

THE HYBRISTÊS IN AESCHYLUS

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Among the slices which Aeschylus picked up from the Homeric banquets was the theme of *hybris*. In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* acts of *hybris* create the situation on which the plot is based, that is, the seizure of Briseis and the plundering of Odysseus' property. Moreover, *hybris* is displayed or imputed in many other situations, and the man of *hybris* is described in many different terms meaning insolent, presumptuous, overbearing, merciless, violent, reckless, and so forth.¹ His characteristics are insolent language and overbearing acts, in particular misappropriating the property of others.

After Homer the idea of *hybris* was broadened and was brought into relation with other concepts. Hesiod proclaimed the necessity of struggling against *hybris* and pursuing *dikê*.² Other writers developed the idea that *olbos* and *koros* produce *hybris*, which in turn leads to *atê*.³ *Hybris* eventually came to be a term of wide connotation. Its essence is over-aggressive self-assertiveness which may express itself in physical violence, lust, overbearing behavior, plundering, headstrong folly, boasting, or acts of pride. It overlaps or shades off into other concepts such as injustice, intemperance, shamelessness, and impiety. Hence there are many Greek words which may have some implication of *hybris*.

Aeschylus makes extensive use of these various aspects and relationships. In his rich vocabulary *hybris* is described in many terms, and he may use poetic elaborations, figures of speech, or allusions to related concepts. Thus he has many words which are synonyms of *hybris*,

¹ Cf. my note on "The *Hybristes* in Homer," *CJ* 51 (1955) 81-83.

² Cf. C. Del Grande, *Hybris* (Naples 1947) 26-30.

³ Cf. W. Headlam, *Cambridge Praelections* (Cambridge 1906) 101-37; L. Pearson, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece* (Stanford 1962) 70-73; A. Lesky, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* (Bern 1963) 146-48.

hybristês, and *hybrizô*, others which denote related concepts, such as *koros* and *atê*, and others which suggest *hybris* in particular contexts, such as *meas* and *neos*.

The list is as follows: ἀβουλία, ἀγῆνωρ, ἀκόρεστος, ἀλῶ, ἀνόσιος, ἀντίτολμος, ἀποπτύω, ἀσεβής, ἄτη, ἄτλητος, αὐθαδία, αὐχέω, ἄφρων, βλαψίφρων, δαιμόνιος, δορίμαργος, δύσαγνος, δύσθεος, δυσσεβία, δύσφορος, δύσφρων, ἐλευθεροστομέω, θούριος, θράσος, θρασύς, θρασυστομέω, θρασύστομος, θυμοπληθής, καθιππάζομαι, κακουχία, κομπάζω, κόμπασμα, κομπέω, κόμπος, κόρος, κυνοθρασής, κυνόφρων, λαβροστομέω, μαργάω, μάργος, μάταιος, μεγαλαυχέω, μέγας, νέος, ὄλβος, ὄξυκάρδιος, οὐλόφρων, παμμάχος, πανούργος, πάντολμος, παντότολμος, παράνοια, περίφρων, πορθήτωρ, σεμνόστομος, στόμαργος, τλάμων, τλάω, τόλμα, τυρανίς, τύραννος, ὑπέρτολμος, ὑπέρφρων, ὑψηγόρος, φρενώλης, ὠμοδακής.

In the texture of his extant plays the theme of *hybris* always provides some strands. He does not repeat any stereotyped pattern, but uses the theme in various ways and to a greater or less extent in order to enhance the dramatic effect.

Persians. The theme of the play is not the victory of the Greeks, but the disaster brought upon a great people by the *hybris* of Xerxes, a compound of pride of wealth, overconfidence, youthful recklessness, and impiety towards the gods.⁴ The first part of the play is full of subtle suggestions that Xerxes may be a *hybristês* and may be overtaken by *atê*.

