SEMELE AND THE DEATH OF ACTAEON:
AESCHYLUS, FR. 221 (RADT)

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ABSTRACT

Fr. 221 of Aeschylus is a one-line fragment that comes from the lost play of Aeschylus *Semele/Hydrophoroi* and suggests that the body of Actaeon was on stage after being killed by Zeus. A version that combined the death of Actaeon with the story of Zeus and Semele featured in Steichorus and Hesiod in contradistinction with the more common version that included his death after insulting Artemis, as found in later sources. Aeschylus' choice to include the death of Actaeon in *Semele* if the two stories could indeed exist independently as early as the early 5th century BC, can perhaps be explained by the function that the poet gave to this element in the play.

Fr. 221 is one line long, but, interestingly, it suggests that a lost play of Aeschylus with the double title *Semele/Hydrophoroi* included the death of Actaeon, whose body was on stage at some point of the action. Fr. 221, which is preserved by the scholia on *Iliad* 4.319, seems to be reliable, because the scholiast gives the title of the play and the name of the playwright. The fragment reads: Ζέας ὄς κατέκτα τοῦτον. The play plausibly evolved around the imminent birth of Dionysus, the illegitimate child of Zeus and Semele, the revenge of Hera that caused the death of Semele, and the salvation of Dionysus by Zeus. The story is found elaborated in later sources such as Apollod. 3.4.3; Ovid *Met.* 3.256-315; Hyg. *F.* 179. In the two latter cases, Hera, as part of her plan to destroy the girl, transforms herself into Semele's nurse. As is attested by Aesch. fr. 168, which is frequently assigned to the play, the same seems to be the case in *Semele*. Only this time Hera is

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transformed to a priestess (cf. Plato, R. 381d; Diog. 34.2; Aesch. Fr. 168). Nevertheless, the outcome seems to be the same: she causes Semele to doubt the identity of her lover and as a result the heroine asks Zeus to appear to her in full regalia. He is forced by a promise to do it and the pregnant Semele dies from his power. Zeus manages to save the unborn Dionysus.

How is the death of Actaeon accommodated in this play, when the most common version of it is related in later sources as insulting Artemis in one way or another? Occasionally he boasted that he was better than the goddess in hunting (cf. Eur. Ba. 337-40; Diod. Sic. 4.81.3-5) and, alternatively, he hid to see her bathing and sometimes even tried to rape her (Hyg. Fab. 180-81; Ovid, Mist. 3.138-252; Diod. Sic. 4.81.3-5). In any case, he caused her anger and she transformed him into a deer, or simply dressed him in deerskin, to be devoured by his own faithful hounds. There is, however, another version, which, as suggested by Acousilaus (Fr. 33), is rarely attested, and relates him to Semele. Although this version of the story is never found elaborated in later sources, it is at least twice attested in older tradition: in Stesichorus (Fr. 236 PMG), as noted in Pausanias 9.2.3-4, and in Hesiod, as attested by two papyrus fragments that will be discussed below. According to this account, Artemis killed Actaeon to prevent him from marrying Semele, the concubine of Zeus, by dressing him in a deerskin or transforming him into a deer and having his hounds devour him. Apparently this was done to please Zeus or even according to his instructions.

Apart from the brief references in Stesichorus and Acousilaus, some additional information can be extracted for the version of Hesiod, who apparently included the story of Actaeon in the Catalogue of Women. A papyrus discussed by Renner, P. Mich. inv. 1447 (column II.1-6), specifically notes that as narrated in the Catalogue, Actaeon was killed by Artemis, because he was in love with Zeus' concubine Semele. This allows, no doubt, both for the inclusion of the story of Actaeon in the Catalogue and for the version used there (here?). More information has been extracted from another papyrus (P. Oxy. 30.2509) that was assigned to Hesiod by Lobel, the first editor, because it

2 For a discussion on the transformation of Hera in Aeschylus' Semele and her unique presence on stage, see I.L. Hadjicostis, 'Hera transformed on stage: Aeschylus fr. 168', Kerne 19 (2006), forthcoming.
3 See F. Jacoby, Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker (Leiden 1957) 55-56.
includes the one-line fragment known as Fr. 42 of the *Catalogue*.\(^5\) Even before P. Mich. appeared, Lobel had suggested that the *Catalogue* presented the killing of Actaeon by his maddened dogs.\(^6\) In P. Oxy 2509, Athena comes to Cheiron (lines 1-2), the future tutor of Dionysus,\(^7\) to inform him that Dionysus will be born and will own the dogs of Actaeon (8-9). Apparently the hero is dead and the dogs still maddened. Athena removes the madness from them (14) and they start crying for their master (16ff.).\(^8\) Janko, who agrees with this reading, suggests that the papyrus would explain why Actaeon had to be killed, always in relation to Semele and her son.\(^9\)

