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THE "GRAMMAR" OF DIVINE INTERVENTION IN GREEK TRAGEDY

In his great commentary on *Agamemnon*, Eduard Fraenkel noted that "for Greek tragedy there exists also something like a grammar of dramatic technique."¹ There is a set of conventions for conveying what the audience needs to know and cues for how they are to evaluate what they see.² The present paper is a contribution to this grammar. I will argue in brief that comments about the gods, often uttered casually and without any clear evidence and often by minor characters, are a device used by all three tragic poets to hint that the gods are actually at work. They are casual comments only from the characters' point of view: the poet uses them, and the original audience understood them, as serious signposts.

Why this convention might have been useful to a tragic poet is not hard to understand. Virtually all the stories that were dramatized by the tragic poets take place not only on the human level but also on the divine. An epic poet, who enjoys an omniscient point of view, can take his hearers from the battlefield or the feasting hall to Olympus to learn what the gods are planning. He can tell his audience of things being done by gods acting unobserved in the midst of mortals, as when a god spirits someone from the battlefield in a mist. The tragic poet can only rarely portray this divine realm directly. Sometimes a god or gods will appear at the beginning of the play, as in *Ajax* or *Troades*. Sometimes he will appear at the end, as almost invariably in Euripides. Apart from beginnings and ends of plays, however, the poet's options look limited. At best, one would think, he can put on the stage one of the gods' accredited spokesmen, a Teiresias or a Cassandra, or a visitor from the other world, like Darius. But in addition to these, I argue, another means tragic poets have for hinting at the divine background is the casual statement, often by a minor character, that something must be the work of the gods. Such remarks operate on two levels. To the character himself they are pious conjecture, as who should say "How providential that the boiler exploded at night when no one was in the building." But on another level these guesses are intended as guidance to the audience. There is enough of a pattern for us to say, I will argue, that they are a conventional means of conveying important facts to the audience. I argue that such statements become authoritative even in the mouth of characters who are not accredited spokesmen for the divine. When a character in tragedy, even a minor one,³ says something about the gods, we owe it to ourselves to listen carefully because the poet is counting on his audience's response to this convention. Even casual talk about the gods in tragedy is not at all like talk about the weather. And even talk about the weather is almost always talk about the gods.

My brief and necessarily incomplete survey begins with *Persae*. There are numerous comments on the workings of the gods by the Chorus, the Queen, and the Messenger, and these are part of the way in which the divine background to the action is suggested to the audience before being confirmed once and for all by the ghost of Darius. The Chorus early on in their parodos express fear of the *dolomêtis apata theou* (94). The queen is afraid that Persian prosperity, raised up by Darius *with the help of some god*, may be tripped up (164). But the messenger is considerably more pointed. He enters with news of the Persian defeat and after saying (345-7) that the gods have saved the city of Pallas, he goes on to describe how the whole disaster was begun by some *alastor* or evil divinity appearing he

¹ E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus: Agamemnon* (Oxford, 1950), ii 305 on lines 613 f.

² Much worthwhile work has been done in recent decades in an attempt to describe the "grammar" of visible stage action: see O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1977); id., *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London, 1978); W. Steidle, *Studien zum antiken Drama* (Munich, 1968); and M. R. Halleran, *Stagecraft in Euripides* (London, 1985). Other studies, chiefly of formal elements, are listed in the first volume of my *Loeb Euripides* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), p. 47.

³ Minor characters appear very frequently in the discussion below. It would seem that they are especially frequent bearers of this kind of information.

knows not whence (353-4). He implies that this divinity took the shape of a Greek man who brought the lying message that the Greeks were about to flee from Salamis. Xerxes believed him because he did not understand the guile of this Greek or the ill-will of the gods. The Queen agrees with this view: a *daimôn* has deprived the Persians of their wits. Later the messenger describes the storm that froze the Strymon, attributing it to the agency of a god (495-6). There are many other such statements in the rest of the play. The truth of all of them is confirmed, explicitly or implicitly, by the ghost of Darius. But it is worth asking whether these earlier statements, even before their confirmation by Darius, are not meant to have the force almost of authoritative pronouncements. Though none of these earlier speakers can speak from full knowledge and though their statements are merely pious conjecture, the dramatist gives them these lines in order to suggest to the audience something that is in fact true.

