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I. Mythical Origins as a Legitimation of Ancestry and Autonomy of Messenia

The traditions associated with Messenia's past go back to the mythical return of the Heraclids to the Peloponnese.[1] Pausanias 2.18.7 writes: "It was in the reign of Tisamenos that the Heraclids returned to the Peloponnese; they were Temenos and Cresphontes, sons of Aristomachos, and the sons of a third deceased brother, Aristodemos." It was then that, faced with the occupation by the Dorian invaders, the old local courts gave way to a new division of kingdoms between other sovereigns. In accordance with the myth, Temenos stood out as the chief of the Heraclid invasion, who conquered the region and founded the Dorian state of Argos. The vast territory occupied by him and his sons in the north-eastern Peloponnese, including Argos, is known in tradition as the "lot of Temenos" (cf. Pausanias 2.29.5, Ephorus, *FGrHist* 115F 393).[2] In the division of Peloponnesus by the Heraclids, Lacedaemonia fell to Prokles and Eurysthenes, the twin sons of Aristodemos and Messenia to Cresphontes (cf. Pausanias 3.1.5, 4.3.3-5).[3] This distribution, and the interests it involved, did not seem to presage a harmonious future for the territories then shared, Argolis, Laconia, and Messenia. Mythical fantasy of etiological characteristics suggests a historical process and justifies an entire vocabulary of toponyms and anthroponyms. The political fluidity of the region, as well as the scarcity of literary and archaeological evidence, led to the emergence of a diversity of variants, but all of them shared one of two goals: 1.either to find an autonomous origin and a political individuality for Messenia, which had been submitted to the power of Lacedaemonia or was within its sphere of influence from a very early stage; 2.or to justify the legitimacy of the Laconian ascendancy over its neighbors. In the words of Luraghi (2008: 3): "This was an impressive effort in the reshaping of the past if there was one."

The submission in which Messenia found itself concerning Laconia from the 8th century BC made its historical course particularly uncertain; Tyrtaeus and Pausanias are, for us, the two most eloquent – among a few - testimonies on a process that would have led a territory, who knows whether previously independent, to find itself captured, for several centuries, by a neighboring authority, until a liberation only consummated in 369 BC. In the year following the Theban victory over the Lacedaemonians at Leuctra, there was occasion for the return of the Messenians in exile, for the foundation of the city of Messene and thus for the political independence of the region.[4] At the end of this process, Messenian identity became deeply controversial. Which past can be safely attributed to it? Without reliable ancient traces, whether literary or

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[1] Cf. Pausanias 4.3.3: "At the end of the war against Troy, when after returning home Nestor died, the invasion of the Dorians and the incursion of the Heraclids, two generations later, drove the descendants of Neleus out of Messenia." Luraghi 2008: 17 underlines that the return of the Heraclids and the division of the Peloponnese between them worked "as a sort of foundational moment in the myth-history of the Peloponnese."

[2] The version that assigned Argolis to Temenos before the lot (*P. Oxy.* 2455, fr.9.10), because he was the eldest son of Aristomachos, was undoubtedly the one used by Euripides in *Temenos* and referred to in *Temenidai*.

[3] Cresphontes' commitment to Messenia certainly had to do with the praised fertility of that territory. In *Temenos* (fr. 727e Kannicht = Strabo 8.5.6), Euripides insists on this characteristic that has become traditional, in a context that in all probability referred to the mythical distribution of the Peloponnese. Those verses elaborate a lengthy comparison between the characteristics of Lacedaemonia and those of Messenia. The aggressive mountains of the former (surrounded by the Taygetos and Parthenios) are matched by the fertility and amenity of the latter's soil. Καλλίκαρπος, "rich in fruit," "fertile" (fr. 727e.7 Kannicht), is the starting point for the description of a territory abundant in pastures and cattle, with a mild climate, irrigated by the Pamisos river. These are the features that made Messenia equally attractive to a possible usurper, according to Euripides, Polyphontes, a Heraclid like Cresphontes, the holder of a territory assigned to him by lot; in Pausanias, the Messenians themselves attributed the desire of the Lacedaemonians for possession of their environment to a, in this case, fatal fertility (4.4.3).

[4] Cf. Pausanias 4.1.3: "Before the battle fought by the Thebans against the Lacedaemonians at Leuctra, and the building of the Messene of our time below Ithome, I do not think there was any town of that name."

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archaeological, which would consolidate, from a mythical origin, the various stages of the existence of Messenia and would give a detailed account of the conflict which opposed its people to the Lacedaemonians, left room for speculation and fantasy among ancient commentators. But it is consensual that the dominated people were forced either to exile themselves (in Rhegion and Naupactus) or, in the case of those who did not wish to leave their land, to become slaves or helots, now cultivating their fields under Spartan control.[5] Alcock (1999: 333-4) expresses in precise words the polemic generated by the obscurity of testimonies, confronting a school of thought that "argues that the Messenians, under the Spartan rule, inevitably had no history" – and, in this perspective, a narrative like that of Pausanias, Book IV, would be nothing more than pure speculation and the result of the need to invent for those now liberated a history and background –, with those who "argued for the Messenian right, despite the Spartan rule, to possess a sense of their past." This second position tends to detect in the history of Messenia a continuous process and to see in that distant past an identity and a potential for political resistance against a usurper; thus, the Messenians, after returning to their territory, would maintain an unbreakable and coherent link with the past. Despite the scarcity of reliable testimonies, the political connotation was decisive in both readings.

