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ATHENA EX MACHINA:  
DISTURBING SERENITY IN THE *EXODOS* OF EURIPIDES' *SUPPLIANTS*\*.

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**Summary:** Athena's *ex machina* intervention in the *exodos* of Euripides' *Suppliants* has often been branded as irrelevant from the point of view of the action of the play. However, although it is true that it does not resolve any dramatic impasse, Euripides uses this device in order to reflect retrospectively on the conflict between *logos* and *pathos*, whose tension runs transversally through the play until its final resolution in an ominous stillness. The author raises, thus, some disturbing questions about the role of gods with regard to human fate, and about whether or not mankind is able to resolve its internal conflicts on its own. These considerations compel us to reconsider the orthodoxy of the image of gods in the *Suppliants*, as well as its presumably irenic ending.

**Resumen:** La intervención de Atenea *ex machina* en el éxodo de las *Suplicantes* de Eurípides ha sido a menudo tachada de irrelevante desde el punto de vista de la acción de la obra. Sin embargo, aunque es cierto que no resuelve ningún *impasse* dramático, Eurípides se sirve de este recurso para plantear una reflexión retrospectiva sobre el conflicto entre *logos* y *pathos*, cuya tensión recorre transversalmente la obra hasta su resolución final en una calma ominosa. Así, el autor suscita algunos interrogantes inquietantes sobre el papel de la divinidad en el devenir humano y sobre la posibilidad de que los hombres puedan resolver sus conflictos internos por sí solos. Todo lo cual obliga a replantearnos la ortodoxia de la imagen de los dioses en las *Suplicantes* así como su desenlace presuntamente irénico.

**Palabras clave:** Eurípides; tragedia griega; *deus ex machina*; *Suplicantes*; *logos/pathos*; éxodo; etiología.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The *exodos* of Euripides' *Suppliants*<sup>1</sup> marks the final part of the play, and corresponds to the moments when the chorus is about to leave the stage, once the main action has been fulfilled, as dramatic conventions dictate. The focus of this paper is to point out that the *exodos* develops an essential function in the play, since it carries out a final revision of the main themes outlined during the course of the play, and “rounds off” a tension which remained unconcluded. In fact, *logos* and *pathos*, which, after Burian's ingenuous study<sup>2</sup> can be deservedly considered as the two principal dimensions of the drama, and as the factors which achieve the dramatic tension all along it, are brought together in the *exodos*. The convergence of these channeling forces in the final part of the play confers a highly significant role to the *exodos*: not only does the conflict between these forces not fade away as a secondary theme as the play goes on, but, since this tension is resumed at the very end of the drama, the allegedly anticlimactic end<sup>3</sup> gains a particular interest, becoming fully integrated within the thematic core of the play.

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<sup>1</sup> The text I follow in this paper is G. Murray's, 1913. I owe this decision to D. J. Conacher's, 1956, p. 25, compelling argument: he claims that the most meaningful text distribution in lines 1140-1152 must be one which respects the premise that “the martial notes belong to the Sons and the peaceful dissuasions to the Mothers”, a premise which P. Burian, 1985, p. 152, apparently, did not take into account, since he assigns lines 1145 and 1152 to the mothers, who, consequently, “join (their children) in the wish for vengeance”.

<sup>2</sup> P. Burian, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> This is the judgement that can be inferred from statements like A. Lesky's, 1989, pp. 407-8, who considers that after the recovery of the Seven's corpses, the main action of the play has come to an end. D. J. Conacher, 1956, p. 23, too, avows, as regards the final portion of the play, that “in the severe terms of formal criticism, however, it must be censured as bearing little relation to the main theme as we have seen it so far”, though he rejects this interpretation, and underlines the deep ideological meaning of the last part of the play, which he considers essential to understand the *Suppliants* as a whole. In a similar line, G. Zuntz, 1955, p. 64 refuses the widespread (*sic*) idea that the *exodos* in particular is only loosely connected with the main action. He argues that “the Exodos widens the sphere of the drama, it never relinquishes it”.

The political level of the play, which is, according to Zuntz's reading of Euripidean tragedy<sup>4</sup>, one of its most relevant aspects<sup>5</sup>, will not be treated in this paper. However, I will refer to it in general terms, that is, bearing always in mind that the tragical conflict expressed in the *Suppliants* has its external manifestation in the problems of human fellowship<sup>6</sup>, and in the eventual clash between them as a result of this inner conflict.

