναίμην in his consequent agonistic[34] reply to Pentheus, with the implied protasis bearing the meaning of 'in any circumstances'. Seaford describes this syntax as a 'rhetorical device, notably an expression of inadequacy to the theme'.[35] Though I do not disagree with this assessment, I wish to focus on Teiresias' current emotional state. Pentheus, in lines 215-62, had unashamedly defied the new god and his supremacy; thus, he abused religious feeling and offended an existing religious reality, thus violating essential moral norms. In so doing he committed ὕβρις (for which τίσις shall follow later). Teiresias then experiences an overpowering sorrow, which is augmented because of his role as a seer. This sweeping emotion leads him to defend the new god earnestly. Speaking in a temperate and orderly manner (unlike Pentheus' fuming tirade), Teiresias exalts and eulogises Dionysus (266-327). It is noteworthy that, immediately after he has uttered the words quoted above, in which he admits (using οὐκ ἄν δυναίμην) his inability to fully explain the grandeur of this new god, Teiresias nonetheless attempts to do so and proceeds to establish Dionysus and Demeter as the duo indispensable to human existence (274-85). Teiresias, like all other Euripidean characters, finds himself in a devastating emotional situation. His religious beliefs have been mocked and challenged and his religious feelings have been offended. But, as he attempts to defend the new deity, he recognises his inability and his inadequacy to do so effectively, because of the immensity and grandeur of his subject: that is, because of Dionysus' overriding supremacy, the extent and dimensions of which are hard to apprehend – let alone to explain. The use of the stereotypical pattern of the negative potential optative allows Teiresias to come as close as possible to expressing his feeling of helplessness, as he envisages with awe the incredible greatness of Dionysus.

Later in the *Bacchae* Pentheus too employs οὐκ ἄν δυναίμην, in the scene where Dionysus dresses him as a maenad (834-6):

(15) (Πεν.) ἦ καί τι πρὸς τοῖσδ' ἄλλο προσθήσεις ἐμοί;
(Διόν.) θύρσον γε χειρὶ καὶ νεβροῦ στικτὸν δέρας.
(Πεν.) οὐκ ἄν δυναίμην θῆλυν ἐνδῦναι στολήν.

[34] The scene resembles an agon: see Collard (n. 11, 1975) 68; Lloyd (n. 11, 1992) 10.

[35] R. Seaford, *Euripides: Bacchae* (Warminster 1996) 174, comm. on 266-327.

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(Pen.) And will you give anything to me in addition to these things?
(Dion.) Yes, a thyrsos for your hand and the dappled skin of a fawn.
(Pen.) I would not be able to put on female dress.

(trans. R. Seaford)

By now Pentheus has lost his former aggression. Although he agrees to be led by Dionysus to the mountains to watch the maenads, he still refuses to put on female dress; cf. 822: τί δὴ τόδ'; ἐς γυναῖκας ἐξ ἀνδρὸς τελῶ; ('What is this? Am I from being a man to join the category of women?'), and 828: τίνα στολήν; ἦ θῆλυν; ἀλλ' αἰδώς μ' ἔχει ('In what dress? Female? But I feel shame'). After these two expressions of reluctance, Pentheus' resistance culminates in line 836: οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην θῆλυν ἐνδῦναι στολήν (with the implied protasis being 'if you were to give me female clothes'). His emotions of despair and shame (828: αἰδώς μ' ἔχει) culminate too – and unprecedentedly so – and for a while he cannot even picture the possibility of his being dressed as a woman. This moment when Pentheus' resistance reaches its peak before irreversibly collapsing is outstandingly conveyed by Euripides through the negative potential optative. Immediately afterwards Pentheus unconditionally yields to Dionysus (838: ὀρθῶς) and consents to his external transformation into a maenad by accepting a *thyrsos* and a fawnskin. This external change marks and intensifies his internal change too, that is, his change of mental state.[36] As noted above, this instance and *Medea* 1044 (cf. *ad loc*.) are the only two cases where the infinite duration implied by οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην is abruptly cut short and the act initially imagined as unattainable is carried out within the play, as the characters experience a radical and unparalleled change of mental state.