The position of our two main witnesses, Tyrtaeus (7th century BC) and Pausanias (2nd century AD), is opposed. Tyrtaeus, the official poet of Sparta,[6] adopted a position compatible with that bond. He not only urged the Spartans to wage war courageously, but also looked at the consequences of the conflict for the Messenians, who, after years of hard fighting, were forced to abandon their land or submit to the authority of a triumphant conqueror (frs. 5-7 West).[7] Tyrtaeus is thus the author of the first record of the Messenian wars, written in a flattering tone for the Spartans. About the content of his narrative, Brunhara comments (2014: 252): "... the poem is often used by historians to prove the authenticity of the Messenian Wars and has been remembered by scholars of Greek literature as an example of archaic historiographical narrative." Pausanias, on the other hand, sympathetic to a people who, in spite of misfortunes and after being absent for three centuries from their territory (4.27.11), "never abandoned the customs of their land, (...), nor unlearned their Doric language, (...) but always kept its purity."[8] Thus, Auberger (2000: 260) may state on this subject: "Pausanias has created a long fable, in which, with commitment, he has attributed to these kings all the qualities of statesmen and the people the values that make men free and respected in the centuries to come." In other words, the content of the two accounts, which seems to preserve some 'objectivity,' starts from a reverse perspective and expresses itself in a different tone.

Luraghi (2008: 132), after considering literary and archaeological testimonies about Messenia's past, characterizes it as a politically weak region, lacking a population aggregate that could centralize its interests and, therefore, deduces as evident the significant dependence that linked it to neighboring Laconia: "during the periods commonly associated with the birth and development of the Greek city-state, no independent political entity existed in the territory west of the Taygetos and south of the river Neda." It does not mean that a cultural affinity between the populations of this territory did not create in them a feeling of ethnographic autonomy. The idea of the existence, from the 8th century BC onwards, of a warlike youth capable of mobilizing a common defense against increasingly expansive aggression may suggest a starting point for a crescendo of contestation. The heroes and reference values then emerged in the obscure history of the Messenian past. Collard, Cropp, and Lee (2009: 123-4) establish, in an attempt to be more precise about the path of Messenia and its process of liberation and recovery of identity, the following coordinates: "This process may, however, have begun in the 5th C., e.g., after the Messenian rebellion of 465-56 when Athens settled Messenian refugees at Naupactus."[9] This phase

[5] Cf. Thucydides 1.101.2: "Most of the helots were the descendants of the ancient Messenians long since reduced to slavery."

[6] Cf. Pausanias 4.15.6, on the origin of Tyrtaeus and his influence in Sparta: "An oracle from Delphi conveyed to the Lacedaemonians that they should get an Athenian counselor. They then sent a message to the Athenians conveying the oracle and requesting someone to advise them on what to do. The Athenians did not want: neither that the Lacedaemonians should, without further difficulty, take over the best part of the Peloponnese nor that they should disrespect the god. This was the solution they found. There was a certain Tyrtaeus, a schoolmaster, that passed for not being very bright in spirit and was lame in one foot. It was this guy that they sent to Sparta. Arrived there, not only in private for the important people but in groups with as many as he could find, he recited elegies and anapests". See Plato, *Laws* 629[a], Diodorus 8.27.1. In this issue, see Rocha Pereira 2006: 201 writes: "The origin of the latter (Tyrtaeus) is disputed, for the tradition was already divided in antiquity (...). It seems to have more probabilities the Spartan provenance, for, as it has been justly remarked, the Lacedaemonians would not take orders from a foreigner. The poetry of Tyrtaeus is full of orders and exhortations, which the soldiers sang as they marched into battle."

[7] On the possibility that other fragments attributed to Tyrtaeus (19, 23 West) refer to the same theme of the Messenian Wars, see Podlecki 1984: 95-7.

[8] Concerning this crucial aspect of a people's identity - language - Thucydides (3.112.4, 4.3.3, 4.41.2) underlines, during the Peloponnesian War, a similarity between the language of the Messenians and that of the Lacedaemonians which made them indistinct. The similarity could even function as a weapon by preventing the Lacedaemonians from identifying their enemies.

[9] Cf. Thucydides 1.103.3. Settling these exiles in Naupactus, on the Gulf of Corinth, Athens secured a strategic position through radical

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is excluded by Pausanias from his account. But other testimonies, such as that of Thucydides, show how, in the conflicts that broke out between Athens and Sparta in the second half of the fifth century BC, Athens treated the case of the Messenians as an argument for anti-Spartan propaganda and used the Messenian exiles as allies against Sparta. Fifth century BC was thus the time when the Spartan occupation of Messenia began to be called into question. Thucydides' perspective, which focused on the interests of Athens and the exploitation of Sparta's enemies, does not explicitly contribute to the knowledge of Messenian history.