On the other hand, my aim is not only to emphasize the crucial structural significance of the *exodos*, but also to stress the function of the intervention of the *Dea ex Machina* at a level which surpasses the mere aetiology of a given mythical tradition (that of the expedition of the Epigonoï) and, is, instead, more related to an allegorical meaning. Athena's announcement of new wars to be fought and new sorrow to be faced foretells not only the fate of the Sons of the Seven, but of mankind as a whole.

## II. CONFIGURATION OF THE *EXODOS*.

After the fifth *stasimon*, where the mothers, together with the children of the Seven, have uttered their last lamentations, Theseus' intervention brings to an end the chorus' last *kommos*. From line 1165 to 1175 the Athenian ruler asks for Argos' gratitude to Athens and to himself. By addressing to Adrastos and to the mothers as γένος (1165), he is underlining the political dimension of the gratitude he expects<sup>7</sup>, and also of his own intervention. Theseus is speaking about "holding memory" of his deeds, and μνήμη (1169: μεμνημένους; 1173: μνήμη) is, thus, what he is invoking. He also remarks the "honour" the Argives have received thanks to Athens' help; indeed, the term ἄξιος / ἄξια is specially important in this *exodos*, and is repeated twice by Theseus (ἡξιωμένοι, 1175; ἄξιος, 1181), and one more time in the chorus' last words (ἄξια, 1233). It echoes the profound importance which Athens' help to Argos had in myth, and how glorious a deed it was for the community, still in Euripides' times. Zeus -claims Theseus- and all

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<sup>4</sup> G. Zuntz, 1955, p. X.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, this does not mean that there were no political readings of this play before Zuntz's (among which we could refer to the interpretations of J. Markland, 1811; G. Hermann, 1837; P. Giles, 1890, pp. 95-98; G. Lugge, 1887; or E. Delebecque, 1951, as cited by G. Zuntz, 1955, p. 4, and D. J. Conacher, 1956, p. 8). Yet, most of the scholars will agree (with J. W. Fitton, 1961, p. 430) that Zuntz set a milestone in criticism, since he demonstrated a sharp sense of judgement in his arguments defending the *Suppliants* as a political play.

<sup>6</sup> See Zuntz, 1955, p. X, who considers the *Suppliants* "as a variety of Greek tragedy in which the problems of human fellowship become the material of artistic creation. It is possible in this sense to call them 'political'".

<sup>7</sup> As C. Collard, 1975, p. 408, underscores.

the heavenly gods shall be the witnesses of these glorious feats (1174-75).

In lines 1176 to 1182 Adrastus, the Argive Mothers and the Sons of the Seven promise their eternal gratitude and recognize the Argive obligation towards Theseus' *polis*, and, by Theseus' leave, they are prepared to turn back home.

Nonetheless, Athena's epiphany *ex machina* interrupts their farewells, and, in its first part (lines 1183 to 1212), raises again the question of the verbal agreement between the two cities, and orders them to make "official" the spoken promise of gratitude. She exhorts them to take a solemn oath, which will warrant not only Argos' thanks to the Athenian efforts (μοχθημάτων, 1187)<sup>8</sup>, but also a perpetual alliance between the two *poleis*. The climax of the goddess' intervention is line 1188, with the religiously and politically charged word ὄρκον in a remarked position<sup>9</sup>. Belonging to the terms of the contract there are the threats of severe punishment in case of a violation of its specifications (1194-95). Scholars agree that the style of lines 1190 to 1195 echoes quite clearly the style of Greek political treatises<sup>10</sup>.

After that, Athena specifies the concrete ritual terms and forms of enactment of this oath of alliance: one is the tripod on which Theseus has to make the inscription of the terms of the alliance, and, then, has to consecrate to Apollo, the god of Delphi; the other is the dagger with which he is going to fulfil the sacrifice, which has to be buried next to the pyres of the fallen heroes.

