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## QUOD LICET BOVI NON LICET IOVI?<sup>1</sup>

*Hubris is surely a phenomenon that played an important role in the morality of the Greek people; hubris means wanton violence, arising from the pride of strength or from passion and connected with insolence or licentiousness. In the Greek tragedy, however, the gods also sometimes behave as if they followed a bad example set by mortals and were themselves overcome by a sort of hubris. Nevertheless, is it at all possible to talk about the hubris of the gods? The aim of the paper is to examine this particular question in relation to Euripides' tragedies that narrate stories from the Trojan Cycle.*

**Keywords:** Ancient Greek tragedy, hubris, Euripides, Trojan Cycle, *Hecuba*, *The Trojan Women*, *Andromache*

One of the pillars of the political life in ancient Athens was theatre, which flourished in the fifth century BC.<sup>2</sup> Dramatic production served as a means of promoting the values of the Greek polis while hubris was certainly an offence against these values. Hubris is surely a phenomenon that played an important role in the morality of the Greek people. Hubris means “wanton violence, arising from the pride of strength or from passion and

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lesky, Albin 1957. *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*. Bern: Francke; Segal, Charles. 1986. *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text*. Ithaca — London: Cornell University Press; Easterling, P. E. [ed.]. 1987. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Bartoňková, Dagmar. 2006. „Hybris v řecké literatuře.“ In Krmíčková, Helena et al. [eds.] *Querite primum regnum Dei*. Brno: Matices moravská, 2006, 41–50; Bartoňková, Dagmar. 2007. „The Ancient Greek Tragedy as a Source of Common European Values.“ In Odysseos-Polydorou, Zoi [ed.]. *To archaio helleniko drama*. Leukosia, Kypr: Paidagogiko Instituto Kypru, 2007, 89–98; Canfora, Luciano. 2009. *Dějiny řecké literatury*. Praha: KLP.

connected with insolence or licentiousness”, arrogance going beyond the limits of common behaviour, limits that are based on both divine authority and human moral tradition. We can say that the Greek culture in its entirety is pervaded by reflections on where the limits actually are; ancient authors very frequently claim or imply that the violation of these limits is illegal.

I have been dealing with the discussed phenomenon ever since I began to lecture on Ancient Greek literature. With respect to my enduring interests I was very pleased to receive an invitation to take part in the “Sixth International Symposium on Ancient Greek Drama”, held in September 2000 in Cyprus, at Drusha near Paphos, and thematically focused on hubris in Ancient Greek drama. On this occasion, distinguished scholars delivered papers on hubris in Aeschylus (*The Persians*) and Sophocles (*Ajax*, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*), as well as general talks on the topic in question. My paper presented at the symposium discussed the role of hubris in Euripides’ play *Alcestis*. All of the given talks demonstrated what kind of destiny hubris prepared for a mortal who had become controlled by this kind of behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

In 2009, I once again returned to the subject of hubris on the occasion of the conference “Hellenic Dimension: Studies in Language, Literature and Culture”, organized by the Department of Classical Philology in Riga (Faculty of Philology and Arts of the University of Latvia), where I delivered a speech on the above-mentioned phenomenon in Sophocles’ tragedy *Philoctetes*. As shown at the mentioned conference, hubris is performed by mortals who surpass the confines of the divine — that is, moral orders, and the gods sooner or later punish such behaviour.

Examining the instances of hubris in the Greek tragedy, I have realized that even the gods sometimes behave as if they followed a bad example set

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<sup>3</sup> See Bartoňková, Dagmar. 2002. „Hubris and Blindness in Euripides’ Drama *Alcestis*.“ In Georgiou, Christakis et al. [eds.] *Sixth International Symposium on Ancient Greek Drama (September 2000). Hubris and Blindness in Ancient Greek Drama: Contemporary Stage Approaches*. Leukosia: Kypriako Kentro, 299–303 (henceforth abbreviated as *Hubris and Blindness*); Deceus, Freddy. 2002. „Some Aspects of Methodological Blindness in Interpreting Oedipus.“ In *Hubris and Blindness*, 214–222; Greco, Giovanni. 2002. „Antigone and her Doubles.“ In *Hubris and Blindness*, 247–250; Hadjistephanou, Costas. 2002. „Hubris — Ate: The Case of Ajax.“ In *Hubris and Blindness*, 181–186; Handriotis, Elladios. 2002. „Hubris in Sophocles’ Tragedy *Oidipous Tyrannos*.“ In *Hubris and Blindness*, 236–246; Kollberg, Lennart. 2002. „Hubris — a Threat and a Promise.“ In *Hubris and Blindness*, 263–268; Mikellis, George. 2002. „The Function of Hubris on the Contemporary Stage — a Theoretical Approach.“ In *Hubris and Blindness*, 315–320; Papanicolaou, Antonis. 2002. „Hubris and Sickness of the Mind in Aeschylus’ Tragedy *the Persians*.“ In *Hubris and Blindness*, 194–213; Walton, J. M. [ed.]. 1997. *Euripides. Alkestis, Helen, Ion*. London: Methuen Drama.