In the 4th century BC, Messenia appears more associated with Arcadia, undoubtedly because the latter participated in its liberation after Epaminondas' victory in 369 BC (cf. Pausanias 4.3.8); Harder 1985: 54 underlines: "The story was then adapted to form the 'ancient history' of Messenia and the connection with Arcadia was stressed by calling the son of Cresphontes Sr. Aipytos, ancestor of the Aipytidai and deriving his name from the old Arcadian hero Aipytos."

II. Versions of the Myth after Euripides

Before focusing on the Euripidean productions devoted to this motif, let us look further at later versions and of which the plays of the tragic have also become an antecedent. Harder 1985: 9 affirms: "After Euripides, we find the story of the killing of Cresphontes Sr. and its consequences in several prose-authors, who tend to leave out the 'dramatic' details of Euripides' version and adapt the story to suit propagandistic purposes in the conflict between Sparta and Messenia." If such versions come from Euripides or other treatments of the myth is a complex matter to clarify. Still perhaps it is not unreasonable to think of some diversity of motifs available within what would already be a tradition, based mainly on local narratives. At least, each new remembrance of the episode contains different intentions.

Considering the few fragments that represent the tragic treatments that Euripides dedicated to the subject 'Messenia', the influence of the poet on the later treatments seems inevitable. One of the tragic features that have left a strong ballast on successive rereadings is the murder of the first Cresphontes. The responsibility that, in *Cresphontes* fr. 448[a].20-2 Kannicht, the dramatic poet attributes to Polyphontes, his victim's brother, accentuates the family dynamic in the murder, increasing a particular type of personal and emotional tension. The version that comes closest to the Euripidean is that of Apollodorus, *Library* 2.8.5, perhaps even a synthesis of the play:

> Cresphontes, after ruling Messenia for a short time, died murdered along with his two sons. Polyphontes then reigned, a member of the Heraclids, who, against her will, took Merope, the wife of the deceased king, as his wife. But he was also murdered. Merope had a son, named Aipytos, whom she gave to her father to raise. When he became a man, he returned secretly, killed Polyphontes, and recovered his father's throne.

Divergences are relevant in the other testimonies, who hold the Messenians responsible for the regicide, and thus accentuate the political aspect of Cresphontes' death. Thus Isocrates 6.22: "The Messenians reached such a point of impiety that they decided to kill Cresphontes, the founder of the city, the holder of that land, a descendant of Heracles, who had been their lord." Ephorus, *FGrHist* 70F 116-7 even specifies the reasons for this collective revolt, as if complementing the statement of Isocrates, his master: "Cresphontes gave the Messenians and the Dorians similar rights, which resulted in a conflict."[10] And Ephorus goes on to say that the conflicts between Messenians continued until the Spartans conquered Messenia. This justification is compatible with that advanced by Pausanias (4.3.7): "But it did not remain for long, because the wealthy citizens rose against Cresphontes for benefiting the people too much, and killed him and the rest of his sons."

To the murder of Cresphontes, the various testimonies also add, as particularly relevant, the problem of succession. Variations on Euripides' choice in the authors who succeeded him are also suggestive. It is common to all of them that the deceased sovereign had descendants (cf. *Cresphontes* fr. 448[a].23-30), but their fate is controversial. Euripides includes, in the regicide, the murder of the two elder sons of Cresphontes and attributes the survival of the younger one to the prudence of his grandfather and mother, who kept him safe in Arcadia. In this detail, the tragic poet was again underlining family ties and consolidating the protagonism of Merope as a cautious mother and wise woman.

Keeping the family plot on which Euripides' version was based, Nicolaus of Damascus, *FGrHist* 90F 31 tries to reconcile the familiar and political aspects of the story. The Dorians, in this case, were the persecutors, who, after being responsible for the regicide, tried to capture the children. Then, they asked their grandfather, the sovereign of Arcadia, to send them, because their father wanted them back at his court. But Cypselos realized the trap, so he returned only the two eldest and retained the last, Aipytos, who

enemies of Sparta, an advantage that history would prove; cf. also Thucydides 2.9.4, 2.69.1, 2.90.3, 4.41.2.

[10] The testimony of Pausanias follows the same lines (4.3.6): "The ancient Messenians were not driven out by the Dorians; they submitted to the sovereignty of Cresphontes and divided their territory with the Dorians. They accepted these compromises out of distrust of their kings since the descendants of Neleus came from Iolchos".

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had just been born. In this way he saved his life from the treachery of his enemies.

In contrast, other solutions stressed the political sense of rescue exclusively. Isocrates 6.22-3 assumes a pro-Spartan version. He attributes to the persecuted the initiative of the flight and to the Lacedaemonians the role of welcoming those who rushed to take refuge in Sparta. Grateful for the protection granted to them, the descendants of Cresphontes would have voluntarily handed over their land to those willing to protect them. Then the Lacedaemonians invaded Messenia to avenge the victims of the crime, in compliance with a divine oracle from Delphi. In this way, Isocrates legitimized, with the distortion of the mythical version, the Spartan occupation of Messenia, certainly echoing Spartan arguments for the legitimacy of their claim.