A significant change has been carried out with the insertion of these ritual elements, and, of course, with the presence of the goddess herself: the μνήμη, which Theseus appealed to as a warrant of gratitude (1169, 1173), has now been substituted by the μνημεῖα (1204), that is, by the concrete and palpable tokens which will ensure the accomplishment of the treatise's terms, or, in the worst

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<sup>8</sup> As C. Collard, 1975, p. 411, observes, with regard to the word μοχθημάτων, "till now, Athens' altruism has been presented as πόνου (185, 342, etc.); Athena deliberately emphasises its cost to Athens, deserving gratitude in proportion, with the more colourful word: cf. 1234 προμεμοχθήκασι".

<sup>9</sup> In fact, C. Collard, 1975, p. 411, indicates that "the single word is the climax of 1183-1188. Athena insists on Argos showing gratitude in more than words or memory (1169-1175)".

<sup>10</sup> See, v. g., D. J. Conacher, 1956, pp. 16-17, n. 22, with bibliographical references, and G. Zuntz, 1955, p. 73, who points out that, although there can be inferred some similarities between the oath in the *Suppliants* and the Athenian-Argive alliance of 420 b. C., "the terms reflected in the words of Athena are typical of Greek political treatises in general". A. N. Micheline, 1994, p. 219 argues, referring in more general terms to the discourse patterns of the *Suppliants*, that it is "rich in terms and formulations, both sophisticated and popular, that derive from contemporary and archaic social, religious, and political ideology".

case, will carry destruction to those who may break them<sup>11</sup>. As regards the divine intervention, one of the main functions of this epiphany is, doubtless, to underline the ritual aspects of the play, connecting it, thus, with the ritual basis from which ancient tragedy sprung up<sup>12</sup>, and affording, on the other hand, the establishment of a link with two relics actually known by Euripides' audience<sup>13</sup>. Hence, thanks to the intervention of the *dea ex machina*, not only is the aetiology of these tokens introduced; moreover, a mythical basis or precedent of an Athens-Argos alliance might have been observed by the audience<sup>14</sup>. As we can see, the drama acquires a great amount of its ritual dimension in this last part, where the goddess, despite her limited participation in the proper action<sup>15</sup> of the *Suppliants*, plays an important role as the bearer of an "enlargement of meaning", as Collard<sup>16</sup> defines it.

Athena's aetiological function goes on in the second part of her *rhesis*. From line 1213 to 1226 she turns her attention to the sons of the fallen heroes, and foretells the revenge which they will accomplish, once they will have grown up. One of the central components of her discourse is the affirmation that "No otherwise is it to be"<sup>17</sup> (οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλως, 1224), for it raises debate about how do gods interact with men and what is their position in mankind's unstable existence. How do we have to interpret this statement? If the future is already determined, and gods have nothing to do with it, that means that gods are not any more warrants of justice and order, and, more important, that gods are not any more participants in the tragic conflict, whose battlefield has become exclusively the inner world of mankind, with all its inherent faults, instabilities and disintegrating forces. I will turn back to this discussion later, and I will try to

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<sup>11</sup> See P. Burian, 1985, p. 154, who refers to the terms of the compromise fixed by Athena thus: "an oath to be broken at incalculable peril".

<sup>12</sup> See, v. g., F. Rodríguez Adrados, 1972, or A. Lesky, 2003, pp. 37-85, with further bibliographical references.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Zuntz, 1955, p. 19 and p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion in G. Zuntz, 1955, pp. 71 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Which in strict dramatic terms seems to have finished with the recovery of the bodies of the Seven, and in a broader sense, has, apparently, run to an end once the *pathos* of the mothers' lamentation has passed, in the last *stasimon*. See A. Medina, J. A. López Férez and J. L. Calvo, 1982, p. 403. Collard, 1975, p. 407, argues that Athena "contributes hardly at all to the play's action".

<sup>16</sup> 1975, p. 407.

<sup>17</sup> I follow here E. P. Coleridge's 1891 prose translation, in W. J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill (eds.), 1938, available at the site:

<http://old.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0122&layout=&loc=1224>.

connect this observation with what seems to be the real polarized tension in the *Suppliants*' tragic cosmos: it is not the conflict between the limitation of men and the existence of gods, but the inner human tension between *pathos* and *logos*.

Finally, in the last part of the *exodos* (1227 to 1234), Theseus and the Argives can only accept and recognize the divine commands, getting prepared to take the oath and the prescribed rituals to gratify the ἄξια, the honourable deeds of the Athenians.

