

EURIPIDES AND THE DIVINE

PIETRO PUCCI, *Euripides' Revolution under Cover. An Essay*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca / London 2016. Pp. 235. ISBN 9781501700613.

THE REPRESENTATION of the gods in the extant poetic texts of Greek literature has gained attention among academics. This is testified by works such as *Gods and Religion in Hellenistic Poetry* (Groningen 2012) or *The Gods of Greek Hexameter Poetry* (Stuttgart 2016). Pucci joins the debate with his last book on Euripides, offering a highly original insight into Euripides' poetry and the Euripedean assessment of the divine world. *Contra*, for instance, Kovacs 1987 and Mastronarde 2010, Pucci argues that Euripides should not be considered as traditional poet; Euripides was not even simply an innovative poet, inclined towards sophistic ideas (cf. e.g. the seminal work of Goldhill 1986, 161ff. and 233ff.)¹. On the contrary, according to Pucci, Euripides starts a "revolution under cover": again and again, he includes gods as a means of conveying a systematic criticism of the traditional anthropomorphic view of the divine [ch. 1].

The undermining of religious thinking and the fostering of an Age of Reason *ante litteram* progress through the narrative strategy of the conflation (or split) of the divine image with a cosmic principle that deprives the gods of their personal intentions and limits their power in favor of human self-realisation and individual wisdom (*sophia*). In the *Alcestis*, for example, Thanatos does not bear any supernatural features and, being Death, embodies Ananke (Necessity) [chs. 2-3, esp. pp. 8-11]. *Alcestis* and *Admetus* break

1. D. Kovacs, *The Heroic Muses: Studies in the Hippolytus and Hecuba of Euripides* (Baltimore 1987); D. Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides* (Cambridge 2010); S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1986).

the rules of Necessity and undermine its constraining force: out of love for her husband, Alcestis is ready to die for Admetus; after Alcestis' death, Admetus does not fear death anymore, but loves it (866-867). In the *Medea*, Medea is an empowered subject, whose *sophia* debunks the social inequality of male control over women through sex and marriage and its cultural legitimization through poetry [ch. 4]. Medea represents her revenge as a proof that women are the wisest creators (*sophotatai tektones*) of evil (401-409). The chorus endorses Medea's vengeful intentions and reverses the male stereotypes of the female mind that Medea appropriates for herself: men are deceitful beings, and Medea deserves to acquire glory through song, in contrast to the fact that Apollo did not grant women the sound of the lyre, since their songs would have been about men abusing the female race (415-430). If humankind, then, had a female song, women would probably not suffer the violent constraints that marriage imposes on them. Towards the end of the play, Medea represents the conflation of a mortal and a divine figure: when the Sun does not condemn her for the murder of her children, but brings her to Athens, we have the impression that Medea, touched by the rays of the sun (1251-1254), has reached "a kind of balance between the violence she suffered and the violence she committed" (pp. 28-29).

Another argument by Pucci deserves the attention of Euripidean scholars. The enlightened self, enabled by *sophia* to resist the constraints of social life, is nonetheless a fragile subjectivity exposed to the dangers inherent in sexual desire for the other. Erotic passion is an uncontrollable force sent to human beings by Aphrodite; or, the expression of the self's desire [chs. 7-10]. In the *Troades*, Helen affirms that Aphrodite was responsible for her adulterous love for Paris, because Aphrodite came with him to Sparta (940ff.). Hecuba, instead, states that Helena's love is nothing but the effects of her sexual desire for Paris: when she saw Paris, her mind turned into Aphrodite (988). For Hecuba, then, Aphrodite "is conflated with a cosmic force, that of sex" (p. 42). In the *Hippolytus*, Aphrodite affirms that she made Phaedra fall in love with Hippolytus (26-27) and that Phaedra built a temple for her (29-31). But Phaedra never talks about this temple and, throughout her confessions of love, she does not present her love for Hippolytus as a madness and a sickness coming from Aphrodite but as a passion that belongs to her alone. Phaedra's view of erotic love, as her own individual experience of passion and desire, leads the heroine to an uncompromising critique of the poets and their gods. When the nurse justifies sleeping with Hippolytus by mentioning that even Zeus himself had sex with Semele, Phaedra firmly refuses to comply with the poetic and divine

traditional standards [ch. 10]: “she rejects the Nurse’s proposal and Zeus’s mimetic influence, and thus also the poets (451-454) who champion Zeus’s and other gods’ love affairs” (p. 63).

