

DRAMA AND DEMOCRACY

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The world of Athenian tragedy is a remarkable fictional creation. It occupies a flexible space between the world of Homeric epic and the world of its fifth-century audience. Like virtually all Greek poetry at all periods in antiquity, the subject matter of tragedy with very few exceptions was heroic myth. For Greeks at any period, the world of the heroes meant the world presented in epic, and especially Homer.

Because we are so used to Greek tragedy, we don't usually stop to notice how strange this is. Of all classical Greek states, Athens with its subordination of policy and legislation to the will of the masses was probably the furthest removed from the political world of epic, with its power concentrated in the hands of kings. Yet for two hundred years or more the audiences sat and watched plays about kings.

The Homeric background explains in part at least the wide difference between the audience reaction to political systems inside and outside the theatre. In the sixth century Athens had experienced a kind of monarchy, in the tyranny of Peisistratos and his sons in the sixth century. The tyranny was unpopular at its end and even more unpopular in retrospect. Under the circumstances, one might expect the presentation of kings on stage to be uniformly hostile. But the Athenians were able to distinguish between the world of tragedy and contemporary reality. So kings exist at different points on a scale between government and misrule. The distance between life and theatre is at its clearest in Sophokles' *Oidipous Tyrannos*. The play opens with the word *tekna*, 'children', addressed by Oidipous to the people of Thebes:

My children, latest born of ancient Cadmus,
why do you sit like this before me
bearing suppliant boughs?

His language, and his concern for the people, establish him as the father of his people; and it is this paternal concern which drives his attempts to discover the truth, a concern which ultimately destroys him. In contrast, Euripides' in his *Herakles* gives us a ruthless and brutal king, who terrorizes the innocent and defenceless family of the absent Herakles. Kings can even move along this spectrum during the course of the action; the regent in Sophokles' *Antigone* begins as a sympathetic figure, concerned for the polis, but he is gradually isolated as he elevates his own authority above all other considerations. Except that there must be kings, nothing in this political world is fixed. It all depends on the needs of the drama.

The world of tragedy is flexible in another, equally important, sense. Kings sometimes come with the political structures of democracy. In Aischylos' *Hiketides* Danaos and his daughters arrive in Argos; they are running from Aigyptos and his sons, who wish to marry the girls against their will. The king receives the fugitives just like any epic king. But the political situation is very different. The king in Aischylos wishes to grant asylum to the chorus, but this may mean war with Egypt; he is afraid to make the decision on his own authority; he requires the support of the people (365-9):

You are not suppliants at a hearth
 or mine. If the city is publicly stained,
 let for the people together contrive to work a cure.
 I would make no promise until
 I have conferred with the citizens about this matter.

Homeric kings consult the people. But the people cannot control the Homeric kings; their opinion is important; but it is only opinion. The play presents a constitutional hybrid, part kingship, part democracy, with the king as a kind of hereditary public official. The same mixture appears in Euripides' *Hiketides*, where Theseus appears as founder of democracy, a role he had adopted in fifth century democratic myth-making; he actually argues the case for a democracy based on equal rights:

This is freedom: who wishes to offer the city
 Publicly some wise advice which he has?
 And anyone who wishes to do so wins renown, while the one who doesn't
 Remains silent. What is more fair for the city than this?
 Where the people are guardian of the land

They honour the young citizens as a resource.
But a king finds this hateful
And all the best people and those he considers wise
He kills in fear for his tyranny.

The tragic world is recreated in different forms from play to play. It is always based on the epic world, but the epic world is constantly reshaped, often including features of contemporary Athens.

This position of tragedy, both Homeric and contemporary, creates a complex relationship between the theatre and its audience. This relationship has generated a debate about the connection between tragedy and politics and particularly democracy. This is what I would like to discuss briefly tonight.