### III. THE *DEA EX MACHINA*.

#### III. 1 Aetiology and ritual aspects.

The most important feature in the form of this *exodos* is the divine epiphany which closes it. The *pathos* and the tension of the drama have faded away, and there is only space for the expression of thankfulness and for the creation of future expectations; no further advance in the action is possible. Thus, the dramatic device of the *deus ex machina* fulfils, a priori, a very concrete and established function, which can be defined as aetiological and ritual.

The scheme of the divine epiphany here agrees with the form a *deus ex machina* device ought to have according to Aristotle, *Poetics* 1454b 1-9. As he prescribes, the god's presence should only be used to explain what lies outside the play: μηχανῆ χρηστέον ἐπὶ τὰ ἔξω τοῦ δράματος (1454b 3). But Aristotle's discussion of tragedy is not concerned with the ritual importance either of tragedy in general, or of divine epiphanies at the end of tragic performances in particular<sup>18</sup>. Besides, Horace's contribution to the theory of drama, even more alien to any religious dimension, did not place a high estimate on the use of this device, whose presence he advised against in *Ars Poetica* 191-92<sup>19</sup>, unless it was absolutely necessary for the resolution of a dramatic impasse. Thus, it is not surprising that a considerable part of scholarship has completely ignored its ritual aspects, and, consequently, has been led to regard the Euripidean *deus ex machina* as a rather unjustified device, since, in many cases, it does not contribute significantly to the dramatic action<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> For Aristotle's secularization of the drama see S. Halliwell, 1986, pp. 202-237, and, especially, pp. 231-233. See also G. Murray's preface in I. Bywater, 1920, pp. 13-14, and I. Συκουτρής, 2003, p. 117\*.

<sup>19</sup> *Nec deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus / incidereit*. See Brink, 1971, pp. 251-253 and 491-492.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, A. W. Schlegel (1809, 216), whose lectures on Greek dramatic poetry influenced to a not unimportant degree on subsequent criticism, considered the appearance of deities at the end of many Euripidean plays devoid of meaning: "In den Prologen sowohl als bei der Auflösung ist er sehr freigebig mit unbedeutenden Erscheinungen von Göttern, die sich nur durch das Schweben in der Maschine über die Menschen erheben,

Athena's appearance is not gratuitous, though, and we are dealing with an aetiological epiphany, which is, according to Collard<sup>21</sup>, "Euripides' individual contribution to the form [of the *deus ex machina*]". Why, then, did the author need such a link with his contemporary reality? On the one hand, his scope was to "retain for tragedy some explicit associations with myth and cult"<sup>22</sup>, which seems pretty plausible, since the play holds a high degree of rituality. This can be observed in its very name -reflecting the sacred rite of supplication-, and in some other manifestations, like the *ekphora* of the dead bodies of the Seven, and the connection of the play's action with some holy places, as well as the link with relics and observances known to the spectators<sup>23</sup>. But there is something more: Athena's aetiological function creates a bond with the history of Athens<sup>24</sup>, and, therefore, with its very idiosyncrasy as a *polis* ideologically built upon the feats of its past. Besides, the goddess foretells the vengeance of the *Epigonoï*, who will wage war against Thebes in order to take revenge for their fathers' death.

Even so, most interesting of all is not the aetiology itself, since the expedition of the *Epigonoï* was a well-known story in Athens, but the frame in which it is inscribed. We will find out that, perhaps, Euripides' objective is not merely the establishment of an aetiology of the Epigones' factual expedition, but a larger explanation –through the illustrating *exemplum* of the inexhaustible rage-cycle which embody the Epigones- of the sad evidence of mankind's inability to dominate its passions. If we bear in mind the whole course of the play, as well as the terrible emotions which emerge out of the presence of death in the

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und gar wohl entrathen werden könnten". Furthermore, he does not hold the *Suppliants* in particular esteem, since he calls it a mere occasional tragedy: "Die Herakliden und die Schutzgenossinnen sind wahre Gelegenheits Tragödien, und konnten wohl nur als Schmeichelei gegen die Athener Glück machen" (1809, 257). Yet, finally (258), he acknowledges that the *Suppliants*, compared to the *Heraklidae*, is richer in poetical merit. Cf. G. Zuntz, 1955, p. IX.