However scarce the evidence for this version is, it suggests that Actaeon was Zeus’ rival for Semele.\(^10\) The question that arises is whether Aeschylus preferred the version found in Stesichorus and Hesiod above the other one that seems to have been better known,\(^11\) if we were to judge from its subsequent circulation and survival. Renner, on the contrary, suggests that the version with Semele is the only one attested with certainty before the *Bacchae* of Euripides, where we encounter the hunting-boast version.\(^12\) Nevertheless, we should allow the possibility of the existence of this version at the time of Aeschylus, if we consider the amount of lost literature that has never reached us. Such could be the case of a play by Phrynichus, who wrote a tragedy on Actaeon of which we do not know much.\(^13\) We should also take into account the fragments of another lost play of Aeschylus, titled *Toxotides*, as they may point to the co-existence of both versions at the time of Aeschylus. The title of the latter is attested in the catalogue of plays and there are a few fragments surviving that testify that the play dealt with the death of the hero.\(^14\) According to the fragments, the chorus consists of nymphs, followers of

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\(^6\) E. Lobel, P. Oxy. 30 (1964) 5-7.
\(^7\) Cheiron was also the tutor of Actaeon (cf. Acus. Fr. 33).
\(^8\) Renner (note 4) 283.
\(^11\) This was first suggested by E. Schwartz in *Annali dell’Istituto di corrispondenza archeologica* 54 (1882) 297-98. Cf. S. Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Göttingen 1985) 346.
\(^12\) Renner (note 4) 283.
\(^13\) Phrynichus, an older contemporary of Aeschylus, wrote a play titled *Actaeon*, of which nothing survives, but the title is attested for him in the *Suda Lexicon* (Test. 1a). See B. Snell, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Göttingen 1971) 72.
\(^14\) The tragedy is among those in which Aeschylus is supposed to have revealed the Eleusinian mysteries; cf. Radt (note 11) test. 93b.2ff.
Artemis (cf. Aesch. Fr. 242). The hero is presented as a great hunter (cf. Aesch. Fr. 241) and it is not implausible, but certainly far from certain, to suggest that possibly this could point to the version where boasting that he excelled Artemis in hunting brought about his death. Another fragment gives the names of some of his dogs (Fr. 245), which once more are attested to have devoured him (Fr. 244). There are also suggestions that Aeschylus wrote another play on the story of Actaeon: Actaeon.\textsuperscript{15} However, such a play is not attested in the catalogue and its existence is doubtful. The Toxotides\textsuperscript{15} is enough to suggest, however, that Aeschylus wrote twice on the death of the hero (cf. Frr. 221; 244), at least in one case extensively, probably in the Toxotides. Would he use the same version in both cases? It is difficult to reach a conclusion on the evidence, but one should allow this possibility. Aeschylus was certainly not obliged to use the same version of a myth in more than one play.

Let us return to Semelē/Hydrphoroi and the version there. What is the function of the death of Actaeon in Semelē and why is the body on stage? The story could certainly have existed without the death of Actaeon. However, the presentation of the body on stage and the revelation of his killer could be used cleverly by the poet. It could be used to make evident the desire that Zeus had for Semele. As a result this would make his interest in the girl manifest, perhaps for the first time in the story, and would as a result provoke the hatred of Hera towards the girl and consequently trigger the line of terrible events that is to follow. This explicit proof that Zeus had a relationship with Semele would be an insult to Hera, who would decide to act. His death would, moreover, create an interesting correspondence in the play: Hera is to kill her antagonist, Semele, in the same way that Zeus had earlier killed his antagonist, Actaeon. If the body of Actaeon was on stage in this play, as is implied by the fragment, then this would probably occur before the death of Semele. The death of Actaeon, and his personal tragedy, would apparently have to give way in the course of the play to the tragedy of Semele, the main heroine of the play.

In addition, there is a point to be made on dramaturgy. The body of Actaeon was certainly on stage at the beginning of the play, as Fr. 221 shows. One should allow the possibility that the body of Semele was also brought on stage by the end of the play. The two deaths correspond to each other in many ways and the visual parallelism would perhaps allow the audience to understand this. Mirror images are something that Aeschylus does use in his surviving corpus. In the Oresteia, the death of Clytemnestra in Choephoroi

\textsuperscript{15} Radt (note 11) 130 notes the 19th century suggestion of Butler, but regards it as doubtful.
corresponds to the death of Agamemnon in *Agamemnon* through many similarities of expression and presentation and both bodies are revealed to the audience.\(^\text{16}\)

