

Tragedy as Democratic Education

The Case of Classical Athens

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ABSTRACT

Tragedy was an essential part of the public administration of ancient Athens. This article provides a short overview of three basic topics: how the city administered its public affairs, how it paid for its system of government, and what classical scholars mean when they talk about Greek tragedy. It then offers a brief reading of Aeschylus' play Suppliant Women as a specific example of how tragedy could engage the city's attention on an important matter of public moment. It concludes that the education Athenian spectators received in the theater was their best preparation for service on the democratic bodies of the assembly, council, and law courts.

I begin with democratic Athens. By this phrase, I denote a relatively small Greek city-state of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E.¹ Consisting of perhaps 30,000 citizens and 150,000 inhabitants overall, and occupying an area of approximately 965 square miles, Athens was, by and large, efficiently governed by one of the most radical democracies the world has ever seen. The sovereignty of the people, or *demos*, was guaranteed by three political institutions: the popular assembly, called the *ekklesia*; the council of 500, or *boule*; and the law courts, *dikasteria*. All important policy decisions, whether foreign or domestic, were taken by majority votes in one or more of these bodies.

Pride of place goes to the Athenian assembly. Its meetings were open to all male citizens over the age of about 20 and required a quorum of 6,000. Anyone who wished could speak. By the mid-fifth century B.C.E., the city had begun offering a modest daily wage to enable poorer citizens to attend. The body's decisions were final, although they could be (and occasionally

were) reversed by other, subsequent meetings of the assembly. A decree of the *ekklesia* thus served as a rough barometer of the will of the people on a given issue at a particular moment in time.

Directing the deliberations of the assembly was an enormous task. Thus, the main purpose of the council of 500 was to set the agenda for the larger body, in both its regularly scheduled and ad hoc sessions. Ordinarily, the council also prepared draft resolutions on the various items to be taken up, although these motions could be ignored or amended beyond recognition. A basic axiom of Athenian politics was *meden aprobouleuton*: Nothing should be done without preliminary consideration by the council. Part of what made the council unique was that its 500 members were chosen annually by lot from among all interested male citizens, with 50 drawn from each of the city's 10 tribes. (For a thought experiment, imagine what the U.S. Senate might be like if its 100 members were chosen by lot, with two senators chosen randomly from the lists of eligible voters in each state.) These 500 Athenian councilmen took turns presiding over both the council's and the assembly's meetings, rotating over a lunar calendar of 10 months. No citizen could serve on the council more than twice in his lifetime. As in the case of the assembly, each councilman was paid a salary to facilitate his service.

And then there were the law courts. These numerous bodies, chosen anew from a large pool of jurors for each individual trial, were composed of at least 500 citizens who assumed the roles of both judge and jury. Bound by neither written constitution nor precedent, they heard a wide variety of cases, ranging from the criminal to the political to the personal. Their decisions were sovereign and not subject to appeal. They, too, were staffed by citizen volunteers chosen annually, who were, in turn, paid for their deliberations.

The decisions of all these bodies—assembly, council, and law courts—were implemented by a force of over 700 magistrates, most of whom were themselves selected by lot from among citizen volunteers. Each of these officers was subject to a preliminary screening by the council before assuming office and to an automatic financial investigation on stepping down. The assembly and law courts investigated those thought to have abused the city's trust and punished those found guilty with penalties ranging up to lifelong exile and execution.

This summary, although cursory, suggests just how radical the Athenian democracy was. For almost 200 years, the city's most important decisions were taken by majority votes of large groups of citizen volunteers who had little or no formal education, were mainly poor, and were often illiterate. Of course, the elite exerted a disproportionate influence over the workings of countless individual assemblies, council meetings, and trials. However,

This article is a revised version of a lecture delivered at the annual meeting of the Public Administration Theory Network, Omaha, May 21, 2010.

Athens was nevertheless unique in the extent to which it succeeded in forcing the elite to pay heed to the concerns and interests of the people proper, the *demos* (Ober, 1989).

So just how did the average Athenian citizen formulate his opinions on the crucial issues of the day? By listening to and occasionally making speeches in political bodies, by assessing what he heard against his own experience, and by voting. The political health of the city hinged on the ability of large numbers of its citizens to listen attentively to others; to assess the arguments, evidence, and opinions they heard; and to articulate their own views convincingly in private and in public. The ubiquitous nature of these activities led the Athenians to venerate persuasion, an abstraction that was ultimately personified as a goddess (Peitho) and worshipped in a shrine at the foot of the Athenian Acropolis.² The ultimate result was that the city developed a distinct rhetorical ethos in which all citizens shared. As Ober put it, “Athenian political ideology and significant aspects of Athenian social practice were formulated through, maintained by, and revealed in the processes of public speech” (1994, p. 157).