Finally, version of Pausanias (4.3.7-8), a great admirer of Messenian superiority, pays great attention to the only surviving son of Cresphontes, designated Aipytos (the same for whom Euripides preferred the name of his father, Cresphontes, and made the protagonist of his play):

> The palace, which Cresphontes himself and his sons were to inhabit, was built in Stenykleros (...) But it did not remain for long because the wealthy citizens rose against him for benefiting the people too much and killed him and the rest of his sons. Aipytos, who as a child was raised by Cypselos, escaped. When he became a man, the Arcadians sent him to Messenia (...) When he became king, Aipytos avenged his father's death and punished those involved in the crime. Eventually, he became sympathetic to the Messenians with kindnesses, and to the people with gifts, and such was the prestige he gained that his descendants, instead of Heraclids, were called Aipytidai.

Even if some divergences from Euripides are evident, such as the direct responsibility for the murder of old Cresphontes, attributed to those for whom the favors granted to the people became inconvenient, there are aspects of confluence which also seem relevant. First of all, "Discord" (cf. fr. 453.10-3 Kannicht) created conditions for political unrest and regicide. As well as the reintegration into the power of his heir, the only surviving son, whom the Arcadians supported in this claim. This seems to have been a mere political process in the tragedy, a moment of significant dramatic effect, being enough to keep the identity of the newcomer hidden. Equally suggestive is the image of the perfect sovereign that the young Cresphontes, following, with greater prudence, the line of his father[11] left among his people. They accepted his authority, and his memory persisted among those who came after him. Generosity towards the people and diplomacy towards the powerful were his traces.

III. Euripidean Readings of the Messenian Myth: Their Dramatic and Political Repercussions

It is likely that by taking the myth of the return of the Heraclids to the Peloponnese and the distribution of the territory among the various invading chieftains as the context for several productions - *Cresphontes*, *Temenos*, and *Temenidai* -, Euripides was responding to contemporary historical events;[12] *Cresphontes*, for example, seems to coincide with the return of some Messenians to their former territory to cooperate with Athens in the occupation of Pylos, against Lacedaemonian interests (425). As far as we know, this was not a theme that had aroused the interest of other tragedians. Euripides, however, must have had earlier sources (the elegies of Tyrtaeus are undoubtedly among them), of which we have not received, in general terms, significant testimonies. The insistence of the poet on the same myth may be indicative of the interest it aroused, which was not unrelated to some historical consonance or exploration. On the other hand, the treatment of the theme from the 5th century BC onwards and the diversity of readings it provided suggest the possible existence of different models with which a kind of dialogue was established.

a) Cresphontes

As far as we know, there were no other tragic treatments of this theme. The lack of previous mentions of some of the participants in the episode, as Euripides elaborates it, allows us to speculate on the responsibility of this poet as the inventor of some aspects of the story. There is, for instance, no earlier mention of a young Cresphontes, a descendant of the first occupant of Messenia, the protagonist of Euripides' play; the name of this younger son of the old Cresphontes and Merope, in later versions of the 4th century BC, is replaced by Aipytos, as in Apollodorus, *Library* 2.8.5 and Pausanias 4.3.6. The names of Polyphontes and Merope, in Euripides' tragedy the usurper of the throne, and the widow forced to marry the murderer, also seem to be a Euripidean novelty.[13]

[11] Auberger 2000: 261 observes the differences that Pausanias accentuates between the two Cresphontes. Although he had initiated a process based on generosity, the first Cresphontes had not had the insight to keep the good graces of the powerful, committed only to favoring the people. The young Cresphontes corrected this excess, distributing kindnesses and gifts to one and another.

[12] Discussing the possible date for the two plays, Luraghi 2008: 53 suggests: "*Temenos* and *Temenids* are difficult to date, but they can hardly be earlier than the peace of Nicias in 421; see Harder 1991: 118 n. 5. It is tempting to connect these tragedies, or at least one of them (…) with the political relations between Athens and Argos between the peace and the Sicilian expedition (…); this would coincide nicely with the popularity of the myth of the division among the Heraclids at Argos in 418 BC suggested by the allusion in Thuc. 5.69.1."

[13] Moreover, we cannot help but be surprised that Polyphontes does not figure in the popular episode of the division of the Peloponnese among the sons of Aristomachos.

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It has been noted how, in general terms, between Euripides and the testimonies which succeeded him on this myth, there seems to be a fundamental divergence of intention, resulting from the topics put in evidence: the tragic poet was very keen, as far as the narrowness of the fragments and the evidence of specific motifs allows us to judge, on exploring patterns of dramatic fiction - within the tragic convention of return, trap, recognition – and their potential in theatrical terms; while other testimonies explore above all the political symbolism of the myth, as an argument to legitimize or contest the Lacedaemonian occupation of Messenia. Perhaps a more careful evaluation of the testimonies allows us to speak more of a different proportion using of the two perspectives, rather than an irreconcilable opposition between them. If we consider the intensely politicized character of Euripides' dramatic production in general, it is possible that the poet made use of the mythical origins of Messenia, as an argument in defense of its antiquity and independence, after two centuries of occupation; he thus made himself the spokesman of the anti-Spartan propaganda promoted by Athens. Motives like the autonomy of the peoples and the qualities or vices of those who exercise power permeate Euripides' dramatic proposal. At the same time, some of this poet's options do not fail to influence the accounts that later prose writers dedicated to the history of Greece. Such is the very particular case of Book IV of the *Description of Greece* that Pausanias dedicated to Messenia; it is evident how this book, within the general narrative of Pausanias, has its character, in which the relationship between myth and history, fiction and testimony, tends to balance.

