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978-1-107-52583-2 - Performing Oaths in Classical Greek Drama

Judith Fletcher

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CLASSICAL GREEK DRAMA

Oaths were ubiquitous rituals in ancient Athenian legal, commercial, civic and international spheres. Their importance is reflected by the fact that much of surviving Greek drama features a formal oath sworn before the audience. This is the first comprehensive study of that phenomenon. The book explores how the oath can mark or structure a dramatic plot, at times compelling characters such as Euripides' Hippolytus to act contrary to their best interests. It demonstrates how dramatic oaths resonate with oath rituals familiar to the Athenian audiences. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and her accomplices, for example, swear an oath that blends protocols of international treaties with priestesses' vows of sexual abstinence. By employing the principles of speech act theory, this book examines how the performative power of the dramatic oath can mirror the status quo, but also disturb categories of gender, social status and civic identity in ways that redistribute and confound social authority.

JUDITH FLETCHER is Associate Professor in the Department of History at Wilfrid Laurier University. She is the author of numerous articles and chapters on ancient Greek poetry, drama, religion and law, and has co-edited *Virginité Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body* (with Bonnie MacLachlan, 2007) and *Horkos: The Oath in Greek Society* (with Alan H. Sommerstein, 2007).

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*For Rick Nixon, a man of his word*

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## Acknowledgments

This project came into being when I taught *Lysistrata* in a small, upper-level Greek seminar at Wilfrid Laurier University. My pupils and I were struck by the power and humor of the women's oath in the prologue of the play. Our discussions led to my article published in 1999, "Sacrificial bodies and the body of the text in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*," *Ramus* 28: 108–25, which has been revised for the last chapter of this book. I am grateful to Aureal Publications for permission to use it. I also presented a version of that paper at a conference on personification at the University of London in 2000, where I met Alan Sommerstein, with whom I began an ongoing and fruitful conversation about the Greek oath. I am deeply grateful for his generosity, wisdom, humor, hospitality and encouragement over the past decade. At his invitation I became an honorary research fellow in 2001 at the Center for Ancient Drama and Its Reception (CADRE) at the University of Nottingham where I spent a productive summer in the city of my birth. In 2004 Professor Sommerstein and I organized an international conference on the Greek oath at the University of Nottingham, which resulted in our co-edited volume, *Horkos: The Oath in Greek Society* (Exeter, 2007). The first chapter of this book is a much expanded and reconsidered version of my contribution to that volume. My own project has been greatly enriched by the diverse scholars who contributed to the conference and the volume. With funding from the Leverhulme Trust and the assistance of two postdoctoral fellows, Alan Sommerstein subsequently began to assemble an online databank of oaths and references to oaths in Greek literature and inscriptions from the earliest records to 322 BCE. That databank, which is now freely available to all scholars ([www.nottingham.ac.uk/classics/research/projects/oaths/database.aspx](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/classics/research/projects/oaths/database.aspx)), has been invaluable for this project. I am grateful to Isabelle Torrance and Andrew Bayless for giving me early access to it.



### Acknowledgments

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Two other portions of this book have also appeared in earlier versions elsewhere. A section of Chapter Five is adapted and revised from my 2005 “Perjury and the perversion of language in Euripides’ *Cyclops*,” in *Satyr Drama: Tragedy at Play*, ed G. M. Harrison, Swansea: 53–66. I am grateful to George M. Harrison for allowing me to use it, for his sagacious comments on the original, and also for inviting me to present it at the stimulating conference on satyr drama at Xavier University in Cincinnati in 2003. Finally, Chapter Six is the revision of an article published in 2003 (“Women and oaths in Euripides,” *Theatre Journal* 55: 29–44).

The cover of this book features Jacques-Louis David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1876), reproduced with the kind permission of the Toledo Museum of Art. It deals with an imaginary moment from the mythical history of early Rome, but I think that readers will understand why I thought it to be an appropriate image. It seemed to me to convey many of the ideas that I have tried to articulate in the following chapters, including most particularly the symmetry between masculinity and agency.

In addition, I must thank all those friends, students and colleagues whose ideas and challenges have helped to strengthen this book. I owe a special debt of *charis* to Bonnie MacLachlan for her astute comments on several chapters in their earlier forms, but most especially for her friendship throughout the years. Thanks also to Donald Lateiner for allowing me to read his work on oaths in Herodotus and Thucydides before publication. Likewise I am grateful to Stephen Mitchell for providing me with the text of his article on a bronze oath before publication. I am indebted to Cambridge University Press’ anonymous readers whose suggestions improved this volume significantly. Thanks also to Faith Boughan, Megan Daniels, Laura Gawlinski, Melanie Lovacz, Ben Moser, Nancy Rabinowitz, Derek Shank, David Stark, Bob Wallace, Mary Lim and Arden Williams for their various forms of support, guidance and assistance. I am also grateful to Michael Sharp and Elizabeth Hanlan at Cambridge University Press and Rebecca du Plessis for guiding me through the editorial process. My understanding of oaths was also greatly enhanced by physical contact with a huge inscription of an oath from Smyrna upon which I learned to do a squeeze under the direction of Graham Oliver and Jon Bodel during their intense summer school on Greek epigraphy at Oxford University in 2004. All of these activities and publications were facilitated by various grants. I was fortunate to receive the generous support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada Standard Research Grant, which paid for

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## *A note on abbreviations*

I use the standard abbreviations for authors and their works, for inscriptions and for journal titles, as listed by Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (2003) *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd rev. edn., Oxford. In the rare cases when an abbreviation is not given by *OCD*, I give the full title of the work, or author's name. I have followed the Nottingham Oath Project (which is derived from *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*) for identifying fragmentary works and inscriptions. Unless otherwise noted, the texts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes are Oxford Classical texts. In most cases I use the Latinate form of a name or work of literature unless the Greek form is better known, e.g. Helios, or more appropriate, e.g. Kinesias.

I use the abbreviations for journals as found in *L'Année philologique*.