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TRAGEDY, RITUAL AND MONEY IN ANCIENT GREECE

Richard Seaford is one of the most original and provocative classicists of his age. This volume brings together a wide range of papers written with a single focus. Several are pioneering explorations of the tragic evocation and representation of *rites of passage*: mystic initiation, the wedding, and death ritual. Two papers focus on the shaping power of mystic initiation in two famous passages in the New Testament. The other key factor in the historical context of tragedy is the recent *monetisation* of Athens. One paper explores the presence of money in Greek tragedy, another the shaping influence of money on Wagner's *Ring* and on his Aeschylean model. Other papers reveal the influence of ritual and money on representations of the inner self and on Greek and Indian philosophy. A final piece finds in Greek tragedy horror at the destructive *unlimitedness* of money that is still central to our postmodern world.

RICHARD SEAFORD is Emeritus Professor of Ancient Greek at the University of Exeter. He is the author of numerous papers and books on ancient Greek texts from Homer to the New Testament, among which *Money and the Early Greek Mind: Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy* (2004) and *Cosmology and the Polis: The Social Construction of Space and Time in the Tragedies of Aeschylus* (2012) are also published by Cambridge University Press. He has a particular interest in uncovering the relationship between the economy, ritual, philosophy and drama. He is currently completing a historical comparison of early Greek with early Indian thought. He has been a Fellow of the National Humanities Center (USA), a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Texas at Austin and Honorary President of the British Classical Association. His research has been funded by the Leverhulme Foundation and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

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Selected Essays

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Foreword

The work of Richard Seaford is distinctive for the way in which it combines the approaches of several disciplines – philology, anthropology, philosophy, and political and economic history – in order to present a diachronic account of the form and central preoccupations of Greek texts of the archaic and classical periods, most notably tragedy. Many of the ideas contained in his three major monographs were developed from observations made in academic papers.[1] The present volume is designed to make readily available certain papers appearing in relatively inaccessible journals, to make other papers more accessible to those without Greek by providing translations, and to illustrate the breadth of Seaford's work by the inclusion of papers on such diverse topics as the New Testament, a Marxist account of the genesis of the inner self, early Indian thought, and the influence of Aeschylus on Wagner.

Seaford's academic career began with a doctoral thesis on Euripides' *Cyclops*, which can be seen as the seed of much subsequent work. As a commentary, that most traditional of genres, it remains grounded in the close reading of primary texts and in textual criticism, and, despite the increasing breadth and abstraction of much of his later studies, the evidence adduced is frequently evaluated in terms of the manuscript tradition of the author under discussion. At the same time, Seaford's choice of readings tends to draw on extra-textual realities beyond what is normal in editorial practice. By concentrating upon ritual structures and religious conceptions alien to the modern reader, he laid the foundation for a series of papers in the 1980s devoted to elucidating the meaning and emotional effect of various tragedies by detecting and describing the evocation of rituals – in particular, certain highly emotional rituals such as mystic initiation, death ritual and wedding ritual – that were central to the lives of

[1] Seaford 1994b, 2004c, 2012a.

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the audience.[2] The dramatist could rely upon this centrality in order to evoke emotions and ideas, but did so especially through portraying the perversion of those rituals. Finally, Dionysos looms in the background of the *Cyclops*, and the place of this god in the religion and thought of ancient Greece would come to assume a central role in Seaford's work.[3]

From the analysis of ritual in Greek tragedy there emerged a diachronic dimension. In real life, ritual must end well, as it generally does in Homer; in tragedy, by contrast, it is generally perverted, and often accompanied by intrafamilial killing, which does not occur in Homer. This led to consideration of the socially integrative role of ritual, and so to consideration also of other forms of social integration, such as reciprocity and money.

For Seaford the key difference lies in the type of society in which each genre was produced. The Homeric poems reflect, broadly speaking, a pre-state society in which the most important social group was the family, and in which social integration is achieved to a large extent through reciprocity between households (although even here reciprocity is already in crisis in both epics). Tragedy, on the other hand, was the creation of the democratic polis, which emerged from the limitation of the autonomy of individual households, as well as from the deposition of the ruling household of 'tyrants'. Accordingly, tragedy frequently (though not always) moves from the self-destruction of the ruling household, often accompanied by the perversion of household ritual, to the final creation of benefit for the polis (often in the founding of polis cult). These ideas form the core of *Reciprocity and Ritual* (1994b), a *tour de force* in which the central themes of epic and tragedy are analysed from the perspective of their historical contexts and related to each other diachronically through reference to the structural differences between the societies in which the works were created. The recourse to a historical explanation of the subject matter of Greek tragedy is what perhaps most distinguishes Seaford's work from his contemporaries, given the generally ahistorical approach characteristic of scholarship over the past sixty years.[4]

[2] E.g. in this volume 'The last bath of Agamemnon' (1984b = Chapter 11), 'The destruction of limits in Sophocles' *Electra*' (1985 = Chapter 12), 'The tragic wedding' (1987c = Chapter 13), 'The structural problems of marriage in Euripides' (1990b = Chapter 14). For mystic initiation, see n. 6 below.

