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Redefining deity in Athenian tragedy

1. *Presocratic philosophy*

The relation between the two momentous Greek inventions of presocratic philosophy and Athenian tragedy has, relative to its importance, inspired surprisingly little scholarship. The theme of this paper, the redefinition of deity in Athenian tragedy, must be understood in the context of its earlier radical redefinition in presocratic philosophy.

Fundamental to presocratic philosophy is a cosmos that does not require personal gods. Such a radical and unprecedented revolution in thought does not happen by itself, and I have argued in detail¹ that an important factor was the unprecedented *monetisation* that exactly accompanied it. This conclusion will be important for our discussion of tragedy, and so I will here briefly recapitulate the argument for it.

The argument was based on three considerations that are independent of each other. Firstly, central instruments of social integration tend, at least in pre-modern societies, to be consciously or unconsciously projected onto the cosmos (cosmized)². In the absence of experimentation, telescopes, microscopes etc., the unknown can be envisaged only as the known. The trans-individual comprehensiveness of social power is reified as transcendent. This is obvious with the patriarchal monarchy of Zeus, and it would be surprising if it did not occur with the new instrument of social integration, impersonal but seemingly all-pervasive and all-powerful, coined money, that began to pervade the *polis* from the early sixth century BCE.

1 SEAFORD 2004.

2 For the phenomenon of cosmization see BERGER 1967.

Secondly, the first substance to function simultaneously as a general measure of value, a general means of payment and of exchange, and a general store of value, with conventional value distinct from its intrinsic (metallic) value, was the coined money that first became generally used early in sixth-century BCE Ionia, of which the commercial centre was Miletos. And so the revolution in thought marked by presocratic cosmology occurred at exactly the same time and in exactly the same place as the first society in history to be pervasively monetised.

Thirdly, the presocratic universe is astonishingly similar in various respects to money, for instance in the idea that the universe is a single entity that is transformed from and into everything else, and in the increasingly greater abstraction of the single entity. (This does not of course mean that it *is* money or is *reducible* to money).

Inasmuch as the new power of money is both universal and impersonal, its cosmization produces a universe without personal gods, although the impersonal power that controls it may be imagined as divine. But two qualifications are in order. The belief in a universe without personal gods (a) was probably held only by a small minority of the population, and (b) may be *synthesised* with traditional belief in deity.

An example of (b), of the ambivalence between the traditional and the new conception of god, is the statement of Herakleitos that «One thing (ἓν), the only wise, does not and does wish to be called by the name of Zeus» (VS 22 B 32). Another example of (b) is provided by Xenophanes, who states that

[there is] one god, greatest among gods and humans, similar to mortals neither in body nor in mind [...] All of him sees, all of him thinks, all of him hears [...]. Always he stays in the same place without moving [...] but without effort he shakes all things with the thought of his mind³,

whereas in the *Iliad* Zeus merely shakes Olympos by nodding (1.528-30). It also seems that Xenophanes regarded his deity as

3 VS 21 B 23; VS 21 B 24; VS 21 B 25; VS 21 B 26.

permanently unchanging, in some sense identical with the universe, and self-sufficient⁴. Despite the radical newness of this idea of god, he remains to some extent personal, and the traditional metrical language of “greatest among gods and humans” (ἐν τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισι μέγιστος) associates him with a traditional conception of god.

2. *Zeus in Aeschylus*

The pervasion of Athens by coined money occurred later than of Ionia, and was a precondition for the remarkable Athenian invention, towards the end of the sixth century BCE, of tragedy. The influence of monetisation is detectable on the genesis, form and content of tragedy⁵. The contradiction we have found in Xenophanes between the traditional (personal) and the new (impersonal) conception of deity is more obvious in a fragment of Aeschylus (fr. 99 *TrGF*), in which Zeus is said to have abducted Europa without moving from his place and without effort (ἀὐτοῦ μένων ἄμοχθος): the bull mentioned in the (textually corrupt) previous line is therefore presumably not Zeus himself (as in other versions of this myth) but merely his *agent*. Similarly, in the parodos of Aeschylus’ *Suppliants* the Chorus both refer frequently to the myth of Zeus impregnating the errant Io (*Suppl.* 16-18, 40-48, 117) and maintain that “everything of the gods is effortless (πᾶν ἄπονον δαίμονίω). Seated he somehow carries out his will from where he is, from his holy seat” (ll. 100-3).

