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CRITIAS AND ATHEISM

One of the best-known fragments of a lost Greek drama is Critias' fr. 43 F 19 Snell,[1] an extended *rhesis* from the play *Sisyphus* in which the protagonist[2] narrates how once upon a time human life was squalid, brutal, and anarchistic; as a remedy men devised Law and Justice; this expedient served to check open wrongdoing but did not hinder secret crimes; then some very clever man hit upon the idea of inventing gods and the notion of divine retribution; thus secret criminality was stopped by fear of the gods.

The prevalent understanding of Critias' motives is largely determined by the commonest interpretation of this fragment.[3] Some authorities think the notion of divine justice as merely a human device designed to serve a socially utilitarian purpose is Critias' own invention; others regard this passage as wholly or in part a *réchauffé* of the ideas of others, such as Protagoras, Democritus, or Diagoras of Rhodes.[4]. With few exceptions,[5] it has until recently been thought that Critias was, if not a sophist himself, at least a cynical disciple of *Machtpolitik* who differed from similar thinkers such as Thrasymachus and Callicles only in that he translated ideas similar to those these figures are made to express in the pages of Plato into brutal political action.[6]

A handful of authorities have dissented from this view on the grounds that it is dangerous to attribute to a playwright sentiments placed in the mouths of his stage-characters (although to be sure, as we shall see, the theory that the views expressed in the fragment were the poet's own has ostensible ancient authority in the doxographic tradition). Recently the prevalent interpretation of fr. 19 Sn. has been subjected to additional criticism in two articles by German writers that may well be harbingers of a major reappraisal – long overdue, in the present writer's opinion – of Critias' beliefs.

A. Dihle has pointed out that nothing in the other preserved fragments of Critias confirms the theory that he was an atheist.[7] Thus Dihle preferred the alternative ancient tradition (discussed below) that assigned the fragment to Euripides, not

[1] Critias' dramatic fragments are quoted and cited from Snell, *TrGF* I; his other fragments from Diels–Kranz, *Vors.*[12]

[2] Sisyphus is identified as the speaker by those ancient writers who attribute this fragment to Euripides (see below).

[3] Some of the more notable discussions of this fragment are W. Nestle, 'Kritias', *NJBB* 1903, 99–104 (cf. also Nestle's *Von Mythos zum Logos*, Stuttgart, 1940, 467 and his note at Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen* 4.–7. *Aufl.*, Leipzig, 1923, i. 1408 n. 0); A. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (London, 1922), 44–50; Dorothy Stephans, 'Critias' Life and Literary Remains' (diss. Cincinnati, 1939), 76–8; Schmid-Stählin, *GGL* I. 3. 176–81; Werner Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greeks* (Oxford, 1947), 186–8; Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists* (New York, 1954), 333–5; W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, U.K., 1969), iii. 243 f. cf. the further sources cited by Patzer, loc. cit. infra, 3 n. 1.

[4] cf. the speculations of Nestle, Drachmann.

[5] Drachmann, loc. cit. and Wilamowitz, *Aristoteles und Athen* (Berlin, 1893), i. 175 n. 178. Miss Stephans, loc. cit., suggests Critias may have believed in the abstract theism enunciated in fr. 4 Sn. but not in the traditional gods. One fails to see how the fragment permits any such distinction and, as we shall see, the authorship of fr. 4 (from *Peirithous*) is in any event problematic.

[6] Thrasymachus, Callicles, and Critias are taken quite closely together by Untersteiner and by Guthrie.

[7] 'Das Satyrspiel "Sisyphus"', *Hermes* 105 (1977), 28–42.

Critias. But, while Dihle's initial observation is true and important, his solution only shifts the problem from Critias to Euripides. For it would have to be proven rather than assumed that the religious attitude of this fragment is in any kind of agreement with Euripidean opinions about the gods, and the impossibility of deeming Euripides an atheist seems well established.[8] Stylistic features of fr. 19 Sn. also discourage ascription to Euripides.[9]

In an article designed to show that Critias was no adherent of sophistic thought, Harald Patzer has refused to accept the standard interpretation of our fragment.[10] According to Patzer, the fragment bears no marks of parodying sophistic teaching (in the manner that Polyphemus' speech at Euripides, *Cyclops* 316 ff. is supposed to parody sophistry).[11] Rather:[12]

> ...der Zusammenhang der Gedanken in diesem Fragment macht diese Auffassung nicht nur unmöglich, er weist in eine ganz andere Richtung. Der Sprecher verurteilt die Gewalt und bejaht die menschliche Kultur, die das zuerst tierische Leben der Menschen zu einem geordneten gemacht hat. Die Einführung der Nomoi ist also ein erster grosser Kulturfortschritt...Der Sprecher will also nicht weniger, sondern mehr 'Nomos' als es zur Zeit gibt.

