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5

Sophocles and the Democratic City

JASPER GRIFFIN

At school in the early 1950s, the first Attic tragedy we read was Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*: in retrospect, perhaps an eccentric choice. To help us we had a small school edition with notes in the back. The notes, broadly speaking, were concerned with questions of two kinds only. One was the reason why the verb in a given verse was in the infinitive, or the noun in the dative. That is, the note gave, in an oracular manner, a name to the case or the mood: an 'ethic' dative, a 'historic' infinitive. The other kind of note, the kind which we really disliked, gave curt and (again) oracular answers to inscrutable disputes between German scholars about the reading of the text. Discussion in class dealt with grammatical questions, not literary criticism; as for discussing the function of tragedy in the democratic city of Athens, such a thing never crossed the mind of any of us, teacher or pupil. The play was simply *there*. We set about it very much for the same reason, and in the same frame of mind, as climbers tackling Mount Everest: roped together by our shared sessions of translation in class, and with our survival kit in the form of our edition with notes in the back.

At Oxford in the late 1950s we advanced from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Now we met with books which did venture a fairly straightforward and unselfconscious literary criticism. Literary it was; so much so that in 1954 Victor Ehrenberg, publishing his *Sophocles and Pericles*, opened defensively by saying that it was 'a prevalent trend of our time' that 'the basis for any discussion of poetry seems to be the idea that a poet ought to be judged by poetical standards only', as against the 'chiefly transatlantic tendency of "sociology"':

I too live under the shadow of that towering bastion from which the literary critics dominate the intellectual and artistic countryside;

and yet after all, he daringly pleaded, it must be possible to discuss tragedy and the history of Athens.[1]

All that was in the 1950s; it seems now as remote as the 1850s. As late as 1986 a scholar could still write

The present study may also serve as a corrective to the tendency, discernible in the most recent work on Greek drama, to ignore its political aspects entirely.[2]

Since then, what a change there has been! Clio, Muse of history, has moved massively into the territory of her tragic sister Melpomene. It is now not surprising to read that

The tragedies and comedies composed for production at the Athenian dramatic festivals in the fifth and early fourth centuries BC are priceless historical documents,[3]

and that

Greek tragedies are perceived as important manifestations of political thought,[4]

and indeed that

Die attische Tragödie war eine Institution der attischen Demokratie. Das heisst: sie war eine politische Institution.[5]

So completely has the fashion changed that the question seems now to be, not whether tragedy is political, but exactly how its obviously political purpose is to be defined. Thus in the new *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* it seems almost natural that the first

[1] Ehrenberg (1954: 2). He goes so far as to say, in the spirit of that time, that to literary critics 'it will seem a kind of sacrilege to regard one of the great tragedies of the Attic theatre as anything but a masterpiece of literary genius and theatrical art . . . the essential nature of which is outside all merely historical values' (8).

[2] Podlecki (1986: 76). That was perhaps already not quite an up-to-date statement of the situation.

[3] Alan H. Sommerstein in Pelling (1997: 63).

[4] Raaflaub (1989: 49). Cf. also J. Peter Euben in Euben (1986: 29): 'Tragedy was as close as one could come to a theoretical institution. In its form, content, and context of performance, tragedy provided, by example and by precept, a critical consideration of public life.'

[5] Wolfgang Rösler in Sommerstein *et al.* (1993: 81).

chapter should be on 'Theatre as Process in Greek Civic Life', and that it should pronounce immediately that

The play-festivals of Dionysus . . . served further as a device for defining Athenian civic identity, which meant exploring and confirming but also questioning what it was to be a citizen of a democracy.[6]

Elsewhere we find such generalizations as these:

Tragedy might thus mirror aspects of current political thinking; in doing so it fulfilled its intended educative function by creating an awareness of the achievements of the *polis* or the problems it faced, or by reflecting the nature of politics, while presenting them in a largely nonpartisan manner.[7]

Very often we find it confidently asserted that

Tragedy . . . must be viewed as reflecting the aims and methods of the democracy. First, tragedy was funded either directly by the *polis*, which paid the honorarium to competing poets, or through the system called the liturgy . . .[8]

and, again, that

Greek tragedy is the dramatization of aetiological myth . . . shaped by the vital need to create and sustain the *polis*.[9]

Since the city paid the bills, it is obvious in this post-Thatcher world that the city must have called the tune; and a highly political tune it turns out to be. I quote as representative an influential recent book of essays on tragedy:

The patron (let us call it more generally the polis, understood as a social institution) operates towards the public with an end in view that might be roughly formulated as 'consolidating the social identity, maintaining the cohesion of the community'.[10]

It has in fact become a problem in its own right, with a growing learned literature, to wonder why Attic tragedy, although it was so political and, more specifically, so democratic, none the less continued to set its plays in the world of the old regal and

[6] Easterling (1997*a*). The first chapter is by Paul Cartledge: significantly, a historian. The passage quoted comes on p. 6.

[7] Meier (1990: 88).

[8] Croally (1994: 3).

[9] Richard Seaford in Silk (1996: 293).

[10] O. Longo in Winkler and Zeitlin (1990: 14).

aristocratic heroes of the myths.[11] That fact is perhaps not really so surprising. The ubiquitous presence of the myths and their high-born people in the tragic theatre of democratic Athens does not seem to have presented contemporaries with anything like the problem that it poses for modern scholars. That might make us pause and wonder whether they really did expect their tragic poets to be so constantly concerned with democratic ideology and democratic propaganda.

In the words of Denis Feeney, 'The current dominant model is J.-P. Vernant's "democratic moment", the intimate bond between the novel artistic and political institutions of democratic Athens'.[12] He goes on to predict, 'One feels that the consensus is about to crack.' A recent article mounts a general criticism of this approach, which shows signs of having hardened from a consensus almost into an orthodoxy,[13] and suggests a different kind of connection between tragedy and the events of fifth-century history. In this chapter I hope to question one part of it, and to give some pleasure to a scholar who has contributed so much to our understanding of Sophocles, both in the fine details of his text and in the broader patterns of his thought, by turning particularly to that poet in connection with this vexed question of politics and tragedy.