Such a synthesis of traditionally mobile and newly unmoving new deity is facilitated by the fact that monetisation reshapes ideas not only of the cosmos but also of the power of the individual person. Money embodies impersonal power to acquire any goods and services (including military violence) from anybody, anywhere, at any time; and so it makes unnecessary *in principle* traditional forms of obligation such as kinship, voluntary requit-

⁴ VS 21 B 14; VS 21 A 12; VS 21 A 28-37: for discussion and references to scholarship see SEAFORD 2004, 211.

⁵ All this is argued in detail in SEAFORD 2012.

al (reciprocity), loyalty to the centre, and respect for the sacred. In reality of course such forms of obligation persist in monetised economies, but tend to be weakened. The power of money seems to be impersonal and invisible (to reside somehow in the money), and is deployed merely by the will (or thought) of its owner alone, *independently of any personal connection*. Money enhances individual *self-sufficiency*, most prominently in the new kind of ruler called *tyrannos*. The Xenophanean god is a synthesis of the impersonal power of money (invisible, universal, unchanging) with the personal self-sufficiency of the monetised *tyrannos*, who enacts his solitary will (through the impersonal power of silver money wherever it is accepted) without having to move from the centre to create or confirm personal connections.

Such self-sufficiency can of course be viewed negatively, as isolation. For instance, Zeus in the *Prometheus Bound* is repeatedly called *tyrannos*, and indeed embodies the isolation of the *tyrannos*: he is stubborn, a law unto himself, and suspicious of his intimates (*φίλοι*), tramples on the principles of reciprocity and of kinship, obtains power through *intelligence*, and regards himself as having no need of the offerings provided by humans, whom he intends to destroy⁶. None of this occurs in the premonetary version of the same story in Hesiod. The negative features of self-sufficiency are even more marked in the human *tyrannoí* of tragedy⁷: their unprecedented isolation is created by intra-familial violence and divine hostility, and are also sometimes portrayed as much concerned with money⁸ – in contrast of course to the god Zeus (though at Aristophanes' *Wealth* 130-1 it is humourously but acutely observed that Zeus rules the gods because he has the most silver money). I will return to this theme in the next section.

The parodos of *Agamemnon* describes the sacrifice of Iphigenia demanded by Artemis. In the epic version (the lost *Cypria*) Agamemnon shoots a stag and boasts that he is a better hunter

6 SEAFORD 2003 = SEAFORD 2018, 90-110. See THOMSON 1932, 7-10; SAÏD 1985.

7 As well as of historiography and of philosophy: SEAFORD 2003. A living individual in tragedy is never called ἥρως (hero), but very frequently *tyrannos*.

8 E.g. Soph. *OT* 124-5, 380-9, 541-2; *Ant.* 295-301, 1047, 1055; Eur. *Ba.* 255-7, 812; see further SEAFORD 2003.

than Artemis, and it is this that angers the goddess and leads to her demand for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia as the price for favourable winds. In Aeschylus however this motivation is missing. Instead, at Aulis a portent occurs in which eagles devour a pregnant hare, which is interpreted by the seer Kalchas as indicating the eventual capture of Troy, but also the sacrifice of Iphigeneia (and subsequent conflicts). The impression thereby given that Artemis' angry demand arises from the portent at Aulis of the eagles' feast. Whatever appropriateness we may find in the symbolic opposition between eagles' feast and the sacrifice of a daughter⁹, Artemis' demand seems irrationally cruel.

The portent, as indicating eventual victory but also human sacrifice, is *ambivalent*: "favourable but to be blamed" (Ag. 145 δεξιὰ μὲν κατάμομφα δὲ). "Cry Sorrow! Sorrow! But let the good prevail!" (Ag. 159): with this dramatic expression of ambivalence the Chorus break off to utter, in a different metre, a hymn to Zeus, followed by an anxious and partial description of the horrible intra-familial sacrifice. It is the hymn to Zeus that contains a remarkable redefinition of deity which comes immediately after manifestation of its irrational cruelty, a sequence that we will also find below in Euripides' *Herakles*.

