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TRICKS IN THE PLAYS *HELEN* AND *ION* OF EURIPIDES

It is a well-known fact that Euripides' relations towards the gods and to everything that is connected with the faith in gods, is rather different from that of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

The heroes of Euripides seem to be nearer to the persons of real life, and that is why we are not surprised by the presence of tricks and deceit in his plays – as they are common in the real life.

In this study, I would like to deal with two cases of conscious deceit in two of Euripides' plays, which were important for solving the dramatic situation developed by the author. This deceit is, however, carried on not only by common mortals, but also by prophesiers or prophetesses, who are interpreters of the divine will, yes, even by the gods themselves, e. g. the goddess Athene.

Let us start with the Euripides' play *Helen*. The main female person of this play, the famous Helen, plans an adventurous escape from Egypt, together with her husband Menelaos, who returns back from Troy, disguised as a messenger telling of Menelaos' death, just via Egypt, where the real Helen is living. In order to spend finally a quiet life with Menelaos, Helen thinks out a trick which we know also from the Euripides' play *Iphigeneia in Tauris* (v. 1032); she asks the Egyptian king Theoklymenos, who fell in love with Helen and wishes marry her, to lend her a ship for a symbolic sacrifice on sea, dedicated to the memory of Menelaos, allegedly drowned in the sea. But in the palace of the king Theoklymenos, also his sister Theonoe lives, a well-known prophetess, who knows very well that Menelaos did not die and is present here; see v. 857–860:

HELEN

Oee eyoh. It's happening.

Her Reverence is coming, Menelaos:

They're opening the gates. Run! Hide!

She knows everything, she'll know where you are.

and v. 873–875:

THEONOE

(...)

Helen, all my prophecies were true.

*Your husband Menelaos, look:
Shipwrecked. Your shadow: gone.*

see also v. 887–888:

THEONOE (to Menelaos)
(...)
*It's up to me, they've left it to me.
If I tell my brother you're here, you're dead,
(...)*

Helen and Menelaos undergo the risk of persuading Theonoe to conceal the truth of Menelaos being alive from her brother; see v. 894–900:

HELEN
*Your Reverence, I'm kneeling, begging.
For myself, for my husband. All these years
I wept for him, and now I've found him
I must weep again. Don't tell your brother
he's here, he's in my arms. Help us.*

They succeed in persuading her, and Theonoe answers (v. 1017–1019):

*All right. I'll say nothing.
My brother and his... foolishness,
I'll do what you ask, say nothing.*

She is ready to tell her brother even lies, as Helen informs us later (see v. 1370ff.: *Her Reverence didn't tell – / Her brother asked, she knew, / But she didn't tell. 'He's dead,' she said, / 'Menelaos, buried, sees no more sun.' / She helped us, helped us.*), justifying her behaviour as follows (v. 1020ff.):

*It's for his own good, he'll thank me later.
But now it's up to you. Find a way out:
You, yourselves, I won't help you.
I'll stay impartial. Pray to the gods:
Aphrodite to bring Helen safely home,
Hera to bless you both, keep you safe, still safe.*

*Father, in your name I do this:
Your honour, your reputation, are safe with me.*

The possibility of two solutions is based for her on the different approaches of two goddesses, that of Aphrodite and that of Hera (see also v. 878ff.).

We tried to show that the words of a prophetess cannot be taken for reliable if she has been persuaded to lie (unlike it was the case of Teiresias in Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*). Euripides himself formulated it speaking generally against the prophesiers and prophetesses, and the dramatic effect of his words is

stronger, as they do not refer here only to the individual case of Theone, who respected the personality of her dead father, the protector of Helen, and who would have liked to help also to his brother as we have seen above.

Let us mention here what Euripides put into the mouth of a sailor in v. 744ff. and also what the Chorus said in v. 758ff.:

SAILOR

*Yes, Majesty. Prophets, ha!
 What do prophets know? Lies,
 They burn bits of animals on fires,
 They listen to birds, they make up lies,
 And we believe them! He could have told us then,
 Kalchas, told us in Aulis: 'It's nothing.
 It isn't Helen, it's a shadow. If you go to Troy,
 Set siege to Troy, you'll die for nothing, a shadow.'
 He could have said that, and he didn't. Why?
 Did God shut his mouth? Forget him, then!
 Forget all prophets! Sacrifice to God,
 Ask God directly, ignore what prophets say.
 They're in it for the money, it's conjuring.
 Believe your own eyes, own ears: that's what I say.*

CHORUS

*I think he's right.
 Make the gods your friends,
 Ignore priests and prophets,
 You'll have all you need.*

(v. 744–760)

Another Euripides' play, putting lie into the mouth of a prophet, is his tragedy *Ion*, which probably comes from 411 B.C. and is probably younger than *Helen* by one year.

