

ON THE ORACLE GIVEN TO AEGEUS (Eur. *Med.* 679, 681)

Aegeus, according to Euripides the childless king of Athens, consulted the oracle at Delphi on the matter of his childlessness, and was given a puzzling answer. He decided, therefore, to seek an explanation from Pittheus, king of Troezen, who had the reputation of being a prophetic expert and a wise interpreter. On his way from Delphi to Troezen Aegeus passes through Corinth,<sup>1</sup> meets with Medea, and repeats to her the Pythia's advice:

ἄσκοῦ με τὸν προύχοντα μὴ λύσαι πόδα ... (679)  
πρὶν ἄν πατρώαν αὐθις ἐστίαν μόλω. (681)

'I am not to loosen the hanging foot of the wineskin ...  
until I return again to the hearth of my fathers.'

Medea does not attempt to interpret the oracle, but offers instead to cure Aegeus' childlessness with drugs when she arrives at his court, and the Athenian king having promised to grant her asylum proceeds to Troezen and to the begetting of Theseus.

A hexametric version of the oracle, which somewhat differs from that of Euripides, appears in Apollod. *Bibl.* 3, 15, 6 (and in Plut. *Thes.* 3, 5):

ἄσκοῦ τὸν προύχοντα πόδα, μέγα, φέρτατε λαῶν,  
μὴ λύσης πρὶν ἐς ἄκρον Ἀθηναίων ἀφίκηται.

'The bulging mouth of the wineskin, O best of men,  
loose not until thou hast reached the height of Athens.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. T.B.L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London 1967) 54: 'It is reasonable that he should pass through Corinth on his way from Delphi to Troezen,' but cf. A. Rivier, *Essai sur le tragique d'Euripide* (Lausanne 1944) 55, and the literature cited by him.

<sup>2</sup> Frazer's translation in the Loeb series. Variant readings are listed by H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford 1956) II, 48 (see also Vol. I, 300–301).

Since oracular responses were usually formulated in hexameters, Parke, assuming that Apollodorus preserved a tradition prior to Euripides' *Medea*, regards Apollodorus' version as the chief source, and that of Euripides as a derivative variant. Flacelière, likewise, has sought to explain the discrepancies between the two versions by asserting that Euripides adapted an existing hexametric oracle to the iambic meter, in which the stychomythia between Aegeus and Medea is written.<sup>3</sup>

However, the oracle concerning Aegeus' fate is obviously a literary invention. It seems, therefore, reasonable to ask whether it is possible to establish the time when this mythical Delphic response was created. Is Apollodorus, although a late mythographer, preserving a tradition prior to Euripides; or is the Euripidean version the earlier one? It seems that a case could be argued for a view contrary to that of Parke and Flacelière, viz. that Euripides is the creator of the oracle given to Aegeus, and that the hexametric version quoted by Apollodorus and Plutarch is a later adaptation of Euripides' iambic original by someone who was aware that oracles usually come in hexameters.

As Parke puts it: 'Mythical responses were invented for events of the heroic period [...] The interest of these legendary prophesies is less in connection with the period to which they are attributed than with that in which they are invented.' (I, p. viii). In the extant sources prior to Euripides, in which Aegeus appears as Theseus' father, nowhere is it mentioned that he had difficulties in begetting children.<sup>4</sup> Chronological-