After expressing a doubt about the nature of the deity (a commonplace of prayer) the Chorus utter the following words (Aesch. Ag. 163-6):

οὐκ ἔχω προσεικάσαι
 πάντ' ἐπισταθμώμενος
 πλὴν Διός, εἰ τὸ μάταν ἀπὸ φροντίδος ἄχθος
 χρεὶ βαλεῖν ἐτητύμως

I have nothing to liken him to (or to him),
 putting everything on the scales,
 except Zeus, if from my mind the futile weight
 I am to cast genuinely.

9 SEAFORD 1989.

This passage has never been understood by the commentators and translators. The verb ἐπισταθμᾶσθαι, which occurs nowhere else, refers specifically to *weighing*, not – as it is often translated – ‘measuring’. Σταθμόν in classical Athenian Greek regularly means a *weight*, and the simple verb σταθμᾶσθαι can mean to weigh (e.g. Aristoph. *Lys.* 797), with the added ἐπι- meaning putting *onto* the scales. That the passage concerns weighing is then put beyond doubt by ‘weight’ (ἄχθος) in the next line. The correct translation is given by Fraenkel, but even he fails to see that the image of scales suits the balance of good and evil just expressed by Kalchas, and that the association of scales with Zeus must owe something to the operation of scales by Zeus in the *Iliad*, where they determine victory in battle¹⁰. These scales of Zeus were adopted by Aeschylus as a central theme in his (lost) *Psychostasia*, and are invoked at critical moments in his *Suppliants* (ll. 403, 405, 823), just as they are invoked at a critical moment in the narrative here in *Agamemnon*.

In two passages of the *Iliad* (ll. 8.69-72; 22.209-19) the fall of one side of the divine scales is caused by the (respective weights of) the two κῆρες (fates) put on the scales by Zeus. In another (19.223-4) it is caused by Zeus himself (κλίνησι). But what does our *Agamemnon* passage mean? In Homer Zeus may incline the scales, presumably by pressure on one side. Aeschylus develops this idea in a somewhat new direction. I claim¹¹ that the idea of an omnipotent Zeus who outweighs all things is influenced, as is the god of Xenophanes, by the imagined omnipotence of abstract monetary value¹².

In premonetary societies an instrument for the *impersonal* regulation of fair exchange is the balance (scales). And so the social authority of scales may be projected onto the cosmos, as in Egypt, and to a lesser extent in Greece. With the advent of coined money, commodities may still be weighed, but now so as to ascertain their universal abstract value. In general the impersonal power to control exchange by the power to equalise seems to belong no longer

¹⁰ *Iliad* 8.69-70; 14.99; 16.658; 19.223-4; 22.209-19.

¹¹ This develops and contextualises my argument to this effect in SEAFORD 2010.

¹² SEAFORD 2004, 162-5, 214-6.

to scales but to universal abstract value, which is embodied not only in commodities but also in coins, which do not need to be weighed. Universal abstract value is difficult to imagine other than as a *thing*, a divine power-entity: all the commodities that you may put on the scales cannot outweigh it.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that what I have translated 'liken' (προσεικάσαι) must also suggest *equivalence*¹³. To the extent that Zeus is imagined as universal abstract value, there is – firstly – nothing that can be *likened* to him, and – secondly – no amount of commodities (on the scales) that can be *equivalent* to him. The new phenomenon of universal abstract value is imagined as a *thing*, which is both *unlike* all other things and *more valuable* than all other things. This subjection of the traditional omnipotence of the Homeric scales to the new omnipotence of money reappears – in a different guise – in the very next choral song: Ares at Troy is «gold-changer of bodies, and holding the scales in the battle», who in exchange for bodies gives mere dust: cremation is expressed as monetised exchange of large for small (gold-dust), with the implication that war is fought for omnipotent money¹⁴.

