

Re-Reading Reading Greek Tragedy

I have a copy of the Oxford Classical Text of Sophocles where one spread of pages is permanently discoloured into a dull yellow because it was left open for many days in the sun. I was working intently on the so-called deception speech in the *Ajax* and the book sat for hours open on my desk by the large windows of my college apartment through the summer. To see these pages now reminds me of the famous, grim lines of Macbeth, ‘My way of life is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf . . .’ There is inevitably for me a certain melancholic sense of the passing of time to reflect back to that summer more than thirty-five years ago, when I was writing *Reading Greek Tragedy*, still in my untenured twenties; but, unlike Macbeth, I can at least look back without a crippling sense of horror, and forward still with hope, not least thanks to the intellectual community of scholars in Cambridge and across the world with whom I have had the privilege of continuing to discuss Greek tragedy over the intervening decades.

This essay, written for the reissue of *Reading Greek Tragedy* in the Cambridge Classical Series, allows me to reassess what I wrote then in the light of these ongoing discussions. *Reading Greek Tragedy* was written at the highpoint of what now appears to be a transformative moment in the study of Greek tragedy, when the philological and aesthetic approaches that had continued to dominate the scholarship on tragedy were being reshaped by an insistence on the performance of tragedy as a theatrical and political event, and by a broad, anthropologically informed understanding of fifth-century categories of thought.

Three crucial vectors drove this transformation – which was the work of many scholars, of course, and many conversations.¹ The first was the

¹ The footnotes below will record my – and the field’s – many debts to what is a long list of scholars; in order to keep the references to a decently brief level, I have tried to list only pieces that have stood the test of time along with some of the most recent discussions, rather than full doxographies. Invidiousness is inevitable. But let me thank here, for formative conversations at the time, Froma

recognition that a philology that aimed to define and fix the certain meaning of words would always fall short of the language of tragedy, which displays the shifts, conflicts and ambiguities of the language of the city.² Rather, the philology of tragedy needs to be alive to the dynamic interaction of a language in dialogue. It has been demonstrated that the highest standards of philology can be maintained in commentaries on the texts of Greek tragedy while *including* such a recognition of the semantic fluidity or internal tensions of discourse – although it is still the case that the edition/commentary form, which has remained a most conservative strand of scholarship, has all too often struggled with this challenge of absorbing political and semantic conflict into its discussions of the details of the text.³ The language of tragedy as a public performance of the discourse of the city has remained a prevalent subject of critical discussion, from details of re-enacted direct speech, to song and voice, to the generic polyphony of tragedy as a form.⁴

The second vector came from the insistence that, whatever the rhetoric of tragedy about its universal significance, and however much tragedy remained a privileged form across the centuries, the plays we have from the fifth century need to be understood within their historical context, their *moment*. On the one hand, this meant seeing tragedy as part of a specific Greek festival, the Great Dionysia; on the other, it meant that Greek tragedy must be understood within the categories of fifth-century thought that were culturally and historically particular.⁵ As we will see, this desire for historical contextualization could lead to an overly determined sense of cultural production, and some over-confident projections of the political impact of plays; but to ask how these dramas spoke to the society in which they were produced has continued to prove a compelling question of cultural and literary history.

Zeitlin, †Charlie Segal, Helene Foley and Pietro Pucci in the USA; †John Gould, Pat Easterling, †Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, Oliver Taplin, Paul Cartledge, John Henderson in Britain; †Pierre Vidal-Naquet, †Jean-Pierre Vernant and †Nicole Loraux in France; Renate Schlesier in Germany. For this essay, my thanks to my dear friends, Froma Zeitlin, Helen Morales, Catherine Conybeare, Katie Fleming, Johanna Hanink for reading it and offering robustly helpful comments.

² Vernant's essay 'Tensions and Ambiguities' in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981 is seminal.

³ Contrast the outstanding Griffith 1999 with the consistently disappointing Finglass 2007, 2011, 2018. On commentary form – a form we all rely on – see Goldhill 1999.