There is also the question of the identity of the speaker of the fragment. Apparently she/he is someone who knows that it was Zeus who killed Actaeon and most probably the speaker knows the reason for this. This would mean that the speaker is one who does not doubt the relationship of Zeus and Semele. But this play seems to revolve around the doubt of whether Zeus is actually the lover of Semele. This is what leads the young woman herself, perhaps under pressure from others, to ask for proof from the god and is thus led to her death. There must have been several doubters in the play. These could be the sisters of Semele; Ino and Agave, who according to tradition (Eur. *Ba* 24-29) doubted her union with Zeus. The chorus of female servants could also have doubts at some point in the play, perhaps under the influence of Hera after their encounter with her (cf. Fr. 168). So it is not the chorus or the sisters, if the latter take part in the play, who spoke the fragment. If any of these knew the truth they would probably declare it to the rest. There is someone, however, who certainly knows the truth, although she does not share it with the rest of the characters, and this is Hera. Perhaps Hera is present with an escort, for example Iris or Lyssa, and speaks the line, not only because she knows the truth, but precisely because for her it would be the reason to act against Semele. If not her, then her representatives mentioned above could speak the line.

The scene with the body would have to precede Fr. 168 because by the time of her meeting with the chorus, Hera's scheme has already been put into action. This would require that the body of Actaeon reaches the stage early, perhaps as early as the prologue. It could allow a hint of the forthcoming reaction of Hera and could, moreover, make an interesting contrast with the chorus that enter with their happy song that blesses the union of Zeus and Semele, completely unaware of imminent disaster (Fr. 168), perhaps in the *parados*. The line is spoken by someone who knows in a play where everybody doubts and it points to divine knowledge. Hera and her followers know and they consciously manipulate those who do not. The body of Actaeon is the proof beyond doubt of the relationship of Zeus and Semele.

\(^{16}\) For mirror scenes, see M. Griffith, *The Authenticity of the Prometheus Bound* (Cambridge 1977) 201-02; Taplin (note 1) 100, who speaks of mirror scenes, their form and function. The latter notes (102-03) such scenes in the *Oresteia* (the deaths in *Agamemnon* and *Choephori*) and the *Persae* (the two entries of Atossa). Cf. also R.W. Garrison, 'Observations on some recurrent metaphors in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, *ACLass* 26 (1983) 33-39.
There is an alternative for the timing of the presentation of the body on stage and therefore for the revelation of the reason for his death that should also be discussed, even if only to be rejected. The fragment has been discussed in this article so far as presenting the revelation to Hera of the relationship of Zeus and Semele and the imminent birth of their child. But could it have been used to reveal to all Zeus’ interest in Semele and stop them from doubting? This would be the case only if it comes at the very end of the play and not before, because otherwise there would have been no doubts and no need for Semele to die. In such a case it would be the final proof that would justify the girl. But would it serve more dramatically at the end rather than at the beginning? It is doubtful, since by the end of the play Zeus makes himself known as the lover of Semele both through her death and through the salvation of his illegitimate child. This would have been enough evidence for the characters. The death of Actaeon as proof of Zeus’ desire for Semele serves no end at the end of the play. However, it could have been ingeniously used to push Hera to act at the beginning of the play. This could have been a reason for Aeschylus to include a disposable element in myth, as the relation of Semele to Actaeon might have been, to advance his plot.

To conclude, the play could start with the body of Actaeon on stage and the necessary explanations for his death, perhaps by Hera. His death would cause her intervention to punish Semele and prevent the birth of her child. Meanwhile, everybody would be celebrating the union of Semele and Zeus until Hera makes them doubt it. Semele, after confrontations, perhaps with her sisters or others, would express doubts herself and ask for some confirmation from Zeus. The rest would have to be narrated through messenger speeches. Zeus would appear to her in his full shape and she would therefore be killed and the unborn Dionysus saved. This would reveal to all the relationship of Zeus and Semele and would be proof of the origin of Dionysus. The characters could include: a chorus of female servants, Semele, Hera and perhaps followers of hers, the sisters of Semele or other doubters, and a messenger who would narrate the tragic end of Semele and the miraculous salvation of Dionysus.

There is one last point to be made in relation to the deaths in *Semele* as part of the story of Dionysus. Both the death of Actaeon through Zeus’ design and of Semele through Hera’s could in a way be paralleled by the death of Pentheus through Dionysus’ design, as we encounter it, for example, in Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Moreover, as is made evident by fragments and testimonies, the death of Pentheus was the theme of two lost Aeschylean plays: *Pentheus* (Aesch. Fr. 183) and *Xanthis* (Aesch. Fr. 168-172b). Perhaps in Aeschylus, whether in a connected trilogy or not, the complete story of the god was told from his birth to his establishment. Dionysus, who survived the
cruelty of Hera against his mortal mother and himself, turned out to be an equally cruel god against mortals in his effort to establish his cult, and punished those who did not respect him. At the end of the story all three mortals that opposed gods, in one way or another, are killed in the crudest way. This could, in addition, have implications for the cruelty of gods in Aeschylus in general.¹⁷

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¹⁷ The author would like to thank the anonymous readers of Acta Classica for their helpful suggestions.
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