This radical redefinition of Zeus by Aeschylus, like the Xenophanean, does not simply eliminate the traditional anthropomorphic conception. It is qualified in the antistrophe and strophe that follow: the permanent victory of Zeus as the third ruler of the world, and his establishment of the principle of learning through suffering, both prefigure the permanent resolution of conflict in the third play of the trilogy¹⁵. The relation of deity to mortals will be reconfigured amid final rejoicing. The Chorus in their anxiety arising from the concrete horror of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia have sought for a new, more abstract and universal conception

13 There is nothing similar in Greek literature, except for the almost identical οὐκ ἔχοιμι' ἄν εικάσαι in the next play of the trilogy (Ch. 518), which is generally translated «compare» but in fact must refer to *equivalence*: SEAFORD 2010, 186 n. 20. Εικάζειν could mean to estimate quantity or weight: PSI 5.522; P.Gurob 8.14: both 3rd cent. BCE. Cfr. Eur. *El.* 559 (numismatic).

14 An idea familiar to the Athenians: *Il.* 1.165-8; 9.330-3; *Hdt.* 6.132; *TrGF Adesp.* 129; *Thuc.* 7.82; *Arist. Pol.* 1258a 11-5.

15 On the importance of the number three in the trilogy, especially for ending conflict, and for its connection with Pythagoreanism, see SEAFORD 2012, 300-3.

of Zeus: this belongs already to the dramatic process of reconfiguring relations with deity. The complex manner in which Zeus embodies the human progress enacted in the *Oresteia* I have described in detail elsewhere¹⁶.

We have already seen in the parodos of another Aeschylean play (*Suppliants*) a similar transition, from concrete anthropomorphism (Zeus' impregnation of Io) to the invocation by the Danaids of a more abstract Zeus, as well as their invocation, during their subsequent violent abduction, of his scales together with his universal power as the god without whom nothing can by mortals be *completed* (*Suppl.* 821-4; 21-92; 138-9; 208; 525-6).

As such, he is the god from which the Danaids must ask for an end to their suffering. Although his intention is obscure (*Suppl.* 87-95; 1057-8), he can effortlessly enact it without moving from his seat (ll. 100-3). The play ends with declarations that his mind is *unlimited* (*Suppl.* 1049; 1058). The abstraction of Zeus consists of being imagined as ubiquitous *mind*. Similarly Xenophanes' god is pure subject ("All of him sees, all of him thinks, all of him hears"), is in some sense identical with the universe, and "shakes all things effortlessly by his thought of his mind".

So too in the hymn to Zeus in *Agamemnon* Zeus is associated with *mind*. To the extent that his power is imagined as the power of (monetary) abstract value, he is unique, and beyond equivalence with (the value of) all particular commodities that might be put on the scales. Inasmuch as this inequality is expressed as of weights on the scales, the weight that this abstract Zeus outweighs (lifts or casts off) is also abstract: it is in the *mind*. The abstract (incorporeal) component of a person is mind. With the historical advance of abstraction (in value and in deity), the scales of Zeus have here been introjected into the mind so as to relieve anxiety. An intermediate stage occurred in Aeschylus' lost *Psychostasia*, in which it is ψυχαί (souls) that are weighed against each other on the scales, not – as in Homer – the (concrete) κῆρες of the warriors (with victor he whose κῆρ is the lighter)¹⁷.

¹⁶ SEAFORD 2012, 312-5.

¹⁷ ll. 8.69; 22.212; cfr. 14.99; 16.658.

The implication of our discussion is that monetary value, deity, and mind may each be imagined as invisibly ubiquitous (even uniting all things into itself). Because I have elsewhere described how these three constructions of universality interconnect¹⁸, I will confine myself here to a single illustration, from the *Derveni Papyrus*. This requires a new section.

3. *Redefinition of deity and mystery-cult*

The Derveni Commentator cites from an Orphic narrative poem a passage in which everything is absorbed into Zeus, adding a comment that identifies with each other the universalities of deity, mind, and value (xvi.9-12):

in saying this he makes clear that mind (νοῦς) itself being alone is always worth all things (πάντων ἄξιος), as if all else were nothing. For it would not be possible for the present things to exist, if they were without the mind.