Now it is true that the speaker of this fragment seems to be no apologist for criminality and may even regard the suppression of wrongdoing as a good thing. Then too, those who would lump together Critias, Thrasymachus, and Callicles must discern several unspoken corollaries in this fragment that are probably quite unwarranted, such as an implied attack on *nomos* as a snare devised by weak men to entrap their natural betters, or an insinuation that those taken in by this swindle are fools. But while the major thrust of this fragment may well be an admiring description of *Kulturfortschritt*, the consequence that, like divine justice, the gods themselves are a human invention, is less easy to deny. After all, we only know of this fragment because it was quoted as an example *par excellence* of atheistic thought by various ancient writers.

[8] Euripides' atheism has most memorably been asserted by W. Nestle, *Euripides* (Stuttgart, 1901); cf. however Drachmann's severe critique, op. cit. 51–6.

[9] Euripides' *Sisyphus* was of course produced with the Trojan trilogy of 415 B.C. Although it is doubtful that his satyr plays marched alongside his tragedies in the matter of iambic resolution, it is difficult to imagine any kind of late Euripidean play displaying the timid resolutions exhibited by fr. 19 Sn.: five in 42 lines, resolutions in first and third foot only, no more than one resolution per line. Note also the following rather unfortunate word-repetitions: 4 κόλασμα~ 6 κολαστάς, 5 κἄπειτα~ 9 ἔπειτ', 10 πράσσειν~ 11 ἔπρασσον~ 15 πράσσωσιν, 11 ~ 14 λάθρᾳ, 16 ~ 25 εἰσηγήσατο, 29 ~ 35 ὅθεν.

[10] 'Der Tyrann Kritias und die Sophistik', in *Studia Platonica* [*Festschr. Hermann Gundert*] (Amsterdam, 1974), 3–20. This article contains interesting observations, but too much of the argumentation uncritically accepts the Critian authorship of *Peirithous*, *Rhadamanthus*, and *Tennes*. Remarkably, there is no mention made of the testimony of Xenophon, *Mem.* I. 2. 30–1 that as a member of the Thirty Critias engineered passage of a law forbidding the teaching of λόγων τέχνη. Xenophon's anecdote appears doubtful or at least over-compressed. He deduced this action from a quarrel with Socrates, but inasmuch as Socrates himself was hardly a rhetoric-teacher, evidently the reader is left to surmise that this hostility somehow evolved into a dislike of sophistry (possibly Critias acquired the equation Socraticism = sophistry from Aristophanes' *Clouds*). In any event, the theory of A. Lesky, *GGL* (Eng. tr.), 498 that this law was an attempt to muzzle Socrates' criticism of the Thirty seems unwarranted. If the bare fact of the law forbidding rhetoric-teaching is true, as may well be the case, Xenophon's testimony has a clear bearing on the question of Critias' attitude towards sophistry.

[11] To be sure, Patzer notes the broad resemblance of this *rhesis* to the culture-*mythos* Protagoras is made to deliver in Plato's *Protagoras*. The 'sophistic' interpretation of the *Cyclops* originated in Wilhelm Schmid, 'Kritisches und Exegetisches zu Euripides' *Kyklops*', *Philologus* 55 (1898), 57. But this interpretation cannot in fact withstand the devastating criticism of R. Marquardt, 'Die Datierung des euripideischen Kyklops' (diss. Leipzig, 1909), 48.

[12] op. cit. 16 f.

So even if Dihle and Patzer cast a certain amount of healthy doubt on the proposition that fr. 19 Sn. is some kind of reflection of contemporary atheistic speculation and an expression of the poet's own view, neither scholar presents a completely convincing case. Further consideration is required.

Ancient writers are divided in attributing our fragment to Critias or to Euripides. Sextus Empiricus, the only writer to quote it in its entirety, attributes it to Critias at *adv. Math.* 9. 54 and *Pyrrh.* 3. 218. By comparison with Theophilus of Antioch, *Epist. ad Autolycum* 3. 7, Hermann Diels has shown that both Sextus and Theophilus were drawing on the same florilegium of philosophical sententiae as their source.[13] Plutarch, *de Superstitione* 171 b identifies Critias as an atheist; presumably he did so on the basis of fr. 19 Sn., acquired from this source or another that attributed the fragment to Critias. On the other hand, Aetius I. 7. 2, Ps.-Plutarch, *de Placitis Philosophorum* 880e, and Eusebius, *PE* 14 p. 753 retail in the same words, and Galen, 19, 250 Kühn in paraphrase, an anecdote whereby Euripides placed these atheistic sentiments in the mouth of the rascal Sisyphus in order to avoid being haled before the Areopagus on a charge of impiety. Most probably the source used by these writers was one of those biographies like Satyrus' *Life of Euripides* and the *Vita Euripidis* in which colourful anecdotes are illustrated by (and are in fact often deduced from, by *post hoc propter hoc* reasoning) excerpted quotations.

