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## HUMAN AND DIVINE GUILT IN AESCHYLUS' *NIOBE*

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The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Aeschylus presents human and divine guilt in his fragmentarily preserved *Niobe*, numerous fragments of which toy with the concept of guilt and the inheritance of evil, as well as explore the delicate balance between divine causality and human error. A detailed analysis of these fragments allows us to understand how the aeschylean Niobe, daughter of a grave sinner, continuously provokes the divine wrath, and fails to understand her mistakes until it is too late. Building on previous scholarship, my goal is to explore the different ways in which Aeschylus approaches and distributes guilt, especially focusing on the interdependence of human and divine causality. Ancestral guilt, as has been suggested<sup>1</sup>, plays an integral part in Niobe's doom, but eventually it is her own actions that set the divine punishment in motion. A close reading of the fragments *TrGF* III 154a, *TrGF* III 162, *TrGF* III 160 and *TrGF* II 700<sup>2</sup> helps us understand how this interplay of divine necessity and human responsibility finally works.

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<sup>1</sup> See LLOYD-JONES 1971, 44 and GANTZ 1981, 24

<sup>2</sup> The fragments are examined in order of presumed appearance in the play.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The myth of Niobe and her children constitutes a popular theme in both the archaic and the classical era. It is firstly attested in Homer's *Iliad*<sup>3</sup>, when Achilles briefly narrates to grief-stricken Priam the story of the beautiful mother who sees all her children die due to her insolent behavior towards Leto. Following Homer, the myth receives various treatments by poets and mythographers, but its core remains the same: Niobe is always portrayed as a happy queen and mother of many and beautiful children who dares compare herself to goddess Leto, mother of only two children, Apollo and Artemis. Leto, angry at the boastful woman, urges her own children to kill the Niobids, which they happily do. Afterwards, Niobe abandons Thebes and goes back to her homeland in Asia Minor, where Zeus takes pity on her and transforms her into a rock on Mount Sipylus. However, despite her metamorphosis, Niobe continues to weep in eternity for her family's demise<sup>4</sup>.

This is the myth Aeschylus works with in the *Niobe*, few fragments and ancient testimonies of which help us sketch out the basic plotline. We know that the tragedian sets his play in Thebes<sup>5</sup> and that the plot begins three days after the divine massacre<sup>6</sup>. Niobe sits silently by the tomb of her children, mourning for their loss with her head and face covered in grief<sup>7</sup>. The chorus consists of Lydian maidens who accompany Tantalus and interact with at least one more character, probably Niobe's Nurse<sup>8</sup>. Arguably, the play has limited action and few characters in it. Aeschylus puts great emphasis on motherhood and family ties, whereas the most intriguing theme of the play is the dynamic between humans and gods and the burden of guilt each of them carry.

In this paper I will present – along with translation<sup>9</sup> and commentary – the surviving fragments of the play that explore this dynamic and proceed to recon-

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<sup>3</sup> *Il.* 24, 602-620.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief narration of the myth see Pseudo-Apollodorus' *Library* 3, 5, 6.

<sup>5</sup> FITTON-BROWN 1954, 176 puts a definitive end to the discussion of where the play is supposed to take place.

<sup>6</sup> As verses 6-7 of fr. 154a RADT clearly suggest.

<sup>7</sup> Niobe's lengthy silence invites the ridicule of Aristophanes in *Frogs*, where the character of Euripides suggests that Aeschylus exploited silence as a cheap trick to create suspense in his plays. See *Ar. Ran.* 911-920.

<sup>8</sup> On the identity of the chorus, see HERMANN 1828, 45-46. The girls must be either Lydian or Phrygian, since they accompany Tantalus, whose kingdom is situated in that area. On Tantalus' kingdom see Pind. *Ol.* 1, 37-40. No consensus has been reached on who the other character is, but many scholars prefer Niobe's Nurse, who might have also been the children's nurse too. See METTE 1963, 44 and PENNESI 2008, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Translation is my own, unless noted otherwise.

struct and interpret them in order to throw light on the aeschylean presentation of the clash of divine justice and human guilt.

