

LEXIS

Poetica, retorica e comunicazione nella tradizione classica

33.2015

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Pubblicato con il contributo di:

Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)

Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici (Università degli Studi di Salerno)

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ISSN 2210-8823

ISBN 978-90-256-1300-6

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What's in a μή? On a Polysemous Negative in Call. *Aet.* fr. 1.25

In his fragmentary *Prologue of the Telchines*, Callimachus¹ recounts an incident when he received divine instructions for the poetological programme of his *Aetia* by Apollo, who admonished him to follow the ‘slender Muse’ (Μοῦσαν [...] λεπταλήν, l. 24) in his career as a poet. In this context, the metaphor of a way and a wagon is evoked: the poet should avoid ‘wide roads’ (viz. old, established poetic tradition), but instead search for ‘untrodden paths’ (viz. new means of writing poetry):

πρὸς δέ σε] καὶ τόδ' ἄνωγα, τὰ μὴ πατέουσιν ἄμαξαι
τὰ στεῖβε,ἰν, ἐτέρων ἴγνια μὴ καθ' ὁμά
δίφρον ἐλ]ῶν μῆδ' οἶμον ἀνὰ πλατύν, ἀλλὰ κελεύθους
ἀπίπτο]υς, εἰ καὶ στε,ἰ,γότερην ἐλάσεις.

(Call. *Aet.* fr. 1.25-8)²

The unusual use of the negative μή instead of expected οὐ in the relative clause in line 25 deserves attention. Various explanations may be offered to account for its usage:

[1] The explanation that is perhaps the most obvious at first sight is that of a relative clause conveying a hypothetical conditional connotation and therefore substituting for a hypothetical conditional clause, the negation of which would by default have to be μή³. In a case like this, where «the antecedent is indefinite, the relative clause commonly has a conditional force, and, if negative, takes μή like the protasis of a conditional sentence» (Smyth 1956, 564 [§ 2505b]). Furthermore, since hypothetical conditional clauses often convey a causal nuance⁴, the relative clause may be interpreted in a similar way: Apollo urges Callimachus to frequent certain places ‘if [= because] waggons do not tread them’.

[2] Furthermore, μή + indicative in a relative clause is also to be found when the relative clause has a tone of a general qualification to itself (this being instead of, or in addition to, and in continuation of, a hypothetical conditional connotation). This use of the relative clause is commonly referred to as ‘qualitative’, ‘characterising’, or ‘generic’⁵. Even more than a purely conditional/causal colouring, Call. fr. 1.25

¹ By saying ‘Callimachus’, I mean, of course, not the real author Callimachus of Cyrene, but the implied author who emerges to the reader’s mind as a fictitious person and narrator of the *Aetia*.

² The Greek text follows Harder’s edition (2012 I). – On the imagery of way and waggon as metaphors for poetry and poetic ideal in Callimachus’ poetry, cf. Asper 1997, 21-107.

³ On the grammatical phenomenon, cf. e.g. Gildersleeve 1880, 54; Stahl 1907, 767; Smyth 1956, 564 [§ 2505b], 576 [§ 2560]; Gerö 1997, 42 f.; Rijksbaron 2002, 90.

⁴ On the grammatical phenomenon, cf. e.g. Goodwin 1897, 220 [§§ 580-81]; Kühner – Gerth 1904, 466 f. (only implicitly); Stahl 1907, 382 f.

⁵ On the grammatical phenomenon, cf. e.g. Gildersleeve 1880, 54; Whitelaw 1894, 15, 17; Kühner – Gerth 1904, 185, 192; Stahl 1907, 769 f. – An example is Ar. *Ra.* 354 f.: εὐφημεῖν χρεὶ κάξιτασθαι τοῖς ἡμετέροισι χοροῖσιν, / ὅστις ἀπειρος τοιῶνδε λόγων ἢ γνώμην μὴ καθαρεύει (‘To remain silent, and to stay away from our choral performances, has whoever is [the type of person who is] unexperienced in such utterances, or is not pure in his mind’).

conveys such a qualitative/generic sense, since Callimachus is meant to trace ‘those paths that are of such a quality that waggons do not tread them at all’. When regarded from this perspective, the negative μή adds a tone of generalisation, and therefore also of emphasis and intensification, to the relative clause in question⁶.

