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To what extent does the presentation of the gods in Greek tragedy reflect the real-life experience of the audience?

As an immature lecturer in the late 1960s, I came across a statement in Eduard Fraenkel's *Agamemnon* Commentary, which made me wonder how so great and celebrated a scholar could have made a pronouncement that seemed, and still seems, to me to be obviously untrue. "It seems most unlikely", he wrote, "that at any time [Aeschylus] should have doubted this fundamental truth: the gods (or Zeus) see to it that sooner or later the impious man is punished while the righteous will be spared". There are of course differences between our modern culture and that of the fifth century BC, but I cannot believe that anybody in the audiences in the Theatre of Dionysus had failed to notice that in real life wicked people often seem to flourish, while the virtuous are left to suffer. At the beginning of Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* the Danaids want to believe in Fraenkel's 'fundamental truth', when they remind Zeus of his duty to sink their pursuing cousins' ship as a punishment for their *hybris*, only to be sadly disappointed when the cousins arrive safely later in the play.

It is, I think, no coincidence that Fraenkel promulgated his "fundamental truth" at a time in which many scholars took it for granted that the aim of the tragedians was mainly didactic, to give their audiences political advice and to improve their morals. After all, Aristophanes had said in *Frogs* that, while children had schoolmasters to teach them, adults had poets to perform that function for them. One should hesitate before taking so seriously the words of a Comic poet. Would any scholar nowadays agree with the editor of a 1960 major edition of Aeschylus' *Persians*, that the play could have ended at line 597, and that Aeschylus added the Darius scene, and all that it involved, only because he suddenly realised that he had not yet introduced the moral of the play? Was the audience in the Theatre of Dionysus not as puzzled

as we are when Euripides presented as tragedies such plays as *Alcestis* and *Helen* with their happy endings? We expect our 'tragedies' to present suffering and to treat it seriously, to inspire the audience to think about why it has happened, but not to offer a simple explanation as *the* correct one. If Fraenkel's "fundamental truth" were true, there would be no tragedies.

It might be thought that the gap between the polytheistic background of Greek tragedy and the monotheism or atheism of modern societies is particularly hard to cross, but this does not seem to be the case. If the Witches of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* can be acceptable to modern audiences, there is apparently no reason why they should find it difficult to engage even with plots whose divine characters appear onstage. The ordinary man in the Athenian audience was himself unaccustomed to meeting face to face with a god in the *agora*. The frequency of powerful women on the Greek stage has puzzled many scholars, when real women played so small a part in the public life of the city. A simple answer is that convention permitted it, particularly when it was required by the myth on which a play was based. Similarly, we should not take it for granted that the behaviour of onstage gods, or the religious views of onstage human characters about the gods, coincide with the beliefs and expectations of real-life people, who themselves do not necessarily agree with one another in their beliefs. Presumably these beliefs will be influenced, to some extent and in different ways, by what they have heard on the stage, while the tragedians must have drawn on their understanding of what the members of the audience believed. They used that understanding, however, not to educate the audience with simple morals, but as valuable tools in the construction of their plots and the manipulation of their spectators' reactions. When Aristotle in his fourth century *Poetics* defined the best kind of tragedy, his criterion has nothing to do with morality, but only with the success of the plot.

The best kind of tragedy, he says, is that in which someone falls from good fortune and high reputation to failure and disgrace. Although he does not often refer to Aeschylus, and does not name him here, these words apply perfectly to Aeschylus'

Persians. Who could have been greater and more renowned than Xerxes and his country, and who could have fallen further? The construction of *this* plot, however, must have called for exceptional skill. If he was to make his audience sympathise with the characters of this play in their fall, which I am sure was his intention, he had to make it forget, at least for the duration of the play, that those characters were really their own worst enemies. The gradual process by which he achieves this end is accompanied by the gradual but systematic way in which the fall and various possible reasons for it are presented. At the beginning of the play the Chorus of old men, as it waits for the return of Xerxes and his army from Greece, celebrates the divine destiny which has made the Persian armies invincible by both land and sea; there is, however, always a risk that a deceitful god may entice a man into a net that will destroy him. I am sure that the manuscripts are wrong here to present a different text which says that the gods intended only land battles to be successful, and that crossing the sea to fight would be a step too far. O. Müller in the nineteenth century, for various reasons, was right to emend. Why the god might wish to be so destructive is not explained. Nor does the Chorus say that prosperity and success are the *reason* for someone's fall. At this stage of the play the idea is only that failure is often seen to follow on success, and, as Aristotle understood, the greater the victim's prosperity and success, the more striking it will be when it happens to him. When someone in a play of Aeschylus hopes for the best, the audience can be sure that the worst is going to happen.