⁴ On re-enacted direct speech see Uhlig 2019 and generally on reperformance Hunter and Uhlig eds 2017; on song and voice, Nooter 2012 2017; on polyphony Swift 2010. On Sophoclean language see Budelmann 2000; Goldhill 2012; or, from a very old-fashioned perspective, Rutherford 2012.

⁵ Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981; Goldhill 1987; 1994; 2000; Meier 1993; Easterling ed. 1997; Carter 2007; Carter ed. 2011 and the works cited below especially nn. 6, 8.

The third vector concerns how this compelling question can and should be answered. Along with many other fields, the study of Greek tragedy was energized by contemporary discussions of power, gender, language, authority, and by the recognition that such broad categories have a significant and changing history. The study of fifth-century culture was invigorated by such historical anthropology, which was especially associated with the scholars around Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet in Paris – though it involved scholars across the world from its beginnings.⁶ How sacrifice functioned as a ritual within Greek society, for example, and how it therefore became a crucial term in the language of tragedy, could only be explored through such a methodology of anthropologically informed cultural and literary history; and a philology that eschewed such understanding would always fall short.⁷ It is a saddening deformation of the discipline of classics that the terms ‘scholarly’ and ‘scholarship’ are still used self-servingly by the more conservative wings of the field as if they were an adequate shield to excuse ignorance of contemporary discussions of gender, power and rhetoric, and their salience for the study of Greek tragedy – whose themes so often are precisely the destructive conflict of males and females, the failing exercise of authority, and the self-serving distortions of politicized language. How could you edit or write a commentary on *Medea* (say) and not think that gender, power and rhetoric must be categories deserving the most attentive *scholarly* reflection – and thus requiring an engagement with the most up-to-date and sophisticated expertise in the salient disciplines?

Reading Greek Tragedy aimed to bring these three vectors together by offering readings of particular plays in the light of some of the general issues with which tragedy was concerned: a philology informed by cultural history. The agenda of the book – which still seems salient – was to take broad categories of ancient Athenian society, literary history and intellectual debate to explore specific tragedies, and to use the tragedies to reflect on those broad categories. ‘It is little help’, the introduction asserted programmatically, to use the word *polis*, ‘if the reader has no understanding of the nature of civic ideology in the fifth century and its importance

⁶ From a long potential list, see Humphreys 1978; 1983; Lloyd 1979; 1983; 1987; Foucault 1985; 1986; Segal 1981; Parker 1983; Hartog 1980; Loraux 1981a, 1981b; Detienne 1967; 1981; Burkert 1983; Hall 1996. For contextualization of Vernant, see Zeitlin ed. 1991 3–24, and especially Leonard 2005; on Vidal-Naquet, Hartog 2007; Dosse 2020.

⁷ See the seminal Zeitlin 1965; Vidal-Naquet 1969; Foley 1985; with the background of Detienne and Vernant eds 1979; Burkert 1983; Durand 1986; and, since, Seaford 1994; Gibert 2003.

for tragedy in particular.⁸ This statement – which leaves open the question of *how* tragedy speaks to the city – leads to the first of the four areas where I wish to re-engage with *Reading Greek Tragedy* in this essay, namely, the continually vexing question of politics and tragedy.

The Politics of Tragedy

In *Reading Greek Tragedy*, I used a model of tragedy at the Great Dionysia that determined a significant dynamic between the pre-play ceremonials of the festival and the dramas (tragedy, satyr play and comedy) that were staged. The pre-play ceremonials were seen as embodiments and projections of the dominant civic ideology of democracy, and the plays that followed were seen as questioning of that ideology, either through the tragic implosion of asserted civic values into violence and self-destruction, or the comic hooliganism that mocked the institutions and leaders of the democratic state. It is now a commonplace of criticism that the historical contextualization of tragedy requires a discussion of its place within the city's festival culture, but how such a dynamic is to be appreciated continues to be debated as a key question for the genre.