## 2. *NIOBE* 154A RADT

At first sight, papyrial fragment 154a<sup>10</sup> suggests that the representation of gods in the play is, to say the least, ambivalent. Setting aside the grueling problem of the speakers and assuming that the fragment presents an exchange between the chorus and Niobe's Nurse<sup>11</sup>, we can move on to examining its content. The fragment goes on for twenty-one lines and is the longest surviving of the play:

οὐδέν' εἰ μὴ πατέρ' ἀναστενάζε[ται τὸν] δόντα καὶ φύσαντα Ταντάλου β[ίαν, εἰς οἷον ἐξώκειλεν ἀλίμενον γάμον. ]ς κακοῦ γὰρ πνεῦμα προσβ[. . .]. δο[ ] δ' ὄρατε τοῦπι[τ]έρμιον γάμου·	5
τριταῖον ἡμαρ τόνδ' ἐφημένη τάφον τέκνοις ἐπῶζει – υ τοῖς τεθνηκόσιν ]υσα τὴν τάλαιναν εὐμορφον φυήν. ]ς κακῶθεις δ' οὐδέν ἄλλ' ε[ἰ] μὴ σκιά. ] μὲν ἤξει δεῦρο Ταντάλου βία	10
]κόμιστρα τῆσδε καὶ πεφα[. . . . .]ν· ] δε μῆνιν τίνα φέρων Ἀμφίονι ]ον αἰκῶς ἐξεφύλλασεν γένος; ]ὸς ὑμᾶς οὐ γὰρ ἐστε δύσφρονες[ ] θεὸς μὲν αἰτίαν φύει βροτοῖς,	15
ὅταν κακῶσαι δῶμα παμπήδην θέλη· ] ἐ θνητὸν ὄντα χρὴ τὸν .[ π] εριστέλλοντα μὴ θρασυστομ[εῖν ] εὐ πρᾶσσοντες οὔποτ' ἤλπισα[ν ]ντες ἐκχεῖν ἦν ἔχωσ[	20
γ]ὰρ ἐξαρθεῖσα [κ]αλλισ[τ... ]. . [ ... ...	

<sup>10</sup> All *Niobe* fragments are from RADT 1985 unless noted otherwise.

<sup>11</sup> This is not an arbitrary hypothesis. The speaker makes a reference to both the beginning (2-3) and the sad ending of Niobe's wedding (4), which allows us to assume that she has closely known Niobe since her youth. However, the speaker also maintains her composure and manages to emotionally distance herself enough from the disaster to both explain what happened to the chorus and acknowledge that Niobe is also at fault (21). Niobe's mother would not have been able to do neither, and Antiope (her mother in law) would have been reluctant to insinuate that Niobe's marriage to Amphion (*i.e.* her son) was the beginning of her misfortune. See also SOMMERSTEIN 2010, 72.

4 παντὸς Pfeiffer προσβ[άλλε]ι δό[μοις] Latte 5 ὑμεῖς Norsa-Vitelli 6 τριταῖον Wolff 8 σκέπουσα Pfeiffer cf. *Ran.* 911-912 cf. *Eust. Il.* 1343,60· τήκουσα Camerer 9 βροτὸς Körte 10 αὔθις Page 10-13 choro dedit Fitton-Brown 11 πεφασμένων Wolff 12 Φοῖβος Maas δαίμων Cazzaniga πατέρῳ Lesky 13 πρόρριζον Norsa-Vitelli 14 ἐγὼ πρὸς Norsa-Vitelli 15 λέξω Norsa-Vitelli 17 ὅμως δὲ Norsa-Vitelli ἐκ θεῶν ὄλβον Körte 19 ἀλλ' οἱ μὲν Norsa-Vitelli 20 πεσόντες Lobel· σφαλέντες Fraenkel ἔχουσι πλησμονήν Latte 21 χάυτη Latte καλλιστεύματι Lobel

## &lt; NIOBE'S NUTRIX &gt;

All she can do is weep for her father,  
mighty Tantalus who brought her to life and gave her  
to a marriage that drifted to disaster.  
The spirit of every evil power has attacked the palace.  
But you see the ending of this marriage. 5  
It is the third day that sitting on this grave  
she laments for her dead children, with her beautiful  
albeit wretched body covered.  
Man hit by misfortune is nothing but a shadow.

## &lt; CHORUS &gt;

But soon mighty Tantalus will come here 10  
to bring her and the dead back.  
Why did Phoebus get so mad at Amphion  
that he completely ruined his family?