The majestic figure of Darius is brought on the stage with the double purpose of providing a foil to the reckless folly of Xerxes and of having him pronounce wise judgment, thus emphasizing the moral theme of the play. He speaks repeatedly and scathingly of his son's rash and impious conduct, the cause of a disaster without precedent in the whole history

⁴ R. Lattimore, *Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy* (Ann Arbor 1964) 86-87, observes that this is almost the only play which justifies the common misconception that pride and punishment is the normal pattern in Greek tragedy. L. Pearson (above, note 3) 104-7, holds that "the chorus of Persian elders has a fair claim to be regarded as the first tragic character . . . and its tragic error or fault is its failure to see when loyalty to a king should be withheld or modified." Undoubtedly this personal tragedy is a factor in the situation, but it is subordinated to the main theme, the disaster brought upon a great nation by *hybris*.

of the royal house. In his last speech he foretells the further disasters in store for the expedition and calls them "retribution for hybris and impious thoughts" (808), and then proceeds to enlarge on the theme that "one who is a mortal should not entertain proud thoughts" (820).

Seven Against Thebes. From the beginning of the play Aeschylus sets out to create a tense situation by emphasizing the menace of the attacking chieftains with their hybristic threats. Contrasted with this is the steadfast calm preserved by Eteocles, except for a brief display of irritation at the panic of the Theban women; this lapse reveals a fierceness of mood beneath a usually resolute bearing.⁵

Throughout the long scene in which the scout names the Seven, both he and Eteocles emphasize the hybris of the attackers (except Amphiarus) and claim that justice is on the side of the defenders.⁶

With the news that Polyneices will attack the seventh gate, the mood of Eteocles suddenly changes, and he again reveals the passionate nature which he displayed in his rebuke of the panic-stricken women. The chorus try to restrain him and virtually accuse him of hybris (686-93).

The rest of the play stresses not only the influence of the curse of Laius but also the spirit of hybris which has been at work, and in the closing laments pity for the two brothers is blended with condemnation of their misguided belligerence.

Throughout the play the hybris theme contributes to the character interest, thus affecting the sympathies of the audience. Antipathy for the hybristic attackers is somewhat modified by the exemplary Amphiarus, and similarly admiration for Eteocles' steadfast heroism is lessened by his exhibitions of hybris. Although character does not account for everything, and although the curse of Laius is the primary cause of the action, yet the aggressive effrontery of the attackers and the reckless self-will of Eteocles provide adequate motivation on the normal human plane. The hybris theme also helps to give the impression that the characters of the play are voluntary moral agents and not mere instruments of the curse.

⁵ For a recent study of Eteocles see A. J. Podlecki, *TAPA* 95 (1964) 283-99.

⁶ It is never made clear how the quarrel arose or whether the attackers are wholly in the wrong.

Prometheus. In this play the theme is used to emphasize the clash of personalities, on which the dramatic effect chiefly depends. Except in the long descriptive passages, persons in the play are continually being accused of self-will, pride, boastfulness, tyranny, and injustice—all that makes the *hybristês* objectionable. Zeus is no exception. He does not appear in person, but is represented on the stage by his truculent and officious underlings, Power, Force, and Hermes, and he is criticized by the chorus, Oceanus, and Prometheus for his arbitrary rule, his arrogance, and his outrageous treatment of Prometheus. The Io scene serves, among other things, to furnish additional evidence of the hybristic conduct and attitude of Zeus.

Prometheus himself does not escape criticism. Even those who sympathize with him, Hephaestus, Oceanus, and the chorus, make it clear that they do not approve of his self-will and his abusive language. They obviously feel that he has partly spoiled his case by his unfortunate attitude.

Prima facie it would seem that both Prometheus and Zeus have been guilty of hybris. We cannot tell what Aeschylus intends us to make of this or how it contributes to the moral issue, since we do not know how he effected a solution in the rest of the trilogy.⁷ All we can say is that the hybris theme serves to give more life and color to the play and to enhance the dramatic conflict of its static situation.

Suppliants. Here Aeschylus takes a situation from a grotesque primitive legend and gives it universality by introducing two themes which have social, political, and religious implications. There is the hybris motif, which has been exploited in his other plays, and, contrasted with it, the theme of *dikê*, which is now used more extensively and effectively. The suitors are the embodiment of hybris, and *dikê* is typified by the Danaids, their father, and the king of Argos. Throughout the play it is contended that forced marriages would be an instance of hybris and a violation of *dikê*.