The autonomy of the enlightened self is threatened also by *tyche* (chance) which has the power to upset humans’ fate. The subject, however, can master his/her own life. In the *Troades*, Andromache, now the slave of Neoptolemus, is anguished by the fear that she has to sleep with him: to consent to sexual intercourse with Neoptolemus is to betray her dead husband Hector; to refuse is to be hated by her new spouse. Yet, as Hecuba says (697-700), she should not think of Hector anymore, but please Neoptolemus. Sex becomes for Andromache a means of survival and places her in the role of the mistress of her destiny [chs. 11-13]. In the *Heracles*, the protagonist is in control of his own life. Heracles sees his madness as coming from the forces of Chance and not from Hera (1357). The refusal of the logic of divine revenge allows the hero to live out the virtue of endurance and to enjoy friendship: Heracles chooses to live and to accept Theseus’ hospitality. Heracles’ denial of Hera’s destroying power is grounded on a criticism of the “sad stories” of the poetic tradition, which bring humans to believe that gods behave like humans and control their lives (1340-1346). Such a criticism of the belief in anthropomorphic gods is evident also in the *Electra* and the *Orestes*. In the *Electra*, Orestes recognizes full responsibility for the murder of his mother and condemns Apollo’s oracle as wrong (1177; 1190-1193). In the *Orestes*, the Erinyes are not the vengeful goddesses of the murdered Clytemnestra but the ghosts of Orestes’ remorse. When Menelaus asks Orestes what is wrong with him, the matricidal son attributes his illness to his consciousness (*sunesis*): Orestes is aware of his terrible deeds (396-397). Menelaus, who embodies the traditional *sophia*, according to which the gods are always responsible for murder and madness, does not understand him. Orestes, therefore, explains his hallucinations as the vision of the Erinyes (408). This exchange dramatizes the cultural and religious marginalization of an enlightened understanding of human pain [ch. 14].

The Euripidean criticism of religious thought is consistent with the condemnation of Athenian politics. In the *Suppliant Women*, Theseus illustrates an enlightened theory of human progress according to which a cosmic principle (*sunesis*: intelligence or consciousness) is responsible for human development (201-204). In this light, politics are not about the citizens’ compliance with the state and its sacrificial violence (laws and war) but, rather, about the happiness of humankind. We may understand Theseus’ initial rejection of Adrastus’ plea to bury the Argives’ corpses as the refusal of the

traditional politics of state aggression and war: bravery and clamor (the opposite of *sunesis*) pushed Adrastus to attack Thebes (159-161). When finally Theseus chooses to obey his mother's urge to respect the Panhellenic and divine law of burial (19, 301) and decides to engage in a war with Thebes for the corpses' restitution, the play performs the king's surrender to the violent irrationality of state politics and religion. Aithra convinces Theseus by appealing to his bravery rather than his intelligence (305). She represents the war as the just will of the gods (306-310; 328) but no divine law of burial affirms the legitimacy of war; by sending her son to war, she denies maternal love in the name of her love for her city (343-345; 789). Theseus makes war against Thebes because the laws of the gods appeared in front him (562-563). Yet, the play performs the scandal of Athens' violence against Thebes and its divine legitimization: although Theseus wins, the Epigonoï, with the full support of Athena, declare war again. Staged shortly after the battle of Delion, this is hardly a propaganda play for Athenian imperialism. The audience knew that no gods appeared before the Athenians during the disastrous battle of Delion against Thebes [chs. 15-21].

The failure of state politics and the criticism of divine anthropomorphism are at the core of the tragic discourse of the *Bacchae*, perhaps Euripides' most complex play. Pentheus has excluded Dionysus' cult from Thebes, as he associates Dionysism and his ritual practices with orgiastic female sexuality (217-232). Tiresias tries to persuade the young king to worship Dionysus by explaining that the god, as the inventor of wine, cures human pain (277-283) and is not responsible for the women's lewdness (314-318). But Pentheus does not listen to the seer, and orders the destruction of Tiresias' prophetic seat, when the old man invites him to dance for the god (322-327). Dionysus takes revenge upon Pentheus' scorn: he persuades the king to watch the Bacchantes who, together with his mother Agave, cut him into pieces. Dionysus' revenge exposes the city's loss of political authority. Pentheus agrees to watch the Bacchantes, as he realizes that he has no control over the women, who, against his will, have gathered on Cithaeron to worship Dionysus: since he cannot be the master over women in the city, he tries to control them as their voyeur on the mountain. In addition, after Pentheus' death, Thebes remains without leadership, as Agave and Cadmus go into exile. Dionysus' revenge also reveals the brutality of anthropomorphic gods who, as Cadmus says (1348), should not be revengeful as human beings. In fact, the god is not interested in the recognition of his cult in Thebes: if this were the case, Dionysus would have spared Pentheus' life when, in a flash of lucidity, the king admitted his errors (1118-1121).

Perhaps, even more importantly, the god's victory over Pentheus is simultaneously a defeat: Thebes will not include Dionysiac rites (1383-1387). Through the failure of Pentheus' politics, the play seems to suggest that only an enlightened vision of the divine (here embodied by Tiresias' vision of Dionysus as wine, that is to say as a cosmic principle) can secure political stability and social peace. Yet, by silencing Tiresias, the play seems to affirm that enlightened politics are utopian. City politics in drama, as in reality (Athens persecutes Protagoras and exiles Euripides), condemns enlightened thinking. It may be mistaken, however, to talk about Euripidean pessimism. By envisioning an alternative way of life, enlightened thinking gives hope that peace may be possible [chs. 22-29].

As with all of Pucci's books, *Euripides' revolution* is written in a very elegant style that is never redundant or pretentious. Pucci teaches us once again the magic of writing complex ideas in an accessible way. One does not read *Euripides' revolution*: one dances with its ideas. This book is the intellectual pirouette of a Maestro.

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