## &lt; NIOBE'S NUTRIX &gt;

You are not my enemies, so I will tell you.  
God plants a seed of guilt in humans, 15  
when he wishes to completely ruin a household.  
But because we are mortals, we should hide godsend  
happiness and not speak impudent words.  
Still, those who are happy never expect  
to fall and spill their blessings. 20  
And because this one boasted for the beauty...

The informative nature of the fragment allows us to place it in the first part of the play, probably the first episode, when Niobe has yet to break her silence<sup>12</sup>. Upon entering the *orchestra*, the chorus is surprised to see a veiled woman sitting near a newly built tomb. Someone from the palace, presumably Niobe's Nurse, informs both the chorus and the spectators about the tragedy that has stricken the family; All Niobe's children are dead, murdered by the gods (5-9). The chorus mentions the imminent arrival of Tantalus in Thebes (10-11) and then supposes

<sup>12</sup> Cf. CAGNAZZO 2018, 9.

that a rivalry between Apollo and Amphion must be responsible for the cruel massacre (12-13)<sup>13</sup>. Ignoring their assumption, the Nurse answers that it is god who plants a seed of guilt in humans, when he looks for a reason to ruin them (15-16).

If we read lines 15-16 out of context, we reach the conclusion that the speaker openly blames the gods for what happened. She accuses them of creating themselves guilt in humans so that they have an excuse to destroy them afterwards. Plato, in fact, focuses on this utterance and accuses Aeschylus of being an impious liar that portrays gods as vengeful entities who cause humans misery<sup>14</sup>. However, if we pay attention to what the speaker says next, we realise that Aeschylus all but exonerates humans in *Niobe*. The Nurse points out that humans should be very careful of their behavior and by no means boast for their blessings or take their happiness for granted. Θρασυστομεῖν ("to speak impudent words") alludes to Niobe's offence, of which only the members of the chorus would not already know. The last surviving line of the papyrus is probably directed to Niobe too. The grieving mother is already there sitting by her children's grave, therefore χαῦτη, as proposed by Latte, must refer to the veiled figure the chorus sees in front of them. We must assume that the participle ἐξαρθεῖσα describes Niobe's hubris, *i.e.* her boastful behavior towards gods. As for the last word, I opt for Lobel's καλλιστεύματι, which could refer to either Niobe's beauty or that of her children, although the latter seems more likely. The gist remains the same; Niobe, being a mortal, should have safeguarded her happiness and abstained from vane words. Had she not boasted for the beauty of her family, she would not be forced to see it perish.

Despite assigning blame to her queen, the *persona loquens* initially states that the gods wished (the use of the verb θέλω is well chosen) to annihilate Niobe's household and therefore looked for a reason to blame her. Tantalus' wrongdoings might be the explanation behind the divine hostility against Niobe. It seems possible that gods wish to ruin the offspring of the man who so gravely offended them. At the beginning of the fragment, we are informed that Niobe laments for her father for bringing her to life and giving her to marriage to Amphion (1-3). If one of the two had not happened, she would not have to experience such loss. But Tantalus seems to be part of her lamentation for all the wrong reasons. However common it is in Greek tragedy for humans to wish they had never been

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<sup>13</sup> I accept Maas' suggestion of Φοῖβος because it fits nicely both the space and the meaning. It is also possible to read δαίμων, as Cazzaniga has suggested. The choice we make regarding the first word of the verse does not change the fact that Amphion is the first that comes to the chorus' mind as responsible for the disaster.

<sup>14</sup> Pl. R. 380a 4-5.

born<sup>15</sup>, Niobe should not put any blame on her birth or her marriage but, instead, she should lament for Tantalus' transgressions that made him and his blood line hated by the gods. We must not forget that ancestral guilt is a common theme in Greek tragedy and no child is easily relieved of the burden their sinful fathers place on them<sup>16</sup>. Tantalus' offences are a *miasma*, as Cagnazzo says<sup>17</sup>, that passes from one generation to another and constitutes the reason why Niobe and her children must suffer.

Building upon this thought, it is tempting to assume that the *persona loquens* of the fragment insinuates that Zeus *made* Niobe sin. It seems fair to wonder if Zeus "planted" these insults against Leto in Niobe's head, so that divine retribution could be set in motion<sup>18</sup>. Such an approach, nevertheless, would suggest that aeschylean gods go out of their ways to make humans err, and that humans are innocent victims of divine anger. But if Niobe had no say in her fate, nobody would consider her guilty for spilling her blessings. Regardless of who put these thoughts in her head, she is the one that chooses to voice them and offend the gods. Inherited or not, her guilt is undeniable.