i. *Dramatic elements in Cresphontes*

Reproducing what appears to be a synthesis of Euripides' *Cresphontes* made by Hyginus in his *Fable* 137 may provide a good starting point for our evaluation:

> Polyphontes, king of Messenia, after having murdered Cresphontes, son of Aristomachos, took the power that belonged to him and his wife, Merope. 2. The son, still a child, that she had borne from Cresphontes, his mother, Merope, secretly sent him to a guest of hers in Aetolia:[14] Polyphontes pursued him in every way, promising a reward in gold to anyone who killed him. 3. The latter, when he grew to manhood, decided to avenge the death of his father and brothers. 4. He went to King Polyphontes to claim the gold, saying that he was the murderer of the son of Cresphontes and Merope, Telephontes.[15] 4. The king then ordered him to settle in the guest room until he could investigate him better. When Cresphontes, tired, fell asleep, an old man who acted as a messenger between mother and son came tearfully to Merope, saying that he was not at the guest's house and had disappeared. 5. Convinced that she had her son's murderer in the house, Merope, while he was asleep, penetrated the room with an ax to kill, in her ignorance, her son. But the old man recognized him and prevented his mother from killing him. 6. Realizing that the enemy had allowed her to take revenge, Merope reconciled with Polyphontes. When the king, very happy, was making a sacrifice, the guest, pretending to hurt the victim, killed him and recovered his father's throne.

Given the motifs underlined by Hyginus, concordant to a certain extent with the suggestions given by the fragments preserved, we may begin by highlighting, following the analysis of various scholars, the primary theatrical resources and their harmony not only with specific dramatic preferences of Euripides, but with the tragic tradition in general.

The main thread of the play, consisting essentially of return, recognition, and revenge, corresponds to a pattern that underlies several Euripidean creations, such as *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, *Electra*, *Ion* and *Helen* and, among the lost productions, *Aegeus* and *Alexander*, to mention only the most visible examples. In all of them, relatives whom fate has torn asunder meet again. There is, therefore, someone who arrives - Orestes, Creusa, Menelaus, Theseus, Paris, respectively - in the skin of an unknown person or under a false identity to exact revenge, heal old wounds that misfortune has left open, and recover his place in the house and the family. It is this, in *Cresphontes*, the role attributed to the protagonist, who, under the guise of having murdered himself, returns to avenge the murder of his father and brothers, and to recover his legitimate rights. The risky position in which he finds himself, as someone whose coming is desired by some but feared by others, places him in the role of the enemy to be slaughtered and determines the need to find allies for his cause. The vital step in the episode presupposes recognition, the famous motif to which tragedy, especially Euripidean tragedy, has greatly impacted. And, as it is well known, the more delayed and postponed it is, the more effective from the dramatic point of view. If the revelation of a long-desired relative or the avenger who is feared every day is reserved for a final moment, in which a weapon is already raised to eliminate the stranger, its impact will be strong. Orestes, faced with the sacrifice that his sister Iphigenia, in Tauris, is already preparing for him, is placed on the verge of death; as well as Ion, faced with the despair of his mother, Creusa, who tries to poison the one she believes to be a bastard of her husband; or Theseus, whom Medea tries to eliminate to safeguard the interests of her son, whom she had borne by the king of Athens, in *Aegeus*; or Hecuba, faced with a strange winner in sporting competitions in which her other sons, princes of Troy, were defeated, in *Alexander.* In *Cresphontes*, Merope is already raising the ax (cf. fr. 456 Kannicht) to eliminate who she thinks is the

[14] This detail had different versions, from Euripides onwards; see fr. 448[a].30 and Nicolaus of Damascus, *FGrHist* 90F 31.

[15] Cresphontes, in Euripides' version. In Apollodorus, *Library* 2.8.5 and *Pausanias* 4.3.6, this son is called Aipytos.

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murderer of her son, when, at the last moment, someone recognizes in the guest the same son threatened by maternal rage.[16] It is then the moment to join efforts so that the consummation of the vengeance succeeds. Iphigenia and Electra (*Iphigenia among the Taurians*, *Electra*) are precious allies in defense of the rights of the house to which they belong and normality in a family devastated by misfortune; Helen, in the play to which she gives the title, conducts the escape from Egypt and protects her husband from the threat of her suitor, the pharaoh Theoclimenus. Merope, enlightened about the identity of her victim, changes from executioner into an ally and collaborates actively in the vengeance against the usurper of the throne and her bed, Polyphontes.

