

Pietro Pucci

*Euripides's Revolution  
under Cover*

AN ESSAY



EURIPIDES'S REVOLUTION  
UNDER COVER

*An Essay*

PIETRO PUCCI

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EURIPIDES'S REVOLUTION UNDER COVER

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## 1. Euripides's Poetic Game and Law of Composition

The title of this book is an oxymoron. Revolutions can be conceived under cover, but then they explode. The Euripidean revolution I describe in this book is not explosive in this way, nor is it prepared with great fanfare. The book's title reflects an aspect of the oxymoronic and paradoxical poetics of Euripides's plays.

This study focuses on what I take to be the two overarching aims of Euripides's poetic game and law of composition: to elaborate a consistent criticism of the anthropomorphic nature of the Greek gods, and to provide audiences and readers with the wisdom and the strength to endure the distress of life. Together, these two aims are at the heart of the Euripidean revolution. They are also deeply inter-connected. The criticism of anthropomorphism undercuts the interventions that the gods, armed with human-like passions and finalities, enact among the mortals. The suspension of these interventions leaves human beings responsible for their actions, but also deprived of any external recourse. If Zeus—to take an example—ceases being perceived as the god administering justice, and appears as merely another name for “Necessity,” the prayers of wronged and humiliated human beings will have no recourse: their prayers will be in vain. In this condition, what they need is the wisdom and the strength to endure the injustice they are suffering.

Euripides's plays are indeed designed to administer just this teaching and deliver these resources with healing effects. His language aims at being a language of *sophia*, in the sense of an enlightened, sensitive, and performative poetic event. Since both aims, the criticism of anthropomorphism and the rousing of individual wisdom, derive from philosophical and sophistic culture, they introduce flashes of enlightened thought in Euripides's texts.<sup>1</sup> The revolutionary momentum lies in the first aim, suspending the traditional anthropomorphic view of the gods.

1. I employ the word “enlightenment” and its cognates, though I am aware of their anachronistic impropriety when applied to fifth-century Greek culture. With these words I do not intend to evoke the complex meanings and implication of the eighteenth-century cultural revolution, but only some of its connotations: the emerging in the fifth century of a philosophical and a literary production that questioned and criticized the previous mythical conglomerate or hypertext, and in turn brought about new ways of thinking. It privileged the value of evidence, the analysis of language, the knowledge of comparative cultures, the individual experience, the working of reason

According to the traditional view, to the mythical hypertext, the gods control human destinies and act through impulses and motivations that are similar to human ones. Euripides's plays develop various strategies to demystify this view of the divine. I mention here only a few. The plays portray the gods behaving in criminal, unwise, and arbitrary ways through indomitable passion. This behavior convinces a character like Heracles that such beings cannot be gods. At times, the plays suggest that the traditional gods are the embodiments of impersonal and cosmic forces: Zeus is Necessity, Aphrodite is sex, Dionysus is wine, and so on. When the gods are stripped of their human-like passions and personal motivations, the whole carapace of the traditional myth is subverted.

Sometimes the two poetic aims are explicitly contrasted in exhilarating dramatic debates that appear almost philosophically inspired: in the *Troades*, Hecuba, arguing against Helen, extols the sinful responsibility of the adulterous woman who tries to justify her ruinous behavior by attributing it to Aphrodite's doing.

The rich and fertile innovations that I am describing have not escaped the critics of Euripides's plays: Zeitlin, Lloyd, Kovacs, Mastronarde, Roisman, Allan, Goldhill, Dué, and Susanetti, to name only a few recent scholars, have dealt with these aspects of Euripides's theater. Yet, for some of them it has been impossible to characterize these innovations as enlightened strokes capable of subverting the ideological structure of Greek mythology. Others, who have, on the contrary, appreciated the tremendous intellectual energy of these ideas, have often found it difficult to interpret an entire play as fully marked by enlightened principles. And there is a factual reason, among others, for this. Euripides had to introduce the new philosophical principles and dramatic effects in plots and productions that traditionally staged anthropomorphic gods. This initial condition was unavoidable and created what I call his "under cover strategy": a representation of anthropomorphic gods that endeavored to empty the anthropomorphism from those figures, and to intimate a different divine notion.

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and intelligence (*sunesis*). I prefer the word "enlightenment" to the word "rationalism" that is often used by historians of the period: reason and rationalism come to us from the same eighteenth century, and have even today, especially after Freud and postmodernism, hazy outlines and questionable implications. When I employ the word "reason" I generally add the Greek word to which I am referring.