In the chorus's introductory prayer comes a passage which strikes the two keynotes of the play (77-82):

⁷ For recent discussions of the nature of Zeus in Aeschylus, see K. Reinhardt, *Aischylos als Regisseur und Theologe* (Bern 1949) 68-76; H. Lloyd-Jones, "Zeus in Aeschylus," *JHS* 76 (1956) 55-67; L. Golden, "Zeus, whoever he is . . .," *TAPA* 92 (1961) 156-67.

But hearken, gods of our race, and regard the right with favor. Grant not that insolent youth have unholy consummation, but heartily abhor hybris—so would you be just towards wedlock.

The mainspring of the action is the hybris of the suitors, and the dramatic effect depends on the crescendo of terror it inspires in the Danaids. This is first expressed when they are presenting their case to the king, later when the near approach of the suitors' ship is announced, and finally when their herald appears on the scene.

Since it is the first play of a trilogy its close is inconclusive. The herald has been dismissed, but the Danaids still feel the menace and pray that they may escape forced marriage. Their final words return to the theme of *dikê*: "Content that, by means of deliverance from heaven, conflicting claims, in accordance with my prayers, should follow Justice."

Among other things, *Suppliants* dramatizes the conflict between hybris and *dikê*. Aeschylus' purpose may have been to illustrate some popular ethical concepts or to heighten the dramatic effect of a rather rudimentary plot. It is difficult to conjecture what is the relevance of the two themes to the rest of the trilogy, unless it is to suggest that present evil is not necessarily irremediable and indeed may ultimately lead to good, as in the case of Io.

Agamemnon. The chief moral issue is the question of where justice lies,⁸ and a subordinate theme is the iniquity of hybris. The action takes place in the atmosphere of an approaching storm which is created by the doubts, fears, and premonitions of the chorus, in whose thinking the idea of hybris plays a significant part.

In a striking passage of the first stasimon the doctrine of *koros-hybris-atê* is elaborated in figurative language (374-80). The reflections are applied to Paris (399), but one feels that there are other sins in the singer's mind. Paris suggests Helen, and the chorus reflect upon the sorrow and havoc caused by her and her hybristic conduct (408). But, they continue, the Atreidae also are blamed for the loss of lives, and this prompts the reflection that successful conquest may lead to excess and divine displeasure (456-74). Thus the hybris theme is used

⁸ References in 525, 773 ff., 808, 911, 913, 1406, 1432, 1535, 1546, 1577, 1604, 1611 1615, 1660.

to justify forebodings about Agamemnon just before Agamemnon's messenger appears.

The second stasimon recurs to Helen and the disasters she caused; then the chorus turn to reflect upon Hybris and describe her parentage and offspring in highly figurative language; *Dikê* on the contrary honors the humble and righteous and avoids polluted wealth (750-81). Once again the ostensible reference is to Helen, Paris, and Troy, but the reflections have a wider significance and suggest a reference to Agamemnon, whose palace is before our eyes and who is about to appear on the scene. We are made to feel that he may prove to be a man of hybris and a victim of *atê*. The glory of his conquest is overshadowed by a cloud of doom.

On his appearance, a situation of hybris is created when Clytemnestra invites him to walk on tapestries.⁹ He is reluctant to do so because they are symbols of oriental pomp or divine worship. When he is induced to consent, they become concrete evidence of hybris.

In the third stasimon the chorus are disquieted by intuitions of approaching calamity, and in expressing their forebodings they elaborate the danger of success in figurative language (1001-7). The theme is repeated at the beginning of the fourth stasimon; they cannot dismiss the fear that Agamemnon may prove to be a victim of too much power and success.