Despite the diversity of confluences with a specific tragic pattern of Euripides' preference, the particular affinity between the saga of Cresphontes and the life path of Orestes, as traced by the three great tragedians (Aeschylus, *Coephoroi*, Sophocles and Euripides, *Electra*), has still been underlined. There is correspondence in the two myths between: the death of a king (the old Cresphontes / Agamemnon) at the hands of an enemy (Polyphontes / Aegisthus); the exile of the youngest son for his protection (Cresphontes / Orestes); his return to carry out the revenge; the expectation of someone from the house for the return of the avenger (Merope / Electra); the intervention of an old servant, capable of recognizing, in the newcomer, the child once removed and the opportunity for the murder of the usurper when making a sacrifice (Polyphontes/ Aegisthus).

Still, in the dramatic plan, it seems evident in *Cresphontes*, as in a diversity of situations, the relevance of the feminine performance. This option is also another point of confluence with the personality of a poet, Euripides, in whom the contemporary comedy pointed out "the worst enemy of women," only to caricature what was patent as a preference: the attention to the personality of women and to their potential as intelligent and active. Iphigenia, Electra, Helen, Creusa, Medea, and Hecuba are, in the plays where we have underlined manifest similarities with *Cresphontes* in the general conception of the intrigue, figures of dense character, or even fearsome, in their performance. Merope can be included in the same gallery. She is mainly the victim of unsustainable violence, the wife of a sovereign and mother of his dead children, almost all of them killed by the usurper of the throne. Another violence, no less severe, is superimposed, which directly targets the widow: the murderer's harassment, demanding submission to his wishes. Despite the grief and depression this state of affairs may have caused her (cf. fr. 448[a].5 Kannicht, "washed in tears"), Merope dared to kidnap her youngest son from the murderous hands of the new lord of Messenia. These conditions certainly predated the intrigue of the play, but they determine at the outset an emotional charge and a state of mind in the victim of such atrocities. Her situation is not different from that of the Euripidean Clytemnestra, also deprived of her husband and son by Agamemnon's desire for her hand (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 1148-1160). When in *Cresphontes* fr. 454 Kannicht - "It is not only to me among mortals that sons have died, / nor am I alone to be deprived of a husband. There are thousands of women / who, like me, have endured the same fate" - Merope recalls that her fate, even if particularly painful, was not unique; other women also experienced it, other Euripidean productions give an argument to her words.

The resignation that the course of life imposed on her could never silence a resentment that only waited for the opportune moment to manifest itself. Perhaps the play reserved, for the problematic relationship between this pair, two *agones*, a first one full of recriminations from Merope, and a second, falsely appeasing, in which vengeance already hovered in the intentions of the offended. This pattern has a famous model in the confrontation between Medea and Jason in Euripides (*Medea* 446-626, 866-975). A possible first *agon* between Merope and Polyphontes would show the courage of the offended woman before the oppressor (fr. 451 Kannicht), under this accusation: "But if, as you say, my husband waited to kill you, / You too should have waited, and let time pass." By these words, Merope seems to refute an argument of self-defense that Polyphontes used to justify the murder of old Cresphontes. Prudence would have ordered Polyphontes to imitate Cresphontes' hesitation in liquidating him, and thus, a crime would have been avoided. The long-awaited hour came when a stranger appeared at the palace to claim from Polyphontes the reward announced for the elimination of the surviving son of old Cresphontes and Merope. Revenge she had not been able to execute on the illegitimate holder of the throne, Polyphontes, gives strength to the arm that rises to strike the guest who proclaims himself the murderer of the last of her sons. Merope accompanies this gesture with words of hatred, ancient and now renewed (fr. 456 Kannicht): "Well (deserved) is this blow that I am going to give you."

All the more emotional, we imagine, is the embrace - permanent in Euripidean recognition - which will have brought mother and son together at last. By this gesture, Merope's attitude evolves from mere impulse to homicidal rationality. She understands that

[16] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1454[a] 4, mentions the paradigmatic effect obtained by Euripides with the articulation between death threat and recognition, exemplified by Merope in *Cresphontes*: "The best example is the last one; I refer to the moment when, in *Cresphontes*, Merope prepares to kill her son, and does not kill him, but recognizes him." See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1111a 11, in which, about the commission of an involuntary act, it is strange that a son, through ignorance, can be considered an enemy.

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the time has come to collaborate in the vengeance against the one truly responsible for so much life-destroying violence. If the queen does not strike the blow, she allies herself with the young Cresphontes to give him victory over the usurper. She seems to be the brain of a trap: pretending resignation, appeasing old hatreds now that, as she says, yet another death has sealed the end of a stage in her life (cf. frs. 449, 454, 455, 458 Kannicht). So that, appeased and confident, Polyphontes offers the flanks to the coup without reaction or defense. Fr. 458 Kannicht may be particularly suggestive: "My fate, / after taking my dearest ones as payment, / has made me prudent." The sense of σοφήν, understood not precisely as "wise or prudent", but also as "skillful,"[17] gives an interesting nuance to the words of Merope, between the message she intends to pass on to her interlocutor and what she has in her mind. Her words are appropriate when vengeance was being prepared against Polyphontes and when Merope dominated the enemy's credulity.