This strategy triggered a variety of textual tactics, including the introduction of double plots, long philosophical and political debates, enlightened utopias, apparently contradictory arguments, ironic scenarios, and, on occasion, what I have called—following Genette (1983)—“metalepsis-scenes,” that is, scenes that in tone and substance disrupt the main flow of the text. In this book I expose these enlightened textual strategies, demonstrating their referential power both within particular scenes and with respect to the interpretation of the entire play. To cite only one example, in the political arena, the *Suppliant Women* stages a sort of double plot: Theseus, starting from a position of enlightened principle, analyzes the legitimacy of the Athenian armed intervention in Thebes and decisively denies it, but, after his mother's pleading, he accepts this military intervention, which then unfurls as the plot of the play. The first denial, however, with its innovative motivations, frames Athens's entire action in the play, casting suspicion on the city's alleged political generosity, justice, and greatness while intimating that this portrait is a mere propagandistic myth.

A careful analysis of these textual strategies, coupled with an appreciation for the implicit connotations that emerge from them, has allowed me to elaborate new interpretations of passages, scenes, or plays many times visited by Euripidean scholars. For whatever reasons, most critics have been cautious about the direction I have chosen: a few have preferred to make of Euripides—*malgré lui*—a traditional poet; while those who appreciate the innovative and sophistic energy of his dramas have not always seen how far and deep this energy goes.<sup>2</sup>

Although in principle I might have traced Euripides's main aims across his entire corpus, I have chosen to study them in plays and scenes that focus

2. On the conservative side, see, for instance, Kovacs (1987) and Mastrorarde (2010, 156–61), who argues for a cautious view of the gods in Euripides: he endeavors to integrate Euripides's “novelties” in the rich and complex variety of moral and theological aspects that the “literary” figures of gods possess in Greek myth and especially in Greek tragedy. In this integration, Euripides's enlightened views would not produce any revolution. On the opposite side, Dodds (1929, 1951), Loraux (especially 2002), and Goldhill (1986, 161ff. and 233ff.) open new paths and offer—as I will show—creative suggestions for my analysis. For a particularly original reading, see Segal (1993, 214ff.), who interprets the characters' views of the gods as a revelation of the characters' own natures and values. The list of great Euripideanists is very long: for an instructive survey of the views of Euripides's gods in the second half of the twentieth century, see Kullmann 1987.

on some of the most debated issues of his time: language, eros, and politics. The interpretation of Euripides's views on language, eros, and politics is arduous and highlights complex, unresolved questions; yet, though unresolved, the mirage of a language of truth, the uncheckable power of sex, and the frustrating game of politics on display in Euripides's theater yield many exciting insights, pleasant and hopeful promises, and admirable utopias. But men in power and rulers of the cities seem unable to fully appreciate what is at hand, and because of this they force other human beings to endure violence and nonsense. Unwise prophecies and nasty inspirations complete the tragic scenario.

## 2. Anthropomorphism

Euripides employs a number of different textual moves that have the effect of suspending or undercutting the gods' anthropomorphism. I will single out a few of these moves here. One of the more frequent ones consists in conflating the divine image with a cosmic principle that depersonalizes the gods and limits the richness of their portraits and *timai* (honors and attributes). As a consequence, human beings confront a universal, indifferent force and not a personally motivated indomitable power. In the *Alcestis*, Admetus returns home after the funeral ceremony for his wife and is unable to confront the emptiness of his house and the desolation of his new life. Nothing can bring Alcestis back, and appropriately the Chorus of his friends tries to console him by singing a hymn to Anankē (Necessity):

I have soared aloft both with the Muses<sup>3</sup> and with high thought, and having engaged in many reflections, I found nothing mightier than Necessity.<sup>4</sup>  
 . . . Of this goddess alone it is impossible to approach either the altars or the image, nor yet does she pay attention to sacrifices. May you not, lady, come upon me with mightier force than formerly in my life. Truly, whatever

3. This passage opens up the problem of the very interpretation of *διὰ μούσας*, for we do not know whether the Muses are intended here as the goddesses of music and poetry or as a simple hypostasis of songs and poems.

4. κρείττον οὐδὲν Ἀνάγκας ἤϊρον. Susanetti (2001, 258–59) reads in these lines an autobiographic touch.