<sup>21</sup> 1975, p. 407.

<sup>22</sup> C. Collard, 1975, p. 407.

<sup>23</sup> For the relation of Adrastos' funeral oration with the traditional Athenian *logos epitaphios*, see C. Collard, 1972, pp. 39-53. See also *idem*, 1975, pp. 323 ff., and D. J. Conacher, 1978, pp. 253-257, who remarks, with a tinge of reservation upon Collard's view, the "highly conventional nature" of Adrastos' funeral oration. G. Zuntz, 1955, pp. 13-16, as well as A. N. Michelini, 1994, pp. 241-245 refer to the *logos epitaphios* too. As regards the relics, see G. Zuntz, 1955, pp. 77-78.

<sup>24</sup> G. Zuntz, 1955, p. 75: "Athena's prediction of the expedition of the Epigonoï (v. 1214 ff.) prolongs the dramatic action towards an event guaranteed by the supreme authority of Homer". Moreover, Zuntz refers to the function of Athena as a character introduced to lend authority to the poet's novel treatment of myth, that is, to Adrastos' oath: "Athena defines its place within the frame of the national tradition".

community, and, especially, the grievous dirge of the mothers in their second *kommos*<sup>25</sup> -which is the immediately preceding context of Athena's "enlightening" prophecy announcing more blood and more destruction-, does the goddess not perform, ultimately, a sort of aetiological role at an ontological level, that is, giving the clue to mankind's tragic existence?

### III. 2 Athena, an advocate of war?

The most puzzling question which arouses Athena's aetiological intervention at the end of the play is whether she merely confirms the eagerness for revenge of the Epigones (which they have already expressed in 1143-1151), or she compels them to war. If we opt for the latter approach, necessarily we will discover behind the apparently munificent action of Athena a "second view": a hint at her function as an advocate of new wars and destruction. According to this interpretation, the pretended positive role of the goddess is partly inverted and turned into a quite uncanny one. In fact, it is undeniable that, once the martial desires of the Sons had been suffocated by the Mothers' reconciling words which had substituted vengeance desires for maternal worried affection utterances (1140-1152)<sup>26</sup>, the unexpected intervention of Athena introduces again tension in the play with her "harsh commands"<sup>27</sup> of vengeance.

After the terrible experience of death and suffering, one could think that the last thing the suppliant mothers can desire is one more war, as they have already declared (ἄλις γόων, / ἄλις <δ> ἄλγέων ἐμοὶ πάρεστιν: 1147-1148). But the fact is that, while the gods have been represented all along the play in a seemingly positive light<sup>28</sup>, it is a deity who announces and seems to support the

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<sup>25</sup> As Burian, 1985, p. 146, recalls, "the only lesson they seem able to draw is that it would have been better not to marry and give birth than to lose one's children (786-93)". Thus, he refers to the mother's laments as "a *kommos* that rises to an almost ecstatic pitch of grief".

<sup>26</sup> As I have argued in note 1, G. Murray's (1913) text distribution makes far more intelligible the dialogue between the Mothers and the Sons. D. J. Conacher, 1956, pp. 25-26, following Murray's text, indicates that: "as the Sons develop the image of themselves clad in the armour of vengeance and strive to hear an order to battle voiced by their father's shades, the Chorus seeks to replace these thoughts with gentler images of love. The hint of vengeance seems to pass."

<sup>27</sup> D. J. Conacher, 1956, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> See D. J. Conacher, 1956, pp. 9 ff. for the main guidelines of the critical debate which has arisen around the issue of the image of the gods in this play. The play has been read either as a serious patriotic drama, or as containing touches of irony and ambivalence which reveal Euripides' critical attitude towards some established values and civic procedures depicted in it. The author concludes the revision of the critical approaches to



new war which the Epigones will embrace. The impression, therefore, is that Euripides is showing a certain critical attitude towards Athena in this juxtaposition of an absolute reject of more wars uttered by the mothers, and the commands for a new one, expressed by the goddess.