Consider next *Agamemnon*. The Herald comes on, delivers his good news, and then is forced to tell of the great storm that sank and dispersed so much of the Greek fleet. In 650-60 he describes the aftermath of the storm, the sea flowering with corpses and wreckage. Then in 661-4 he says, "But as for us and for our ship, some god, no mortal man, stole us away or begged us off from punishment, putting his hand to the tiller, and Tuche the Savior sat upon the ship." From the point of view of this honest fellow, these words are merely conventional piety: "It was a miracle that we survived." But it is not hard to hear the dramatist behind him suggesting that there is more truth to what he says than he could possibly know. If Agamemnon escaped from a storm sent by the gods to ruin all the Greek fleet, it must be because some divinity allowed him to. Furthermore, the verb for "begged us off from punishment," *exêitêsato*, draws attention to the possibility of unexpiated guilt. It would not take an extraordinarily quick audience to realize that the Herald is made to say what he says in order to suggest that Agamemnon has won a reprieve from death at sea in order that he may be murdered at the hands of his wife. Later in the play we learn from the privileged words of Cassandra (1138-39, 1275-76) that she herself has arrived in Argos in order to be murdered by Clytaemestra, in punishment for her deception of Apollo. This seems like an oblique confirmation of what the Herald's words imply. And even without this confirmation, what he says rings so true – truer than he himself realizes – that we must suppose the audience took it as guidance provided by the poet. The same is true when Clytaemestra is made to say (1497-1504) that the *alastôr* of Atreus, appearing in the guise of Clytaemestra, has punished Agamemnon. Clytaemestra could never make such a statement authoritatively (how could she know?) but nevertheless Aeschylus has her make it because it is what he wants to suggest and because the audience can be counted on to take such suggestions seriously. It should be noted that in her case the ground has already been prepared by Cassandra's comments on the Erinys in the house of Atreus.

Sophocles too makes pointed use of this kind of talk. In *Antigone* after the Guard reports that the corpse of Polynices was buried under mysterious circumstances right under the noses of the watch, the Chorus say (278-83), "My lord, my mind has long been wondering whether this deed might not be sent from the gods." The suggestion, of course, is angrily repudiated by Creon. In one way it seems a gratuitous and unnecessary hypothesis: why not imagine a purely natural scenario, that someone moving quietly in the dark has escaped detection? An audience, however, that is receptive to this kind of suggestion will realize that this is the first hint that the gods had a hand in helping Antigone perform the burial. This first hint is closely followed by a second. When the Guard returns with Antigone in the next scene he describes how he and his fellow-guards were sitting up-wind from the corpse at midday when suddenly a dust-storm arose. All weather is conventionally ascribed to the gods, and when the Guard calls the dust-storm a *theia nosos* (421), he is using conventional language. But it is not hard to hear behind his words the poet using his conventional language to suggest something significant. Ruth Scodel has shown that the dust-storm is for Sophocles what the cloud of enveloping mist is for the epic poet, a way of getting a character into or out of a situation unobserved.⁴ To the Guard it is merely a dust-storm, for neither he nor Creon must be able to detect a true miracle here. But he is allowed to use language that suggests divine intervention because the poet has no other way to convey this information to the audience. We can see a pattern emerging here. Once more minor characters, the Chorus Leader and the Guard, attribute something to the action of a god. Once more pious guessing about the oddness of events, including – again – the weather, looks very much like guidance from the author.

A second Sophoclean example is in *Oedipus the King*, in the speech the Exangelos delivers just after Oedipus has learned the whole truth and gone into the palace. The Exangelos comes out and describes how first Jocasta entered the house in agitation, shut fast the bedroom doors, and called on Laius

⁴ Ruth Scodel, "Epic Doublets and Polynices' Two Burials," *TAPA* 114 (1984) 49-58.

and their marriage-bed. How she died after that he cannot say, for Oedipus burst into the house shouting, asking for a sword, and demanding to know the whereabouts of his wife, no wife, the womb from which both he and his children sprang. An obvious place to look for Jocasta is the bedroom where she has just shut herself in, but Sophocles does not choose to represent Oedipus' finding of his wife and mother as the result of a search in the obvious place. Rather he has the Exangelos say (1258-62), "To him in his rage some *daimôn* revealed the truth. For none of us men who were standing by did so. And giving a terrible shout, as if under the guidance of some leader, he leapt upon the double doors." The introduction of the divine here is again gratuitous: Oedipus could have found Jocasta without divine intervention. But this is a reason for thinking that this language, so highly marked, must be significant. What it suggests is that Apollo is at work in the action of the play, not just before it began. Through the eyes of the Exangelos we get to see him guiding Oedipus to his fateful encounter with the dead Jocasta and with the brooches on her clothing. And when Oedipus emerges from the palace, he says, "It was Apollo, my friends, Apollo who accomplished these my sufferings, but the hand that struck the blow was my own" (1329-32). Sophocles uses the words of the Exangelos, words that are merely an impression on his part, and the words of Oedipus, which are mere surmise, to suggest to the audience the way to understand what they hear about. Such language here is authoritative.