The *Vita Euripidis* informs us that three tragedies ascribed to Euripides, *Peirithous*, *Rhadamanthus*, and *Tennes*, were spurious, and Athenaeus 11 p. 496a expresses doubt whether *Peirithous* should be attributed to Euripides or Critias. Wilamowitz combined these facts with the evidence concerning *Sisyphus*' authorship and produced an elaborate theory, accepted by many subsequent writers, that these four plays were all by Critias and comprised a tetralogy written during or after his exile of 407 B.C.[14] But J. Kuiper has shown the essential flimsiness and tendentious nature of this theory and has pointed out that the reasons adduced by Wilamowitz for denying the possibility of Euripidean authorship of *Peirithous* in particular are not weighty.[15] A couple of stylistic features may also suggest Euripidian authorship.[16] Therefore it would seem wisest to suspend judgement about the authorship of these three tragedies and the possibility that *Sisyphus* may have been written with them. For the sake of completeness, in the following pages the fragments of these three tragedies will be brought into the discussion, but only upon the understanding that the conclusions to be suggested in no way presuppose the correctness of Wilamowitz' theory.

Sisyphus is often, although not universally, thought to have been a satyr play rather than a tragedy.[17] While the considerations offered by Wilamowitz scarcely prove the play's satyric nature,[18] the strongest indication that it was such is the appearance of

[13] *Doxographi Graeci* (repr. Berlin, 1958), 59.

[14] *Analecta Euripidea* (Berlin, 1875), 166–72; cf. the other references given by Untersteiner, op. cit. 320 n. 59.

[15] 'De Pirithoo Fabula Euripidea', *Mnemosyne* 35 (1907), 354–85; cf. also Sir Denys Page, Loeb *Select Papyri* (Cambridge, Mass.–London, 1950), iii. 120–3.

[16] 'Critias', fr. 1, 9 Sn. is identical to the first line of Euripides' *Melanippe the Wise*. Similarly, if the attribution of *P. Flor. Inv.* 3021 to *Peirithous* is correct, the echo of Eur. *H.* 990 in *vv.* 6 f. might be relevant (cf. B. Kramer, *Kölner Papyri*, Cologne, 1976, i. 18). For a notable feature of Euripidean style is the repetition of phraseology from one play to another: this phenomenon has been observed by F. Schroeder, 'De Iteratis apud Tragicos Graecos' (diss. Strassburg, 1882), A. B. Cook, 'Unconscious Iterations', *CQ* 16 (1902), 151–4, and Milman Parry, 'Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Versemaking', *HSCP* 12 (1930), 97–114.

[17] An example of the wavering one encounters is that the play is included in Wiktor Steffen, *Satyrographorum Graecorum Reliquae* (Poznan, 1936) but not in the same author's *Satyrographorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Poznan, 1952).

[18] As pointed out at D. F. Sutton, 'The Nature of Critias' *Sisyphyus*', *RSC* 22 (1974), 3–7.

the word χωρίον in line 39: diminutives (including those that would appear to have lost their diminutive force through constant usage) are avoided in tragedy, doubtless because diminutives constituted such a prominent feature of contemporary colloquial speech. In a passage by one of the major tragedians the appearance of such a diminutive would be all but proof positive that the play in question was satyric,[19] and although fr. 19 Sn. exhibits some stylistic infelicities, as noted above,[20] Critias was a competent writer and his fragments show that he was alive to the stylistic requirements of the various genres in which he worked. Therefore the conclusion that *Sisyphus* was satyric appears sound.

Such are the known facts surrounding our fragment. We do not know the subject of the play or the date of its production (if indeed it ever was exhibited or intended to be enacted on the stage). Let us now consider whether fr. 19 Sn. reflects Critias' own atheism.

Dihle has already pointed out that nothing in Critias' other fragments indicates atheism. Indeed, if *Peirithous* was his, it is noteworthy that one fragment (fr. 4 Sn.) is an apostrophe to Anaxagoras' divine Mind and that several other fragments mention the god-wrought *eidolon* that tormented Ixion.[21] The play was set in the Underworld, had a chorus of Mystic Initiates, and dealt with the punishment of the sinful in the afterlife.[22] Similarly, a fragmentary Hypothesis to *Rhadamanthus* reveals that the play concluded with an epiphany of Artemis and with the apotheosis of the protagonist's daughters. Apollo is somehow mentioned in the even more fragmentary Hypothesis to *Tennes*. So these would be strange choices of plays for an outspoken atheist.