For some recent writers the relationship between tragedy and democratic ideology is one of tension, even opposition. Tragedy – because it deals with royal families – creates space for the presentation of ideologies which compete with democracy. The problem with this approach is that it focuses on externals and ignores the fact that the values of tragedy are not just elite values; likewise, the emotions and experiences in tragedy are not just those of an elite. It also ignores the fact that all myth is heroic myth – so tragedy *has* to be about kings (there is no alternative) – and it assumes too easily the equation of mythic royal families with contemporary Athenian elite families; it is a very large leap from distant kings to contemporary aristocrats. One recent scholar has argued that fifth century tragedy is by nature conservative because of the composition of the audience in the fifth century. There was no free admission to the theatre in the fifth century. So (the argument goes) the audience of tragedy are people who can pay – people with money. Tragedy does not merely co-exist with democracy – in a sense it opposes democracy. But it has also been noted that we do not know the price of theatre admission in the fifth century. And even if we knew that the ticket price was high, with an annual festival it is entirely possible that people would save for the event (this festival was so important that the Athenians let people out of prison to attend). And the theatre in the late fifth century could probably hold 14,000 to 16,000 people. This cannot be an elite group.

More influential has been the attempt to make tragedy a servant of democracy. The dramatic festival is a political event; so tragedy in turn is political. This does not mean that tragedy offers monolithic state propaganda. Tragedy does not propound a monolithic civic ideology but

rather questions shared assumptions; the strength of democracy is in its openness to question. This view rests on the highly political nature of some aspects of the dramatic festival context. The Great Dionysia took place in spring, when the seas were open; and there were many foreigners in the audience. The Athenians used the event to display the power and wealth of Athens to the Greek world. In the fifth century (we're told) the Athenians displayed the tribute from their empire in the theatre. It was the Athenian practice to bring up the orphans of men who died for the city at public expense. When they reached the age of eighteen, they paraded in the theatre in full armour before the Athenian people. The theatre was also used to proclaim honours to benefactors of Athens. This both offered a role model for those living in Athens and dramatized to the Greek world the readiness of the city to reward those who served it well.

Against this approach scholars have pointed out that the dramatic festivals were not created by the democracy but in the sixth century, under the tyrants. This is not a powerful objection; since civic institutions can change as their context changes, the date of the founding of the festival is of little relevance to its function under the democracy. More significantly, recent research makes a very good case against the specifically democratic nature of much of the organization of the dramatic festivals – much of what we see in Athenian political practices reflects the functioning of the classical Greek *polis*; the principles underlying the organization are not specifically democratic. So what look like democratic features in the festivals and in the play are not always exclusively democratic.

A more important problem – for me – with this approach is the way the festival points outward. The presentation of tragedy to a panhellenic audience was part of Athens' claim to be the cultural centre of Greece. As a gesture of cultural hegemony it was remarkably successful from very early on. When Hieron, the tyrant of Syracuse, founded his new city of Etna in the 470s he invited Aischylos to produce a play, possibly a trilogy, to commemorate the event. Greeks in the west were aware of the new literary form created in Athens and it was considered distinctive enough to add lustre to Hieron's ceremonials. We have evidence (from painted pottery) for tragic performances in Italy in the fourth century. We cannot always be sure that a painter is illustrating a drama rather than just telling the myth. But some of the mythic material points unmistakably to the tragic theatre – and where it does, it is Athenian tragedy that is the source, not some local literary product. We hear in Plutarch that after the failure

of the Athenian attack on Syracuse in 413 some Athenian prisoners were liberated because of their knowledge of Euripides' songs. If true (and we cannot be sure), it suggests that the western Greeks were hungry not just for tragedy but for Athenian tragedy. And Athens exports not just plays but also writers of plays. Hence at the end of the fifth century we find Euripides and Agathon producing plays in Macedonia. Euripides' play for Macedon, the *Archelaos*, proved a classic and was revived in the following century. Athenian tragedy had high status as a marker of taste and culture. It is difficult to believe that no Sicilian or Italian ever wrote a tragedy. Indeed we do know of tragic playwrights like Theodectes early in the fourth century BC who were not of Athenian birth. But none of them leaves any mark on the record outside Athens. In fact Theodectes is very revealing in this respect, because his dramatic career as far as we know was confined to Athens. More significantly, in the fourth century Dionysios II, tyrant of Syracuse, who had ambitions as a poet, had a play performed at the Dionysia in Athens. Athens is the make or break place for tragedy. Like Hollywood for modern movies; if you're ambitious, you go to Athens.