Very few critics today would argue that tragedy is not political in some sense.⁹ The occasion of the Great Dionysia was undoubtedly one of the major congregations of citizens in the year; the ceremonies before the plays asserted the power and glory of Athens; the event was organized and funded by the state system of liturgy, and eventually citizens received financial support to attend; the subjects of the plays are serious and engage major issues of political purchase – the values of the family and state, the perils of leadership in the city, the desires and dangers of ambitious excellence, to take but three obvious examples. Any attempt to categorize tragedy as no more than – or even as predominantly – a form of entertainment founders not least on the untenable assumption that there is a polarized contrast between entertainment and the political (an assumption that Plato for one would think foolish), as well as on the evident politicized reactions to tragedy in our sources. There is no evidence that the desire to

⁸ Preface, p. ix.

⁹ See e.g. Euben 1990; Winkler and Zeitlin eds 1990; Croally 1994; Seaford 1994; Goff ed. 1995; Pelling ed. 1997; Said 1998; Henderson 2007; Carter 2007. Griffin 1998 [responded to by Seaford 2000, Goldhill 2000, Allan and Kelly 2013] rejects 'collectivism' *tout court*. Griffin bizarrely likens the Great Dionysia to a football match, as if football's 'content' was anything like tragedy's political debates. There is a more sophisticated account of football and theatre in Critchley 2017. Finglass 2011 asserts that *Ajax*, of all plays, has nothing to do with democratic politics.

The Politics of Tragedy

5

win the competition at the Great Dionysia stopped the tragedians from writing intellectually challenging and sophisticated dramas, or required tragedians to kowtow to aristocratic elements of their audience.¹⁰ But *how*, then, is tragedy political?

One response, associated especially with Mark Griffith, has been to argue that the scene of tragedy stages a conflict between mass and elite, in such a way as to allow the state to recognize the importance of the elite families who, whatever the rhetoric of democratic equality, continued to dominate the political process in Athens.¹¹ Griffith starts from the acknowledgement that tragedy as a genre poses political questions about civic identity, and, with all due caution, proposes that the trajectory of the genre is towards a recognition of the necessary dominance of the elite, an acceptance of a hierarchy of power in the state. He imagines that the audience, like the minor characters in the plays, ‘gazes up at these leaders from below, in wonder, as stupendously superior pillars of strength, ambition and determination’, and, in summary, he declares that tragedy, for all its twists and turns, works to determine that the ‘actual or implied outcome of the whole process is the assurance of the continuation in authority of a class of aristocratic leaders, vulnerable, occasionally flawed, but in the last resort infinitely precious and indispensable’.¹² For Griffith, the *Oresteia* is the paradigm of this narrative of tragedy as a genre, with Orestes back in charge at Argos at the play’s end, and with the ‘bad aristocrats’, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, removed.¹³ The *Oresteia*, however, is one of very few tragedies that might be thought to have such a ‘happy ending’, despite the horror of matricide, and its final image of the city celebrating itself in procession is unparalleled in the extant plays. It is much harder to see how the violent self-destruction and social upheavals of *Medea* or *Trachiniae* or *Bacchae* or *Antigone* act as triumphant reassertions of aristocratic indispensability. How ‘reassuring’ is the survival of Creon at the end of the *Antigone* as he cries ‘I am destroyed’ amid the wreckage of his family and his own authority?¹⁴

Indeed, Richard Seaford, in a contrasting comprehensive view of the genre – contrasting both in its conclusion and in its assertive rhetoric –

¹⁰ One of the unconvincing and unevicenced views of Allan and Kelly 2013.

¹¹ Griffith 1995, largely followed e.g. by Carter 2007. ¹² Griffith 1995, 73.

¹³ Griffith 1995, 110.

