What are the weltanschauungen espoused by these tragedies?

It might well be unreasonable to suggest that all cultural products serve a social function. On the other hand, in the case of the Greek tragedies, one is inclined to wonder with what intentions the Greek city-state of Athens called upon its didaskaloi to produce works for performances part-funded by the public purse, on what criteria the principal Αρχων would have been expected to select four plays for the Greater Dionysia, what influence the sponsoring χορηγοι might have had upon the content of works presented, and on what merits the judges would award prizes.

This paper works from the premise that a play which reaches us through such a process has received some degree of endorsement from the Greek establishment, whether as entertainment, or on a more broadly Reithian evaluation of its educational, informative value. The texts examined will be Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* Trilogy[1], Sophocles' *Antigone*[2], and Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*[3]. The catharsis of tragedy – in which with dark inevitability

[1] Aeschylus, *The Oresteia Trilogy*, trans. E.D.A. Morshead, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996)
[2] Sophocles, *Antigone*, *The Oedipus Cycle*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977)
[3] Euripides, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, trans. W.S. Merwin and George E. Dimock, Jr., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978)

"the worst" occurs – could be thought to re-interpellate and instil docile timidity afresh, into a law-abiding and God-fearing citizenry. Yet of these works, I will claim that such a social function could only be attributed with any degree of plausibility to *The Oresteia* Trilogy. That all of these plays were chosen and to varying degrees endorsed bespeaks a certain compatibility, even a resonance, between the ideological messages they contain and the zeitgeist. Thus the question is: "What are the weltanschauungen espoused by these tragedies?"

In Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* Trilogy[4], the efficacy of human agency is perilously low in relation to the fate ordained by powerful gods. Aeschylus' chorus of Furies warns "learn ye how to all and each / The arm of doom can reach!"[5] and even after the bureaucratic mess of polytheism[6] has shifted to a jury system which implicitly enacts the will of a single divinity – "thus the will of Zeus shone clearly forth"[7] – with the play ending such that "Zeus, king of parley, doth prevail"[8], one senses that the "arm of doom" has not simply been superseded by the long arm of the law. The chorus of captive women in *The Libation-Bearers* give us the most substantial rendition of a weltanschauung available in the work. Here is intoned a view

[4] Performed in 458 BCE
[5] Aeschylus, (1996), p.122
[6] "Apollo: What? to avenge a wife who slays her lord? / Chorus: That is not blood outpoured by kindred hands" ibidem., p.119
[7] ibid., p.142
[8] ib., p.148

of the world in which fear and mystery preside. The couplet "Many and marvellous the things of fear / Earth's breast doth bear"[9] is subsequently expanded upon. Monsters are said to teem[10] in the unknown – and implicitly unknowable – depths of the sea, whilst in the unearthly light of lighting and meteor showers, "Breed many deadly things – / Unknown and flying forms, with fear upon their wings".

In contrast, only sixteen years but one generation later, the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone*[11] presents a world which is knowable, ordered and open to empirical investigation. Birds may fly whilst man cannot – and here is no great mystery, for they are "lightboned". Nature may manifest powerful forces, but they are subdued and they have been mastered, by the intellect of man: even "the stormgray sea / Yields to his prows"[12]. The word δεινός sets a leitmotif for this paper as it will come through the course of this fifth century BCE to shift its meaning from "terrifying" to "awe-inspiring" in a similar manner to Ruskin's "sublime". The deep-sea creatures which lurked nightmarishly in the collective unconscious of Aeschylus' libation-bearers are all captured by Sophocles' man (or rather δεινός Man – with ingenuity both fearsome and wondrous) and "tamed in the net of his mind"[13]. Where formerly the

[9] ib., p.91
[10] ib.
[11] Performed in 442 BCE
[12] Sophocles, (1977), p.203
[13] ib., p.204

“rushing whirlwinds, of whose blasting breath / Man’s tongue can tell” were enumerated among a list of many “things of fear” in Aeschylus’ work, in Sophocles’ rendering, the elements pose no threat: “his the skill that deflects the arrows of snow / The spears of winter rain: from every wind / He has made himself secure”. Death is the only insecurity left in the natural world for Sophocles’ quasi-enlightenment man.

Yet there are always things to be feared. Whereas the world that Sophocles paints is an intelligible one, inspiring wonder in its abundance and comprehended complexity, as opposed to fear and incomprehension by its monstrous disorder; it is a world which will run well under the condition that man obeys the laws. Here the chorus rejoins in a minor key the pathological fear held by Creon for the “anárchic man”: “Never be it said that my thoughts are his thoughts”[14]. To even entertain such thoughts as would lead to illegal acts – thereby endangering the well-being of one’s city-state – such could not be the trepidation of Sophocles himself, whose heroine receives from him a beatific aura whilst she destabilises a kingdom. Was Creon’s most egregious crime to sacrifice human dignity on the altar of long-term political stability and normative social cohesion; or was it his proud inability to rescind in the face of prophesy? Whichever is worse in the eyes of the gods, Sophocles’

[14] ib.

chorus declaims upon the "fate of man, working both good and evil!"[15].

With Aeschylus, the case is somewhat different. Here the chorus is given license to proclaim that the greatest fear is in fact woman. If things go wrong in the world portrayed by Sophocles' chorus, it is as a result of human fallibility, but for the chorus presented by Aeschylus, it is the "passion-fraught and love-distraught, / The woman's eager, craving thought" which is "the fiercer thing" – albeit as the singled-out manifestation of the "aweless soul", Aeschylus' recurring concern in this work. As elemental as a force of nature, womankind's awelessness is corroborated time and again through history – Althea, Scylla, Clytemnestra herself, and the Lemnian women are cited by the chorus – such that even fearsome natural phenomena can be described as being spawned by the sinister fermenting generative organs of a female mother earth. The "seas lap" which "with many monsters teems" and the "things of fear / Earth's breast doth bear" are a far cry from the sublimely fruitful "Earth, holy and inexhaustible" whose "shining furrows" are ploughed by the "stallions" of Sophocles "year after year" and whose "huge crests bear him high".