[3] See in particular the commentary on Euripides' *Bacchae* (1996a) and the monograph on Dionysos (2006a); also n. 5 below.

[4] This ahistoricism partly represents a reaction to the excesses of the Cambridge school, of which Seaford's work may be viewed as a refined continuation, especially of the work of George Thomson, with its emphasis on socio-economic as well as ritual factors (See Seaford 1997a and 2004a: xxix–xxx). But Seaford's interest is not so much in 'origins' as in the meaning and emotional power of the rituals evoked or described in the texts, not so much in 'survivals of the primitive' as in the historical changes from the eighth to fifth centuries BCE, in particular the development of the polis.

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It is also in relation to this diachronic dimension of tragedy that Dionysos assumes a central role. This is an exhilarating aspect of Seaford's work, as time and again we are swept along by the centrality of this paradoxical god in articulating the tension between the two fundamental social units in the developing city-state of the polis: family and citizen body. The historical process is one of transfer – of economic resources, military allegiance, religious practice – from the family to the state, in which problematic tendencies within the family – reciprocal violence, endogamy, excessive accumulation of wealth – are controlled by the supra-familial, impersonal institutions of the state. The mythical catalyst for this transfer is Dionysos. On the basis that tragedy originated and continued to be performed in the cult of Dionysos, and that its earliest themes were about Dionysos, the hypothesis is that the self-destruction or near-self-destruction of the ruling household leading to the establishment of communal cult was a mythical paradigm that derived from the power of Dionysiac myth and cult, where it is most at home (for instance in Euripides' *Bacchae*), and helped to shape tragic myth in general. In Homer, by contrast, the paradigm is absent and accordingly so is Dionysos (almost entirely), although maenadism is twice evoked, along with the destruction of Hektor's household.[5]

Within the analysis of the literary representation of ritual motifs, mystery cult plays an important role. This was given early expression in 'Dionysiac drama and the Dionysiac mysteries' (1981a), and has figured prominently in various manifestations since then. Two aspects may be emphasised: first, the simple identification of references to the mysteries in literary texts, and the explanation of how they contribute to the structure of a work or its articulation of ideas. Given the scarcity of evidence for mystery cult as such, there is always an element of speculation in this area, and different readers will find some identifications more convincing than others. But, as with the identification of other ritual elements, the key is to explain a phrase or scene otherwise misinterpreted owing to neglect of this ritual background.[6] Secondly, a crucial aspect of mystery cult for Seaford is the communality of individuals brought about through mystic initiation. This is viewed in contrast to the isolating effects of a monetised economy, especially as represented by the literary representation of historical and tragic tyrants, and for Seaford this communality also represents an illuminating

[5] See in this volume 'Homeric and tragic sacrifice' (1989b = Chapter 1) and 'Dionysos as destroyer of the household' (1993 = Chapter 2). Note also Henrichs 2013: 570–7, esp. 576–7.

[6] E.g. '1 Corinthians 13.12' (1984a = Chapter 15), 'Sophocles and the mysteries' (1994c = Chapter 10), 'Thunder, lightning and earthquake in the *Bacchae* and Acts of the Apostles' (1997a = Chapter 16), 'The fluttering soul' (2009c = Chapter 18).

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contrast with the social atomisation characteristic of contemporary capitalist economies.[7]

Reciprocity was a central element in Seaford's analysis of the relationship between new mechanisms of social integration and the distinctive cultural creations of the polis. From reciprocity he expanded his focus to a contrasting and revolutionary form of economic interaction: coined money. The emergence of this phenomenon in Ionia in the sixth century BCE, and specifically in Miletos, coincided with the beginnings of philosophy, and in Athens (where monetisation came later) with the emergence of tragedy. Seaford's interest in Presocratic philosophy is already evident in the article 'Immortality, salvation and the elements' (1986a = Chapter 9 below), which detects the influence of mystery cult on Presocratic philosophy and on the *Prometheia* trilogy, in addition to making an important early contribution to the interpretation of the Derveni papyrus.[8] The new focus on monetisation elaborated on these ideas by giving a historical account of the unprecedented form that specific concepts assume in Presocratic thought (in particular the cosmos as a single, increasingly abstract substance transformed from and into everything else), while at the same time the analysis of the conflict found in tragedy was deepened by a sharper focus on the dichotomy between reciprocal forms of exchange and a monetised economy (represented by the frequent *isolation* of the individual at the heart of tragedy).[9] This work culminated in the publication of *Money and the Early Greek Mind* (2004c).