This outward-looking aspect of tragedy is important. From the moment we encounter it, Greek poetry is always aware that it is *Greek*. Gregory Nagy has stressed that *panhellenic* circulation is vital for the success of poetry in early Greece. From Homer onward, poetic success depends on acceptance in *Greece* – not just locally. Athenian tragedy shares this panhellenic aspect. It is not just Athenian, it is Greek. The festival with its panhellenic audience encouraged tragedy to face outward as well as inward; and the readiness of other Greeks to import Athenian tragedy shows that tragedy could speak to Greece and not just to Athens.

There are also problems when one looks at the internal evidence. It is a weakness of the 'democratic' reading of tragedy that many tragedies have no obvious political dimension; if the approach is to be applicable to all tragedy, the term 'political' has to be stretched to a point where it ceases to be useful as a means of distinguishing between tragedy and other poetic forms and between the civic festivals and other contexts. This approach loses the distinction between a play like Aeschylus' *Eumenides* which engages directly – boldly – with controversial political changes in Athens and many tragedies which are more concerned with less specific and less urgent issues. It is also a problem (as Jasper Griffin has pointed out) that some at least of the issues which interest the tragedians are already visible in the Homeric poems; so tragedy loses its distinctive

connection with democracy. There is a danger that tragedy becomes monolithic, when we all know that it is complex and diverse.

The mythic content of tragedy is also a problem for any attempt to focus exclusively on the local political role of tragedy. Scholars have found in Sophokles' *Philoktetes* a problematization of the Athenian *ephebeia*. The play may suggest the *ephebeia* to some, *perhaps* many, members of the audience. But in a very literal sense the *Philoktetes* is *not about the* *ephebeia*. It has been suggested – plausibly – that Euripides' *Orestes* (produced in 408), a play in which friends band together to commit violence (the attempted assassination of Helen), was influenced by the oligarchic coup of 411, which rose out of the aristocratic clubs. But the play is *not about* the revolution. Even when it deals with contemporary events, tragedy filters them through the medium of myth. The myth suggests associations but does not demand them. Myth and history are never identical.

But there is also a danger in dismissing too easily the interest of tragedy in issues facing democratic Athens in particular. It is true that many of the issues in tragedy are shared by democratic Athens with the various non-democratic states. But the scale and complexity of state control at Athens were probably unusual even by the standards of Greek democracies. In the case of *Antigone* recent scholars have stressed that some of the features of death and burial (specifically the apparent state hostility to private funeral display) which appear at first sight to be peculiar to fifth century Athens are in fact part of a larger Greek pattern. But it remains the case that as far as we know Athens appropriated the war dead to a degree unmatched by any other Greek state. It was the Athenian practice to bury the war dead in communal state graves (excavations for the Athens metro unearthed one such burial a few years ago) without patronymic or demotic, just the tribe name. At the same time private memorials almost disappear from the Kerameikos. By the late fifth century the private memorials, including memorials for those who die in war, become more common, and it looks as though the tensions between the demands of the state and the needs of the family have been resolved. Issues such as family or individual versus state are Greek issues as well as Athenian issues. But they were probably present in Athens to an unusual degree and were at their most visible at the time *Antigone* was (probably) performed.

