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SENECA, *MEDEA* 680: AN ADDENDUM TO *ZPE* 117 (1997) 73-80

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In the edition of a fourth century parchment (P. Mich. inv. no. 4969, fr. 36) containing 41 continuous fragmentary lines from Seneca's *Medea*, the editors (Greg Schwendner and I) paid particular attention to line 680:

*et triste laeva comprecans sacrum manu.*

comprecans P. Mich., E : complicans A (Costa) : comparans Buecheler  
(Zwierlein, Chaumartin)

Textual critics have rejected the reading of *E* (*comprecans*) in favor of the conjectures *comparans* (Buecheler, Zwierlein, Chaumartin) or *complicans* (Costa) on the basis of the uncertainty of the reading *comprecans* and the problematic meaning of *sacrum* as its direct object. But because the new parchment now confirms *comprecans*, we offered an argument in favor of this daring reading (20, p.79). It has only recently come to our attention that studies on gestures in prayer support our argument. At the time, we interpreted the line to mean that Medea is keeping her left hand directed to the earth in order to invoke the infernal powers with her left hand and to make her *sacrum* magically potent: "praying for a gloomy *sacrum*." In the phrase, *sacrum* may refer to the sinister sacrifice and rite, or to the deadly potion that Medea is producing through it. The sinister use of the left hand is well known in general,<sup>1</sup> but we could not provide evidence for the sinister use of the left hand in prayers. We stated: "nothing is known about praying with the left hand" (*loc. cit.* p. 79 on line 20 of the parchment [*Medea* 680]). Such evidence, however, exists and our purpose here is to make a note of it.

In their prayers, Greeks raised either both or only the right hand,<sup>2</sup> but, as D. Aubriot notes, in prayers to the gods of the netherworld, the left hand was often turned towards the ground.<sup>3</sup> Plato remarks that the pious person pays honor to the underworld gods after the Olympian gods and the gods of the city and, in doing so, attributes to them the "even and the second and the left," while the Olympian gods and the gods of the city receive what is higher than these and opposite.<sup>4</sup> According to Pythagorean numerology, the one (hence, the odd) is superior to the two that is created from the one. Therefore, in Pythagorean doctrine, one is enjoined to bring odd-numbered offerings to the gods of heaven, but even-numbered to those of the underworld.<sup>5</sup> It seems also to be the logical consequence of Plato's words that, if one were to use only one hand in one's prayer to the gods of the netherworld, then it should be the left hand, while the right hand was to be reserved for the Olympian gods.<sup>6</sup>

Another gesture deserves attention. In magical papyri, the person praying may clench his (her) thumb, κρατεῖν τὸν ἀντίχειρα (*PGM* XXXVI.163; LXIX.3; LXX.6, cf. IV. 2328), and in certain votive reliefs the supplicant is depicted "standing with his right hand raised in worship and his left hand clenched with

<sup>1</sup> O. Zwierlein, *Würzb. Jahrb.* 2 (1976) 205f. and the commentary on the line in *ZPE* 117 (1997) 79.

<sup>2</sup> For the archeological evidence of praying with one hand see F.T. van Straten, "Gifts for the gods" in H.S. Versnel, *Faith, Hope and Worship: Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World*, Studies in Greek and Roman Religion II (Leiden, New York, Köln 1981) 82 and figs. 7-10; S. Pulleyn, *Prayer in Greek Religion* (Oxford 1997) 198.

<sup>3</sup> *Prière et conceptions religieuses en Grèce ancienne jusqu'à la fin du Ve siècle av. J.-C.*, Collection de la maison de l'Orient Méditerranéen (Lyon 1992) 132 n. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Plato *Laws* IV, 717A πρῶτον μὲν, φαμέν, τιμὰς τὰς μετ' Ὀλυμπίους τε καὶ τοὺς τὴν πόλιν ἔχοντας θεοὺς τοῖς χθονίοις ἂν τις θεοῖς ἄρτια καὶ δεύτερα καὶ ἀριστερὰ νέμων ὀρθότατα τοῦ τῆς εὐσηβείας σκοποῦ τυγχάνοι, τοῖς χθονίοις ἂν τις θεοῖς ἄρτια καὶ δεύτερα καὶ ἀριστερὰ νέμων, τὰ δὲ τούτων ἄνωθεν [τὰ περιττὰ] καὶ ἀντίφωνα τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν ῥηθεῖσιν νυνδῆ.

<sup>5</sup> W. Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1972) 474 n. 56.

<sup>6</sup> S. Pulleyn, *op. cit.* [n.2] 198 with reference to D. Aubriot, *op. cit.* (n. 3) 132 n. 23.

the thumb closed inwards... The purpose was probably to give the prayer a magical, coercive power." <sup>7</sup> While this gesture is not necessarily restricted to prayers to the netherworld deities, its primary place is in prayers that target the infernal powers for achieving a desired sinister and magical effect. Seneca's Medea may have used her left hand in praying in this way. By the power of this gesture she would have engaged the forces of the netherworld. Thus, her left hand gesture is completely in keeping with the sinister intentions of the prayer (*comprecans*) that directs her sacrifice to the gods of the netherworld and invokes their power to make her potion deadly.

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<sup>7</sup> van Straten [above, n. 2] 83; L. Deubner, *JDAI* 58 (1943)88 ff.