Zeus nods to, he brings it to fulfillment with your assent. And you subdue with your violence the steel among the Chalybi, and there is no respect (αἰδώς) in your unrelenting heart. (*Alc.* 962–83)

Dodds (1929, 101) writes: “For Euripides, Man is the slave, not the favorite child of the gods (*Orestes* 418),<sup>5</sup> and the name of the ageless order is Necessity. Κρεῖττον οὐδὲν Ἀνάγκας ἤϊρον cry the Chorus of the *Alcestis* 965 (cf. *Hel.* 513 and the repeated instances that Man is subject to the same cycle of physical necessity as Nature, frs. 332, 419).”<sup>6</sup> Dodds is correct in not identifying Necessity with Death as some readers do:<sup>7</sup> although the collaboration of Anankē with Death is touched on especially in lines 966–72, and although Zeus is the god who killed Asklepios because he brought men back to life (*Alc.* 3–4, 121–29), in this context Anankē has a greater range of powers than human death.

Continuing his analysis, Dodds writes: “All else is guesswork. Is Zeus some physical principle like the ether (fr. 869; cf. 836, 911, 935) or is he the mythological projection of what is highest in ourselves? Or is he just another name for ‘Necessity’?” Avoiding a specific answer, he continues: “Euripides lets his puppets speculate, but Euripides does not know. His own position seems to be fairly summed up in one of the fragments (793):<sup>8</sup> ‘Men are not masters of these high arguments. He that pretends to have knowledge concerning the gods, has in truth no higher science than to persuade men by assertion.’ And with that the whole of the traditional Greek mythology crumbles to the ground.” Dodds then contrasts this skepticism with Euripides’s “religiosity” and, after quoting the famous passage in the *Hippolytus*, 189ff., he offers his well-known interpretation of the *Bacchae*.

5. Orestes: “We are slaves of the gods, whatever the ‘gods’ are” (δουλεύομεν θεοῖς, ὅτι ποτ’ εἰσὶν οἱ θεοί). See West 1987: “whatever ‘the gods’ are: a Euripidean cliché (after Aesch. *Ag.* 160), cf. *HF.* 1263, *Tro.* 885, *Hel.* 1137, *Ba.* 894, fr. 480. We are governed by powers we do not understand.” Also “whatever the gods are” might question and suspend their traditional anthropomorphic nature. Thus it is obvious that human beings are subject to Necessity.

6. Euripides is probably not the first to assert equivalence between Zeus and Necessity. For instance, in Hesiod, *Theog.* 615–16, the will of Zeus is implicitly identified with Necessity, though of course from a different perspective and with different consequences..

7. See, for instance, Parker 2007, 247.

8. In Kannicht, *TGF*, this is fr. 795, and I will cite it from now on as fr. 795.

The reader will have observed that Dodds does not take fr. 795 as a speculation by one of Euripides's puppets but as Euripides's own fundamental speculation that ultimately sinks the whole mythology. The passage, indeed, sounds like a new version of Protagoras's famous declaration regarding the gods, and nothing prevents us from attributing it to one of Euripides's puppets, rather than to Euripides himself. Indeed, this is the inevitable difficulty with all the ideological and theoretical statements in Euripides's work—we are not sure to whom to attribute them. Dodds's commentary leaves open two questions related to that vision: First, how can the universal forces, which in Euripides appear to be synonyms or substitutions for the traditional gods, be understood as divine entities and objects of cult, since they are also indifferent, cosmic principles? Second, how can their specific relationship to the traditional gods be described?

Necessity, Eros, and Tukhē are attached in some substantive way to traditional gods: Zeus, Aphrodite, and Hera. This conflation of anthropomorphic divinities with cosmic principles creates critical difficulties in Dodds's analysis, especially when he suggests that Aphrodite in the *Hippolytus* may be a simple hypostasis of sex. This does not convince me. A cosmic force acquires divine power and does not deprive the traditional divinity of its divine personality. A sort of conflation occurs whereby the traditional god and the cosmic divine force coalesce in a hybrid nature. This conflation has a traditional ring, and, though conceptually difficult for us moderns to accept, the hybrid form did appear normal to the archaic Greeks. One has only to see how Gaia (Earth) in Hesiod's *Theogony* is simultaneously the planet Earth and the anthropomorphic character Earth, wife of Ouranos, to realize the frequency and the normality of this feature. In the *Theogony* we read: "And he [Ouranos] used to hide his children in a cavern of Earth (Γαίης ἐν κευθμῶνι) as soon as each was born" (156–58); "Vast Earth groaned (ἡ δ' ἐντὸς στοναχίζετο Γαῖα πελώρη), being tight-pressed inside, and she thought up a crafty and nasty wile (δολίην δὲ κακίην ἐπεφράσσατο τέχνην)" (159–60). The "vast" earth and the crafty Earth are the same divine person, and both sides of this hybrid entity are holy, divine. Because the ancient Greeks were accustomed to conceiving the divine in such a form, it ought not to have been difficult for them to conceive of Zeus as a "person," an impersonal process, Necessity, and a divine phenomenon of the sky.