There is another point to be noted here. In noting the fact that much in tragedy could be understood of Thebes by Thebans or of Corinth by

Corinthians, we should not fail to note the uniqueness of tragedy as a vehicle for exploring social and political issues before a mass audience. Though tragedy in some key respects resembles epic, there is a crucial difference. In epic political structures are not subjected to serious scrutiny. The *Odyssey* asks who will be king in Ithaca. But the chaos in the absence of Odysseus shows that there must be a king. Epic may ask *who* and *how* but not *what*. Lyric is still less open. Where lyric deals with political issues, it is most often in the context of the symposion in the company of like-minded members of the elite. The big public lyric compositions for cult occasions or for the celebration athletic victory do not open up political questions to debate but close them off. The patrons of Pindar and Bakchylides found political prejudices comfortably reinforced, not challenged. No other state evolved this medium or this public context for challenging debate.

And tragedy *does* challenge, both on issues of structure and on issues of political principle. Let me take two cases, chosen for their obviousness. The first is the *Orestes* of Euripides. The messenger speech provides an account of the trial of Orestes which like the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus puts the emphasis on the political aspect of the administration of justice. He describes a trial which resembles a meeting of the assembly at Argos. The conduct of the assembly does not present democracy in a good light. The debate is eventually won by a ranting speaker who resembles the demagogue as presented by comedy (*Orestes* 943 -5):

Yet, for all he seemed to speak well, he did not persuade the assembly;
but that villain who spoke in favor of slaying you and your brother
gained his point by appealing to the mob.

Democratic debate is presented as open to abuse. This is Argos, not Athens; but the conduct of the meeting is unambiguously Athenian. The *Philoktetes* of Sophokles places emphasis on the issue of obeying orders rather than following one's conscience. Democratic government is no guarantee that crisis of conflict will not arise, as the Athenians sent to slaughter the inhabitants of Mytilene found in 427 (who – Thucydides notes at 3.49 – rowed slowly because they found their order repugnant). *Orestes* indicates that the tragic stage has a licence to ask difficult questions about democracy itself and *Philoktetes* that it has the licence to ask larger questions about the nature of political life which have no easy answer, which may indeed have no answer. The same applies to the questions about state, individual and family raised by *Antigone*. The issues

raised in *Philoctetes* and *Antigone* would also interest people in oligarchic states. But we know of no comparable forum in other states which allowed a literary form performed within a civic context to complement the more specific debates within the formal political process. And if (as is likely) tragedy was first performed under the Peisistratid tyranny, it is unlikely that it asked awkward questions about the regime; this questioning came with democracy. Also worth noting here is the lack of any concerted attempt to restrict the freedom of the tragic theatre, just as we have little evidence for attempts to restrict comedy. We have of course the famous case of Phrynichos, who was allegedly fined for his *Capture of Miletos*, which distressed the Athenians by reminding them of a painful failure, but that is a specific and isolated example.

In looking at the relationship between the theatre (and here I mean comedy as well as tragedy) it's important to bear in mind the vagueness of its link to other political structures such as the assembly. Modern scholars sometimes treat the theatre and the Assembly as though they were identical. But they are complementary. The Assembly's role was formally created by constitutional changes and was repeatedly re-articulated several times a month through formal decisions and decrees. Though the festivals were created and governed by legislation, and paid for by the state, the absence of any formal function for drama (both comic and tragic) meant that the relationship between theatre and politics was open to renegotiation play by play. The audiences were different (6,000 in the assembly, perhaps 16,000 in the theatre) even if they overlapped. And the assembly had hard decisions to reach about real events; the theatre only had to judge the best plays. This looseness of relationship is what allowed the theatre to look beyond specific events at larger issues which are more difficult to address in everyday situations. It also allowed tragedy to look both inward to the city and also outward. This looseness allowed Athens to export tragedy to the whole Greek world and ultimately to Rome. This larger flexibility is the reason why Greek tragedy is still produced in many languages across the globe and why it still has a voice with contemporary audiences.