¹⁴ Griffith 1998, 73–4, where the chorus is described as ‘aristocratic . . . rallying round’. It is worth remembering that even after Creon recognizes that he has been wrong, he still goes to bury the corpse of Polyneices before releasing the live Antigone – a decision that ensures her death, and consequently his son’s.

argues that far from the safe conservatism that Griffith makes the hallmark of tragic politics ('safe' is Griffith's term), tragedy repeatedly stages the necessary destruction of the elite as a consequence of precisely their superior ambition and determination.¹⁵ For Seaford, it is the survival of the chorus which provides the thrust of tragedy's politics – the necessity for survival of the collective, the ordinary people. Seaford, in turn, downplays the lure of the heroic individual, and it is difficult simply to see the ideals of democratic collectivity in a chorus of Furies or slave women or foreign Bacchantes or Persians.¹⁶ If Griffith sees tragedy as a challenge to democracy's collectivity in the name of elite families, Seaford sees tragedy as the collectivity's will to justify the destruction of the elite families in the name of democracy.

What the contrast between Griffith and Seaford demonstrates is not just how hard it is to provide a comprehensive political overview of such a complex event as tragedy with its multiplicity of individual dramas, but also and most specifically how hard it is to calibrate the evident tensions between the tragic heroes and the chorus, within the context of democracy and its politics of mass and elite.¹⁷ There are, as Griffith rightly states, multiple and conflicting lines of political and emotional sympathy between characters on stage and the audience. It is crucial also to recognize that the audience reacts both as a collective and as individuals. Sometimes a collective response – laughter, outrage, tears – will bury individual counter-feelings; individual political assumptions will also affect reactions.¹⁸ Sympathy can also shift between characters in a play or with regard to an individual figure. The opposition between Griffith and Seaford demonstrates how distorting it becomes to allow a single line of political sympathy or affiliation to oversimplify the more complex dynamics of a particular play or the genre as a whole: the chorus or a character like Ismene in *Antigone* may survive, but at what cost? The hero may be grand in ambition and power, but at what cost? Unlike many a Hollywood film, the leading figures of tragedy, even when extreme, are rarely simply or purely attractive or horrible; the politics of a play rarely seem aggressively or naively didactic. Indeed, the critic's hardest task may be to maintain an openness to the lure *and* danger of each political position staged and their dynamic interactions.

¹⁵ Seaford 2000; see also Seaford 1994.

¹⁶ An issue debated between Gould 1996 and Goldhill 1996; see also Henrichs 1995; Gagné and Hopman eds 2013; and for reception, Billings, Budelmann and Macintosh eds 2013.

¹⁷ Ober 1989; Ostwald 1989 for mass and elite. ¹⁸ Macleod 1982 is influential on this point.

The Politics of Tragedy

7

Let me give an example from what I now regard as my own oversimplification in *Reading Greek Tragedy*. In my discussion of Sophocles' *Antigone*, a political play if ever there were one, I analysed the rhetoric of Creon and Antigone as producing opposing claims of political value. But in contrast to the influential analysis of Hegel, who saw Creon and Antigone as dramatizing a clash of right and right, I argued that both figures started from a political position that would be recognized as justified – that obligation to the city was crucial, that obligation to the family was crucial – but both ended up in distorted, extreme, self-destructive enactments: Antigone ended up destroying the family she claimed to support, as Creon was destroyed by the family he wanted to subordinate to the city. I would now want to argue not so much that this analysis of the rhetoric of Creon and Antigone was wrong – it is important to see that both are extremists and that extremist rhetoric leads to profound and violent contradictions – but rather that such an analysis leaves out a crucial dynamic of the play. Ismene, the Guard, the chorus, each try to resist being sucked into the gravity of Creon's and Antigone's extremism; they resist, in vain, such rhetoric – but survive, as they wish to, albeit desperately. A structuring tension of the play is between Creon and Antigone, on the one hand, mirrors of each other in their extremism, and the other characters, on the other hand, who aim for *compromise*, flexibility, acquiescence – or allow themselves *to be compromised*, as Creon or Antigone would insist.¹⁹ This unresolvable tension between passionate self-assertion and keeping one's head down provides one severe political question that *Antigone* stages: how can extremism be responded to adequately? Are all responses, including the extremist's, destined to fail? Is not the bleakness of *Antigone* located in its refusal of any hope of a solution to the forces it unleashes? The question for the critic is how to pay due attention to this network of positions that the play mobilizes, without falling into the trap of privileging one character's politics, one character's or pair of characters' stance. Like so many readers before me, I was drawn to the clash of Antigone and Creon, and thus ignored the contrast between this pair and the other characters in the play.