Nonetheless, things are not so clear, and there is still a question in the air: to what degree does Athena promote this future war? Is it possible that her main function is only to announce the unavoidable fact of a new war, without having any intervention or taking any part in it, that is, not *compelling* the Argives, but simply *preparing* them for what is inescapable? Is Athena, thus, acting as a mere “aetiological informer” for the spectators<sup>29</sup>? The response is not easy to be given, if we take it as a polarized one, because it would imply an extreme position of the author towards the gods, and, I claim, this is not the case. Neither are the gods messengers without an own voice, nor are they the promoters of human disaster. The solution is probably to be sought by way of a balance of these two extremes: although facts are fixed by a necessity which surpasses gods (“No otherwise is it to be” [1224]), they do have an active role in the play, and, as for Athena, she actively exhorts the Argives and Theseus to assume the measures she has dictated. But Athena’s role is not that of an avenging god who sends a plague upon men because of their *hybris* -a transgression of their human limitations. In fact, she has

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the attitude of Euripides’ *Suppliants* towards the gods with the assertion that “one cannot help feeling that those critics who complain of the unexpected orthodoxy of this play have missed some of the asides by which the poet has saved his integrity” (p. 12). For him, one of the central features of the god’s treatment, which has been overlooked by most critics is “the touch of ambiguity which surround the treatment of the gods and of religion in this play” (p. 13). Besides, G. Zuntz, 1955, p. 5, in spite of his rather optimistic view of the divine apparatus in this play, had already advanced that “the world in which Euripides lived had been abandoned by the gods”. Even so, this is only a general observation related to Euripides’ contemporary train of thought: regarding the *Suppliants* and, particularly, Athena’s image, Zuntz (p. 71) does not believe in the possibility that Athena could be represented in an unfavourable light. Zuntz is, thus, to be counted among those scholars who do not notice any hint of irony in Euripides’ attitude towards the gods in this play. As a matter of fact, his point of view is not shared by D. J. Conacher, 1956, p. 13, who, though reckoning that Zuntz’s analysis is “brilliant”, considers that “it is possible (...) that it presents a rather more idealized picture than the text of the play will support”.

<sup>29</sup> The question of whether Athena’s divine prophecy does prompt, or rather simply state the fact of the future Argive campaign has received different responses. According to V. Muñoz Llamosas, 2002, p. 111, men alone resolve the conflict, while the role of the *deus ex machina* is not significant from the point of view of dramatic action (although the author claims that the gods are the supporters of justice in this play). On the contrary, Fitton, 1961, p. 442, sustains that Athena “encourages the Argive boys to attack and ravage (...) the city of Thebes”.

little relation with the action itself, because the renewal of conflict doesn't rise from a god's will, but from men's inability to yield to reason.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS.

What lies at the basis of the *Suppliants*' ideology is that the tendency to war and destruction is rooted in the deepest of human soul. The avenging war of the Epigones is nothing but a logical consequence of the action. The Seven, with Adrastus at their head, showed that passion is the motor force of mankind, and, also, that the results of this irrational passion lead to a sad end. The announced action of their sons is an ironic inversion of the values that are transmitted from father to son: the sons "learn" from their fathers the tragic and destructive inability to listen to reason, and the tendency to move towards unmastered passions. Thus, as Burian<sup>30</sup> points out, the glorifying praises of Adrastus, where he tells with optimism that "virtue can be taught" (ἡ δ' εὐανδρία διδακτόν, 913-914), as well as Theseus' *kosmos*, an *enkomion* of reason (195-249), are ironically inverted by the example of what the Sons have learned from their fathers. The resulting statement is that heroism can only destroy, and brings grief and pain, and that there is no "just hero", moved by reason, but that *pathos* is, in last term, the main motor force of men, as the instances of Evadne, Adrastus and Theseus himself (he could not reach any reasoned compromise with the Theban Herald, and that is why the solution were the arms<sup>31</sup>) confirm in a specially significant manner. This is the reason why Athena's intervention is justified: her function is to warrant those points which mere human words are not able to reach: a verbal promise doesn't suffice; her presence implies the statement that spoken reasons are fragile, and are condemned to fail under the force of passion.