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Parke (supra n. 2) *loc. cit.*; R. Flacelière, "Sur quelques passages de Vies de Plutarque," *REG* 61 (1948) 69; Flacelière repeated this view in his commentary to the *Medea*, cf. *Euripide: Médée* (Paris 1970) 76. Parke's and Flacelière's view has not yet been challenged.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hom. *Il.* I, 265 (the verse, though lacking in good MSS such as Ven. A, is quoted by Paus. 10, 29, 10; on the controversy concerning its authenticity, cf. W.H. Roscher, *Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* [Leipzig 1884-1886] V, 746-747); Hesiod *Scut.* 182; *Theog.* 1233; Aegeus is Theseus' father in Euripides' *Aegeus*, staged soon after 450 B.C., cf. Webster (supra n. 1) 77-80, 297; idem, *Monuments Illustrating Tragedy and Satyr Plays*<sup>2</sup> (London 1967) 153; A.D. Trendall and T.B.L. Webster, *Illustrations of Greek Drama* (London 1971) 72-73. Poseidon is Theseus' father in Pind. fr. 243 (Schroeder)=116 (Puech); Bacchyl. 16, 33-36, and cf. R.C. Jebb, *Bacchylides. The Poems and Fragments* (Cambridge 1905) 378: 'The key to the confused legend is that Aegeus and Poseidon are originally identical'; cf. also Roscher I, 145-146. Euripides deals with Theseus' double paternity in the *Hipp.*, cf. W.S. Barrett, *Euripides: Hippolytus* (Oxford 1964) ad 887: 'In our play Theseus is Poseidon's son only when the curse is in

ly, the *Medea* is the earliest extant source which presents Aegeus as childless.<sup>5</sup> It is not the play's only innovation. Not only is it the first tragedy to deal with the subject of Medea's abandonment by Jason, it is also the first to have Medea kill her own children, in order to turn their father into a childless king.<sup>6</sup> Since the theme of a king's childlessness is so focal to the plot of the *Medea*, it seems reasonable to contend that Euripides invented Aegeus' condition, and the attendant oracle, in order to support his main theme. 'The period appropriate to a fictitious oracle rests often on internal evidence.' (Parke, I, p. viii). It seems that the theme of the childlessness of a king in the *Medea* constitutes such internal evidence, on the basis of which Euripides could be credited with the invention of this fictitious oracle.<sup>7</sup>

It was universally known in antiquity that Apollo's oracular answers were ambiguous. Creating, so to speak, in this traditional 'genre', Euripides imbued his Aegeus' oracle with an intentional ambiguity. This was achieved not by the puzzling prohibition that interdicts the loosening of the hanging foot of the wineskin, (whether interpreted literally 'not to drink wine', or metaphorically 'not to have sexual

question [...] where the curse is not in question, he remains son of Aegeus.' Poseidon is called Αἰγαῖος by Aristias (fr. 1 p. 726 N<sup>2</sup>), i.e. probably before the *Aegeus* of Euripides, and cf. H. Usener, "Göttliche Synonyme," *RhM* 53 (1898) 356–357; on Theseus cf. most recently A.J. Podlecki, *RSA* 5 (1975) 1–24; and the literature cited by him.

<sup>5</sup> The case for Euripides' priority has been forcefully stated by L. Séchan, "La légende de Médée," *REG* 40 (1927) 255ff. (see also idem, *Études sur la tragédie grecque dans ses rapports avec la céramique* (Paris 1926) Appendix VII, 592ff.), and reiterated by D.L. Page, *Euripides: Medea* (Oxford 1952) xxx ff.; cf. esp. Séchan, *REG* p. 258 n. 6 with Page's theory of two Neophrons. The case for Neophron's priority is ably, but unconvincingly stated by E.A. Thompson, "Neophron and Euripides' *Medea*," *CO* 38 (1944) 10–14; see also E. Christmann, *Bemerkungen zum Text der Medea des Euripides* (Diss. Heidelberg 1962) 105 ff.; A. Dihle, *Euripides' Medea* (Heidelberg 1977) 23–24; B.M.W. Knox, "The 'Medea' of Euripides," *YCS* 25 (1977) 194 n. 7; C. Barone, "Neofrone e la *Medea* di Euripide," *RIFC* 106 (1978) 129ff.

<sup>6</sup> On Euripides' originality, cf. Séchan, *REG* 40 (1927) 262; idem, *Études*, Appendix VI, 589ff.; Page (supra n. 5) xxi ff.