Nothing in Critias' biography suggests atheism. Critias is only characterized as an atheist by later writers who, as we have now seen, knew fr. 19 Sn. only as a fragment.[23] If the danger of imputing to a playwright opinions expressed by his characters is notorious, it is infinitely more dangerous to form any such conclusions when dealing with passages torn out of their original contexts. And it is notable that no contemporary or near-contemporary writer (including Xenophon, who intensely disliked him) imputes atheism to Critias or associates him with the sophistic movement in any way.

The only known fact that might seem to suggest a contrary conclusion is the appearance of Critias' name in the list of individuals implicated in the desecration of the Mysteries and the mutilation of the Herms preserved at Andocides, *de Mysteriis* 47. But when the informer who had produced this list was cross-examined by the Boule, and upon Andocides' confession, this fellow was convicted of delivering false information and put to death. Neither at that time nor thereafter was Critias prosecuted nor in any way taxed with impiety, and there is not the least reason for thinking that his exile was associated with this affair.[24] It would be dangerous in the

[19] The only certain example of a diminutive in tragedy is pointed out by P. T. Stevens, *Colloquial Expressions in Euripides* (Wiesbaden, 1976), 5, χλανίδιον at Eur. *Or.* 42, *Su.* 110, Chaeremon fr. 14, 9 and fr. tr. adesp. 7. Normally when a diminutive is found in a fragment – e.g. Soph. fr. 768, 1 Radt αὐλίσκοις – we may conclude the fragment to have been satyric.

[20] On the other hand, the fragment is not without felicities such as the description of heavenly portents commencing at line 31.

[21] Page, op. cit. 121, remarks that there is no reason for thinking that the myth of the *eidolon* was presented in any kind of 'rationalized' manner.

[22] Both the setting and the chorus of the play are thought to be somehow imitated or parodied in Aristophanes' *Frogs*: cf. Wilamowitz, *Analecta* 171 and Stephans, op. cit. 74 f.

[23] To be sure, the above suggestion that Plutarch identified Critias as an atheist on the basis of nothing more than familiarity with fr. 19 Sn. is a hypothesis. It might not be inconceivable that he had at his disposal extra information unknown to us. But this is a small point when cast in the balance against the fact that no contemporary styles Critias an atheist.

[24] The probable cause of his exile was the fall of Alcibiades according to Wilamowitz, *Platon*[2] (Berlin, 1920), ii. 119 and G. de Sanctis, *Storia dei Greci dalle Origini alla Fine del Secola V*

extreme to try to find any evidence for his attitude towards the gods in his alleged involvement in the mutilation and desecration.[25] Likewise accusations that Critias was preternaturally unprincipled or self-serving in his political dealings, and therefore that he might be the kind of cynic who sneered at religious and moral conventions, would appear exaggerated if not positively unfounded.[26]

Another reason for doubting that fr. 19 Sn. expresses the poet's own views about the gods is that in a recent study of Critias' fr. 88B44DK, H. D. Rankin has shown that Critias criticized Archilochus because 'he did not conceal his responsibility for his own less admirable deeds and thoughts', whereas as an anachronistic survivor of the old aristocratic 'shame culture' the poet set great store by the preservation of a fair outward reputation.[27] If fr. 19 Sn. represented Critias' own inmost thoughts, would he not be guilty of precisely that for which he condemns Archilochus? For that matter, nobody has supplied an answer to what should be an obvious question: if these atheistic ideas were Critias' own, why should he care to advertise the fact? There would be little to gain and much to risk both in terms of personal reputation and of political chances.[28]

Any playwright is obliged to equip his characters with sentiments and motives appropriate to their various natures. The tradition that ascribes this *rhesis* to Sisyphus himself may appear tainted in so far as the fragment is wrongly ascribed to Euripides by the sources that identify him as the speaker. Nevertheless this tradition would appear probable enough, not only because the anecdote illustrated by the fragment would only make sense according to the assumption that Sisyphus delivers the speech, but also because the frank admiration expressed for the clever man who devised the 'noble lie' of divine justice well accords with the kind of attitude one would expect of this notorious mythological rascal.