The last example of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην occurs in Euripides incertum fr. 899 K.:

(16) εἴ μοι τὸ Νεστόρειον εὔγλωσσον μέλος
Ἀντήνορός τε τοῦ Φρυγὸς δοίη θεός,
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην μὴ στέγοντα πιμπλάναι,
σοφοὺς ἐπαντλῶν ἀνδρὶ μὴ σοφῷ λόγους.

Were god to give me the eloquent song of Nestor
or of Phrygian Antenor,
I could not fill a leaky vessel,
pouring wise words into a man who is not wise.

(trans. C. Collard and M. Cropp)

The fragment is quoted partly by Athenaeus 15.665a and partly by Plutarch *Mor*. 502b-d. As Plutarch tells us, the passage was originally addressed πρὸς τὸν ἀσύνετον ἀκροατήν ('to the witless hearer'). Though fragmentary, the logic behind this passage is the same as in all other cases. The protasis is explicitly stated: εἰ δοίη. Manifestly, the emotions

[36] See Seaford (n. 35) 215, comm. on 835.

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experienced by the speaker are despair, dismay, and resignation, as he acknowledges the improbability of ever being listened to and understood by an uncomprehending audience.

As already observed, Euripides' usage of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην remained unexploited by prose. It seems that it remained so by the comic genre too. This is rather surprising, given comedy's vigorous engagement with tragedy, at various levels.[37] Even Aristophanes, whose intertextuality with Euripides has been remarked on widely and summarised by Cratinus' coinage εὐριπιδαριστοφανίζων (fr. 342),[38] does not make any allusion to this Euripidean expression. An appropriate place to do so would have been in the *Frogs*, where Euripides' experimentation with words is brought to the foreground (for example, lines 956-8 and 971-9).[39]

Within Comedy, οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην occurs eight times: Phrynichus fr. 73, Anaxandrides fr. 40, Eubulus fr. 88, Sopater fr. 1, and four times in Menander: *Dys*. 145, 444, *Epit*. 499, and *Misumenos* 609 Arn. The first of these poets, Phrynichus, was a rough contemporary of Euripides; he is believed to have produced his first play in the mid to late 430s or early 420s (cf. T2, K-A VII.393). Fr. 73 is an incertum and we have no means of dating it. The speaker's absurd preoccupation is that he has lost his molars and he will not be able to crack Naxian almonds any longer. In fr. 40 by Anaxandrides (Middle Comedy) the speaker (an Athenian) dreads the possibility of an alliance with the Egyptians because of their weird customs.[40] In Eubulus fr. 88 the discussion is unsurprisingly (since this is Middle Comedy) about food: the speaker says he cannot eat anything else, for he has had his share (of spring onions) at a *hetaira*'s place (there may

[37] Comedy's reception of and engagement with tragedy – mostly in the form of paratragedy – is a hugely popular thematic area and, accordingly, the relevant bibliography is fast growing, especially after P. Rau, *Paratragodia: Untersuchung einer komischen Form des Aristophanes* (Münich 1967). Standard reference works on the subject include: K.J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley 1972) 183-9; S. Goldhill, *The Poet's Voice: Essays on Poetics and Greek Literature* (Cambridge and New York 1991) 167-222; M.S. Silk, 'Aristophanic Paratragedy', in A.H. Sommerstein, S. Halliwell, J. Henderson, and B. Zimmermann (eds), *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari 1993) 477-504; O. Taplin, *Comic Angels: And Other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Paintings* (Oxford 1993) 79-88; A.M. Bowie, 'Myth and Ritual in the Rivals of Aristophanes', in D. Harvey and J. Wilkins (eds), *The Rivals of Aristophanes: Studies in Athenian Old Comedy* (London 2000) 317-39; M.S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (London 2000), and 'Aristophanes versus the Rest: Comic Poetry in Old Comedy', in Harvey and Wilkins (eds) 299-315 (esp. 302-3); C. Platter, *Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres* (Baltimore 2007) 42-83, 143-75; E. Bakola, *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy* (Oxford 2010) 118-79, esp. 177-9.

[38] Cf. Bakola (n. 37) 24-9, 176-7.

[39] See I. Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysus: Ritual and Theatre in Aristophanes' Frogs* (Oxford 1999) 234-5.

[40] The fragment probably echoes contemporary historical events relating to an Egyptian embassy sent to Athens seeking alliance some time during the second quarter of the fourth century BC. See B.W. Millis, 'A Commentary on the Fragments of Anaxandrides' (Diss. University of Illinois 2001) 162-3.