<sup>7</sup> It has been argued since H. Arnim, *Ausgewählte Tragödien des Euripides*<sup>2</sup> (Berlin 1886) III, xix, that Euripides inserted the Aegeus episode into the *Medea* in order to suggest to Medea the murder of Jason's children. I believe that Euripides, for the above reason, not only inserted the Aegeus' episode but actually invented his childlessness as well; cf. also D. Ebener, "Zum Motiv des Kindermordes in der *Medeia*," *RhM* 104 (1961) 215ff., who postulates a gradual building-up of the murder motivation in between Medea's first encounter with Jason and the appearance of Aegeus.

relations en route'), but by the words πατρῶαν ... ἐστίαν which must apparently mean not Athens but Troezen.<sup>8</sup> This is the interpretation of the oracle given by Euripides himself in a later play, the *Supplices*, where Aethra states that she was given to Aegeus by orders of Apollo's prophecy (6–7):

Αἴθραν πατὴρ δίδωσι τῷ Πανδίωνος  
 Αἰγεί δάμαρτα, Λοξίου μαντεύμασιν.

'(My sire nursed me), Aethra, and gave me to Pandion's son Aegeus, to wife, by Loxias' oracles.'

It was the later adaptation of Euripides' oracle to hexameter which created serious problems. For in the course of turning the iambi to hexameters some words had to be added, and the unspecified πατρῶαν ... ἐστίαν was changed to the explicit name of the city of Athens. Thus, according to the new version Aegeus was ordered not to have sexual relations until his return to Athens. Since he does have relations in Troezen with Aethra, this must mean that he disobeyed the oracle's advice. Such indeed is the explanation offered by Plutarch, who claims that Theseus was born in defiance of the divine will, and that consequently Aegeus was punished for this. It is, however, clear from the oracle's wording that the question which Aegeus asked was not 'Will I have children?' but 'What should I do in order to have children?' And since he did not follow the advice he was given, he should have remained childless, instead of begetting a child on account of whom he would die. The case of Aegeus and Theseus does not parallel that of Laius and Oedipus. Nowhere is it explicitly stated that Aegeus, similarly to Laius, was also warned not to beget a child in order to avoid being killed by him. Moreover, Plutarch's explanation that Theseus was born in defiance of the gods' will contradicts Euripides' unequivocal statement in *Suppl.* 6–7, that he was born to Aethra by Apollo's orders. It is, then,

<sup>8</sup> Cf. G. Murray, *The Medea of Euripides* (London 1906) 90.

<sup>9</sup> Way's translation in the Loeb series. Since there is no thematic or dramatic reason for suspecting Aethra's statement, it should, of course, be regarded as exact, *pace* C. Collard, *Euripides: Supplices* (Groningen 1975) II, p. 106.

quite clear that Plutarch's explanation seeks to remedy a difficulty created by the changing of the unspecified 'hearth of fathers' to the explicit name of Athens.

In order to make sense, the *πατρῶν ... ἐστίαν* of the Euripidean oracle must mean not Athens but Troezen. We should not be too amazed in view of such a possibility, since after all Troezen is the birth-place of the founder of Athens. Moreover, the Athenian *demos* Pittheus, and two other *demoi*, Anaphlystus and Sphettus, said to be sons of Troezen who migrated to Attica (cf. Paus. II, 30, 8–9), apparently regarded Troezen as their *πατρίη ἐστία*. It is, moreover, well known that the relations between the two cities were very close. From 480 B.C. until, at least, the time of Demosthenes, Troezen was the asylum par excellence of the Athenians. Hospitality, so frequently extended, could undoubtedly produce in the Athenians a feeling that Troezen was their second *hestia*.

To sum up, then, the absence of a mention of Aegeus' childlessness prior to Euripides' *Medea* combined with the fact that childlessness is a focal theme in this tragedy speak forcibly for crediting Euripides with the creation of the Aegeus oracle. Its adaptation to a hexameter generated the above discussed difficulties, which seem to be explained if priority is ascribed not to the version of Apollodorus but to that of Euripides.