One might take as a marker for comparison a tragedy of Shakespeare, for instance *Romeo and Juliet*. That play does indeed have a message that can be called political: the feuds of foolish old men, and the privileged violence of their reckless young kinsmen, are a disaster for the whole community. At the end the Prince enunciates it:

> Capulet! Montague!
> See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
> That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love;
> And I, for winking at your discords too,
> Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punished. (v. iii. 291 ff.)

So there it is: the lesson of *Romeo and Juliet*. But! we want to protest; but, of course, we know that already! We do not go to the theatre to be taught that sort of elementary political truth. And, of course, the

[11] I single out the subtle papers by Mark Griffith (1995) and P. E. Easterling in Pelling (1997: 21–38).

[12] Feeney (1998).

[13] Griffin (1998).

interest of the play lies not there but in the suffering and the poetry of the star-crossed lovers. To insist on a political interpretation can mean missing the real point of tragedy.

The only one of the three great Attic tragedians who actually held high elective office at Athens, serving both as *Hellenotamias* and as *strategos*, the only one not to leave democratic Attica and work for foreign dynasts, the only one not to die abroad, Sophocles is also the one who has not bequeathed to us anything which makes explicit propaganda for democracy in the manner of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* or of Euripides' *Supplices*. That cannot be from lack of patriotism. No reader of *Oedipus at Colonus* can miss the feeling of the poet both for his birth-place of Colonus and for the city of Athens. No more splendid praise of a place was ever composed than its First Stasimon:

> εὐίππου, ξένε, τᾶσδε χώ-
> ρας ἵκου τὰ κράτιστα γᾶς ἔπαυλα . . . (*OC* 668 ff.)

But even in this play it is hard to evade the conclusion that what is central is not the politics of Athens, except in an ethical and very general sense (Athens is hospitable, generous, civilized, rich in cults, favoured by the gods[14]), but the sufferings and destiny of the aged hero and his children. Perhaps there is not one of the extant plays of this most elusive poet which does not need a good deal of careful re-description, sometimes tendentious, before it can plausibly be claimed as propaganda for democracy.

Let us begin with a play for which we are fortunate enough to possess the perfect comparative material: *Electra*.[15] The *Oresteia* of Aeschylus contains, especially in its last play, highly political elements. In the next generation both Sophocles and Euripides decided to dramatize the theme of Orestes' vengeance. When Aeschylus dealt with that story, he had in mind the numerous passages in the *Odyssey* on Agamemnon's death at the hands of Aegisthus, and on Aegisthus' death at the hands of Orestes. He seized on the aspects of the story which Homer had minimized or

[14] Cf. recently M. Whitlock Blundell, 'The Ideal of Athens in *Oedipus at Colonus*', in Sommerstein *et al.* (1993: 287–306). Richard Rutherford points out to me that the Theseus of this play is much less democratic than the Argive king in Aeschylus' *Supplices* or the Athenian king in Euripides' *Supplices* (349–51), both of whom make a point of getting the agreement of their citizens before acting. We are further from 5th-cent. Athens in the *Coloneus*.

[15] See the illuminating discussion by Bernard Knox (1983), esp. 8–10.

omitted altogether: the role of Clytemnestra in the murder of Agamemnon; and Orestes' act of matricide, justified but still appalling. He also decided to give a role to one of Agamemnon's daughters, who are ignored in the *Odyssey*; and Electra is shown mourning her father, recognizing her brother, and joining in the great lyric *kommos* at the tomb. She then disappears. She has no role in the killings. Aeschylus enriched this story with a striking compound of Athenian history, recent and remote, secular and sacred.

His successors, in their turn looking for aspects of the story which had not been used up by a great predecessor, both turned to Electra. Aeschylus had not exhausted her possibilities. Euripides made his Electra play more 'political' than that of Sophocles; but he can only do that, it seems, by making it political in a very different sense from that of the *Oresteia*. Effects cannot simply be repeated. Euripides' Electra is obsessed with questions of social status. Banished to the outback from the city and the royal palace, neutralized by a marriage which makes her *déclassée*, she broods resentfully on her social grievances.

Sophocles saw the opportunity for something else. This is not the place to discuss the question whether he wrote before or after Euripides; it cannot be definitely answered, and Lloyd-Jones himself long ago declared 'Those who confidently claim to know the date of Sophocles' *Electra* . . . are living in a private world.'[16] What strikes us about Sophocles' play is its unpolitical character. The real subject of the play is the emotions of the heroine,[17] who is further illuminated by the creation of a sister with a contrasting character. Electra's reactions and sufferings are lovingly displayed to us over more than a thousand lines, from her entry at line 77 all the way to her reunion with her brother—artfully delayed until 1221 ff., although he had already recognized her at line 80—and in her role in the two killings; not forgetting her terrible cry to Orestes, after he has struck his mother, *παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν* (1432): brilliantly explained by Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, not as 'Hit her a second time!', but as 'Hit her twice as hard!'.[18]

Electra mourns Agamemnon not as a political figure, a rightful king assassinated and replaced by an usurper, but as her father,

[16] *Ant. Class.* 33 (1964), 372.
[17] Schadewaldt (1928: 57).
[18] Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990: 74).

pitifully dead;[19] she laments him like Niobe, like the nightingale, the great exemplars in myth of unending grief for death within the family.[20] When she thinks of Aegisthus, it is not as the usurper of power but as her father's murderer, wearing her father's robes as he sits on his throne, and pouring libations on the spot where he slew him (264 ff.). When she asks her sister for help against Aegisthus, she begs her 'to do this for yourself, for me, and for the dearest of all men, the dead father of us both':

ὅμως δ', ἀδελφή, σοί θ' ὑπούργησον τάδε
ἐμοί τ' ἀρωγὰ τῷ τε φιλτάτῳ βροτῶν
πάντων, ἐν Ἅιδου κειμένῳ κοινῷ πατρί (461–3).