I would certainly want now to build into *Reading Greek Tragedy* a more nuanced – and more difficult – understanding of how messy the political conflicts on stage are, and how engaging and exposing these conflicts therefore become, and how easy it is for a reader or audience, engaged in trying to sort out their response to the play, to oversimplify tragedy's

¹⁹ See Goldhill 2021.

politics into a mirror of one of the play's characters or trajectories – so that Antigone, say, becomes a heroine of resistance, a mirror of the critic's self-projection. The plays encourage but fatally undermine such self-heroization. Self-assertion and self-destruction go hand in hand in tragedy.

But I would not want to lose the sense in which the politics at stake is a democratic politics. The specifically democratic nature of the event of the drama festival is widely accepted, but has been challenged most stridently by the historian and epigraphist Peter Rhodes. Rhodes is right that many of the ways that civic life is represented on stage and in the festival organization can be paralleled in a very general manner from cities that are not democratic – commitment to the city, responsibility as an individual to the collective, the military values embedded in the willingness to fight for the state, are widely attested ideals, for sure, just as competition and collective state rituals, too, exist in many cities – but this does not mean that such normative values are not also celebrated as particularly strongly evidenced in democracy and regarded as integral to democracy.²⁰ As Pericles in Thucydides is made to say, 'Athens as a whole is an education for Greece' (2.41). An ideological affordance does not have to be unique to a society to be celebrated as a triumph of the community's values: a fantasy of individual success against established social hierarchies may exist in many different countries but this does not stop the American dream being lauded as signally American in America. So Rhodes himself notes that the organization and performances of ritual at the Great Dionysia were '*polis* institutions that took a particular form under democracy', but then tries to argue that this particularity of form is not 'distinctly democratic'. I am not sure how a particular democratic form can be not distinctive of democracy. So, of course it is true that we can find examples of making decisions by lot, as early as in Homer – but that does not stop selection by lot being recognized as particular and distinctive to democratic practice, especially when appointing state officials, such as the judges of the drama festival. Indeed, Rhodes is so keen to divorce the festival from a specifically democratic politics that he even argues that the pre-play ceremonies were 'accidental' – apparently a random or contingent introduction to the festival, as if the city did not make the decision in the Assembly to institute them purposively. In a similar way, Rhodes, citing as his authority Leslie Kurke, who is writing primarily about Thebes, declares that *chorēgia* is an aristocratic mode of patronage: but in fifth-century Athens *chorēgia* is part of a state-organized and obligatory liturgic system,

²⁰ Rhodes 2003.

The Politics of Tragedy

9

part of the way in which democracy negotiated the tension between mass and elite.²¹ Rhodes seriously overstates his case, as his exaggerated title, ‘Nothing to Do with Democracy’, announces, but his argument does help explain how tragedy, like Menander’s comedies, could be both a product of its time and place, and also an international attraction, exported across the Greek world, and have such a long legacy of study and re-performance. Tragedy is a situated event, but its own language constantly strives towards the general – to transcend the parochial.

All our extant plays also come from the period when Athens actively pursued an imperialist policy, and the sense of democracy in fifth-century tragedies is constantly coloured by the issues raised by such exercise of power, especially in the plays that centre on the fall of Troy, its prelude and aftermath.²² Nor in tragedy – though the same is certainly not true of comedy – is Athens challenged in itself as the home of civilization: tragedy is enacted at the scene of the other – other places, other times, other figures than the citizen.²³ The critical question thus is not so much ‘do the plays performed at the Great Dionysia construct an event that speaks to the democratic city as such?’, but ‘at what level should we see a political debate being shaped and emphasized?’ Or, simply: *where* is the politics in tragedy?