The Commentator identifies Zeus here with mind, elsewhere with air (xvii.5; xxiii.3), Moira with breath (xviii.3), Okeanos with air (xxiii.3), and Rhea, Hera, and Demeter with Earth (xxii). He frequently calls the narrative poem riddling or allegorizing¹⁹. The presentation of fundamental truths in a riddling manner was for centuries a feature of mystic initiation, by which the initiands might be confused before accessing the truth²⁰. The Commentator, after saying that Orpheus (author of the narrative poem) intended to say “great things in riddles”, explains this by adding that ἱερ[ολογ]εῖται μὲν οὖν (vii.6-7): the Commentator regards himself as revealing the mystic truths contained enigmatically in the narrative, which he regards as a riddling ἱερὸς λόγος as uttered in mystic initiation²¹. Like Herakleitos (whom

¹⁸ On the introjection and cosmic projection of monetary value in both Greece and India see SEAFORD 2019.

¹⁹ vii.5-6; ix.10, 12; x.1; xiii.6; xvii.13.

²⁰ Source references: SEAFORD 2004, 226.

²¹ For the ἱερὸς λόγος uttered in mystic initiation see e.g. Hdt. 2.51.4; many further

he quotes), he regards mystery-cult as enigmatically containing wisdom that is inaccessible even to its participants²². Indeed, the λόγος of Herakleitos is influenced by the style and doctrine of mystic initiation²³. In Herakleitos, as in tragedy, the traditional language of ritual is used to express a new (impersonal) conception of deity: in Herakleitos the enigmatic language of mystic revelation, in tragedy the formula of doubt about deity in prayer.

In Euripides' *Bacchae* (ll. 274-85) Teiresias identifies Demeter and Dionysos with the fundamental benefits respectively of the dry (cereals) and the wet (wine). Dodds in his *Commentary* on the passage attributes it to the influence of the sophist Prodicus, adding that "it has been thought surprising that he [Euripides] should put words which recall this 'atheistic' doctrine into the mouth of the pious Teiresias". However, Teiresias' exposition belongs to the tradition of mystic allegory: it is just one of the numerous allusions (all missed by Dodds) to mystic initiation throughout the play (for instance, in the next scene the enigmatic nature of mystic revelation is evoked by Dionysos)²⁴. Teiresias then goes on to explain the myth of Dionysos being sewn into Zeus' thigh (μηρός) as deriving etymologically from Zeus giving a fragment of the aether to Hera as a hostage (ὄμηρος). This myth of the double birth was central to mystic initiation, and the implied identification of Dionysos with a cosmological element (*aether*), and perhaps even the entirety of Teiresias' odd explanation may derive from the kind of mystic allegorisation that we have documented.

Our interim conclusion is that monetisation was an important factor in the redefinition of deity in presocratic cosmology and in at least one passage of tragedy, and that mystery-cult provided a traditional model for the redefinition of deity in cos-

references in SEAFORD 2004, 233 n. 18; PAPADOPOULOU, MUELLNER 2014.

22 Columns vii and xx (cfr. μύστης in vi.8); cfr. Heraclit. VS 22 B 1, VS 22 B 14, VS 22 B 17, VS 22 B 50.

23 SEAFORD 1986; D. L. 9.16 (AP 9.540); e.g. Heraclit. VS 22 B 67 ὁ θεὸς ἡμέρη εὐφρόνη, χειμῶν θέρος, πόλεμος εἰρήνη, κόρος λιμός («god is day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger»).

24 Eur. *Ba.* 461-508, 860-1; SEAFORD 1996, 188-9, 217.

mology and in tragedy. It is therefore worth noting the importance of both monetisation and mystery-cult in the genesis of Athenian tragedy²⁵.

4. *From Aeschylus to Euripides*

I promised above to return to the tragic theme of the human *tyrannos* isolated by intra-familial violence and divine hostility. One of the many examples is Herakles in Euripides' *Herakles*²⁶, subjected by Hera, Iris and Lyssa to a frenzy in which he kills his own family. He is then dissuaded from suicide by Theseus, who – besides inviting him to Athens where he will have purification and an honoured place – points out that the gods commit adultery and obtain τυραννίδες (tyrannies) by binding their fathers and yet live on Olympos. Herakles accepts the invitation to Athens, but expresses disbelief in the divine crimes mentioned by Theseus, adding that “god needs nothing, if he is truly god: these are the wretched stories of poets” (Eur. *HF* 1345-6).