Orestes, too, seems to think of Aegisthus' offence more as 'the squandering of my father's property' than as usurpation of the kingship:

'Don't tell me how Aegisthus is squandering the wealth of the house, pouring it out and scattering it abroad':

ὡς πατρῴαν κτῆσιν Αἴγισθος δόμων
ἀντλεῖ, τὰ δ' ἐκχεῖ, τὰ δὲ διασπείρει μάτην (1290–2).

As Orestes enters the palace the chorus sing, 'Crafty footed, the avenger of the dead is brought into the house, the seat of his father's wealth of old':

παράγεται γὰρ ἐνέρων
δολιόπους ἀρωγὸς εἴσω στέγας,
ἀρχαιόπλουτα πατρὸς εἰς ἑδώλια, (1391–3)

Again: vengeance for the dead, and the property of his father. The political consequences of Aegisthus' crime for the community are not what interests us. Orestes does not say, as he did in the *Choephoroe*, that one of his motives is to free Argos from the usurpers:

'My citizens, glorious men, the sackers of Troy, subjected to two

[19] 95 ff., 115, 132, 145 ff., 241 f., 341, 399, 525, 530, 587 f., 811, 954 ff., etc. When she thinks of killing the adulterous pair herself, she imagines people saying 'These are the sisters who have saved their father's house, who have slain their enemies when they seemed so firmly footed, at the risk of their own lives: they should be loved and honoured by all for their courage', 977–83. There is no mention of delivering the community from usurpation or tyranny, only a personal act of heroism for family motives.
[20] 145 ff., 150 f.

women'; nor does he proclaim the death of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra with the words 'Behold the two tyrants of our country' (ὁρᾶτε χώρας τὴν διπλῆν τυραννίδα[21]). What we do see is the princess Electra forced by her grief and her desire for vengeance for her father into behaviour which she knows to be unseemly,[22] but which cannot be abandoned; lamenting and keening, trembling between hope that her brother will come back and despair of his return.[23] We see her in lively and contrasted conversations with her sister and with her mother; we see her hopes revive when she hears of offerings at her father's tomb; we watch her receive the shattering news of her brother's death, in the presence of her hateful mother; we hear her form the desperate plan of avenging her father herself, alone; and we look on, through tear-filled eyes, as she laments over the urn that she believes to hold the ashes of her brother, and the ashes, too, of her hopes. By contrast with the intensity of all this, Orestes and his deadly plot are of secondary interest. The line just quoted, Electra's chilling cry to her brother, is the most vivid and memorable point in the matricide: even at that supreme moment of his story, Orestes is up-staged by his sister. As for the present or future state of the *polis* of Argos, our attention is never directed to them.

What are we to make of this? The poet has taken a myth which had been shown to be capable of intensely political treatment, and he has chosen to handle it in a completely different way. His Electra is a cousin of the deserted Ariadne of Catullus' Sixty-Fourth poem, and of Virgil's forsaken Dido, and akin to the *Heroides* of Ovid, and to the musical *scene* composed in such numbers for sopranos in the eighteenth century. All are works which allow some passionate woman to run for us through the gamut of her emotions: tenderness, anger, vengeance, pride, self-abnegation, nostalgia, hope, despair. Euripides did something not entirely different, though with a different atmosphere, in his depiction of Medea. She, too, goes through her repertoire of female emotions before our fascinated gaze.[24] In other times and other arts, we can think of Madama Butterfly, or Violetta; or of Madame Bovary, or Moll Flanders, or

[21] *Choeph.* 302–4; 973.

[22] *Electra* 221 f., 307–9, 616–18.

[23] 164–72, 303–5.

[24] This is part of what is going on in the great monologue of the heroine, Eur. *Medea* 1019–80; it is sad that the excellent OCT mutilates the passage by drastic excision. Where the excised verses supposed to have come from—if not (in spite of Ockham's Razor) from another play exactly like Euripides' *Medea*?

Jane Eyre; or of Giselle; or of *Fatal Attraction*. Sophocles' *Electra* is for us a very early example. She differs from virtually all her successors in that her emotions do not include the erotic. Sophocles, we are tempted to say, here marks a transitional point between archaic reticence about female sexuality and the strongly erotic colouring which will be regular hereafter.[25]

The motives of Orestes in this play, and the emotions of Electra, have very little to do with the ideology of the democratic city. It is not easy to see the play as endorsing the values of the democracy, or (a common claim in many recent writers[26]) strengthening the cohesion of the community. It is not even the case that those values are 'subverted' or 'called into question', a line taken by some scholars, perhaps more sophisticated, to be a distinctive function of tragedy.[27] Rather, they seem not to exist. Nor, to turn for a moment to another attractive line of recent scholarship, can we say that the end of the play marks a happy future, with the self-destruction of the old regal family and the institution in the city of democracy.[28] Such an analysis must surely fail with a play like *Electra*, which ends with Orestes presumably back on his father's throne, and with the least possible reference to the future political set-up in Argos.[29] There is not even a patriotic mention of the traditional help given to Orestes by Athens.

The Electra of Sophocles exhibits her emotional range, and also its depth, not only to us in the audience, but also to her brother on stage. The speech she makes with the urn in her arms was celebrated in antiquity. Aulus Gellius retails a story of an actor performing it over an urn which really held the ashes of his recently dead son, and the rhetorical writers found it a source for illustrations of *eleos*.[30] It is, in fact, a perfect example of what most displeased Plato about

[25] In *Trachiniae* sexual love does play a part, but the poet handles the motif with notable delicacy. The situation of sexual rivalry between mistress and slave woman is handled with brutal frankness, by contrast, in Euripides' *Andromache*.

[26] Thus, for instance, O. Longo, in Winkler and Zeitlin (1990: 14): the aim of the city in sponsoring tragedy 'may be roughly formulated as "consolidating the social identity, maintaining the cohesion of the community"'.