### 3. NIOBE 162 AND 160 RADT

These two following fragments shed more light on Niobe's character, and the way she understands the burden of guilt she and divine authority carry.

In fragment 162, Strabo confirms that Niobe is the speaker<sup>19</sup>.

NIOBH

οἱ θεῶν ἀγχίσποροι,  
<οἱ> Ζηνὸς ἐγγύς, ὧν κατ' Ἴδαϊον πάγον  
Διὸς πατρῶου βωμὸς ἐστ' ἐν αἰθέρι,  
κοῦ πῶ σφιν ἐξίτηλον αἶμα δαμόνων·

NIOBE

gods' children,  
the relatives of Zeus, whose altar of father Zeus  
is up in the sky on the peak of Ida,  
and in whom the divine blood has not yet lost its potency.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Soph. OC 1225.

<sup>16</sup> On the theory of ancestral guilt see LLOYD-JONES 1971, 44. This type of reasoning seems weak to GANTZ 1981, 24, who argues that this kind of thinking would not leave anybody innocent behind. But if we consider how many happy endings greek tragedy has, it is his reasoning that seems less likely to be right.

<sup>17</sup> See CAGNAZZO 2018, 12.

<sup>18</sup> GANTZ 1981, 24 asks the same question but does not offer any answer.

<sup>19</sup> Strab. 12, 8, 21.

Both Tantalus and Amphion are Zeus' sons, but it seems more likely that Niobe has her father in mind<sup>20</sup>. The fragmentary nature of the speech leaves plenty of room for speculation. We could argue that Niobe speaks bitterly about the way Zeus behaved towards his mighty offspring, driven by her rage over the loss of her children. The reference to divine blood in her relatives' veins certainly allows for such an assumption and reminds us of the speech Ovid's Niobe gives, when she boasts for her divine lineage<sup>21</sup>.

Tantalus is alive, which means that Niobe is still associated with people who are not mere mortals but children of Zeus. She believes that she should have received better treatment by the king of gods, maybe even special one, given that she bore his grandchildren. She is enraged that Zeus, despite the respect he enjoyed by his own children, felt no obligation to protect those who are tied with him with bonds of blood but allowed such a fate to ruin them. The fact that Plato in his *Republic* uses this utterance as additional evidence of Aeschylus' impiety could work in favor of the hypothesis that Niobe here is indeed being contemptuous of divine laws and justice<sup>22</sup>.

If we opt for a different reading, it is possible to assume that Niobe somewhat desperately attempts to convince herself that she is not defenseless against the divine wrath; Amphion's absence from the surviving fragments suggests that he is dead before the beginning of the play<sup>23</sup>. Despite him being a pious man, loved by gods<sup>24</sup> in greek myth, he suffers an invariably undignified death soon after the death of his children<sup>25</sup>. It is therefore evident that he can be of no help to Niobe anymore, since he is either dead or he too has seemingly descended to folly and

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<sup>20</sup> Strabo states that Niobe utters these verses upon remembering her father: φησὶ γὰρ ἐκείνη μνησθήσεσθαι τῶν περὶ Τάνταλον ("he - i.e. Aeschylus- says that she remembered the affairs of Tantalus"). The fact that Niobe mentions Mount Ida, which is located in Asia Minor, makes it easier to connect it with her father's kingdom than with Amphion. For a different reading of the fragment see KEULS 1997, 198.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ov. *Met.* 6, 172-179.

<sup>22</sup> Pl. *R.* 391e 6-9. However, given that Plato's treatment of aeschylean quotes is often deliberately misleading and exploited to justify the banishment of the poets from his ideal state, we cannot rely on the philosopher's comments too much. See also KYRIAKOU 2019, forthcoming.

<sup>23</sup> PENNESI 2008, 91 suggests that Niobe mentions only her father in her lament in 154a (1-2) because he is the only member of her family left alive. The fact that in the same fragment the Nurse mentions the ending of Niobe's wedding (τοῦπιτέρμιον γάμου) also agrees with this hypothesis.

