

Review: Review of S. Onori, *L'auriga dal breve destino. Commento critico-esegetico ai frammenti del Fetonte di Euripide*, Tübingen 2023

Reviewed Work(s): *L'auriga dal breve destino. Commento critico-esegetico ai frammenti del Fetonte di Euripide* by S. Onori

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NOTE E DISCUSSIONI

Review of S. ONORI, *L'auriga dal breve destino. Commento critico-esegetico ai frammenti del Fetonte di Euripide*, Tübingen 2023

Andrea Monico

Abstract Critical review of a new philological and literary commentary on the fragments of Euripides's lost tragedy *Phaethon*.

Keywords Euripides; Phaethon; Commentary

Andrea Monico is a PhD candidate in the Department of Classics at Princeton University (USA). He works on Greek epic and lyric poetry, but also on Greek drama, particularly Euripides, combining textual criticism and philology with more modern approaches such as reception studies, translation studies, and ecocriticism.



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Andrea Monico

Riassunto Recensione critica di un nuovo commento filologico-letterario ai frammenti della perduta tragedia di Euripide *Fetonte*.

Parole chiave Euripide; Fetonte; Commentario

Andrea Monico è dottorando di ricerca in *Classics* presso la Princeton University (USA). Le sue ricerche riguardano la poesia epica e lirica greca, nonché la tragedia greca, in particolare Euripide, e combinano la critica testuale con approcci più moderni come gli studi di ricezione, gli studi di traduzione e l'ecocritica.



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Review of S. ONORI, *L'auriga dal breve destino. Commento critico-esegetico ai frammenti del Fetonte di Euripide*, Tübingen 2023

Andrea Monico

Euripides's *Phaethon*, the fragmentary tragedy that aroused Goethe's enthusiasm immediately after the discovery of a palimpsest containing large parts of it in 1821, has never ceased to fascinate modern readers and scholars, despite, or perhaps because of, its philological and interpretative uncertainties. The play, now generally attributed to the later part of Euripides's career (c. 420 BC), depicted the unfortunate fate of the young Phaeton, who, having asked his father Helios for permission to use his chariot as proof of his divine birth, dies while attempting to drive it and is burnt to death on the very day of his mysterious wedding. This new commentary, which follows the two masterly editions prepared by DIGGLE 1970 (DIGGLE, J., *Euripides. Phaethon*, Cambridge) and KANNICHT 2004 (KANNICHT, R., *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta, vol. 5, Euripides, pars posterior*, Göttingen), is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, defended at the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio in 2021. ONORI 2023 is not a new critical edition of the *Phaethon*'s fragments, but rather – as the title suggests – a philological and literary commentary on them; the text used and discussed is that of KANNICHT 2004.

The commentary on each fragment, accompanied by a rich bibliography and a useful translation into Italian, is divided into three sections: the first is devoted to the transmission of the fragment under consideration (“Trasmissione”), the second to its textual problems (“Questioni critico-testuali”), and the third to a broader literary and interpretative discussion (“Interpretazione”). A metrical analysis is given only for the few lyric fragments. The commentary on the fragments is preceded by a general introduction, which begins with a brief account of the direct and indirect tradition of the *Phaethon*, followed by a succinct mention of its ancient *hypothesis*. Although it lacks many of the details one might hope for, this source is nonetheless important for its preliminary overview of the play's plot, and the reader of ONORI 2023 would probably have expected a more in-depth examination of its contents. The author then briefly discusses the general plot of the tragedy but oversimplifies it, referring the reader to the commentary on the individual fragments for more detailed discussion. The dating of the staging of the play receives more careful treatment: Onori considers various hypotheses, including some that are now outdated, and ultimately agrees with Diggle's

reasonable view, namely that the *Phaethon* belongs to the later part of Euripides's career (around 420 BC). The second part of the introduction attempts to examine the role of the protagonist of Euripides's tragedy, Phaethon, also in relation to his famous sisters, the Heliades, starting from his afterlife in republican and imperial Latin literature. The author argues that there are two basic interpretative paradigms for his character, one intrinsically negative, the other more positive: on the one hand, an arrogant and irresponsible king, incapable of respecting the limits of his mortal condition; on the other, a courageous young man in search of a risky venture to assert his own identity and worth. Onori's presentation of these two paradigmatic functions of the figure of Phaethon as they appear in Latin literature is well argued, but, as she herself acknowledges (pp. 50-51), given the extremely fragmentary state of preservation of the *Phaethon*, it is almost impossible to assess with a good degree of probability which one of the two roles Euripides might have favored for his work. Onori is inclined to think that the ethical-political component of Phaethon's character must have been less relevant than his titanic behavior, but this statement is actually rather speculative. The author then goes on to comment on the role of the Heliades in both Euripides's *Phaethon* and in Aeschylus's play of the same name, which is now almost entirely lost: unlike what may have happened in Euripides's tragedy, she argues, in Aeschylus's it is possible that Phaethon's sisters joined their brother in his deception of the Sun by helping him to hitch his chariot; for this reason they may have been punished by being turned into eternally mourning poplars. Again, this is possible, as this version of the myth is also attested in a passage from Hyginus's *Fabulae*, but it is not so significant for Euripides's play, where – as Onori herself acknowledges (p. 57) – the Heliades most likely played only a marginal role, if any.