[27] So e.g. S. Goldhill, in Winkler and Zeitlin (1990: 124 ff.), and elsewhere. Some shrewd points in reply are made by R. Friedrich, 'Everything to Do with Dionysus?', in Silk (1996: 262 ff.).

[28] This is the view of tragedy taken by Richard Seaford (1994). Cf. Griffin (1998).

[29] We do not hear of any exile for Orestes, either temporary or permanent; contrast Eur. *Electra* 1249 f., *Orestes* 1643 ff.

[30] Gellius 6.1 f.; *Rhetores Graeci*, ed. Spengel, 1. 400. 25 ff., 402. 18 f.; 3. 20. 23 f.

tragedy: the working up of emotion over something unreal. For not only is the whole action not real life but a play, a *mimesis*: even within the play Orestes is not dead, and Electra mourns and weeps as the result of a mistake. In that Platonic sense, it is a doubly representative tragedy.

Sophocles, then, was so far from feeling it incumbent on him to give his *Electra* a political point, that he turned away from the hints in that direction in the work of his fellow playwrights and applied himself instead to the development of feminine emotion and heroic pathos. That suggests that he regarded a political colouring as just one among many possibilities for a play. Some plays were strongly political. We think at once of *Eumenides*, or of the argument about the merits of democracy in Euripides' *Supplices* (399 ff.); but even that will be followed by the pure pathos of Evadne's act of suttee and her father's grief (990–1113), which can have very little relevance indeed either to endorsing or to questioning the democracy.[31] Some plays were at the opposite extreme, like the *Electra* of Sophocles, or *Alcestis*, or *Trachiniae*; and they were no less acceptable than the more political tragedies, both to archon and to audience.

Of *Trachiniae* we need say little. Here, too, it is hard to believe that the attention of audience or playwright was much focused on questions of political ideology. Heracles is a solitary superman, battling with monsters, possessing more women than any other man (459 f.); he fought with a river for his bride, and he shot a centaur to defend her. He kills an enemy by guile and is enslaved to an Asiatic queen. He starts a war and destroys a city just to get hold of a princess. In death he forces his son to marry his concubine, 'So that no other man shall take her, after she has lain beside me' (1225 f.). Even in his admirable qualities, he has little resemblance to a democrat. After death he is evidently to be succeeded not by democracy but by his son Hyllus; on whom he has just imposed an unwanted wife, in a way so sadly characteristic of monarchies, then and since. What is the play about? Evidently 'the main theme is the destructive power of beauty and love';[32] to which we may add,

[31] Or even its policy towards displays of mourning, as suggested by Foley, in Sommerstein *et al.* (1993: 125 f.). There is a remarkable contradiction, in that volume, between the political interpretations of the main action of the play by Foley (117–29) and by E. Krummen (207 f.); but disagreements of that sort are, as we have seen, regular in the recent literature of political interpretation.

[32] Michael Ewans in Silk (1996: 441).

once again, the trembling heart and fascinating emotions of a woman, presented in the most extreme possible contrast with the utter masculinity of the hero, his male strength and male insensitivity alike exaggerated to superhuman proportions. It is noticeable that recent writers on the political nature of Attic tragedy seldom mention *Trachiniae*.[33]

So, again, the archon who gave a chorus for this play, too, seems to have failed in his job; if, that is, his job was to ensure the presentation of politically strengthening plays, which would send the audience out of the theatre with a heightened sense of citizen solidarity. Or, perhaps, he interpreted his function differently.

Space does not permit an exhaustive survey of all seven extant Sophoclean plays. Very little can be said here about the two which do most clearly raise interesting questions of a sort that can be called political: *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*. It is not my purpose to deny that there are tragedies in which that element was important. There were even some to which it was central; though it is far from clear that in either *Antigone* or *Oedipus* the point has anything to do with democracy. Instead I shall briefly discuss a play which falls somewhere between the strongly political interests of *Antigone* and the apolitical manner of *Electra* and *Trachiniae*, namely *Ajax*. It has been the subject of much recent discussion.

One recent interpretation of the play, explicitly 'historicizing',[34] argues that its thrust is 'toward the validation of Ajax as the best political leader' (65). This is at first sight a surprising conclusion, since after all what we see is an Ajax who has gone mad in brooding over a slight, who has tried to massacre his fellow commanders, and who kills himself, disregarding the desperate pleas of his dependants. It is reached by way of the argument that the poet 'uses all the means at his disposal to present in Ajax an abstracted image on a grand scale of an Athenian *strategos*' (69). Thus the feebleness of the chorus of Athenian sailors represents the dependence of contemporary Athenians, who would identify with them, on a series of commanders who came from the upper class: Athens still needed such leaders! All this must 'reinforce and validate a hierarchical,

[33] Michael Vickers (1995: 41–53) gives a detailed exposition of the play as being about the Spartan colony at Heraclea in Trachis of 427/6 BC, conveying a warning to the Athenians 'of what their fate might be if the Spartans did invade and sack Euboea, and if the Spartans did win the war'.

[34] Peter W. Rose, 'Historicizing Sophocles' *Ajax*', in Goff (1995: 59–90).

patriarchal, and paternalistic image of Athenian society' (71 f.); while as for Odysseus, who has often been thought to come out rather well at the end of the play, he 'adroitly fawns on the Spartan tyrant'(*sic*; it is in fact not Menelaus but Agamemnon with whom Odysseus reasons, and with whom he prevails), and he 'cannot constitute a viable political or social alternative' to the leadership of an Ajax (74).[35] One might think such a verdict on the Ajax of this play hard to reconcile with his fearful dying curse on the whole Greek army, 'go on, you swift and vengeful Furies: do not spare them, taste the whole army':

> ἴτ, ὦ ταχεῖαι ποίνιμοί τ' Ἐρινύες,
> γενέσθε, μὴ φείδεσθε πανδήμου στρατοῦ. (843 f.)

Is that, one asks oneself in some bewilderment, really the utterance of an irreplaceable 'best political leader'?