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be an erotic subtext here). In Sopater[41] fr. 1 the speaker speaks disdainfully of bread made of lentils, which he refuses to eat whilst looking at a bronze colossal statue. Within the surviving Menandrean corpus οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην occurs four times: in *Dyscolus* 145-6 Sostratus admits his inability to confront Cnemon with arguments; in *Dyscolus* 443-4 Cnemon acknowledges he cannot leave his house unattended; in *Epitrepontes* 499-500 Habrotonon refuses to help Onesimus discover who the mother of the baby is before she knows the father's identity; and in *Misoumenos* 609 (Arn.) Crateia tells her nurse she cannot be patient or endure something – the text is largely lacunose.

One may argue that Phrynichus, Anaxandrides, Eubulus, Sopater, and Menander came up with this expression (οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην + infinitive) independently. This is a fairly reasonable argument since no concrete intertextual relation with Euripides can be established. On the other hand, this expression was obviously not, at least at the beginning, an intuitive syntactic structure that a poet would spontaneously use (in poetry, at least) when he just needed to express the common notion of 'I cannot do something'. If this were the case, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and the other tragic poets would have inadvertently used it, and repeatedly so – before Euripides. Even Euripides would have used it more often in any given context. The fact that it appears only in carefully selected passages where emotions are running high, suggests that this structure was purposely coined and implanted there. Besides, there is a slight difference between how Menander uses this expression and how Phrynichus, Anaxandrides, Eubulus, and Sopater use it. In these four poets there is, arguably, a – more or less easily – detectable notion of grotesque juxtaposition of something grand with something trivial, whilst an emotion of some kind can also be traced (for example, anger and despair in Phrynichus; disgust and horror in Anaxandrides), and/or the speaker may sound preposterous and be credited with bombastic and/or (fake) solemn style (as in Sopater).[42] On the contrary, in Menander οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην nowhere engenders (fake) solemnity nor does it aim to combine grandeur in preposterous fashion with trivialities; and the context – emotional and other – is fairly moderate. Nevertheless, all in all, and given the absence of any substantial evidence strongly suggesting that the comic occurrences of οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην were influenced by Euripides, I would refrain from taking the argument any further until new evidence is unearthed.

To conclude, in this article I have attempted to highlight and analyse a distinct feature of Euripides' groundbreaking writing technique: the introduction of the expression οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην into the linguistic register of

[41] A phlyacographer of the late fourth-early third century BC. See K-A I.275-87.

[42] Of course, this just one way of interpreting this fragmentary material, which is cut off from its original context, and – certainly – I do not expect everyone to agree with this interpretation. Besides, one may argue that this is comedy and it is, generally speaking, what comedy usually does.

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tragedy and the exclusive usage of it solely by himself. This expression brings together metrical convenience, elaborate syntax, and conspicuous content in a unique combination. The present tense negative potential optative is a semantically rich – almost excessive – mode, in the sense that its area of reference covers both the present and the – infinite – future. To this powerful and wide-ranging time dimension, the verb δύναμαι is added, which embraces a broad spectrum of connotations that can be substantially richer than simply 'I can' or 'I am able to'. The verb δύναμαι has the potential to lay emphatic stress on the notion of vigorous strength/power, which can represent the ability to transcend typical human norms and boundaries. Accordingly, in the sixteen Euripidean cases which have been examined here, the verb δύναμαι designates remarkable emotional (and also mental, at times) power/capability of enduring (or not) great suffering and other over-whelming emotions. The unprecedented combination of the particular mood with the particular verb reveals Euripides' acute linguistic sense and his sharp perception of a language's subtle meanings and its tones. This syntactic structure, employed as a stereotypical phrase by Euripides, generates semantic parameters of what exceeds human nature; of what is humanly unthinkable and/or unachievable because of either the speaker's lack of spirit, the subject's grandeur and immensity, or material reasons that pose insurmountable obstacles to the accomplishment of a task. As we might expect, the individuals involved in such situations experience devastatingly intense emotions that range from hatred and loathing to agonising grief and despair. Euripides has fittingly designated his most exceptional characters (individuals of royal descent, heroes, and a seer) as the only ones who could meet such emotional challenges and who thus complement – with the majesty of their status – the grand picture of extraordinary suffering which has been conceived and dramatised by this poet of tragedy.

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