Turning now to the actual text and commentary of the *Phaethon*, one striking feature is the absence of a critical apparatus attached to the fragments. This choice, which Onori does not explain, is rather questionable, especially considering the critical-philological nature of her commentary. Moreover, it may not be easy to find the variant readings and scholarly conjectures in Onori's "Questioni critico-testuali" sections. In these sections *every single* textual problem is treated in great detail and, what is more, virtually all the proposals that have been made since the rediscovery of the *Phaethon* fragments, many of them by highly interventionist nineteenth-century scholars, are thoroughly discussed. A couple of examples will illustrate this point. In discussing the expression $\xi\zeta\omega$ δόμων in fr. 773 KANNICHT 2004, l. 10 (καὶ γὰρ αἶδ' $\xi\zeta\omega$ δόμων | δμωαὶ περῶσιν, ll. 10-11), which is a perfectly acceptable text for Onori herself, she nevertheless reports (albeit to discredit them) two bad conjectures by two nineteenth-century scholars who were disappointed by the close repetition of δῶμα, δόμον, δόμους in the previous lines. The first suggestion was to write πόδα instead of δόμων, while the second, much worse, was to correct $\xi\zeta\omega$ δόμων to οὐκ ἄλλως ἄμα

(!). An even more striking example of Onori's tendency to include too much unnecessary material in her philological commentary is her discussion of fr. 773 KANNICHT 2004, l. 37, preserved by both the palimpsest and an ancient papyrus. Here, Onori spends a good ten lines discussing a proposal for the integration of the verse, which is only partially readable in the palimpsest, originally put forward by a nineteenth-century scholar, but then proved wrong after the discovery of the papyrus in the early twentieth century, which provided us with the previously missing part of the text. And these two examples are by no means isolated in Onori's critical commentary. This is not to say, of course, that Onori's commentary omits important information on the textual problems of the fragments, but rather that this information may be difficult to locate amidst an overabundance of often superfluous material. In this sense, even a brief critical apparatus for each fragment would probably have helped the reader. Moreover, what seems to be missing in these lengthy speculations about each fragment is Onori's own contribution, since she hardly offers any new conjectures. In fact, she seems rather uncomfortable in this regard when, at the end of yet another very long review of previous scholars' conjectures about a fragment, she states: "non è mia intenzione proporre in questa sede un'ulteriore congettura che vada ad aggiungersi a quelle già numerosissime avanzate dagli editori" (p. 184).

So much for Onori's discussion of the philological problems of the *Phaethon*. As far as the "Interpretazione" sections are concerned, they deal with (some of) the interpretative problems associated with each fragment in terms of plot, characters, genre, myth and so on, and they actually collect the author's most interesting contributions. I will mention just a few examples here. First, in a well-constructed discussion of the *parodos* of the play (pp. 146-157), Onori argues for the ambivalence of the mythological motif of the nightingale's lament and the swan's song within the verses sung by the chorus, noting in particular how these lines tend to oscillate between the two poles of a serene and enthusiastic celebration of the morning awakening on the one hand, and a dark foreboding on the other (cf. fr. 773 KANNICHT 2004, ll. 49-50: εἰ δὲ τύχα τι τέκοι | βαρὺν βαρεῖα φόβον ἔπεμψεν οἴκοις). Moreover, the semantic ambiguity of θράσος/θάρσος, a word that appears in the line immediately preceding the one just quoted and that can mean either "courage, confidence" or "rashness, insolence", is pointed out by Onori to support her reading of the whole ode as ambivalent and ambiguous (pp. 156-157). Also, in the discussion of fr. 776 KANNICHT 2004 (pp. 197-201), the author considers the figure of Merops in relation to some critical readings of the past that see him as the stereotypical comic figure of the foolish and violent barbarian king. Through a judicious discussion, the author convincingly argues that this scholarly interpretation is overly simplistic and reductive, and therefore deserves to be set aside. And this – Onori continues – applies not only to Merops (whose figure is, and probably will remain, a mystery due to

the *Phaethon's* fragmentary state of preservation), but also to other barbarian characters with whose comic naivety and aggressiveness Merops was compared, such as Theoclymenus in *Helen*, Thoas in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and Xuthus in *Ion*. Also well argued is the discussion of the color of Merops's skin (pp. 79-82), as well as the treatment of the problem of the mysterious identity of Phaethon's betrothed and the reasons for his reluctance to marry her (pp. 172-180, 249-253). In dealing with these last two still unsolved (and probably unsolvable) problems, Onori shows remarkable caution in avoiding easy answers or fanciful reconstructions, and leads the reader to the most probable conclusion through an effective examination of the most promising proposals.

The book concludes with an interesting appendix in which the author considers the reception of the Phaethon myth in modern literature, particularly in Henry Fielding's comic *Phaethon in the Suds* (FIELDING, H., *Tumble-Down Dick or, Phaethon in the Suds. A Dramatick Entertainment of Walking in Serious and Foolish Characters, Interlarded with Burlsque, Grotesque, Comick Interludes*, London 1736) and in Alistair Elliot's attempted reconstruction of the play (ELLIOT, A., *Phaethon by Euripides. A Reconstruction*, London 2008), which was not intended to be a modern rewriting of Euripides's play, but rather a 'philological' re-enactment of it as it would probably have been staged by its original author in fifth-century Athens.

In conclusion, ONORI 2023 is destined to become a valuable resource for anyone interested in the *Phaethon*, from both a critical-philological and literary-interpretative perspective. The volume's main merits are probably twofold. Firstly, all the material that the author has collected and discussed, in most cases very judiciously, drawing on both old and modern bibliography, makes her work a highly informed and well-organized state-of-art resource on the *Phaethon*. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the literary analyses proposed by the author represent interesting advances in the interpretation of both individual lines and fragments more generally. The result is a far more comprehensive archive of information than is available in the editions by DIGGLE 1970 and KANNICHT 2004. However, what ONORI 2023 book gains in breadth and comprehensiveness, it sometimes sacrifices in readability and usability, and, more critically, in originality compared to earlier editions of the play.