<sup>24</sup> Paus. 6, 20, 18

<sup>25</sup> In the epic poem *Minyas* (*Min.* fr.3 PEG), Amphion is punished in Hades for his behavior towards Leto and her children, whereas according to Telesilla, (see n. 9) Amphion too becomes a *theomachos* and is killed by Apollo and Artemis right after the massacre of his children. In Sophocles' *Niobe*, Amphion challenges Apollo to a duel and is immediately killed by the divine arrows that had previously killed his children (See *P.Oxy.* 3653 fr. 2 which contains the *hypothesis* of the play). In later versions of the myth, Amphion commits suicide. (Cf. Ov. *Met.* 6, 271-272.)

lost the privileges he might once have. Hence, her only consolation is Tantalus. Niobe's father is her only close relative left alive that has an important part in the play. He is the speaker in some of the surviving fragments<sup>26</sup> and mentioned in many, while Niobe seems to only break her silence after his arrival in Thebes<sup>27</sup>. It is fair to assume that his presence next to Niobe is supposed to be at first sight comforting, but, if we look more deeply, utterly disturbing. At this point, Niobe seems to have yet to realise that it is her lineage, in which she takes such pride, that makes it more difficult for her to gain any sympathy from any higher force<sup>28</sup>.

Fragment 160 is also an ambiguous one, since we only know of it by means of Aristophanes' parody in the *Birds*, but it can be read as an answer to the previously examined fragment. Its text runs as follows:

χ – μέλαθρα καὶ δόμους Ἀμφίονος  
καταιθαλώσ(ω) πυρφόροισιν αἰετοῖς

Ar. Av. 1247s.: μέλαθρα μὲν αὐτοῦ καὶ δόμους Ἀμφίονος/ καταιθαλώσω  
πυρφόροισιν αἰετοῖς Σ R: μέλαθρα μὲν αὐτοῦ καὶ δόμους Ἀμφίονος: ἔστι δὲ  
ἐκ Νιόβης Αἰσχύλου· καταιθαλώσει Bothe· καταιθαλούτω Fitton-Brown·  
κατηθάλωσε Ahrens

<CHORUS>

...the palace and house of Amphion,  
he (*i.e.* Zeus) will burn down with his fire-bearing  
[eagles.

We should keep in mind that Zeus is in no mythographical source involved in Niobe's cruel punishment; on the contrary, he is the merciful god who takes pity on Niobe after the death of her children and turns her to stone to assuage her pain<sup>29</sup>. With that in mind, we must read these lines as a warning for the future. Zeus has not showed his wrath yet. The speaker, possibly the *coryphaea*, warns Niobe that further contempt or rage against the divine will could very well cause the complete annihilation of Amphion's estate. Zeus will burn down the palace

<sup>26</sup> We know he is the speaker in fr. 158 and 159 RADT and perhaps fr.157a too. On fr.157a see also KEULS 1997, 197.

<sup>27</sup> FITTON-BROWN 1954, 178.

<sup>28</sup> It is impossible -however desirable- to dismiss the hypothesis that the fragment is part of a prayer, perhaps the prayer that eventually grants Niobe her transformation to stone. However, it would be peculiar for Strabo to describe this speech as one that is about Tantalus, if it was in fact Niobe's plea to gods to deliver her from her agony.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *e.g.* a fragment by Bacchylides (20D, MAEHLER 2004) where we read: Ζεὺς ἐλέησεν ἀνακέστοις ἄχεσιν,/ θῆκέν τε νιν ὀκρῖόντα/ λάαν ἄμπαυσέν τε δυστλάτ. ("Zeus took pity in her incurable pain/ and made her a steep/ rock and offered comfort to the wretched woman").



and everyone left alive in it with his lethal thunders<sup>30</sup>. Consequently, I opt for Bothe's *καταιθαλώσει*, which fits well with the oncoming annihilation of Niobe's *oikos* by the king of gods.

Considering that in fr. 162 Niobe seems to speak out against Zeus for allowing the disaster to strike her family, it is possible that fr. 160 constitutes an answer to Niobe's rage, an attempt by the chorus to keep her away from a new hubris. At the same time, it becomes apparent that Niobe is now in control of her fate. It is her words that bring about divine wrath and cause her misery. Unless she sees the error of her ways soon, she will perish too. In fact, it is probable that at some point during the play Niobe begins to understand her fault -and therefore confirm the mightiness of the aeschylean law of *πάθει μάθος*-, just like her father, who upon hearing of the death of the Niobids says:

θυμὸς ποθ' ἀμὸς οὐρανῶ κυρῶν ἄνω  
 ἔραζε πίπτει καί με προσφωνεῖ τάδε·  
 "γίγνωσκε τὰνθρώπεια μὴ σέβειν ἄγαν"<sup>31</sup>

My heart that once was high up in the sky  
 falls to the ground and tells me:  
 "Learn not to rely too much on human things".