With Athena's epiphany, the revenge of the Sons is raised into the domain of the unquestionable and necessary. Yet, the goddess only sanctions a retaliation

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<sup>30</sup> 1985, p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> We have to notice an important detail, as scholars do, namely that "the war declared at the end of the episode [of the Theban Herald and Theseus] was not forced in Euripides by the legendary subject. There is clear evidence that he has preferred the version in which Athens and Thebes do battle to one that he and his audience must have known in which the recovery of the bodies is accomplished peacefully" (P. Burian, 1985, p. 139). Following Burian's reasoning, the meaning of this choice must be that Euripides wanted to show that "war results from the inability of men who desire peace to achieve it by rational deliberation" (1985, pp. 139-140). For J. W. Fitton, 1961, p. 444, such a choice means that Euripides "seems to be declining to use such an ethically satisfying conclusion [in comparison with Aeschylus' version in the *Eleusinians*, where the bodies of the slain are retrieved by peaceful means]".

which had already been announced, for, as we see, it is a dramatic necessity grown from the action itself.

In short, neither mankind nor the gods receive a favourable treatment in this play. If vengeance -the product of uncontrolled hatred- is sanctioned by the supposed guarantors of order and justice, what can be the reaction of the Chorus? Leaving a baleful echo in the last dry anapaests, the Mothers express a sad gratitude, once the lyric has been blurred, and the tears blown away (1232-1234):

Στείχομεν, Ἐδρασθ', ὄρκια δῶμεν  
τῶιδ' ἀνδρὶ πόλει τ' ἄξια δ' ἡμῖν  
προμεμοχθήκασι σέβεσθαί.

Of course we can not extrapolate our modern code of ethics to what is reflected in Euripidean tragedy. The pejorative burden which bears the concept of vengeance for us did not exist as such in Euripides' times. Nevertheless, it is true that in his time old values related to traditional social paradigms, such as blood vengeance as a restitution of order, were becoming questioned as a result of social and ideological changes that were taking place in that moment.

Subsequently, the debate about the values which move mankind is completely in the line of this incipient new Weltanschauung. The question in this tragedy is not anymore what is the position of men in relation to the endless power of the supernatural necessity. The tragical focus is rather on mankind itself, and on the forces by which it is led. The tragical conflict is hold between constructive and (auto)destructive impulses, between reason and uncontrolled passion.

It can be held that sophism was the expression and defence-bastion of the power of *logos*. It can be assumed as well that Euripides was profoundly influenced by sophism<sup>32</sup>. Anyway; do we really have the impression, regarding the *Suppliants*, and the almost ominous overtones of Athena's ratification of the Epigones' vengeance, that Euripides believed -at least in the artistic expression we are analyzing- that reason rules the action of men? Probably not. And that is the very message of the play, here are the politics of the play: what governs human relationships and guides them to despair is *pathos* and the frailty associated with it, exposed as are men not to the forces of a universe beyond

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<sup>32</sup> In this respect, it may be enlightening to take into account G. Arnott's (1973, p. 49) comment upon Euripides' penchant for sophism: "Euripides was fascinated by the sophists. His own mind operated at their intellectual level. Yet Euripides was not himself a sophist, but a dramatist working in and often against conventions of contemporary Attic tragedy." On this largely debated aspect, see W. Allan, 2000, pp. 145-56, with wider and more updated bibliographical references.

them, but inside them. Necessarily (“no otherwise is it to be”, 1224), the avenging war of the Epigones is going to take place, because *pathos* engenders more *pathos*, and destruction leads irretrievably to new destruction: this is the rule, this is the *kosmos* of mankind.

How can this view, then, be reconciled with G. Murray’s consideration of Euripidean epiphanies as a trope which allows the play to culminate in a peaceful “level of serenity”<sup>33</sup>? We can accept that the divine presence casts its enormous shadow of stability, power and necessity over human weakness, contingency and mutability. However, what kind of “serenity” does it afford? No more than the disturbing serenity of submission to the truth, that is, a serenity not achieved by the calmed pleasure of understanding, but by consciousness of human limits and by self recognition. And, moreover, if the god’s revelation in this *exodos* is, eventually, a revelation of the frailty of men, of the inner abyss which divides their soul, and of the self-destruction to which they are condemned, the “serenity” achieved has to be seen most appropriately as a silent acceptance, where no words are to be added: a tragical serenity.

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<sup>33</sup> G. Murray, 1949, p. 176.

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