

Ektos sumphorās: Tragic Athens

It is orthodox to state that Athenian tragedy encourages its audience to meditate on questions related to living in the polis - democracy, ideology, morality, citizenship, justice and so forth - with the resulting claim, or at least implied claim, that it should promote a kind of self-examination among its citizen-spectators, through using the figures of Greek mythology to explore fifth-century Athenian uncertainties and contradictions (e.g. Goldhill, 1987; see, however, Griffin 1998). The evidence that tragedy is political in some sense is incontrovertible. And yet, given the intense horror of what is sometimes seen on stage, it is worth exploring this orthodoxy a little and asking if there are limitations to it. What sort of relationships can be seen between the violent, bloody suffering that some tragic characters undergo and the deliberation on affairs of the polis, and especially contradictions in, and criticisms of, its ways that its spectators are supposed to conceive through viewing tragedy? Are all, or mostly all, spectators expected to undergo a psychological shift from visceral reaction to others' misery to thinking about politics, or is this just for a few?

In particular, what happens when the city of Athens itself is brought into close contact with tragic suffering? It seems that there were limits to what the Athenians were willing to see of suffering that directly involved their city. The huge fine imposed on Phrynichus for "reminding them of their own troubles" in portraying a recent historical event – the capture of Miletus – that hit too close to home (Hdt. 6.21.2), made the portrayal of actual historical events a rare event thereafter. From that point on, tragedy focused on the distant past, yet a distant past in which mythological kings could have conversations about democracy (E. *Supp.* 429-55), or where Iliadic queens might bring

contemporary intellectual inquiry to bear on Zeus (E. *Tro.* 886). Just as these characters inhabit a space between ancient and contemporary, the audience of tragedy is also experiencing a similarly indeterminate place (cf. Easterling (1985). And it is the indeterminate nature of this space that is responsible for the bewildering number of modern interpretations, both of individual plays, and of broader ideas on the nature and function of tragedy.

I will argue that this indeterminacy is essential to how tragedy can work, but the corollary of this is that we may have to modify some orthodoxies about its relationship to politics, because tragedy must always contain the possibility of not challenging, but rather reaffirming, the audience's beliefs about their own city and thus themselves (cf. Mills (2010)). Thus, while it is frequently claimed that Euripides' *Trojan Women* is intended to indict Athenian action at Melos, and while it is entirely possible that some spectators of the sufferings of the Trojan women were moved to reflect on the misuse of power by Athens, the essential indeterminacy of tragedy will show that this is by no means a sure interpretation (cf. Roisman 1997). Similarly, while recent readings of Euripides' most apparently patriotic plays, *Suppliants* and *Heraclidae*, have suggested that Euripides is problematizing Athenian power, I will argue that it can, and must, remain entirely possible that some at least of the audience did not see any such problems in what they saw. Tragedy must allow for its spectators, if necessary, to avoid "being reminded of their own troubles" and retain a more comforting view of what it means to be an Athenian, a citizen of the city which helps the suffering but which must always, itself, remain outside the tragedy (*ektos...sumphorās* (E. *HF* 1249)). In this way, tragedy remains political but it is also imperial, imbued with the image of Athens that emerges

from other texts and artifacts shaped by Athenian power. Modern writers on tragedy, perhaps relying too much on the way that Thucydides coolly undermines all idealized portrayals of his city, may possibly over-estimate the Athenians' ability for self-critique.

Bibliography

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