Father of the young Ion, whom his mother Kreousa laid off after a birth in secret and who was brought by Hermes to the sanctuary at Delphi on the suggestion of Apollo, is Apollo himself. When Kreousa's husband Xouthos (who, of course, did not know of this secret of his wife), together with Kreousa, comes to Delphi to ask Apollo concerning their childlessness, the king Xouthos, who puts the question in the absence of Kreousa, obtains a totally false answer – i. e. that he is already father of a child, of the temple-servant Ion. (Cfr. the dialog between Xouthos and Ion, v. 517ff.)

Kreousa, who had nearly poisoned her not-known son Ion at Delphi, accuses Apollo of injustice at first; when she, however, comprehends that Ion is her own off-laid son, changes her mind and justifies Apollo at once.

Cfr. v. 384:

KREOUSA

Apollo, you did wrong then, you do wrong now.

and v. 1528ff.:

KREOUSA

By Athene I swear, who fought the giants

At Zeus' side, no mortal fathered you.

Apollo's your father. He sired you, reared you –

ION

– And said I was Xouthos' son.

KREOUSA

No. Xouthos asked for an heir.

Apollo gave him you, out of friendship.

It happens. People do this for friends.

ION

So when Apollo speaks his prophecies –

Are we to take them as true, or lies?

Mother, I don't know what to think.

KREOUSA

It's simple, son.

Apollo gives you a royal home

Out of kindness, out of affection.

Suppose we proclaimed who your father was?

Apollo's child! You'd have nothing,

No inheritance, no royal name. I hid it myself,

I tried to keep it secret, to kill you.

Now he's helping you,

He's giving you a mortal father. It's a favour.

ION

It won't do. I must ask him face to face, inside.

Am I some mortal's son, or truly his?

especially v. 1609ff.:

KREOUSA

(...)

I kneel to Apollo; before, I blamed him.

He seemed not to care before;

Now he's given me my son.

I hated this shrine: it glowered at me, it frowned.

Now it smiles. I stroke its stones,

Its doors, I kiss them, I'm happy, happy.

These words, however, are in discrepancy with the prophecy given to Xouthos. Cfr. v. 537 and v. 1607 once again. When the young Ion, educated in the sanctuary

at Delphi, is not content with Kreousa's apology of Apollo, expressed in the above-said verses 1539ff., he wants to explore the truth himself (v. 1546ff.).

The typical *deus ex machina* Athene appears at the end of the play and tells the truth (v. 1555–1568):

ATHENA

(...)

*Apollo sent me. I become his will. He stays away
For fear of hasty words, recriminations.
I speak his words.*

*This woman is your mother,
And Apollo was your father.
He gave you to Xouthos;
Xouthos was not your father,
Apollo gave you to Xouthos
That you might have a palace,
A kingdom, mortal pomp.
His plan was clear.
The truth would have been a secret,
Kept for a time in Athens,
Then revealed: your true parents,
The truth about your birth.
But things happened otherwise.
He had to stop you killing each other,
Mother and son.*

Athene also persuades Kreousa to let the king Xouthos believe that he conceived Ion with an unknown woman (v. 1601ff.). The goddess Athene openly impels to lies which the miser mortal Kreousa accepted already at the beginning of the tragedy, when the god Apollo did not help her (cfr. v. 390ff.).

Even in this tragedy, the correctness of prophecy is doubted, when Ion tells in v. 365: "*If Apollo's hidden this so far, why should he tell it now?*" as well as in v. 369ff.:

ION

*You'll never get an answer.
Not here. No one will speak for you.
You want to prove Apollo
A cheat, a coward, in his own temple –
Whoever put him the question,
Your question, would suffer.
Leave it, lady, leave it.*

Even if these words are not so sharp, nevertheless, they are full of doubts.

In any case, it was not probably by chance that both the tragedies mentioned here exerted later strong influence on literary genres, in which the world of reality played an important role. I have in mind especially the New Comedy as well as the Ancient Novel – in both of them the tricks were already firmly in the hands of mortal people, not only of women, but mostly of clever slaves.

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