by mortals and that they certainly do not represent models to be imitated, as exemplified by the words of Ion in Euripides' tragedy named after this hero (vv. 252ff.)<sup>4</sup>:

KREOUSA: [... ...]

How arrogant gods are!  
When we're crushed, overwhelmed,  
Where can we turn?<sup>5</sup>

The gods themselves are prone to hubris. Nevertheless, is it at all possible to talk about hubris in the case of the gods? The ambiguity of an answer to this question is implied in the question mark placed after the title of the present paper. If a mortal succumbs to hubris, the gods will sooner or later punish him or her for the violation of a moral code. In the Greek tragedy, one also notices, as said above, gods' behaviour resembling the shameful conduct of people. However, who is supposed to punish the hubris of the gods? I still do not consider my reflection as being futile because I would like to show that the insolent and arrogant behaviour of the gods (as well as of mortals with a high social status) did not escape the attention of many ancient authors. Their critical view actually served as a source of inspiration for modern playwrights. The heritage of antiquity is a frequent topic under discussion nowadays. Authors take advantage of the enormous treasure trove of ancient tragedy, frequently following an ancient model in order to remind modern people of the unjust behaviour and arrogance ("hubris"?) of the powerful, who believe that the "gods" are allowed to do everything (see the quotation from Sartre's play *The Trojan Women* at the end of this paper).

The aim of this paper is to handle this particular question especially in relation to Euripides' tragedies that narrate stories from the Trojan Cycle, namely in relation to *Hecuba*, *The Trojan Women*, and *Andromache*.<sup>6</sup> As we

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Biehl, Werner [ed.]. 1979. *Euripides. Ion*. Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft; Walton, J. M. [ed.]. 1997. *Euripides. Alkestis, Helen, Ion*. London: Methuen Drama.

<sup>5</sup> Quotations from ancient tragedies are provided only in (standard) English translation to avoid excessive and unnecessary lengthening of the paper. It is also to be noted that the verse counts in the English translations do sometimes not correspond to the verse counts of the respective passages in Ancient Greek.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Grene, David — Lattimore, Richmond [eds.]. 1958. *Euripides III: the complete Greek tragedies (Hecuba, Andromache, The Trojan Women)*. Chicago: Phoenix; Biehl, Werner [ed.]. 1970. *Euripides. Troades*. Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft; Daitz, Stephen G. [ed.]. 1973. *Euripides. Hecuba*. Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft; Garzya,

know, these plays are unique because of the plain fact that Euripides wrote them — as a reaction to the Peloponnesian War — not from the national perspective of the Greeks' victorious attack, but from the standpoint of the defeated Troy — that is, from the standpoint of the long-time enemies of the famous, mythical Greece. The tragedies in question include several passages where the hubris of the gods immediately strikes the eyes.

It is a well-known fact that already in antiquity Euripides' critical views on the gods generated opinions that he was an atheist; many doubts were, in my view, rightfully expressed about this opinion. One of the sceptics is E. Hall (XXXVff.),<sup>7</sup> who emphasizes that it cannot be denied that in his relation to religion Euripides made some advance towards "modernity", one of the symptoms of which is his ambiguous relation to the gods.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned plays of Euripides manifest great respect for the gods. In the dramas in question, Euripides expresses his belief (cf. E. Hall, XXXVI)<sup>8</sup> "that gods exist, that they pay attention (welcome or unwelcome) to the affairs of mortals and that some kind of reciprocal allegiance between gods and humans was in operation ...". (Anyway, the literary device known as *deus ex machina* that Euripides introduced as a novel dramatic technique is significant in its own right.)