Perhaps only after she understands that she is at fault, she can be granted her transformation to stone in order not to hurt so much for her loss.

#### 4. *P.OXY.* 213 FR.1 = *TRAG. ADESP.* 700 KN.-SN<sup>32</sup>

The next and last fragment offers useful information concerning the ending of the play. *P.Oxy.* 213 fr. 1 is an *adespoton* papyrial fragment that was first attributed to the aeschylean *Niobe* by Reinhardt in 1934<sup>33</sup>. The papyrus has suffered extensive physical damage and has many misspellings and letters that are impossible to read. The last two-thirds of twelve iambic trimeters survive, the style and language of which refer directly to the genre of tragedy. It contains two excerpts, the first of which has several similarities to the myth of Niobe, with vocabulary that offers an obvious connection to the ending of the story, *i.e.* Niobe's

<sup>30</sup> The reference to fire-bearing eagles leaves no room for doubt as to who the speaker is talking about, given that the eagle is a bird that has always been associated with Zeus and thunders are his weapon of choice.

<sup>31</sup> Fr. 159 RADT.

<sup>32</sup> KANNICHT/SNELL 1981.

<sup>33</sup> See REINHARDT 1934, 233-261. More recently, SEAFORD 2005, 120 has deemed valid the hypothesis that said fragment belongs to Aeschylus' play.

petrification. Phrases such as λιθουργές εἰκόνισμα (“image made of stone”) and κωφαῖσιν εἵκελον πέτραις (“same as the mute rocks”) are consistent with the oftentimes attested transformation of Niobe to stone after the traumatic loss of her children. Moreover, the mother’s prolonged immobility during the first half of the play could be foreboding of her imminent metamorphosis<sup>34</sup> and thus strengthen the hypothesis that *P.Oxy* 213 fr.1 belongs to Aeschylus’ *Niobe* and not a different play<sup>35</sup>.

The text runs as follows<sup>36</sup>:

]. ω... αυ [	
τῶνδ’ ἐπεὶ μόνος φόβων	
λι]θουργές εἰκόνισμ’ ἰδεῖν πάρα	
]αι κωφαῖσιν εἵκελον πέτραις	
]εινης οἶδα καὶ μάγους πάγας	5
λ]υγρῶ κάλυβι κοιμηθήσεται	
ἔ]σχον θάμβος· ἧ γὰρ πνεῦμ’ ἔτι	
]οις πέτραισιν ἧ ἴμπάλιν σθένει	
]ωσαι· τοιγαροῦν θ[ρο]εῖτέ μοι·	
]ν οἰκτρὰ συμφορὰ δάπτει φρένας	10
]ναι ἔμολεν ἔκουσίους μ[άχ]ας	
]οιῶν ἀντ’ ἀλαζόν [ων ...]τοι	

1-9 Tantalos dedi· 1-2 choro dedit Reinhardt 2 ἐπεὶ μόνος Reinhardt 3 ἰδεῖν πάρα Reinhardt 3-9 Tantalos dedit Reinhardt 5 μάγους πάγας Barrett 6 λυγρῶ Barrett· καθύγρῳ Reinhardt 7 πνεῦμ’ ἔτι Reinhardt 8 ἧ ἴμπάλιν Reinhardt 9 θροεῖτέ μοι Reinhardt 10-12 choro dedit Reinhardt 11 μολόνθ’ Barrett· ἔμολεν Reinhardt μάχας Reinhardt 12 μοιῶν Barrett ἀλαζόνων Reinhardt

<TANTALUS>

.....	
...Because out of all these my only fear	
...to see an image made of stone	
...same as the mute rocks.	
...I know the treacherous traps	5
...she will rest in a sorrowful covering	
...I’m dazzled! Is there really still life	
...in these rocks or can she have the strength again	
... So, tell me!	

<sup>34</sup> See CAGNAZZO 2018, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Barrett tries to connect the fragment with a tragedy concerning the myth of Perseus and Medusa. See CARDEN/BARRETT 1974, 236-241.

<sup>36</sup> For this fragment, I use the text of CARDEN/BARRETT, with a few adjustments. KAN-NICHT/SNELL present a text with many *loci desperati*, whereas REINHARDT’S restoration involves considerable and sometimes unjustified manipulation of the text on the papyrus.