The visibility that the queen would have in the action of the play is more or less consensual. She had a solid and emotional personality, on whose activity some central scenes of the tragedy depended: the attempt to kill her son, the recognition and participation, through deceit, in the usurper's death.

ii. *Political message in Cresphontes*

After evaluating the thematic and formal strategies that can be guessed at in a production of a Euripidean tone, in line with several of his creations, let us now consider the political message that *Cresphontes* would also contain and which places Euripides among the voices that, directly or indirectly, pondered the experience of Messenia under the overbearing authority of Sparta.[18] The theme of hospitality seems relevant, but mainly that of the exercise of power, in antagonistic versions: the despotic and the humanist. The intervention of the young Cresphontes, who claims, at the cost of his own life, the removal of the tyrant and the liberation of his land, contributes to the political content of the play. Pausanias, in Book IV, dedicates to this motif of the courageous commitment of the Messenian youth to the independence and freedom of their land, in obedience to what seems to be a kind of DNA of which the figure of Aristomenes stands out.

A stichomythic dialogue probably pronounced by the young Cresphontes followed the opening monologue. The young prince returns to his father's court under disguise and at the risk of his life, and receives information about Messenian affairs provided by someone in the intimacy of the house (a servant?). The vague mention of "by deceit" included in what seems to be a set of few words belonging to the initial monologue (fr. 448[a].1 Kannicht) had then a clarification (fr. 448[a].13-31):

> Cresphontes - Is the master of this house aggressive towards foreigners?[19]
>
> ? - The one who is still alive, yes, but the one who no longer exists was, with everyone, very amiable.[20]
>
> Cresphontes - Who is he? And the one who no longer lives, tell me next who he is. 15
>
> ? - One of the Heraclids, named Polyphontes, foreigner.
>
> Cresphontes - And the master of the house who is already dead? Who was he?
>
> ? - Have you heard of Cresphontes, a member of that same family?
>
> Cresphontes - He who came to colonize this land of Messenia.

[17] Cf. Harder 1985: 120-1.

[18] Naturally, the scarcity of the fragments requires some caution in assessing this aspect. There is some agreement among commentators on the play. Harder 1985: 11: "Here of course the question arises whether Euripides' play also reflected the discussion on Messenia. The question is hard to answer: all that can be said is that it seems not *a priori* impossible, as the subject was not without topicality in the years when the *Kresphontes* was written. A political undertone of the *Kresphontes* was favoured by E. Schwartz (...). Schwartz believed that the fate of the exiled young Kresphontes, who eventually returned to his country was inspired by the fate of the Messenians, who after the revolution of 464 had been settled in Naupaktos by the Athenians and had been in Pylos since 426." Luraghi 2008: 62 adds to this hypothesis: "This attitude is consistent with the relations between Athenians and Messenians in the second half of the fifth century, when the Athenians gave Naupaktos as a new homeland to the Messenian rebels who left the Peloponnese, after which the Messenians from Naupaktos were precious allies for the Athenians throughout the Peloponnesian War."

[19] Harder's proposal 1985: 62, which supposes that these first words of Cresphontes were motivated by something said by his interlocutor, suggesting fears about the welcome to expect as a foreigner, seems accurate. In this case, these would not be the first verses of the dialogue.

[20] Cf. Pausanias 4.3.7, on the reasons for the death of Cresphontes: 'But it did not remain long, because the wealthy citizens rose against Cresphontes for benefiting the people too much and killed him and his remaining sons.' Probably Euripides kept silent on references to the deceit by which Cresphontes would have fulfilled his desire to be lord of Messenia, of which Pausanias gives an account in 4.3.4-5: "It was mainly Teras, son of Autesion, who opposed Cresphontes. Teras was a Theban, a fifth-generation descendant of Polynices, son of Oedipus, who then tutored Aristodemos' children as their uncle on their mother's side. Aristodemos had married a daughter of Autesion named Argia. Cresphontes, however, who wanted the power of Messenia at any price, in combination with Temenos, prepared a draw. Temenos deposited two balls in a bottle filled with water, one for Aristodemos' sons and the other for Cresphontes. The one whose ball came out first could choose which of the two regions he preferred. Temenos made both balls of earth, but the one for the sons of Aristodemos was dried in the sun, and the one for Cresphontes was boiled in the fire. Therefore, the sons of Aristodemos' ball fell apart, and Cresphontes, thus drawn by lot, chose Messenia." About this lot, the variations it underwent from the 5th century BC and its symbolism to justify Laconia's domination of Messenia, cf. Luraghi 2008: 50-1. Euripides, according to the hypothesis of *Temenidai*, like Ephorus (*FGrHist* 70F 115), refers to Oxylos (a fantastic being with three eyes) as the person in charge of the Peloponnesian lottery (*P. Oxy*. 2455, fr. 9.4-8). Apparently, the lot was a strong theme in *Temenos* and *Temenidai* (among the oldest references to this mythical episode are Pindar, *Pythian* 5.69-72, Sophocles, *Ajax* 1283-7). In the first case, it was up to Temenos to conduct the process, suggesting that perhaps, as in Pausanias, he was conspiring in the deceit.

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? - After killing him, Polyphontes occupied the palace.

Cresphontes - By violence or by unintentional chance?

? - It was by violence that he mastered it, to become king of this land.