The passages in Euripides' plays where the reverence for the gods is self-evident include, for example, *Hecuba*, vv. 798ff.:

HECUBA: [...] I am a slave, I know,  
and slaves are weak. But the gods are strong, and over them  
there stands some absolute, some moral order  
or principle of law more final still.  
Upon this moral law the world depends;  
through it the gods exist; by it we live,  
defining good and evil. [...],

and *The Trojan Women*, vv. 884ff.:

HECUBA: O power, who mount the world, wheel where the world rides,  
O mystery of man's knowledge, whosoever you be,  
Zeus named, nature's necessity or mortal mind,

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Antonius [ed.]. 1978. *Euripides. Andromacha*. Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft; Morwood, James [ed.]. 2001. *Euripides. Hecuba, The Trojan Women, Andromache*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, Edith. 2001. „Euripides and his Tradition.“ In Morwood, James [ed.]. *Euripides. Hecuba, The Trojan Women, Andromache*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> E. Hall (2001).

I call upon you; for you walk the path none hears  
yet bring all human action back to right at last.

After all, vv. 770f. can also be understood as a sort of defence of Zeus:

ANDROMACHE: [...] Zeus never was your father, but you  
were born a pestilence to all Greeks and the world beside.  
[... ..]

Cf. further *Andromache*, vv. 1284ff.:

CHORUS: Past our telling, the ways of heaven.  
The gods accomplish the unforeseen.  
What all awaited, fails of achievement;  
God arranges what none could dream.  
[... ..]

What deserves notice first is Euripides' attitude towards prophesiers or prophetesses, who are interpreters of the divine will. The words of them cannot be taken as reliable and Euripides himself formulated it speaking not only about specific examples, but also generally against the prophesiers and prophetesses.

Further, the speech that Euripides put into the mouth of a sailor in the tragedy *Helena*<sup>9</sup> (vv. 744ff.) requires our attention:

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.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Alt, Karin [ed.]. 1964. *Euripides. Helena*. Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft; and also Bartoňková, Dagmar. 2002. „Trick in the Plays *Helena* and *Ion* of Euripides.“ *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity. Graeco-Latina Brunensia*, N 6–7, 35–40.

The manifestations of “hubris” in the behaviour of the gods in Euripides’ Trojan tragedies and the author’s criticism of this phenomenon are also noteworthy.

*The Trojan Women*, vv. 1280f.:

HECUBA: [...] O gods! Do I call upon those gods for help?  
I cried to them before now, and they would not hear.  
[... ...]

Cf. also *Ion*, v. 439ff.:

Gods, do what you like — so do good, do good.  
When mortals do wrong, you punish them —  
So how can it be right to enforce your laws on us  
And break the same laws yourselves? Imagine —  
I don’t mean this literally, I’m just supposing —  
Zeus almighty, Poseidon, Lord Apollo,  
Had to pay us mortals a fine for every rape.  
You’d bankrupt your temples. Empty treasuries.  
Do what you fancy first  
And think about it afterwards —  
What mortality is that?  
And when we copy you, we mortals,  
Do as you do — who should get the blame,  
Those who follow the example, or those who set it?

The poet’s critical attitude towards Apollo is no surprise for us; (cf., for instance, *Andromache*, vv. 1161ff.:

All this was done by one hailed as a prophet  
Mind you, distinguisher of right and wrong —  
And done to a penitent, poor Achilles’ boy.  
The prophet brooded, like a spiteful man,  
Over wrongs done long ago. That’s “wisdom” for you?).

After all, Euripides is in this respect not the only one among the famous three Greek tragedians.<sup>10</sup> Aphrodite (*The Trojan Women*, v. 941) or Athena, who in the tragedy *Ion* persuades Kreousa to let the king Xuthus believe that he conceived Ion with an unknown woman (v. 1601ff.), is not always

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Dawe, R. D. [ed.]. 1996. *Sophocles. Ajax, Oidipus Coloneus, Oidipus Rex, Philoctetes*. Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft; West, Martin L. [ed.]. 1998. *Aeschylus. Tragoediae*. Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft.

an example to be followed by mortals. The goddess Athena 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 (cf. vv. 390ff.).

Nevertheless, the fact remains that in *The Trojan Women* (vv. 964f.) the poet recommends certain caution in judging the gods' deeds:

HELEN: [...] Would you be stronger than the gods?  
Try, then. But even such ambition is absurd.

— and, in the same play, Hecuba (vv. 969ff.) defends the goddesses:

HECUBA: First, to defend the honor of the gods, and show  
that the woman is a scandalous liar. I will not  
believe it! ...