Another very recent writer takes a very different view.[36] For him, Ajax 'sees only the city, the *polis*, but since there is more than the *polis* in the world . . . Ajax' view of the world is necessarily distorted'. Ajax' distorted view is 'peculiarly political' (149). This emphasis on the *polis* may seem surprising, as the word is very rare in *Ajax*, much rarer than in any other play of Sophocles, and is uttered by the hero only once, in reference to the cry of lamentation which his mother will raise in *her* city, back home, when she learns of his death (line 873). But, we read, 'the city has been implicitly present (*sic*) since the beginning of the play' (156). In fact this Ajax seems a barely political creature, acting on his own, with no reference to anybody else, whether commander, subordinate, ally, or wife; much less as fellow citizen; and the argument about his burial is not obviously about the *polis*, as the whole thing takes place abroad, under military discipline, in an armed camp.[37]

The *polis* seems to have made its way into the discussion

[35] In extreme contrast, Rainer Friedrich sees Odysseus as 'the authentic representative of the *polis*' in Silk (1996: 267). One is repeatedly struck by the arbitrariness of these political interpretations: how—on what principle—are we to choose between such contradictory assertions? What Odysseus says recalls the last book of the *Iliad*: even before the *polis*, gods forbade, and men hated to see, an unburied corpse.

[36] Michael Davies, 'Politics and Madness', in Euben (1986: 142–61).

[37] Menelaus makes the only significant reference to the city when he says that obedience and subordination are vital to an army, as they are to a city, too: οὐ γάρ ποτ' οὔτ' ἂν ἐν πόλει νόμοι καλῶς | φέροιντ' ἄν, ἔνθα μὴ καθεστήκῃ δέος (1073 f.).

uninvited, because of an *a priori* conviction that tragedy must be political, and political in something like our sense. The grounds on which Odysseus secures Agamemnon's reluctant agreement to the hero's burial are in fact two. One is universal human nature: Odysseus recognizes that he, too, will die and need others to bury him (1365). The other is the supremacy of the divine law (1343 f.). What opposes that law is the spiteful whim of tyrannical power; but while in *Antigone* that whim dresses itself, at least for a time, in the garb of the interest of the *polis*, in this play what the Atridae plead is not civil but military discipline. The *polis* does not seem to be the point.

It is, however, again seen as central by Christian Meier,[38] who says: 'In interpreting *Ajax* it becomes obvious that one is dealing with a highly political play' (185). For Meier, the ideas expressed by Odysseus 'are the foundation on which the polis must stand',[39] and Odysseus himself 'stands for a new phase in the evolution out of the ancient era: the phase where a polis recognizes its conditions of existence' (183). To be quite specific, in the mind of the poet there must have been anxieties about the 'gradual growth of the [Athenian] empire and the despotism that was characteristic of Athens' internal and external relations' (185); this was leading to 'encroachments' in 'certain areas which till then had been regarded as inviolable' (ibid.). The play was, in fact, 'an attempt to make people aware of the problems associated with the ethics and the intellectual infrastructure of Athens' (186).

We remember, with some perplexity, that the question of withholding or granting burial to an enemy already forms the dominant subject of the last two books of the *Iliad*; while the burial of Ajax himself was opposed in the Cyclic *Little Iliad* (F3 Davies) 'through the anger of the king' (διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν τοῦ βασιλέως). As in Sophocles' play, what opposes the divine law is, in both these epic episodes, nothing new, nothing democratic, nothing more 'political' than the

[38] Meier (1993: 166–87). Bernard Knox (1983) uses similar language: cf. pp. 10 and 26, [*Ajax* and *Antigone*], 'raise questions about the right of the *polis* to demand obedience in all things', etc.

[39] For Bernard Knox (1983: 13) on the other hand, it is the Atridae who are the representatives of the polis: 'The claims of the polis are advanced by unworthy spokesmen whose mean and spiteful ranting enhances the dignity of (the) heroic corpse'; cf. also ibid. 26. Once again the interpreters know that the play is political, but their political interpretations contradict each other: flatly, but also blandly. Cf. n. 44 below.

imperious will of an angry commander. Herodotus, too, is concerned with the theme of burying an enemy, the Persian Mardonius, in a context which involves no Athenian but a Spartan king.[40]

To be confident that this age-old wisdom has here a specifically Athenian application, and to see in the odious Atridae of this play a representation of the *polis* of Athens and of Athenian leaders, is a step that one must surely hesitate to take. Reluctance may be strengthened by the cliché of political display oratory which Euripides dramatizes in his *Supplices*: the Athenians selflessly took up arms to prevent the Thebans from leaving unburied the bodies of the Seven. The audience is regaled with large helpings of Athenian self-congratulation.[41] This favourite Athenian myth must surely make us wonder whether an Athenian audience would have taken the action of the Theban Creon, in *Antigone*, or the Peloponnesian Atridae, in this play—the wicked refusal of burial—as standing, in the absence of any evident clue, for Athens. More likely, surely, that they were seen as standing for the human species generally; particularly, I should guess (and guessing is what we are all doing, disguise it as we may) in a period in which there were many men in the Greek world who thought that the end justified the means, and that political calculations were supreme. Thucydides picked Corcyra as the place in which to set a discussion of them.[42]

That current of sceptical thought, rather than the democracy of Athens, looks like a target here; but the pupils of the sophists and the friends of Critias were by no means all Athenians, and the city herself was not identical even with those who were; while the Spartans who, in dooming the suppliants at Plataea, rejected every argument but their own advantage, had nothing to learn from Athens about political cynicism or political sophistry.[43] It is worth mentioning, to illustrate the subjectivity of all this, that while on Meier's view the Atridae of *Ajax* represent Athens, other scholars, no less distinguished, explain their repulsiveness by insisting that they stand for Athens' Peloponnesian enemies.[44] It is not clear on

[40] Herodotus 9. 78–9. The king rejects the temptation, not on any ground which might be called democratic, or even political, but because: 'We leave that kind of thing to barbarians, and even in them we regard it as hateful.'