[3] In addition to these grammatical explanations, compositional and aesthetical aspects may also be considered. First, an effect of using μή instead of οὐ in Call. fr. 1.25 is that it avoids a hiatus between the relative pronoun and the negative (*τὰ οὐ), which would be unthinkable to an author like Callimachus, who is very strict in avoiding hiatus⁷. Secondly, οὐ instead of μή would have produced a cacophonous repetition of the same long vowel <ū> in two subsequent arseis (*τὰ οὐ πατέουσιν ἄμαξαι). Thirdly, and most importantly, the climactic tricolon μή – μή – μηδ’ in three subsequent lines (25-7) seems noteworthy from a stylistic point of view, as it helps to highlight the tripartite structure of these three lines, the content of which is rephrased three times in varied forms of expression ([1] τὰ μή πατέουσιν ἄμαξαι / τὰ στείβε,iv, ll. 25 f. – [2] ἑτέρων ἴχνια μή καθ’ ὄμα / δίφρον ἐλ]ῶν, ll. 26 f. – [3] μηδ’ οἴμον ἀνὰ πλατύν, l. 27). As a result of this, the conclusive instruction (ἀλλὰ κελεύθους / ἀτρίπτο]υξ: ‘but [to pursue] untrodden paths’, ll. 27 f.) is protracted and thus emphasised.

[4] Finally, the question arises as to whether the verb in the main clause upon which the relative clause in line 25 is dependent, may also have affected the choice of the type of negative in the latter. A comparable case well-known in Greek grammar is that of a non-conditional participle that is subordinated to a verb which «is itself either negated by μή, or is positive but would require μή if it were negative» (Moorhouse 1948, 35), and as a result takes μή as a negative instead of expected οὐ⁸. Viewed from this angle, one could consider the negative μή in the relative clause in an analogous way: as an echo of Apollo’s superordinate order to Callimachus (καὶ τόδ’ ἄνωγα, l. 25), as well as of Callimachus’ own verbal attacks against the Telchines, expressed in the form of negative imperatives (αὐθι δὲ τέχνηι / κρίνετε,] μή σχοί,νωι Περσίδι τήγ σοφίην· / μηδ’ ἀπ’ ἐμεῦ διφῶ,τε μέγα

⁶ Harder in her commentary (2012 II, 64) explains the passage in a similar way: «the use of μή with an indicative in the relative clause indicates that this description is of a generalizing nature [...], so ‘where big waggons *never* go’» (emphasis added). However, Harder’s reference to Rijksbaron (cf. my n. 3 above) is imprecise, since Rijksbaron does not address the qualitative/generic type of relative clause, but the conditional/causal only, using as an example Hdt. 3.37.2, where the narrator announces to ‘describe’ the Phoenician Pataeci ‘[to] who[ever] has not seen them’ (ὄς δὲ τούτους μή ὄπωπε, ἐγὼ δὲ σημανέω) – which can equally be paraphrased as ‘I am going to describe them *just in case* someone happens not to have seen them’. – On the generally emphatic force of μή cf. also Gerö 1997, 46, who notes that «μή is said to correspond either to a stressed ‘not’ or to a heightening ‘not even’, ‘not to mention’, or the like. These explanations as a rule link up with more general characterizations which ascribe to μή a prohibitive or dynamic force».

⁷ On μή instead of οὐ serving the purpose of avoiding hiatus, cf. e.g. Jannaris 1897, 430 [§ 1815]; Schwyzer 1950, 595; Gerö 1997, 46 f.; on the rhetorical practice of *Hiatvermeidung* as such cf. Stanford 1967, 57 f.; Lausberg 2008, 476 f. [§§ 969-73]. With regard to Callimachus’ practice, Tsantsanoglou 2010, 110, notes that «the only hiatus allowed in Callimachus is after ἦ».

⁸ On the grammatical phenomenon, cf. e.g. Howes 1901; Kühner – Gerth 1904, 200 f. (tentatively); Laird 1922; Moorhouse 1948. – An example is Aesch. Ag. 906 f.: ἐκβαιν’ ἀπήνης τῆσδε, μή χαμαι τιθείς / τὸν σὸν πόδ’ ὄναξ (‘Come down from the chariot, without putting your foot on the floor, my king!’).