Cresphontes - And the one who died had no children, nor a woman as a wife?

? - Not at all. He had two sons, whom he killed along with their father.

The prologue, therefore, reveals a fundamental antithesis between the dead king and the one now exercising power, that is to say, a legitimate and generous king versus a despotic and violent one. And yet, as between Lacedaemonians and Messenians, both monarchs, who became rivals, had a common ancestor ("One of the Heraclids, named Polyphontes (...); Have you heard of Cresphontes, a member of that same family?", fr. 448a16, 18). At the distance that death has dug, the memory of old Cresphontes is still a mirror from which the image of his antagonist comes out most grotesque. The portrait of Polyphontes that is anticipated here - the one drawn by those who know and observe him, even before he is allowed to confirm it in presence - fulfills the requirements corresponding to those of a true tyrant. And as it is someone under the disguise of a foreigner who makes the question, it is natural that the first trait to be underlined in the tyrant should be his aggressiveness towards the foreigners who come to him as guests. As any barbarian king, Toas of Tauris or Theoclimenus of Egypt, Polyphontes represents a danger for those who come to his palace. The violence that denounces above all insecurity: that which invades someone who, for the crimes committed, may fear the coming of an avenger. The infractions of the new lord of Messenia are many and terrible: political, against the legitimate holder of the throne and his heirs, and also personal, forcing the widow and bereaved mother to submit to his wishes. Ambition is enunciated as the rule that guides Polyphontes. What the Messenian public opinion thinks of their new lord is evident from the words of this servant, direct, ruthless, and firm. The parodos reinforces the same censorship through the voice of a group of old men who, because of their age, establish a link between the past and the present as witnesses to the change in power in Messenia (fr. 448[a].77-89):

I cry for this house

Deprived of the only ... of its king

Of old ...

Worthy of many tears.

A sacred, inexpressible reason for my song.

...

Terrible ... of a relative ...

With hands dyed in blood from the death of his children,

That man is also to me guilty of so many evils.

So ... a father's children...

The chorus was probably alluding not only to the murders committed as a penalty for the royal family, but also for himself, as the representative of the Messenian people. He was thus underlining the political dimension of the regicide. The same multiplicative effect of the crimes of Polyphontes was reinforced by a stasimon, configured as a hymn to Peace, associated with the repudiation of the political discord that brought the tyrant to Messenia or that the tyrant produced in Messenia (fr. 452.9-12 Kannicht):[21]

Come, come, my lady, to my city.

The fierce Disorder drive it from our homes,

And the disturbing Discord

That delights in the sharpness of iron.

The Chorus' appeal seems to have in mind a collective peace (consider the political sense of Στάσις, 10) and thus convey the idea of the disturbance that the regicide and the usurper's authority caused in the city, or, before that, the unrest that facilitated the usurper's coup (cf. Pausanias 4.3.7).

The few words that the preserved fragments allow us to hear said by Polyphontes confirm in a bold and egocentric way the accusations that were being directed against him (fr. 452 Kannicht):

What I suffered is what all mortals suffer.

Of loving myself, above all, I am not ashamed.

It seems clear the insecurity he conveys of someone who knows himself guilty of several crimes. But perhaps his words intend to hide his guilt under a cloak of self-defense. In any case, the selfishness he confesses is manifest.

This insecurity is responsible for the blind, credulous manner in which Polyphontes allows himself to be caught in the trap set for him by his victims - Merope and the young Cresphontes. Relieved at what looks like the elimination of an avenger, whom he has bought at a price, and at the unexpected reconciliation with the woman he dominates, the usurper recklessly offers his back to the blow of revenge. A comment of a moral character, which might well close the play, goes to him and to the excesses of his behavior. The coryphaeus (or Merope or Cresphontes), expressing the moral of the story, reflects on the result of the revenge (fr. 459 Kannicht):

The profits that any mortal obtains should be such,

That he never, afterward, should regret them.

[21] The political unrest that troubled Messenia in the era before the Spartan conquest is referred to by Isocrates 6.22, Ephorus, *FGrHist* 70F 116-7 (*vide supra*).

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IV. Conclusion

The scarcity of solid testimonies about Messenia's remote past has provided some fantasy among authors who mainly belong to a period after the 4th century BC. The intense conflict that opposed Sparta and Athens during the second half of the 5th century BC and the dominance gained by the Peloponnesian city in Greece during the following decades invited consideration of Sparta's relationship with its neighbors. It is not surprising, therefore, that reading the myths of Messenia in these years has led to mainly political conclusions.

Yet there is good reason to think that behind the late versions, there were sources as far back as the 7th century BC if one considers the poetry of Tyrtaeus and the allusions therein to the Messenian wars.

In this limited flow of testimonies, Euripides will have occupied a decisive place if we think of the insistence with which his tragedy used the Messenian traditions. Although very few fragments have been preserved, it is clear that the myths concerning the southwestern Peloponnese were compatible with the preferences of the Euripidean stage. But it is also predictable that the historical timeliness and political message had made them attractive to the Athenian public of the fifth century BC. To look at the fragments and try to go through the ballast left by them is, despite many limitations, a challenging task.

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