[41] Cf. Loraux (1986: 67 ff.).

[42] Thucydides 3. 82–5.

[43] Thucydides 3. 68.

[44] Thus Seaford in Silk (1996: 292): 'The petty and vindictive Atreidai do not, as Goldhill claims, represent the *polis*. They are rather the ancestors of Athens' enemies.' *ὄνειδος ἥκει τόδ' ἀντ' ὀνείδους, δύσμαχα δ' ἐστὶ κρῖναι* (Aesch. *Ag.* 1560 f.). Claim and counter-claim, and it is hard to decide between them; even harder, perhaps, to give systematic or objective reasons for one's choice.

what rational basis the reader is to choose between such contradictory assertions, which have in common only that they are political. And it is made strikingly apparent that an approach to Attic tragedy which promised to be hard-headed, undeceived, rooted not in the subjectivities of literary criticism but in political realities, is in fact at least as subjective as any 'literary' interpretation.

Two last political views of *Ajax*. In 1964 F. Robert[45] argued that the emphasis in the play on the parentage of Eurysaces, Ajax' son by the captive woman Tecmessa, but still his true son and heroic heir, was meant to reflect unfavourably on Pericles' law restricting citizenship to the children of two Attic citizens: 'La pièce prend parti avec vigueur pour la conception aristocratique.' Such specific suggestions are nowadays out of fashion,[46] and historicist scholars prefer to stick to more general accounts of the relation of tragedy and history; but the idea can no more be refuted now than it could thirty years ago. What it suffers is perhaps worse than refutation: it is simply not in the modern style.[47]

More modern, because more collective, is the theory advanced in another recent book.[48] For Seaford, various points in the play 'seem to prefigure the cult of Ajax' as a hero (129 f.).[49] Ajax, in fact, as 'the

[45] Robert (1964: 213 ff.).

[46] See the classic criticism of this approach by G. Zuntz (1955: 55 ff.): 'The most commonly accepted instances of allusions to contemporary events are discussed next. They prove imaginary', etc.

[47] A vigorous defence of this procedure of finding specific references to events and persons in Attic drama, tragic and comic, is made by Michael Vickers (1997: pp. xix ff.).

[48] Seaford (1994).

[49] See the rather different arguments of P. Burian (1972) and A. Henrichs (1993). The absence of clear reference in the play to cult calls forth from Henrichs some subtle arguments: in this play the poet 'explores tentatively, almost reluctantly' hero cult (165), 'seen *in statu nascendi*'. On this view lines 1175–80 are crucial. They show that the corpse of Ajax has already supernatural power: 'The choral voice emerges as the instigator and guarantor of ritual performance' (170); in fact, 'The choral voice also creates the power the corpse holds in the mind of Teukros. It holds this power only because the chorus has effectively buried Aias in an imaginary performance that anticipates the actual burial' (173); and the Athenian audience is to be reminded not only of the tomb far away in the Troad but also of Aias' island of Salamis, and of cult in Athens

recipient of the cult, on the point of abandoning ruinous hostile reciprocity for the permanence of collective cult, acquires a lofty perspective' (136). As Ajax approaches death, his language takes on echoes of the mysteries (392 ff.); he achieves 'mystic insight into the changeability of all things' (397). This insight 'includes the instability of all personal relations, whether friendly or hostile. It is in principle inconsistent . . . with excessive hostility to his enemies' (ibid.). Thus we can say:

> Ajax, already poised (like the mystic initiand) in the liminal space between life and death, is reconciled to his own unjust and piteous death by his insight into the cosmic principle of the perpetual transformation into each other of opposites, including, we may infer (*sic*), his own death and life in the perpetuation of his cult. The political significance of his insight is that it underlies both the communality of cult . . . and its perpetuation. (400)

There are, surely, two difficulties with this account. One is that there is no clear allusion in the text of the play to a collective cult of Ajax, or indeed to any cult of him at all. The other is that what the text does show us is an Ajax who at his death expresses undiminished emotional attachment to his distant parents: they will mourn bitterly for his fate; and who, so far from transcending hostility, still hates the whole Achaean army and curses it to destruction by the Erinyes (835–51). Ajax dies unreconciled, still passionate in love and hate, and alone.

The extreme difficulty of getting objectively reliable conclusions from the text on such questions may be neatly illustrated. Charles Segal describes Ajax receiving 'a warrior's funeral with an entirely masculine focus'; Odysseus is excluded, and 'these funerary rites . . . say nothing of Tecmessa or female lamentation in general'.[50] In the same collection of essays P. E. Easterling replies that what we see is not the burial rite itself but only a procession towards it, and 'One might think of Tecmessa (and her attendants?) taking part in lamentations at some point after the military honours are over . . . there is no explicit (or implicit) exclusion of Tecmessa from the end of the play' (179). In another place she goes still further: Odysseus

(175 f.). Such fine-spun ingenuities surely take us far from the possible experience of an audience; not to mention the fact that what secures the burial of Aias is not the power of the dead but the reasoned pleading, the λόγος, of Odysseus, as Agamemnon tells him with great emphasis at 1370 ff.

[50] In Silk (1996: 161).

does indeed go off, but 'There is nothing to indicate that he and some unspecified number of soldiers will not do as Teucer suggests [*sc.* 1396 f.] and witness the funeral when the time comes.'[51] It is clear how subjective these fascinating speculations are,[52] with all their consequences for the interpretation of the work.[53]

What has this whirlwind tour taught us? First, a political element is one of the possible ingredients of an Attic tragedy, but only one. Second, many scholars are now determined that the *polis* shall enter in, even where the text seems to offer it no foothold: Attic tragedy is defined as a political form, and political messages are to be found in it everywhere. That goes with a conviction that the whole experience of tragedy is, in some way which is important but not easy to define exactly, collective.