And here lies the true interpretation of the fragment: we must bear in mind the identity of the probable speaker, a thing which those holding the prevalent interpretation of the fragment have signally failed to do. Sisyphus was a cunning rogue, if not a downright criminal, and in all likelihood Critias gave him this speech precisely because its sentiments are Sisyphus-like. Possibly Critias may have found it amusing to equip a mythological rascal with such anachronistically modern views (for such sentiments were probably in the air, mooted about by sophists or other progressive thinkers),[29] and while in the fragment the speaker is no apologist for criminality and would appear to applaud the suppression of crime, his appreciation of the benevolent trick by which such progress has been achieved may represent one clever man's admiration for another. It is not out of the question that by putting such atheistic

(Florence, 1939) ii. 463. Nothing supports the idea of a second exile, proposed by K. Freeman, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Oxford, 1946), 406.

[25] So Stephans, op. cit. 29–31.

[26] So Stephans, ibid. 38 (about his conduct during his exile).

[27] '*ΜΟΙΧΟΣ ΛΑΓΝΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΥΒΡΙΣΤΗΣ:* Critias and his Judgement of Archilochus', *Gräzer Beiträge* 3 (1975), 323–34.

[28] The question will occur to the reader, why cannot the anecdote about 'Euripides' merely be shifted to Critias, so that Critias placed this speech in the mouth of a notorious rascal in order to escape prosecution for impiety? That is to say, why could there not be a kind of irony so that ostensibly Critias was placing this atheistic speech in Sisyphus' mouth but at the same time was addressing cognoscenti in a more serious way? The answer is simply that this possibility could not be excluded – if there was the slightest confirmation in Critias' preserved writings or in the facts of his life that he himself might have entertained any such thoughts. But there is not.

[29] Plausible but not demonstrable: the passage at Cicero, *de Natura Deorum* I. 42. 118 stating that some say religion was an invention made for reasons of state is no more than an allusion to Critias' fr. 19 Sn. Diels, loc. cit. shows this passage depends on the same selection of atheistic sentiments used by Sextus and Theophilus.

sentiments in the mouth of a notorious bad man Critias is holding these newfangled ideas up to scorn and ridicule. In view of Xenophon's anecdote about his hostility towards sophistry and Socraticism, this latter possibility is at least more attractive than the converse theory that he is advertising his own sentiments openly or even covertly. But in view of the fact that many a satyr play, including Sophocles' *Ichneutae* and Euripides' *Cyclops*, tells the story of a bold theft or clever deception, evidently with delight rather than disapproval, and since clever tricksters such as Sisyphus, Autolycus, Odysseus, and Hermes are frequently the central characters in satyr plays,[30] even this latter theory fails to convince. But in any event, the chances that our fragment expresses Critias' own philosophy appear minimal. The fragment neither offers an apology for criminality nor attacks *nomos*, and does not seem to parody – let alone endorse – the kind of philosophy expressed by the Platonic Thrasymachus and Callicles.

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APPENDIX

We have seen (n. 29) that Diels includes Cicero, *N. D.* I. 42. 118 in the *Fortleben* of our fragment. Another passage also deserves consideration, Isocrates, *Busiris* 24–25:

ὅσοι δὲ τῶν θείων πραγμάτων οὕτω προέστησαν ὥστε καὶ τὰς ἐπιμελείας καὶ τὰς τιμωρίας εἶναι δοκεῖν ἀκριβεστέρας τῶν συμβαινόντων, οἱ δὲ τοιοῦτοι πλεῖστα τὸν βίον τὸν τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὠφελοῦσιν. καὶ γὰρ τὴν ἀρχὴν οἱ τὸν φόβον ἡμῖν ἐνεργασάμενοι τοῦτον αἴτιοι γεγόνασι τοῦ μὴ παντάπασι θηριωδῶς διακεῖσθαι πρὸς ἀλλήλους.

Here, in the midst of a passage praising Egyptian piety, the discussion is only of a noble exaggeration whereby divine retribution and reward are described with more accuracy than is actually possible in order to achieve *Kulturfortschritt*, not of a noble lie where the gods are actually manufactured for the purpose. Nevertheless it would scarcely seem improbable that, with this modification, Isocrates is predominantly thinking of the argument in Critias, fr. 19. If so, the interest of this passage lies in the fact that Isocrates is the one ancient witness to our fragment who presumably knew it from its original context rather than from the distortive medium of the doxographic tradition;* thus he was not misled into regarding it as a manifesto of cynical atheism but was able to appreciate that its primary thrust is praise of a benign swindle that produced the advance of human culture.

[30] cf. D. F. Sutton, *The Greek Satyr Play* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1979), index s.v. 'tricksters and trickery'.

* In the same way, I would suppose that the allusion to those previous writers who have maligned Busiris (5) is primarily a reference to Euripides' satyr play *Busiris*.