Having hinted at the possibility of divine interference, Aeschylus has very little to say about the gods, except to advise Atossa, worried by a nightmare and a bad omen, that she should go home and say her prayers. The theme of responsibility begins to develop only with the arrival of the Messenger, with the news that although gods have saved the city of the goddess Pallas, some *daemon* has destroyed the army. The whole trouble was begun by the appearance from somewhere unidentified of an avenging spirit (*alastor*) or an evil god. For most of the Messenger's narrative and the response to it by Xerxes' mother, Atossa, no single god is identified. To complicate matters, the *alastor* has taken the

form of the mortal Themistocles. As in real life, it is assumed that, since it *has* happened, some god must have made it happen, but one cannot tell which. As the Chorus of *Agamemnon* will in a different context ask, "What do we find brought to a conclusion without Zeus? Which of these events is not divinely accomplished?" Throughout it all no attempt is made to explain why *any* god might want to act in such a way. A further complication is that to blame a god does not mean that the human characters are absolved from blame. Xerxes misjudged the situation, and "did not understand the trick of Themistocles and the resentment of the gods".

In his final long speech the Messenger at last gives a name to an individual god; on the long homeward march through Thrace, Helios, the god of the sun, caused most of the men to drown as they tried to cross the ice on the river Strymon. The event is almost certainly the invention of Aeschylus himself, who in this play, as I have tried to show elsewhere, drew heavily on the *Odyssey* and the long tradition of 'homecoming' (*nostos*) poetry for the details of his plot. The hero regularly returns unescorted and alone. In the *Odyssey* he has gradually lost all his ships and men. In *Persians* the entrance of Xerxes at the end of the play, unescorted and alone, marks its dramatic climax. In the *Odyssey* the Sun is understandably angry because the last of Odysseus' men have eaten his cattle. Xerxes loses most of his men, not because Aeschylus seriously wants to warn his audience that the sun can be dangerous, but because he provides a convenient explanation for Xerxes' solitary arrival. Moreover, the imagery of light and darkness has been prominent throughout the play. The Messenger's account of the sea-battle begins with the darkness of the preceding night, in which the Persians waste their energy by fruitlessly sailing up and down. Sunrise sees the appearance of the victorious Greeks, and sunset brings us back to the defeated Persians. Light belongs to the Greeks, darkness to the Persians. In the account of the sea-battle the sun is not explicitly described as a god, but the link between the two events is unmistakable.

With the entrance of the splendidly attired godlike Ghost of Darius from the Underworld a serious attempt is at last made to

explain *why* all this has happened. Darius's principal role in the play is to provide a contrast between his successes and his son's failures. If anyone is qualified to tell us the reason(s) for Xerxes' failure, and to provide for the audience an appropriate 'moral', surely it is this Ghost. Firstly, on the way to Greece Xerxes constructed a bridge of boats to carry his army over the Hellespont. This might seem not to be a particularly immoral procedure, but Darius tells us that it has offended Poseidon, the god of the sea (as well as all the other gods) by infringing upon his divine prerogative. Can it be a coincidence that the Sun God and Poseidon are the two principal divine enemies of both Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and of Xerxes here?

The moral word *hybris*, which is not a common Aeschylean term, has only two occurrences in *Persians*, both of them in the Ghost's final speech. It is a difficult word to define, but I take it basically to describe conduct that is intended to humiliate another person or a god, so as to demonstrate one's superiority to him. The first occurrence here presents no problem. The Persians have destroyed the temples of the gods at Athens, and for this they have been rightly punished, and there is more suffering to come (at the battle of Plataea). The second occurrence is more interesting. It takes us back to the beginning of the play, in which the Chorus introduced the idea that success is often followed by failure, but without suggesting that one was the cause of the other. Now, for the first time, Darius seems to be warning us that excessive success is itself immoral and hybristic, because it amounts to claiming a status superior to that of the gods. This, then, might help to explain why Xerxes should not have built his bridge of boats, but not why in real life the building of more orthodox bridges does not seem to offend Poseidon. Theognis and Solon presented a rather different view, and so too does Aeschylus later in an ode of *Agamemnon* in which the Chorus explicitly rejects the doctrine that prosperity by itself is *hybris*; that moral term is to be applied only to the wicked deeds which it often leads to. That seems to happen most often in wealthy houses, which leads to the confusion between cause and effect.