Euripides' criticism is all the more impressive; in *The Trojan Women*, there are lines directed against Zeus (846) as well as against the gods in general — see vv. 857f.:

CHORUS: [... ...]  
For the gods loved Troy once.  
Now they have forgotten.

or vv. 1287ff.:

HECUBA: O sorrow.  
Cronion, Zeus, lord of Phrygia,  
prince of our house, have you seen  
the dishonor done to the seed of Dardanus?

Further, is not the Paris trial a certain demonstration of the “hubris” of Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite (*Troj.*, v. 924) as well?

Passage 469ff. in *The Trojan Women*, where Euripides criticizes the gods and at the same time proclaims that one should worship them when he or she is going through a period of unhappiness, is especially interesting:

HECUBA: [... ...]  
O gods! What wretched things to call on — gods! — for help  
although the decorous action is to invoke their aid  
when all our hands lay hold on is unhappiness.  
[... ...]

One cannot imagine that no ironical criticism of the gods is heard in Euripides' lines when in *Andromache* (vv. 680ff.) Menelaus defends Helen

claiming that her conduct was guided by the will of the gods and that the Greeks actually benefited from the Trojan War:

MENELAUS: [... ...]

Poor Helen had a time of it, not choosing  
 But chosen by the gods to exalt her country.  
 For innocent before of arms and battles  
 Greece grew to manhood then. Experience, travel —  
 These are an education in themselves.  
 [... ...]

However, the culmination of the criticism of the gods' "hubris" is the speech of Hecuba in *The Trojan Women*, vv. 1240ff.:

HECUBA: The gods meant nothing except to make life hard for me,  
 and of all cities they chose Troy to hate. In vain  
 we sacrificed. And yet had not the very hand  
 of God gripped and crushed this city deep in the ground,  
 [... ...]

What we observe in this passage is the "hubris" of the gods in contrast to the humility of the mortal woman Hecuba. The gods' "hubris" was, however, so strong that even the humility of the famous and powerful queen of Troy, who was enslaved by the brave Greek heroes when she was already growing old, and of the whole Troy was of no use. Hecuba understands the situation; her words are a protest not only against the licentiousness of the Olympian gods, but also against the licentiousness of the powerful. Hecuba's utterance makes it clear that mortals can, or rather that they have to raise their heads even against the licentiousness of the most powerful. Not by chance has Antonella Parisi's adaptation of Euripides' play *The Trojan Women*, directed by Paolo Lista, been a great success for the third year in a row. Not by chance did Jean Paul Sartre<sup>11</sup> wrote an adaptation of *The Trojan Women* exactly at the time of the Algerian War, not by chance did he extend the mentioned inspiring speech of Hecuba, and not by chance was Sartre's adaptation of Euripides' tragedy performed at the Mahen Theatre in Brno exactly in November 1968. Nobody would presumably doubt that the play was a great success and that, when staged in Brno, the piece also proved that the Greek drama, containing a lot of wisdom and timeless comments, had still a lot to say. To support this claim, the very words of Hecuba from Sartre's adaptation of Euripides' play *The Trojan Women* seems to be perfectly appropriate (vv. 72f.):

<sup>11</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1965. *Les Troyennes*. Paris: Gallimard; Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1967. *The Trojan Women*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Rags will do.  
 The dead are not particular.  
 You filthy Gods,  
 You always hated me.  
 And of all cities  
 Troy was the one city  
 You detested.  
 Why? Didn't we mumble prayers enough?  
 Make ritual and habitual sacrifice?  
 And all for what?  
 Today we suffer in hell.  
 And you smirk at us from heaven.  
 Keep your heaven!  
 Go on licking your lips  
 Over human misery.  
 But I tell you, this time  
 You omniscient immortals  
 have made one small mistake:  
 You should have destroyed us with an earthquake  
 if you wanted to sweep us out of the way.  
 If you'd done that  
 Nobody would have ever mentioned Troy again.  
 But as it is, we held out for ten years  
 against the whole of Greece,  
 And then were only beaten by a cheap trick.  
 We die, but we do not die.  
 Two thousand years from now,  
 our courage will still be talked about;  
 It was something real  
 like your injustice.  
 You have condemned me. Now I'll condemn you:  
 Soon all of you immortals  
 Will be as dead as we are!  
 Come on then, what are you waiting for?  
 Have you run out of thunderbolts?  
 Filthy cowards!