&lt; CHORUS &gt;

...Pitiable disaster eats away at my mind 10  
 ...she willingly went to battle  
 ...for <her> arrogance...

The most reasonable reading of this fragment, if we indeed attribute it to *Niobe*, is to treat it as a part of the *exodus*, where we also witness the initial stages of Niobe's metamorphosis<sup>37</sup>. Tantalus (1-9) notices the change and fails to understand whether his daughter is still alive inside the rock. Terrified, he asks the chorus for help. The girls (10-12) mourn for the queen's plight, but contemplatively emphasize her guilt; it was Niobe that driven by her arrogance chose to engage in a fight with gods. It is interesting that by -what we presume to be- the ending of the play, the chorus has shifted from almost instinctively looking for the culprit among men (Apollo or Zeus and Amphion in fr.154a) to understanding that Niobe is the one that should be held responsible for the loss of her good fortune. Her sorrowful fate is now literally set in stone and is what she gets in return for her boastful attitude.

The word ἀλαζόν] of the fragment reminds us of the previously examined ἐξαοθεῖσα and highlights once again Niobe's offence. Resembling Ovid's arrogant -to the point of self-deification- Niobe, the aeschylean queen seems to have been unquestionably guilty for offending the gods and disrupting the ethical balance by daring compare herself to them. Ἐκουσίους μάχας suggests that the *persona loquens* considers the whole *theomahia* Niobe's fault and the initial thought that some god made her sin is no longer entertained.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Aeschylus' *Niobe* errs indeed by daring compare herself to Leto and exceeding the limits gods have set for humans. Therefore, gods snatch away from her what she takes pride in, her children. The punishment is harsh, but not unfair. In his own *Niobe*, Sophocles presents gods that are merciful enough to allow one child to escape punishment. Aeschylus chooses not to do so and shows instead the

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<sup>37</sup> KEULS 1997, 197 proposes a different reading of the fragment. She reckons it does not belong in the *exodus* but rather in an earlier part of the play when Tantalus, before being informed of the disaster, sees his daughter sitting next to the children's tomb for the first time. Surprised by the immobile form he sees in front of him, he compares it with a stone statue, inadvertently hinting at the imminent petrification of Niobe. However, the emotion and surprise of Tantalus (ἔσχον θάμβος) and his desperate cry for help to the chorus (θροεῖτέ μοι) can hardly be caused by seeing a woman he does not know sit near an unknown grave. On Tantalus not recognising Niobe when he first sees her see fr. 157a RADT and FITTON-BROWN 1954, 177.

destruction of the family. However, this cruel punishment might be a means for Niobe to atone not only for her mistakes but for what previous generations did too. Surely, the crimes of Tantalus have placed a heavy burden on her shoulders, one that she could not get rid of easily, even if she tried to. Tantalus' presence next to his daughter recalls the famous aeschylean *stasimon*<sup>38</sup>:

φιλεῖ δὲ τίκτειν ὕβρις  
 μὲν παλαιὰ νεά-  
 ζουσάν ἐν κακοῖς βροτῶν

765

ancient hubris breeds, again and again,  
 another hubris, young and stout...<sup>39</sup>

Niobe is the daughter of a *theomahos*, and gods cannot allow her to live happily, given that she carries the *miasma* of her family. But at no point does she seem eager to try and cleanse herself from it. Instead, she herself disrespects divine authority, furthering the need for atonement. Consequently, her own hubris sets the cruel punishment in motion, ensuring the reinstatement of ethical order<sup>40</sup>. The almost inextricable interdependence of human and divine causality in the play is thus verified. Niobe's *ethos* incites her actions, which ultimately lead to the imposition of divine justice and the preservation of ethical balance.

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<sup>38</sup> A. Ag. 763-765.

<sup>39</sup> Translation by ROSENMEYER 1982, 289.

<sup>40</sup> Similar is the case with many other aeschylean characters. E.g. Eteocles in *Septem* is burdened by his father's curse, which means that we cannot expect him to live a long happy life. However, he freely chooses to fight his brother during the siege of Thebes and thus meet his fate. One could argue that Eteocles walks towards his predetermined death on his own free will. On the interplay of necessity and freedom in Aeschylus and the aeschylean cosmic order in general, see also COHEN 1986, 129-141.

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