The 'moral' which so many editors have been happy to identify turns out, therefore, to be unsatisfactory. I may be happy for

the gods to punish someone richer than myself for his presumption. But what about myself? Am I to spend my life worrying that I may be about to reach the point at which my success becomes excessive? The Ghost's advice that we should all prevent this by remaining content with what we have, and not striving for more, is not very helpful. Twice in the *parodos* of *Agamemnon* the Chorus voices the proverb that it is through suffering that learning comes. In other words, you cannot tell in advance when you are going to suffer, so the 'moral' is of little practical use. Aeschylus himself hints that we are not to take it too seriously when, near the end of the Messenger-scene, Atossa provides her own explanation for Xerxes' failure: he had set out to avenge the earlier failure of Darius at Marathon, an event almost ignored elsewhere in the play. When, therefore, the Ghost himself appears and boasts of how he never brought disaster to his country, he must be either lying or remarkably forgetful. Is he, despite his splendid appearance, the right person to be preaching sermons on the dangers of excessive prosperity? He has not learnt his own lesson, and neither has the Chorus, who, on the departure of the Ghost, sings an ode which takes us right back to the beginning of the play, as it magnifies and glorifies Darius' success in all of his campaigns, including his sending of his ships across the Aegean sea, to enlarge the empire that he already had. We hear no more of the 'moral', and the play ends with the arrival of Xerxes and a highly emotional lamentation shared by the Chorus and the king. This marks the climax of the play, and, if it teaches the audience anything at all, it is that Greeks and Persians could sympathise with each other in the suffering that is part of the human condition. Probably, alas, it did not take very long before they remembered that the Persians were their enemies.

Eumenides provides a more positive and apparently happy conclusion to its trilogy. It is good that lawcourts are to replace the vendetta, and that with the return home of Orestes the house of Atreus may at last be expected to enjoy peace. However, surprisingly little is made of Orestes' departure, and we hardly notice him as he leaves the stage. All the interest of the patriotic Athenian audience is now on the Erinyes, as after much persua-

sion on the part of Athena they finally agree, on this occasion, to give up their pursuit of their enemy, Orestes, and to bless Athens instead. The audience must have enjoyed the procession in which, dressed in their splendid new robes, with their new name *Eumenides* (the Kindly Ones) they were escorted off to their new home in Athens. For modern audiences, however, this is probably the most difficult of Aeschylus' plays, and one can understand why in 1911, the entire trilogy having been presented in Munich, *Eumenides* was dropped when the production was moved to Berlin. The original spectators may have been more impressed than we are by Apollo's arguments at Orestes' trial, but some at least must have wondered why the voting was not overwhelmingly in favour of Orestes, so that the matter had to be resolved by Athena's decision that equal voting meant acquittal. This was the system in the fifth-century Athenian lawcourts, and it is more or less the system in Scotland to this day, where there are three possible judgements, 'guilty', 'not guilty', and 'not proven', the last of which means that a proper resolution is impossible. We shall therefore never know what Orestes should have done. Worrying too is the bullying and bribery with which Athena 'persuades' the Chorus to bless, instead of punish, Athens. The promise is conditional, in that it depends on the good behaviour of the city. We thus return to the false idea that good people always enjoy prosperity, and that only the wicked are punished by the gods. Would the ordinary man in Aeschylus' audience in 458 BC think that the Eumenides had kept their promise, or would he be afraid that Athens was in danger of reaching the point at which its prosperity was about to become excessive?