Second, there is the great difficulty of determining just what the political content of a play, or of a passage in a play, should be taken to be. Alternative explanations and accounts are freely on offer, and it is hard to see a rationale for choosing between them; yet it must be a question, for instance, whether *Ajax* can both be about the establishment of a mystical hero-cult which will heal the division of society, and at the same time be a demonstration that aristocratic leaders are indispensable to the armies and fleets of the *demos*; a warning against the perils of Athenian imperialism, and at the same time an attack on Pericles' restrictive citizenship law. And can the unappetizing Atridae stand both for the Athenian democracy and for its Peloponnesian enemies?

But perhaps all this is possible. We must ask: what is the status of these proposals for the interpretation of the tragic texts? If one member of the audience, or one modern reader, claims that he finds such and such a political or ideological message, does it make sense for someone else to deny that it is 'there', or to find an opposite one? Must we acquiesce in a Protagorean state of subjectivity: if it

[51] In R. Scodel (1993: 14).

[52] For another example see Easterling (1993: 191–9), who lists seven interpretations of the 'political' passage, 919–23.

[53] This suggests the question, how was the end of the play staged, when it was first put on? A producer may show Tecmessa, and other women, following the cortège; he may send them off another way; he may add a short, or a long, file of soldiers. It often happens that we are not in a position to make a confident decision between alternatives, all of which were possible in the Attic theatre. But it is clearly unsound to settle such a point in one's mind, and then to treat one's own solution as a basis for the interpretation of the play.

feels hot to me, then it is hot to me,[54] if it seems political to me, then it is political to me; and it feels political to me in *this* sense, even if it seems to you to be political in *that*? Some of these suggested readings seem to be open, if not to refutation in the sense that a proposition in logic can be refuted, then at least (which is the appropriate degree of *ἀκρίβεια* for this subject matter), to being rendered by argument *ἀπίθανα*, implausible, hard to accept.

But, third, there is another aspect. What sort of experience was it, to sit in the theatre through a set of Attic tragedies? Were the audience on the lookout for subtly disguised or obliquely presented political meanings, or were they absorbed in the primary meaning of the words and events? Were they expecting a lesson in civics, something that would send them on their way more ideologically admonished, more collectively minded, more solid in their democratic citizenship, than they had been when they came into the theatre? Such questions cannot, in so simple a form, receive a simple answer. For one thing, audiences are not monolithic. A rustic making a rare visit to the theatre did not look for, or find, the same things in a Sophoclean trilogy as the poets Euripides and Agathon, when they sat through one. Some spectators will have seen more, some less, in these complex works.

But there are at least three points of caution which need to be borne in mind. The first is that the city did not make the experience of watching tragedies free to its citizens.[55] In the middle of the fifth century admission to the theatre cost two obols; not a trivial price, especially as in general festivals in Greece cost nothing. The city, that is, did not place so much value on indoctrinating its citizens with the ideology of democracy that it paid for them to get it for nothing. I suppose that tragedy was one of the *ἀνάπαυλαι*, the breaks, the refreshments, which Pericles in the Funeral Speech claimed were more numerous at Athens than anywhere else.[56] Tragedy was a pleasure (*τέρψις*) that you paid for, not a duty imposed on you by the state.

Second, it is worth observing that it was not only under the democracy that tragedy was loved and performed. Soon every Greek

[54] 80 Diels–Kranz B1.

[55] Cf. Alan H. Sommerstein in Pelling (1997: 65 ff.).

[56] Thucydides 2. 38. 1: *καὶ μὴν καὶ τῶν πόνων πλείστας ἀναπαύλας τῇ γνώμῃ ἐπορισάμεθα, ἀγῶσι μέν γε καὶ θυσίαις διετησίοις νομίζοντες . . . ὧν καθ' ἡμέραν ἡ τέρψις τὸ λυπηρὸν ἐκπλήσσει.*

city had its theatre for the performance of Attic tragedies. The kings and the oligarchies that dominated the cities evidently did not realize that the purpose of tragedy was political, and indeed specifically democratic. Still less, presumably, was that evident to the Roman aristocrats who in the half-Hellenized city on the Tiber patronized the translating and staging of Greek tragedies in Latin.[57] Propaganda for democracy? Hardly. Even the questioning of democracy does not seem likely as a motive.

Finally, and most importantly, we come to the question of the nature of the tragic pleasure itself. Were the spectators really looking through the surface meaning and content of the action for subtle hidden political messages? Surely the answer to this question is, broadly and for the great majority of spectators of most tragedies, No. That answer can perhaps not claim to be wholly free of the subjective, but it has at least the merit of being supported by the ancients themselves. Those who describe the state of mind of the audience in the theatre, whether they approve of it, like Gorgias, or strongly disapprove, like Plato, agree that the audience was 'deceived', emotionally swallowed up, abandoning itself to the pleasure of sympathetic emotion with the sufferings of the characters. Surrendering ourselves, *ἐνδόντες ἡμᾶς αὐτούς*, says Plato,[58] we follow the poet wherever he impels our emotions; by pity and terror (or 'sympathy and alarm'), says Aristotle,[59] we effect the

[57] It is with surprise that one reads that 'When the conquering Romans introduced the arts of captive Greece to Latium, it was not Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides who provided the chief source of popular dramatic inspiration (though political tragedy modelled on Euripides was not unknown in Rome), but Menander' (P. Cartledge in Easterling (1997: 35)). The tragedies of Ennius, Pacuvius, and Accius, based of course on Attic models, were still powerful a century later, in the days of Cicero, who quotes Roman tragedy constantly. On Ennius, e.g. F. Leo (1913: 187): 'Als Tragiker hat er das Theater beherrscht, und zwar mit einer sein Leben überdauernden Wirkung.' On Pacuvius, ibid. 227; he was fond of using plays by Sophocles, and for Varro (Aulus Gellius 6. 14) he was the paradigm of the grand style. And so on.

[58] *Republic* 605de.

