

Family matter/political crisis/astronomic discovery:

Atreus and the Sun's orbit in Euripides

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The story of Atreus causing the Sun to reverse the direction of its orbit, so as to prove that he, not his brother Thyestes, was the rightful king of Argos/Mycenae, was well known to Euripides. At *Electra* 727-744, the Chorus sings the story according to which Zeus reversed the Sun path out of outrage for Thyestes' adultery with Atreus' wife, Aerope. The tale appears twice in *Iphigenia among the Taurians*: first the Chorus includes it in a list of the evils of the house of Tantalus (193-194), and later Orestes mentions it in order to prove his identity by showing his knowledge of Pelopid private history (812-817); we also learn that, years before, Iphigenia had woven a cloth representing the episode. At *Orestes* 1001-1006, Electra ascribes the turn of the Sun's chariot to the goddess Eris, as part of the chain of evil that afflicts Tantalus' descendants. Throughout these occurrences, Euripides seems to consider the inversion as a private, rather than political, matter. Nevertheless, one Euripidean fragment (F 397b Kannicht), usually ascribed to his *Thyestes*, has Atreus declare: "by showing the opposite path of the stars, I saved the house and sat on the sovereign's throne". Here, the political perspective appears predominant: the triumph of private justice within the royal family determines the restoration of order to the city's government. Furthermore, Atreus is no longer the cause of a celestial phenomenon, but rather its discoverer: according to Achilles Tatius' *Isagoge in Arati Phaenomena* (p. 28, 19 M.), the fragment's source, Atreus revealed that the motion of orbiting celestial bodies (including the Sun) is opposite to that of the fixed stars. Achilles (*Is.* p. 55, 18 M.) and Diodorus Siculus (I 98, 2), report that this matter was being investigated, roughly around Euripides' time, by Oenopides of Chios, whose work seems to have been influential in contemporary Athens, if we are to believe the *Rival Lovers*, part of Plato's corpus (*Erast.* p. 132 A). Achilles (*ibid.*) also informs us that, according to Oenopides, it was only after Thyestes' feast that the Sun inverted the direction of its yearly journey. Therefore, we should seriously consider the possibility that Euripides knew about Oenopides' theory. At any rate, the fragment shows that the poet was aware of the latest findings in astronomy. The hypothesis that a scientific discovery might have provided the basis for Atreus' rule, making him the interpreter of the gods' will as expressed through natural events, deserves close attention for the purpose of deepening our knowledge of the links between Euripides' thought and contemporary politics, science and religion.

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