It is impossible to gauge the amount of attention paid by ordinary Athenians to oracles and to the work of prophets and seers. Probably it varied from person to person. For the tragedian such matters provided a valuable tool in the development of his plot, and in the audience's response to it. It looks as if there was an unwritten agreement that prophets told the truth, and that characters who criticised them for their venality and corruption, a practice that was doubtless not uncommon in real life, were always in the wrong. Thus, when in the *parodos* of *Agamemnon* we are

told that Zeus sent Agamemnon to Troy to punish Paris, but that Artemis, angry for no very clear reason, tried to thwart the operation, and the prophet Calchas declared that, in order to obey Zeus, Agamemnon would have to sacrifice Iphigenia, we are not entitled to answer the notorious question of what he should have done by speculating that Calchas might not have been trustworthy. Later in the play the role of Cassandra is to make the connection between the past, present, and future of this unhappy family. Indeed, she is the only character who is able to do so. Cassandra's predictions in tradition were always true, but nobody ever believed her. Here the Chorus does recognise what she says about the past, and by the end of the scene even accepts that in the immediate future Cassandra herself is about to die. But what is to happen to Agamemnon is too close to the Chorus's own interest for it to face what Cassandra predicts. Throughout all this the audience is kept waiting.

At the end of the prologue of Sophocles' *Antigone* the male audience is probably divided as to whether Creon was right to leave Polyneices' body to lie dead on the ground, or whether Antigone's plan to disobey her uncle, which she reveals to their sister Ismene, was justified. Many probably felt that in a society in which women were largely excluded from public life Antigone had no right to interfere with the decree of the legitimate king, and they would doubtless be horrified at the end of the scene, when Antigone leaves the stage by the door that leads to the outside world where the corpse lies, while Ismene goes into the house, the proper place for a woman. Others would have doubts about the propriety of leaving a corpse lying on the ground, while some, like many modern scholars, would find it hard to make up their minds. As the plot develops, Sophocles makes it ever clearer that Creon is wrong, and Antigone right. The first crucial point comes when Haemon, son of Creon and fiancé of Antigone, reports to Creon that the ordinary people are on Antigone's side, and the second, more important, one, when the prophet Teiresias reveals that so are the gods. Furthermore, by the end of the play Creon himself, having at first refused to listen to Teiresias because all seers are susceptible to bribes, eventually, but too late, changes

his mind. Sophocles could hardly have made it clearer that we too are to agree. At the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus* the hero never regrets having persisted in finding the truth. Antigone is less positive. She has not heard that men and gods are on her side. As she goes to her death, she never quite says that she was wrong to bury Polyneices, or that she regrets having done so. All her thoughts are for her suffering. What she wants to know is why, if the gods are on her side, are they letting it happen? Do we in the audience know the answer? In this play Creon suffers for doing wrong, Antigone for doing right, and Ismene for doing nothing.

Even more complicated is the end of *Medea*. Throughout the play Euripides has built up the audience's sympathy for the foreign woman who is so far from home. Her husband, Jason, the Greek man, has become more and more insufferable. We are, however, forced to think again when, to secure her vengeance, at the very end Medea murders her children, and it turns out surprisingly that Jason really loved them. Less surprisingly, Medea recognises that she has hurt herself too. What is worrying is that her grandfather, the Sun God, sends his chariot to rescue Medea from Jason's revenge. Everybody in this play suffers, but why do the gods take the side of a woman who can murder her own children?

At the end of *Bacchae* Cadmus, who has supported Dionysus, but for the wrong reasons, is punished by the god. It seems at least a little unfair, and we may well share the Chorus's sympathy for him at the end. But for most people in real life not everything in life is tragic. Not long after the production of Euripides' play Aristophanes in *Frogs* presented a very different Dionysus, one at whom it was possible to laugh, without being punished for it. It all depends, but on what?

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Abstract

The idea that Greek tragedy is essentially didactic, that it aims to present in particular the simple, and comforting, moral idea that the gods

always punish the wicked and reward the well-behaved, should be rejected, on the grounds that it is neither tragic nor true. We should not take it for granted that the behaviour of onstage gods or what is said about them by the human characters coincides with the beliefs and expectations of real-life people. What matters is the contribution that they make to the construction of a dramatic plot and to the manipulation of an audience's reactions and sympathies. The tragedians may invite their audiences to consider such matters as the relationship between divine and human responsibility, and why it is that the gods so often allow good people to suffer, while bad people do not, but they rarely, if ever, provide a satisfactory solution. Why should we expect them to do the impossible? Such questions are deliberately left open at the end of a play.

Keywords

Gods in Greek tragedy – Aeschylus – Sophocles – Euripides – Aristophanes