The self-sufficiency of deity, first expressed it seems by Xenophanes, reappears also among Euripides' Athenian contemporaries²⁷. What is it doing here in the mouth of Herakles? An obvious effect is the tension between the noble human vision of Herakles and the irrational divine vindictiveness that has been directed against him. Equally obvious, from a broader perspective, is the tension between traditional and new conceptions of deity. What has not been noted is that these are the same tensions that we found in the parodos of *Agamemnon*.

But there is a significant difference. The contrast between the redefinition of deity and the immediately preceding violence does not express, as it does in Aeschylus, anxious aspiration to a divine configuration that will indeed emerge in the course of the drama. Later in the play drama Herakles says (*HF* 1263-4):

25 SEAFORD 2012.

26 Herakles as *tyrannos*: l. 809, etc.

27 Antipho Soph. *VS* 87 B10; Xen. *Mem.* 1.4.2, 10.

Ζεὺς δ', ὅστις ὁ Ζεὺς, πολέμιόν μ' ἐγένεατο
Ἥραι.

Zeus, whoever Zeus is, begot me as an enemy
for Hera.

This resembles, even in its wording, the doubt about the nature of Zeus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. But Herakles is talking about his own father! The result is a tragic sense of irremediable human ignorance of fundamental (divine) and even intimate realities. It is in vain that at the end of the *Bacchae* Kadmos states that gods should not be like mortals in their anger (l. 1348). As Orestes puts it at *Orestes* 418,

δουλεύομεν θεοῖς, ὅτι ποτ' εἰσὶν οἱ θεοί.

We are slaves to the gods, whatever the gods are.

When in *Troades* Menelaos seems intent on punishing Helen, Hekabe reacts with a joyful prayer to Zeus (Eur. *Tro.* 884-8):

ᾧ γῆς ὄχημα κάπι γῆς ἔχων ἔδραν,
ὅστις ποτ' εἶ σύ, δυστόπαστος εἰδέναι,
Ζεὺς, εἴτ' ἀνάγκη φύσεος εἴτε νοῦς βροτῶν,
προσηυξάμην σε· πάντα γὰρ δὲ ἀψόφου
βαίνων κελεύθου κατὰ δίκην τὰ θνήπ' ἄγεις.

O support of earth, and with a seat on earth, whoever you are, hard to guess at, Zeus, whether necessity of nature or mind of mortals, I hereby pray to you: for moving on a soundless path you lead all mortal things to justice.

As elsewhere, the doubt (traditional in the prayer) about the nature of deity allows the introduction of new and sophisticated redefinitions of deity. The redefinitions are *comprehensive* both individually and – even more so – as an aggregate. This extreme comprehensiveness contrasts with the reality that Hekabe and her family suffer but Helen will in fact prosper. There is pathos in the fundamental ignorance of sufferers, and *irresolvable contradiction* between new ideas of deity and the tragic action.

In Aeschylus there is no such irresolveability: the contrast between divine violent revenge and the comfort provided by the uniqueness of Zeus is articulated as a *transition* from the former to the latter – in the trilogy as a whole, but also even within the hymn to Zeus: the image of scales is followed immediately by the vignette of violent displacement of gods (Ouranos and Kronos) ending with the permanent victory of Zeus, who puts men on the path to learning through suffering; even the unwilling learn self-limitation (σωφροσύνη), and there is “violent *benefit* (χάρσις) from the gods” (ll. 168-83).

Aeschylus’ Danaid trilogy seems in this respect to be similar. Just as the resolution of conflict in the *Oresteia* is the victory of Zeus (*Eumenides* 973, etc.), achieved by the eloquence of Athena, so too the praise of Zeus in *Suppliants* probably looks forward to the (lost) ending of the trilogy, in which it seems that his power of completion was finally embodied in the permanent reconciliation of the genders in marriage, achieved by the eloquence of Aphrodite²⁸. In both trilogies there is a transition from concrete to abstract also in the sense that visibly anthropomorphic deities argue for relatively abstract principles: the Furies for the principle of the desirability of the mean or limit in everything (*Eum.* 526-30), Athena for the priority of the male in everything (except for herself being unmarried: *Eum.* 737), Aphrodite for the universal fertility embodied in the impregnation of earth by sky (*Danaids*, fr. 44 TrGF).