ψοφέουσιν ἀοιδὴν / τίκτεσθαι, ll. 17-20). This imperative echo could be further linked to the uncommon application of the verb πατέουσιν, which, as Harder (2012 II, 64) notes in her commentary, «is normally used of walking», that is, of human beings, not of vehicles. It may well be possible that this verb personifies the waggons in a sense that it «convey[s] the notion that the heavy ἄμαξαι are damaging the busy roads of traditional poetry and make them unfit for further use», as Harder (ibid.) suggests. At the same time, however, the verb might also – together with the imperative echo emanating from the negative μή – evoke an implicit order: ‘I urge you to seek out those paths that are of such a quality that waggons do not tread them at all – *you* shall tread them!’

All evidence considered, the question ultimately arises as to how these four different explanations can be reconciled. Option [1] may be regarded as partly conflicting with [2], since the former may be understood as being tied to a (more) specific occasion, while the latter is (more) generalising. Given the axiomatic nature of Apollo's command, a generic interpretation seems more plausible. But what about [3] and [4]? In the introduction to her commentary, Harder (2012 I, 44) notes that Callimachus repeats words only very rarely, concluding that those few cases where repetitions do occur are to be explained as «an effective means of drawing the reader's attention to something special»⁹. In my opinion, the situation in fr. 1.25-8 can be understood along similar lines: the tricolon μή – μή – μηδ' in three consecutive lines, alongside with an imperative echo arising from two preceding orders/prohibitions, has an emphatic and intensifying effect upon Apollo's instructions – which, in turn, enhances the generic sense of the relative clause. In addition to this, Callimachus' scolding of the Telchines (ll. 17-20) and Apollo's claim directed at Callimachus (ll. 25-8) are connected more tightly by means of these multiple negatives. For, by quoting Apollo's words, Callimachus «supports his answer to the Telchines with the authority of Apollo, the god of poetry himself, who at an early stage urged him to write his special kind of refined and original poetry» (Harder 2012 II, 55)¹⁰. Thus, the overlap in content between the two speeches – the former being a *hysteron proteron* in relation to the latter – is further accentuated. To summarise, it can be stated that none of the three explanations [2], [3] and [4] is mutually exclusive; rather, they all complement and reinforce each other, adding up to what is to be presented as the poetological programme of Callimachus' *Aetia*, making it truly «something special»¹¹.

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⁹ An example is Call. *Aet.* fr. 25e.1 ἄρνεες [...] ἄρνεες: «the anaphora draws attention to the importance of lambs in this *aition*» (Harder 2012 II, 262).

¹⁰ The identity of the Telchines is an old and vexed problem in scholarship. Schmitz (1999, 163) is most probably right in concluding that they do not primarily «represent real opponents of Callimachus», but, rather, are to be conceived as (hypothetical) «anti-readers» who «teach us how not to read a (this) poem». For further discussion of the problem, cf. Harder's commentary (2012 II, 13 f.), with further references.

¹¹ I would like to thank the two anonymous referees of this journal for their helpful feedback.

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Abstract: In *Call. Aet.* fr. 1.25-8, Callimachus receives instructions by Apollo about the poetological programme of his *Aetia*. In the relative clause in l. 25, the negative μή instead of οὐ is unexpected. Various explanations can be offered to account for its usage: [1] a hypothetical conditional connotation; [2] a qualitative/generic connotation; [3] aesthetical aspects (avoidance of hiatus and cacophony; tricolon μή – μή – μηδ’); [4] an echo of Apollo’s superordinate order (l. 25), as well as of Callimachus’ verbal attacks against the Telchines (ll. 17-20), evoking an implicit order in the relative clause. The overall effect of the negative μή in l. 25 is that of an emphatic generalisation. In addition to this, the overlap in content between ll. 17-20 and ll. 25-8 is further stressed by the tricolon μή – μή – μηδ’.

Keywords: Callimachus, *Aetia*, Prologue of the Telchines, Negative, Relative clause.