[59] This, of course, is when the play worked. Sometimes it did not work, as when the audience allowed the tension to be shattered if an actor mispronounced a word (see Dover's note on Aristophanes, *Frogs* 304); or when a passage was felt to be absurdly bombastic, *ψυχρόν*. As Timotheus was performing his *Artemis*, one of the audience stood up and ridiculed a vulnerable line (*Poetae Melici Graeci* frag. 778(b) Page)—though in that case it is worth remembering that the kibitzer was Cinesias, a rival composer. The line might not have been such a failure with all the audience.

purgation of such feelings. Where do we find ancient passages that speak of a cool and analytic sophistication in the spectators?

Intense emotion is one of the things which seem to come off rather short, on these political interpretations,[60] necessarily, if the audience, so far from surrendering themselves, are constantly on the watch for secondary meanings, in what might be called a post-modern manner and frame of mind. Another is religion. The plays have so much to say about the gods, and our most recent guides so little. Religion was not less important than politics to playwright and audience; above all, perhaps, to Sophocles.[61]

It has not been the intention of this paper to deny that Attic tragedy, like other forms of literature, has its roots in the healthy loam of contemporary history and the society in which, and for which, it was produced. It is true, too, that a tragedy may have at its very heart something that can properly be called political: a few extant tragedies do. What does surely emerge is that the political element in this art-form can be greatly exaggerated and misconceived; that politics is only one of the possible elements of a tragedy; and that interpretation in excessively political terms can lead to damaging mistakes. Such questions are often far from being dominant. Other aspects of the human heart may be more intense and more central, and so may other questions connected with the eternal problems of man's relation with the divine. That is part of the reason why Attic tragedy continues, long after the passing of Attic democracy, to engross modern readers and modern audiences, to command their attention, and to draw their tears.

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[60] On this central point there is much to agree with in Heath (1987).

[61] See above, ch. 2.

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6

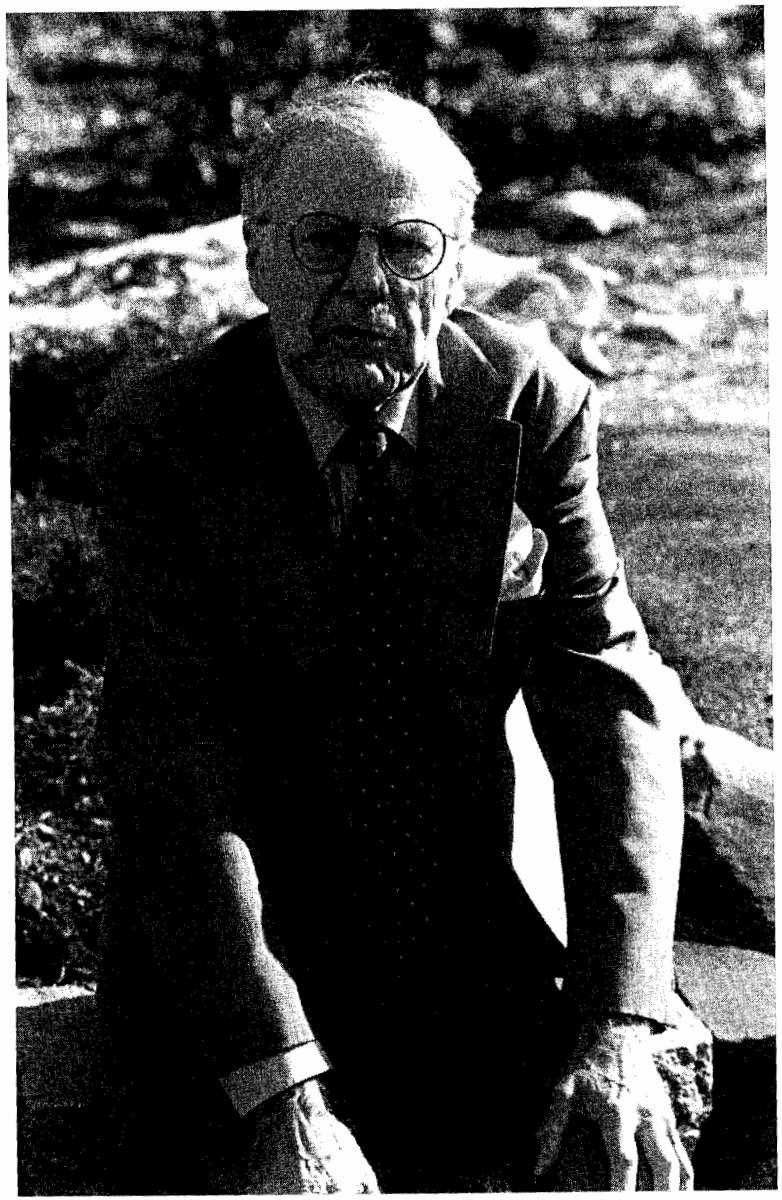
Plain Words in Sophocles

P. E. EASTERLING

Writing a commentary on *Oedipus at Colonus* has made me think about how to do justice to the extraordinary poise and power of Sophoclean language, despite its seeming simplicity in this late play. Hence the 'plain words' of my title, but plain in the spirit of Shakespeare's Lear:

> Pray do not mock me.
> I am a very foolish fond old man
> Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;
> And, *to deal plainly*,
> I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
> Methinks I should know you and know this man;
> Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
> What place this is, and all the skill I have
> Remembers not these garments; nor do I know
> Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
> For, as I am a man, I think this lady
> To be my child Cordelia.
>
> (*King Lear* IV. viii. 60–71)

What I mean by 'plain words' or 'dealing plainly' is not artless naivety or homely colloquialism; I am well aware that Sophoclean discourse—like Shakespeare's—is typically artful in the extreme, relying on a range of vocabulary that includes many abstract nouns and many synonyms, often coinages, which make possible an elaborate use of *variatio*. This subtlety of variation is evident too in syntax, in word-order, sentence-structure, and the rhetorical shaping of arguments, not to mention verse rhythm, and there is a network of references to other texts that further enriches the



Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones

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Essays Presented to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones

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