In Euripides's dramas, such conflation undermines the traditional anthropomorphic gods to the extent that it may be shown to undercut their

personal purposes and aims. Furthermore the hybridization shows a face of the divine that, deprived of personal favorable or hostile intentions, allows mortals to design their own strategies of assent, resistance, or endurance. Phaedra is able to devise strategies that may help her to defeat the sexual desire that tortures her. She fails, but her attempt constitutes a sublime move toward self-control and self-realization.

The cosmic, depersonalized force exists as a new god in conflation with the traditional god, as the passage from the *Alcestis* quoted above confirms:

Of this goddess alone it is impossible to approach either the altars or the image, nor yet does she pay attention to sacrifices. May you not, lady, come upon me with mightier force than formerly in my life. Truly, whatever Zeus nods to, he brings it to fulfillment with your assent.

The Chorus asserts that Necessity is a goddess. They add that she does not accept rituals. Accordingly, the temples, sacrifices, and images through which human beings try to communicate with and persuade their gods are meaningless and useless if Necessity and Zeus are the same god. This recognition invites human beings to probe what in their individual lives or their society depends on Necessity, the law of nature—another cosmic principle attributed to Zeus—or Chance. Chance is a devastating addition to the anthropomorphic Olympus, for the culture of Euripides's century discovers how much in life depends on it. In Thucydides, for instance, intelligence (*gnōmē*)—as one of the determining forces in the making of human history—gradually loses ground to “chance.”<sup>9</sup> Only when Zeus does not contest Necessity is it then legitimate and useful to pray to the goddess Anankē that she may be lenient: “May you not, lady, come upon me with mightier force than formerly in my life. Truly, whatever Zeus nods to, he brings it to fulfillment with your assent.”

The Chorus embraces both Zeus and Necessity, and in this way the friends of Admetus subvert the structure of the Olympian gods: as Necessity cannot be addressed and has no personal intentions or ends, the hope of the one who prays is that Zeus may find Necessity available to deliver what the human being prays for.<sup>10</sup> Even in this pious case, the autonomy

9. See Edmunds 1975; Nussbaum 1986.

10. Zaidman 2001, 129–30.

and power of the traditional gods are drastically undercut, since they depend on the external assent that no argument or persuasion can deliver. One aspect of this question is directly confronted (although resolved in a different way) by Socrates in Plato's *Euthyphro*, when both the priest and Socrates realize that ritual practice is something that gods do not need, and consequently they conclude that it cannot justify or explain "piety."

At this point, it may be useful to consider the minidrama that is played out in the *Alcestis* through the character of Thanatos (Death). Thanatos is already known from the *Iliad* (16.453–57 and 681–83), where, with his brother Hypnos, he carries the body of Sarpedon home to Lycia for burial by his kinsmen. In the prologue of the *Alcestis*, Thanatos starts a dialogue with Apollo. Death appears as black-robed (*Alc.* 843) and winged (a sort of conflation of Thanatos and Hades, 261) and carries a sword. No supernatural elements mark his entrance. He should probably be defined as a daimon or as an "ogreish creature of popular mythology," as Dale (1954, 54) suggests; or as a figure like Charon with his boat (252–57). Insofar as he is Death, however, he is certainly a figure connected with the rule of Necessity. Necessity, therefore, is embodied in synonymic, personalized figures other than Zeus.

Apollo asks Thanatos as a favor to take the body of an old human being instead of a young person. Apollo assumes that Thanatos may accept a switch, such as Apollo had obtained from the Moirai. Thanatos refuses, justifying his decision by saying, "You know my ways" (*Alc.* 61). "Yes, ways hateful to men," Apollo replies, "and hated by the gods" (62).<sup>11</sup> Apollo, of course, should have known that these ways are unchangeable, because they are those of Necessity (here Death), but the text has Apollo playing a fable-like role, which, in agreement with Heracles, undercuts the laws of Necessity (*Alc.* 64–69). In fact, Alcestis also breaks the laws of Necessity in some way, since she accepts death in place of Admetus, whose death was indeed necessary unless someone chose to die in his stead. Her choice has altered the necessary sequence of the events.

Immediately after the Chorus's celebration of Anankē (Necessity), Heracles defeats Thanatos and snatches Alcestis's body from Thanatos's arms.

11. A short argument ensues about Thanatos's *timai*: if Thanatos chooses younger victims his *timai* are larger. As Apollo turns this point around, Thanatos mocks him. Thanatos is Death, the figure of the human necessity of dying, and cannot be persuaded, even by a god, for he hears no prayers, just like Anankē.