It is a trivial misprision to assume that politics is limited to or defined by financial and diplomatic policy, or that the explicit vocabulary of the Assembly or international treaties is required for a play to have a political purchase. Tragedy broaches the broadest questions of what it is to be a citizen and what the perils and necessities of the commitments to a city entail: man as a *politikon zōon*, ‘a creature of the city’. So, to take as an example a play that *Reading Greek Tragedy* did not discuss, Euripides’ *Ion* is set at Delphi, but is concerned with the ‘design of the self’ in Athens, as Froma Zeitlin has discussed in the most telling manner.²⁴ It is fascinating that when Athene, the patron goddess of Athens, the *deus ex machina* at the play’s close, allows that Xouthos will accept Ion as his son, although Apollo is the boy’s actual father, and that thus Ion will give his name to the Ionians, she is establishing a convenient fiction of genealogy for the boy, which is also a fictional genealogy for the Athenians themselves, who are Ionians. This fiction is not just a piece of Euripidean panache, however, a

²¹ Kurke 1998 cited in Rhodes 2003, 119. But see Wilson 2000.

²² Hall 1989; Boedeker and Raaflaub eds 1998. ²³ Zeitlin 1985; 1986.

²⁴ Zeitlin 1989; Loraux 1984, 184–236; Kasimis 2018, 26–48; see also Goff 1988; Zacharia 2003; Gibert 2019.

clever or provocative way to tie up the loose ends of the plot. For Plato, too, a noble or whopping lie about the birth of the nation is a crucial factor in the establishment of his ideal republic.²⁵ Autochthony, a story of Athenians' birth from the soil itself, as I discussed through Nicole Loraux's seminal analysis in *Reading Greek Tragedy*, is a founding myth of the Athenian state, rehearsed in the funeral speeches at the ritual of the public, shared burial of the war dead: a political narrative.²⁶ How political Euripides' twist of plot is taken to be will depend a good deal on how far and how intently any reader or audience engages with the intellectual potential of the drama's displayed foundational untruth: wry irony? Searing critique? Political cynicism? In short, much as a play such as the *Oresteia* has continued to produce conflicted political readings from its critics – witness Griffith and Seaford – where politics are to be found in drama itself can prove a divisive issue.

Tragedy is obsessed with causality – the logic of deciding who or what is *aitios*, that is, responsible for its junctures of destruction – and many plays show how complex and confusing it can be to determine the paths of consequence and regret. 'If only not . . .', as *Medea* paradigmatically opens. Such problems of (over)determination and counterfactuals are neither unique to democracy, to fifth-century culture, to Athens, nor to the genre of tragedy – and will lead to Aristotle's rationale of the 'four causes' (*aitiai*), and, of course, many still ongoing discussions in philosophy and political science (and psychoanalysis).²⁷ Yet democracy placed a heavy burden on the responsibility of each citizen, his ability to listen and vote in response to a debate, to decide policy, to enact political roles and to take up a place in the public life of the city. If democracy makes responsibility a key category of citizenship, tragedy's questioning of how hard it is actually to understand the causes and consequences of action opens an especially engaging *political* reflection for an audience of democratic citizens. How political, then, is tragedy's repeated dramatization of a crisis in the over-determined causality of its narratives?

²⁵ *Kalon*, often translated rightly as 'noble', may also have the idiomatic sense 'whopping', when applied to *pseudos*, 'lie'. See Kasimis 2018 for the link between Plato and *Ion*. The continuing anxiety of fiction in genealogy family history is underestimated in the discussion of Foucault 2011, 72–147, despite his fascination with the 'imperialism of genealogy' (79) and the transition from 'oracular truth-telling to political truth-telling' (107).

²⁶ Loraux 1981a; also Loraux 1984, 3–22; 37–71 – undiminished by e.g. Blok 2009; Lape 2010; Forsdyke 2012; Roy 2014 – though extended well by Kasimis 2018.

²⁷ The broad discourse of *aitios* is discussed in Goldhill 2002b, s.v. *aitia*. For ancestral fault see the excellent and wide-ranging Gagné 2013. Prendergast 2019 is wonderful on counterfactuals, including in tragedy.