Whereas the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles studied here eventually encompass a reconciliation in the case of *The Oresteia* Trilogy, and a sense of finality and restored

[15] ib.

equilibrium in the case of *Antigone*, Euripides is remarkable for the extent to which in a dark genre his *Iphigeneia at Aulis* does not offer his audience anything to retain faith in. Wallowing in the misery of tragedy, he offers only archetypal straw men, but no straws for us to grasp at as his deep cynicism threatens to drown us. In *Iphigeneia at Aulis*[16], the courage of politicians such as Agamemnon is shown to conceal a vacillating sophistry, the heroism of warriors such as the legendary Achilles is depicted as the expression of a egotistical obsession with self-image; and the piety of spiritual leaders such as the prophet Kalchas is unmasked as dissembling: "What is a prophet? Someone / who utters one truth in a flock of lies, / if he's lucky"[17]. This is a more severe accusation than the aspersions of financial impropriety mustered by Sophocles against a prophethood which is ultimately vindicated in *Antigone*: "the generation of prophets has always loved gold"[18].

Euripides is engaged in a systematic attack upon contemporary value systems – the act of a man railing against a world that makes no sense at all. Institutions are undermined: democracy is represented in an instantiation voiced by Agamemnon as merely an enthrallment to semblances, to spectacle, and the lowest common denominator – "We are the

[16] Performed circa 406 BCE
[17] Euripides, (1978), p.67
[18] Sophocles, (1977), p.233

slaves of the mob we lead, / molded by the pomp we must show in public"[19]; The cultural institution of mythology is "no more than a story / out of the books of the Muses, / with no meaning" [20] ; Patriotism is undermined by the heavily ironised nationalistic rhetoric marshalled by the politically naïve Iphigeneia – "They are born to be slaves; we / to be free"[21]; Mass-media justifications and the strained cultural demarcations of love and lust are both shown to ring false – Agamemnon slips from the party line to speak off the record of Paris "winning the love of Helen"[22] whilst Menelaos is rebuked by him: "There's no justice in things turning out / precisely the way you want them to – you get / your vengeance on a worthless wife"[23].

Most fundamentally, the meaningfulness of life is cast into the gloomy half-light of Euripides' radical doubt, in association with a fatalistic conception of limited agency in a world determined by unjust gods, if indeed it is ordered at all: "Each one is born with his bitterness waiting for him"[24]; "Truly / we are creatures / of labor and suffering, and nothing for long"[25]; "It is the role of destiny, in this, / and the role of the goddess, / that are sick"[26]. The

[19] Euripides, (1978), p.42
[20] ib., p.59
[21] ib., p.86
[22] ib., p.43
[23] ib., p.40
[24] ib., p.31
[25] ib., p.81
[26] ib., p.86

earlier optimism of the chorus' faith in moral absolutes – "but everyone knows what is right, / and teaching / inclines them at last to virtue"[27], appears to have been drowned out in Euripides' work by the provisionality of meaning in a world where "the notions of men, all / different and all insatiable"[28] overturn a man's whole life and lead him to live one day at a time: "If there are gods, the gods will reward your goodness. / If there are none what does anything matter?"[29].

Although performed posthumously for an ex-Athenian who died in Macedonia, would these words not have bordered upon heresy had they been spoken in such a mainstream forum merely half a century and one Peloponnesian War earlier? Aeschylus could envision a better society where no one would "*live / Uncurbed by law nor curbed by tyranny*"[30]. Nonetheless, even in an imagined community in which blood feuds are held in check by judicial systems, Aeschylus strongly advocates through Athena and the chorus variously that "Awe" must never be lost. By "Awe" he appears to mean a reverential attitude toward the divine: "Nor banish ye the monarchy of Awe / Beyond the walls; untouched by fear divine, / No man doth justice in the world of men"[31]. It seems that for Aeschylus, at no conceivable

[27] ib., p.47
[28] ib., p.26
[29] ib., p.70
[30] Aeschylus, (1996), p.138
[31] ib. p.138

future time will the ideal instantiation of the rule of law ever obviate the instrumentality of religiously instilled fear as a means of social control: “Know, that a throne there is that may not pass away, / And one that sitteth on it – even Fear / … what nation upon earth, / That holdeth nought in awe nor in the light / of inner reverence, shall worship Right / As in the older day?”[32]

To conclude, Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia* Trilogy appears to promote a reverential attitude towards the retributive power of the supernatural, gradually superseded by the power of legal justice acting out the will of Zeus. Aeschylus paints a fearsome world in which most δεινός of all are those who do not act with awe for the divine – a behavioural trait epitomised by women. We, the audience are reminded how little we are masters of our own destiny and how much there is to fear. We leave humbly having conflated law and divinely ordained order. Controversially, Sophocles’ *Antigone* presents a heroine who makes precisely such a distinction and in accordance with “The immortal unrecorded laws of God”[33] initiates a legitimacy debate which culminates in Creon’s overthrow. The earth delineated by Sophocles is a place apprehensible to the mind of man and if divine laws are kept, δεινός man need not

[32] Aeschylus, (1996), p.131

[33] Sophocles, (1977), p.208

be fearsome. Subsequently, Euripides works to undermine fear, by calling into question whether awe of anything is credible. Such a weltanschauung is in opposition to systems of authority, and makes the task of attributing meaningfulness to life more difficult. Considering this, it is surprising that Euripides' swan song was selected for the Greater Dionysia festival, more so that the collection was awarded first prize.

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