Euripides, who operates with the same conventions as his great predecessor and his great contemporary, makes plentiful use of this kind of talk in places where it would be obtuse not to suspect that something is going on. I restrict myself to a few examples out of many. In *Medea* Zeus is constantly on the lips of the Nurse, the Chorus, and Medea herself. When Aegeus appears quite unexpectedly and out of the blue to offer Medea a place of refuge, she says, as soon as he is out of earshot, "O Zeus and Zeus's justice!" Medea herself says that she will punish Jason "the gods being my helpers," and so it proves. Jason says that his prosperity is being protected by "whatever god it is that smiles on me," and there is something unmistakably ironic about this statement. Medea's words are proved true in the event: a god helps her to vengeance, and her divine grandfather protects her from punishment. When the Chorus say at the end of the play "Zeus is the *tamias* of many things, as many things to distribute," their comment is perfectly apt and serves to make the theological dimension of the play quite plain. For Zeus had been earlier described (169-70) as the *tamias*, the protector, of oaths, and Jason's fate is the fitting one for an oath-breaker: he becomes the last of his line, suffers *exôleia*, root and branch destruction.⁵

In *Hippolytus* an understanding of this convention allows us to give a more interesting explanation for Phaedra's delirium. Phaedra comes out of the house with the Nurse and begins to act irrationally, the mental aberration marked in the text by the Doric alphas characteristic of sung delivery. She raves of taming horses, drinking from a dewy spring, and hunting in the mountains. The Nurse has apparently not seen her raving before, and she seems surprised. She tries to recall her to the proprieties by speaking sensible words to her. Finally she says, "It is worth much divination to tell what god it is that pulls you off course and knocks your wits awry" (236-8). Then Phaedra emerges from her delirium, saying, with Attic etas, "Wretched me, what have I done? Whither have I wandered from the path of good sense? I went out of my mind, I fell by the stroke of a *daimôn*" (239-41). Neither the Nurse nor Phaedra is doing more than conjecturing on the basis of Phaedra's behavior that alien forces are at work. But their comments, though no more than a guess from their point of view, are being used by the poet as an authoritative pronouncement and to remind the audience of something they knew in any case already. It is not merely that Phaedra is suffering from her passion for Hippolytus. It betokens the direct action of Aphrodite, who is driving Phaedra out of her wits in order to bring her secret to light. In the prologue (38-42) Aphrodite had promised that she would not let her die with her secret undisclosed. Thanks to the comments by the Nurse and Phaedra the audience are in a position to interpret what they see before them. Phaedra's delirium, which has begun and ended before their eyes, is the fulfillment of Aphrodite's promise. The delirium, taking place before the Chorus, disturbs them and causes them to press the Nurse to wrench Phaedra's secret from her. And this eventually results in Phaedra's agreeing to tell of her passion. The divine plane is here revealed to view.

One last example is from *Hecuba*. As in *Medea* the passage has to do with the gods' making a just revenge possible; as in *Agamemnon* and *Antigone* it has to do with the weather. Hecuba's son Polydorus has been treacherously killed for his money by her guest-friend Polymestor. Hecuba has dis-

⁵ I have argued this case at greater length in my "Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*," *AJP* 114 (1993), 45-70. See also my "Treading the Circle Warily," *TAPA* 117 (1987), 257-270 (here, 268-69), where I argue for the genuineness of *Medea* 1415-9, bracketed by Diggle.

covered the truth, and she begs Agamemnon to connive with her in punishing this killer of his own guest. Agamemnon is reluctant, but when he realizes that he need do nothing himself, he agrees. "It shall be so," he says. "Indeed, if the army could set sail, I would not be able to grant you this favor. But as things stand, a god is not giving us favoring breezes and so we must wait here in idleness for sailing weather" (897-901). Agamemnon's language is entirely conventional since the weather is ascribed to the gods. His words, however, suggest more than he knows, that the gods are furthering Hecuba's design to punish the wicked Polymestor. Zeus is the weather god *par excellence* and also the god of guests and hosts.⁶

Casual comments about the gods, then, mere guess-work on the part of mortals, are almost never casual from the dramatist's point of view.⁷ Such statements time after time are used by the dramatist to suggest what he cannot, or cannot yet, convey by other means. It is never safe to disregard them as mere conventional piety. The only place they are likely to be wrong is in cases like Creon in *Antigone* or Jason in *Medea*. When an unsympathetic character disputes the presence of the gods in the action, as Creon does to the Chorus and to Teiresias, or assumes they are on his side, as Jason does, then the audience are not expected, obviously, to take their words as gospel truth. It would seem that elsewhere they are and that we have discovered one of the rules of the "grammar" of tragic dramaturgy.

⁶ The windlessness is a situation that has just arisen, suddenly favoring Hecuba's plan, and we should not think that Achilles has been holding the Greek fleet in Thrace by windlessness or contrary winds: see my *The Heroic Muse: Studies in the Hippolytus and Hecuba of Euripides* (Baltimore and London, 1987), p. 145, n. 58 and *Euripidea Altera* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 63-5.

⁷ The one counter-example known to me is *IT* 268-74, where it is not at all clear what was strange enough about the appearance of Orestes and Pylades in the cave to cause the *theosebês* to suppose that they were divinities. I note, however, that although the man was wrong about the identity of Orestes and Pylades, he was not mistaken in believing that the gods had a hand in their being there.