After the death of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra is full of self-justification and defiance.¹⁰ Agamemnon, she claims, has no excuse for vain-glorious boasting in Hades (1528). The chorus accuse her of hybristic speech (1399-1400), they see a spirit of black Ares at work (1509-12),

⁹ H. Lloyd-Jones, "The Guilt of Agamemnon," *CQ* 12 (1962) 187-99, argues that the chief factors in the king's downfall are the will of Zeus and the curse of Thyestes. This perhaps does not take sufficient account of the dramatic emphasis on the hybris theme, as seen in the persistent fears of the chorus and reaching a climax in the incident of the tapestries. The spectators were undoubtedly aware of powerful influences in the background, but here they see something happening on the stage. The scene is a magnificent piece of stagecraft, and must have been designed by Aeschylus for something of significance in the plot: that is, the fact that Agamemnon is faced with a choice and makes the wrong decision. His hybris may be a minor element in his personality, but it is enough to lead him to a decision which reveals him to the audience as a sinner who brings his doom on himself.

¹⁰ There is a certain irony in her use of an ambiguous term (in 1437) which might denote either confidence or hybris.

and they tell the queen that it would be monstrous effrontery for her to lament Agamemnon (1542-46).

With the appearance of Aegisthus, the tone of the play becomes less edifying in spite of repeated appeals to justice.¹¹ The chorus regard Aegisthus' claim as a piece of hybristic effrontery and turn his words against him (1612-16), and finally taunt him with his braggadocio (1611). Both he and Clytemnestra charge the chorus with being fractious and insolent (1624, 1631, 1662-64, 1672).

Thus in the course of the play hybris has been imputed to Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, and the chorus, and has served to emphasize the clash of personalities. In the case of Agamemnon it is hinted at, rather than definitely ascribed to him. The effect is first to suggest doubts and premonitions of doom and later to provide a partial or superficial justification of his fate. He is not the conventional tragic hero who is supposed to be punished for hybris. He has no more than a tincture of it, and it cannot be said to be the cause of his fate. However it helps to weight the scales against him and makes the spectator less sympathetic towards him, thus contributing to the tragic effect.

Choephoroe. This play, like the whole *Oresteia*, is concerned with problems of justice.¹² The mainspring of the action here is the insistence on the inexorable law of punishment for murder, and opposed to this is man's natural repugnance to matricide. In the action of the play this conflict is resolved by the hybris of Clytemnestra which overcomes Orestes' scruples and effectively turns the scales against her. Hybris is never mentioned as such, but it is described in other terms which effectively emphasize the queen's monstrous hardihood and effrontery.

The theme is introduced in the first chorus, when the libation-bearers exclaim at the graceless impiety of her offerings (43-46) and when they assert that lustful violence (a form of hybris) is surely punished (71-72); the point is that Clytemnestra's original crime was equally impious and futile.

¹¹ See above, note 8.

¹² References to justice in lines 61-65, 120, 144, 241, 244, 306-14, 330, 398, 461-62, 497, 639-45, 788, 812, 884, 935-36, 948-51, 988, 1027.

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In the course of the play occur references to the unscrupulous hardihood of her murder of her husband (81-82, 384-85, 996), to her arrogant attitude and her effrontery in wasting the wealth of the house (136-37, 943, 974),¹³ and to her arrogant cruelty in the denial of burial rites and the mangling of the corpse (429-33, 443). A whole chorus is devoted to showing that her spirit is comparable to the reckless passions of the notorious murderesses of legend (1585-1681).

Thus the theme of *hybris* has a subordinate but vital function in the play by supplying motivation and justification for the fearful act towards which everything converges.

Eumenides. Here too the problem of justice is central.¹⁴ The *hybris* theme is used somewhat sparingly, but in ways that enhance the dramatic effect. It is first hinted at when the ghost of Clytemnestra complains of the derisive mockery of Orestes (113). When Apollo confronts the chorus, they charge him with overbearing and insulting disregard of their rights (162-63; cf. 206, 323-25, 778-79, 808-9), while he ironically challenges them to vaunt their prerogatives (209), and charges them with contemptuous disregard of the deities who sanctify marriage (213-16). These exchanges add to the contentiousness of the dialogue and serve to emphasize the conflict between the Furies, with their primitive savagery, and Apollo, the representative of the younger gods with their dangerously radical ideas. Thus Aeschylus prepares for the intervention of Athena as the embodiment of wisdom and moderation. Later the chorus complain of the contemptuous silence of Orestes (303), and in their "binding song" they refer to their duty of punishing men for wanton murder (336-37), proud thoughts (373-76) and insensate folly (377-80).