Although Seaford is particularly well known for his studies on Dionysos, especially as he appears in Euripides' *Bacchae*, his contribution to the interpretation of Aeschylus is equally important. 'The last bath of Agamemnon' (1984b = Chapter 11) is an early example, focusing on the perversion of death ritual in *Agamemnon*. 'Aeschylus and the unity of opposites' (2003a = Chapter 6) is a wide-ranging analysis of the *Oresteia* as a whole, which goes beyond the traditional but unsatisfactory categories of character analysis and moral responsibility, above all by concentrating on the structural and ultimately moral dichotomy between 'limit' and 'unlimited'. Mention may also be made of the important section on the *Supplices* in 'Tragic wedding' (1987c = Chapter 13). Over the course of his career Seaford has touched upon numerous individual passages within the *Oresteia*, and

[7] See 'The politics of the mystic chorus' (2013c = Chapter 8).
[8] Cf. Obbink 1997: 40.
[9] E.g. 'Dionysos, money, and drama' (2003c = Chapter 3), 'Tragic money' (1998c = Chapter 4), 'Tragic tyranny' (2003b = Chapter 5).

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a relatively full *index locorum* has been provided, which will hopefully be of use to future commentators on the trilogy. With *Cosmology and the Polis* (2012a) he concentrated the results of his larger analysis in *Money and the Early Greek Mind* (2004c) on a single author, revealing in Aeschylean tragedy the fundamental but opposed forces of money and communal ritual. Inasmuch as Presocratic philosophy was shaped by the same forces (especially – given its different context – by money), the enquiry explores the extensive and relatively neglected affinities between Aeschylus and Presocratic philosophy (especially Heraclitus and Pythagoreanism).

A general characteristic of Seaford's work is its widening in scope from ideas developed in earlier studies, from an initial basis in editing and interpreting a text, through the ever expanding spheres of ritual, religion, the polis and economics. It is fitting therefore that his current project has widened this scope still further, to ancient India. There are striking similarities in metaphysical thought, particularly in the development of abstract ontology, between Greece and India in the three centuries before Alexander crossed the Indus in 326 BCE. Previous attempts to detect 'influence' range narrowly between the improbable and the imaginary. Building on his work on monetisation in ancient Greece, Seaford instead concentrates on the fact that, outside Greece, the most monetised society in this period was northern India (perhaps also China), in order to seek out the relationship (important in all societies) between metaphysics and socio-economic formation. While a monograph on the subject will appear shortly, the present volume includes a previously unpublished essay (Chapter 19) on why the idea of karma, unknown to ancient Greece, has been so important in religions of Indian origin. In addition to the originality of the argument, not the least remarkable aspect of this chapter is Seaford's ability to navigate through the formidable labyrinth of ancient Indian texts.

The broadly political implications of Seaford's work are illustrated here by two chapters. In 'Historical materialism and the genesis of the Western subject' (2012b = Chapter 17) he engages with the Marxist philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel's emphasis on the influence of commodity exchange on early Greek ideas of the unitary self, thus prefiguring the Kantian transcendental self. Seaford incorporates into the argument the differences between the economies of ancient Greece and modern Europe, which are glossed over in Sohn-Rethel's account, and adduces a variety of texts with which the philosopher was unfamiliar, in order to qualify but ultimately support his conclusions. In 'World without limits' (2009e = Chapter 21), which appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007–8, Seaford

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describes for a general audience central elements of his work in relation to the contemporary world, by setting the ancient Greek privileging of *limit* over the unlimited against the adherence of capitalism to the *unlimited* – not only in the accumulation and global flow of capital and the growing disparity between rich and poor but also in cultural practices and intellectual trends.

A note on editorial procedure. The papers have not been revised, but printed as they first appeared (with occasional small corrections, and additions in square brackets). References have been standardised and at times updated. Bibliographical notes, prepared by Seaford, have been appended to each chapter as a postscript to illustrate developments in scholarship since the original publication. In several papers, translations of Greek passages have been added by the editor. Occasionally the Greek itself has been omitted, where linguistic points are not concerned.

Names of authors are given in their Latin form, whereas names of literary characters, mythological figures and historical persons are transliterated (though inconsistencies inevitably remain – e.g. Ajax). Abbreviations of ancient authors and texts, and of standard modern works, follow those of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th edn, 2012). Note that **GJ** for references to the gold leaves indicate that they are numbered as in Graf and Johnston (2013). No dates are CE unless otherwise indicated.

References to papers of Seaford which appear elsewhere within the present volume are denoted by superscript reference to the chapter number: e.g. 'Seaford 1987c[13]' denotes that the paper appears as Chapter 13. Page numbers of the original publications (e.g. [88]) have been added for further ease of reference. The editor is solely responsible for any typographical errors.

Thanks are due to Paul Curtis for producing the initial transcript of 'The tragic wedding' (Chapter 13), and to the copy-editor, Hester Higton, for her careful assistance in the preparation of the text.

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