This distinction between Aeschylus and Euripides can be correlated with the development of ‘philosophy’. The lifetime of Aeschylus (c. 525-456 BCE) coincided roughly with the flourishing of political Pythagoreanism, and I have shown elsewhere how profound is its influence on his plays²⁹. Euripides (c. 485-407/6 BCE) wrote most of his extant dramas in a different intellectual environment, of which a symptom was the influence of the visit of the sophist Gorgias to Athens in 427 BCE. The shockingly paradoxical self-defence of Helen in Euripides’ *Troades* is often

28 SEAFORD 2012, 145-9, 314.

29 SEAFORD 2012, 281-315.

compared to Gorgias' *Defence of Helen*. But my point here is about the transition from the Pythagorean to the Gorgianic. Among the profound influences of Pythagoreanism on Aeschylus is the idea of the *mediation* of oppositions (contradictions)³⁰. The extant fragments of Gorgias, by contrast, privilege the *irresolueability* of contradiction: logic and rhetoric are deployed to demonstrate that what everybody knows to be true (that something exists, that Helen was culpable) is false: we are left with the irresolveability of this fundamental contradiction, along with the *reductiones ad absurdum* (i.e. irresolvable contradictions) along the way³¹. Similarly, we have seen in Euripidean drama a fundamental and irresolvable contradiction, between some human ideas of deity and their reality as manifested in the tragic action³².

This transition must be understood *historically*. I confine myself here to indicating two factors. The first is the catastrophic dispersal of the Pythagoreans in southern Italy, probably a few years after the death of Aeschylus³³. This ended their dominance – and perhaps even their activity – as a *political community*. Inasmuch as political Pythagoreanism represented the ideology of civic coherence in the newly monetised *polis*, and so was influential well beyond southern Italy (for instance on Aeschylus)³⁴, its sudden collapse was likely to have substantial consequences.

The second historical factor is the contrast in the political trajectory of Athens in the lifetimes of Aeschylus and Euripides. When at Athens tyranny was replaced by democracy, and tragedy instituted at the City Dionysia, Aeschylus was on the verge of manhood; and as a young man he participated in the defeat of

³⁰ SEAFORD 2012, 281-315.

³¹ E.g., «[...] If, therefore, someone thinks that chariots race in the sea, even if he does not see them, he should believe that there are chariots racing in the sea. But this is absurd. Therefore, the existent is not an object of thought and is not apprehended» (*On Nature or the Nonexistent* 82).

³² This is *not* to endorse the widespread idea that the *action* of Euripidean drama embodies irresolvable contradiction. In *Bacchae*, for instance, though Kadmos' idea of the gods cannot be reconciled with the reality, the contradictions within the (aetiological) myth are (no less than in the *Oresteia*) completely resolved by the founding of the *polis* cult, which manifestly should never have been rejected.

³³ MINAR 1942, 77-8; SEAFORD 2012, 282.

³⁴ SEAFORD 2012, 282-312.

the Persians that greatly increased Athenian prestige and power, an increase that continued throughout his lifetime.

Most of Euripides' extant plays, on the other hand, were produced during the long stalemate of the Peloponnesian war, during which, Thucydides observes, practically the whole of Greece was disturbed (πᾶν ὡς εἰπεῖν τὸ Ἑλληνικὸν ἐκινήθη) by civil conflict (Thuc. 3.82), having just given as an example the intra-familial murder and sacrilege in Corcyra in 427 BCE. The kind of creatively optimistic cosmology that accompanied (and probably facilitated) the political flourishing of Pythagoreanism coincided with the flourishing of Athens in the first half of the fifth century, where it was accordingly more likely to be embraced in the first half than in the last quarter of the century. In general I believe that the representation of contradictions in philosophy and drama can be correlated with variety in *socio-historical* contradiction, but must postpone demonstration of this generalisation to another time.

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the redefinition of deity in Greek tragedy by means of a comparison with the beginning of Greek philosophy. Aeschylean and Euripidean concepts of deity will be interpreted through, and framed within, the philosophical context of presocratic thinking, and mystery-cults.

KEYWORDS

Aeschylus – Euripides – Derveni papyrus – deity – gods – presocratic philosophy – mystery-cults

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