When Athena has left the stage to choose citizens for her new court, the chorus sing the second stasimon, in which they foretell the collapse of law and order if Orestes is acquitted; generalizing from his case, they argue that society cannot do without fear of punishment: while reasonable men are governed by a wholesome respect for justice, others must be restrained by fear of punishment and disaster; finally they describe the career of a typical *hybristês*, ending in downfall (532-65).

¹³ Compare *Odyssey* *passim*.

¹⁴ References in 154, 171, 218, 221, 272, 291, 312, 413-14, 430-33, 439, 511, 525, 539, 550-54, 610, 612, 615, 619, 675, 749, 785, 815, 994.

The references to hybris in the latter part of the play call for no special comment.¹⁵

This second stasimon is the most noteworthy instance of Aeschylus' interest in hybris and the problems it created, and it is significant that he uses the problem of dealing with the *hybristês* as the strongest possible argument for not discarding old concepts of justice but retaining what is of value in them and at the same time adding new and more enlightened ideas. For this stasimon shows that the Furies are actuated by more than mere thirst for revenge, that is, they demand just requital and also aim to deter criminals by instilling a wholesome fear of punishment. Thus Aeschylus prepares for their later revelation as Gracious Ones, and at the same time proclaims some social ideas which he wished to emphasize for their own sake, that is, the need for moderation and this wholesome fear. The importance which he attached to these ideas is shown by their repetition in Athena's speech (696-703). The old concept of revenge is reinterpreted and is being replaced by a theory of deterrence such as we later find in Plato.¹⁶

Some eminent authorities¹⁷ have maintained that no advanced conceptions are to be found in Aeschylus' religious and ethical thought, and have so minimized the element of human responsibility as to suggest that the tragic hero is a passive victim of an ancestral curse or capricious gods. Other scholars¹⁸ have rebutted some of their arguments. One indication of Aeschylus' implicit doctrine is his use of the hybris theme. By introducing it again and again in dramatic situations, by presenting the *hybristês* as a strong-willed self-assertive person, and by implying that he is blameworthy, Aeschylus would seem to show that men are voluntary moral agents and, while they may not be wholly responsible for the predicaments in which they find themselves, they are responsible for their words and actions. The eloquence and earnestness displayed in some of the passages dealing with hybris and *dikê*

¹⁵ See 590, 778-79, 789-90, 829-30, 858-66, 934-37.

¹⁶ *Protagoras* 324AB.

¹⁷ J. D. Denniston and D. Page, ed. *Agamemnon* (Oxford 1957) xiii-xvi; H. Lloyd-Jones (above, notes 7 and 9).

¹⁸ L. Golden (above, note 7), and "Zeus the Protector and Zeus the Destroyer," *CP* 57 (1962) 20-26; N. G. L. Hammond, "Personal Freedom and its Limitations in the *Oresteia*," *JHS* 85 (1965) 42-55; H. D. F. Kitto, *Poiesis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1966) 1-115; A. Lesky, "Decision and Responsibility in the Tragedy of Aeschylus," *JHS* 86 (1966) 78-85.

give the impression that Aeschylus, in his better moments at least, had some glimpses of something superior to Hesiodic superstition. It may not be wholly fanciful to see in his justice of Zeus a rudimentary anticipation of later philosophic concepts of justice.

We may conclude: (1) The theme of *hybris* is widely exploited in the plays and appears in many passages where it is implied but not specifically named. (2) The theme is used in working out the plots of all the plays and serves several dramatic purposes: it gives life and color to the dialogue, it increases tensions by providing a clash of personalities, it supplies motivation and advances the action, it affects the sympathies of the audience and thus contributes to the tragic effect. (3) The use of the theme throws some light on Aeschylus' implicit ethical code.