OTHER PEOPLE’S MONEY

It was largely other people’s money that enabled the Athenians to spend so much time making speeches. As previously noted, citizens drew daily wages for attending political gatherings, and a good number of these meetings were dedicated to subordinating and subjugating other cities and peoples. In the course of the fifth century B.C.E., Athens parlayed its unlikely success in a series of wars against the mighty Persian empire into what was first called the Delian League and later, more straightforwardly, the Athenian Empire. Embracing the Aegean and significant portions of the Ionian and Black Seas and most of the islands and coastal cities washed by these waters, this empire produced vast amounts of tribute that were brought annually to Athens and stored in the city’s temple to Athena Parthenos. These funds were crucial to both the cultural florescence of Athens and the daily functioning of its democracy. When Athenians were not drawing pay for attending political meetings, many of them made an adequate living by serving as rowers in the city’s fleets, as spearmen in its hoplite phalanxes, or as light-armed troops prosecuting sieges of reluctant allies behind in their tribute payments. Athenians’ ability to devote themselves to democracy and empire stemmed in good measure from their appropriation of the financial resources of others.

TRAGEDY

These democratic, imperialistic Athenians were also the primary spectators of the city’s cultural jewel: the tragedies put on each year to honor the

god Dionysus. To classicists, the term *tragedy* denotes, above all, public performances of a distinct literary type. The genre likely had its origin in competing choral hymns performed to honor a god or gods on specific festal occasions. Over time, these choral pieces became more and more complex, with a leader stepping out to deliver solos antiphonally with the remainder of the chorus. This duality of voices eventually became a plurality. By early in the fifth century B.C.E., tragedy had reached its canonical form (i.e. live, open-air, one-off performances featuring costumed individuals who spoke, sang, and danced). It had a chorus and, at first, two and then later three actors who took turns interacting with one another in a variety of poetic meters with differing feels and associations. It is a famous truism that not much happens onstage in Greek tragedies. They are affairs centered around entrances, exits, and speeches; props and gestures, while important, as a rule are few and far between. Almost every event of any significance takes place offstage and is reported by a messenger. In short, tragedy would seem to us moderns to have been decidedly dull. Where, for instance, are the action sequences and chase scenes? Where are the special effects? Where is the psychologically penetrating depiction of character?

Yet tragedy was Athens's intellectual glory. The whole city buzzed for months with talk of the coming productions, which were chosen by magistrates in a competition and funded by a special levy (liturgy) on the richest citizens. Tribe competed with tribe and poet with poet, in the cultural equivalent of the Bowl Championship Series. Athenians hung on news of choral rehearsals with the rapt attention that Nebraskans reserve for details of the Huskers' daily diet and practice regimens. And, to switch horses, tragic performances were judged with all the hoopla now surrounding the Oscars, with perhaps the main exception being that the Athenians took greater precautions to guard against corruption and vote-rigging among the judges.

The events surrounding the performances were steeped in civic ritual. As Goldhill notes:

the four moments of ceremonial preceding the dramatic are all deeply involved with the city's sense of itself. The libations of the ten generals, the display of tribute, the announcement of the city's benefactors, and the parade of state-educated boys, now men, in full military uniform, all stress the power of the *polis*, the duties of an individual to the *polis*. . . . It is an occasion to say something about the city. (1987, p. 68)

There is no better way to summarize the importance of tragedy to Athenians than to note what Aristophanes did in his comedy *Frogs*. This play was staged in 405, in the darkest hour of Athens's increasingly hopeless war against Sparta. The following year would see the city come within a hair's breadth of extinction, facing death for its men, enslavement for its women and children, and the destruction of the walls and ports that were once its pride. To whom

do the Athenians look for salvation? To a tragic poet. The playwright has the god Dionysus descend to the underworld and seek to bring back Aeschylus or Euripides from the dead to help the city find a way out of its dire predicament. It is as if the United States, facing an existential threat orders of magnitude greater than, say, that terrible winter at Valley Forge, or the British burning of Washington in 1814, or the prospect of a Confederate march on the Capitol following the first battle at Manassas, should turn not to a statesman or general but to a dead literary figure from a previous generation: a former poet laureate, an erstwhile winner of a Pulitzer or National Book Award.

It was, above all, tragedy's content that made it invaluable to the Athenians. Its plots were largely those handed down by centuries of oral tradition, centered around a few great families such as those of Agamemnon and Menelaos, or Heracles, or Oedipus. In them, a basically good person, like us except better and more prominent, proceeds inexorably from prosperity to ruin because of his own mistake of one sort or another (Aristotle, 1958, *Poetics*, 1453a). Although many of these plots were familiar from the epic tradition of Homer and others, the way they were presented was strikingly different. Actors and chorus interpreted what transpired around them in a variety of conflicting ways, depending on their particular circumstances and stations in life. Equally important, there was no omniscient, third-person narrator to arrange and subordinate these competing perspectives, creating a sense of order and purpose out of chaos. In short, each spectator had to think for himself, deciding what was wrong and what was right and what exactly had led to each play's disaster. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (lines 177–178), the chorus famously says that it was Zeus who first linked *pathos* and *mathos* (suffering and learning). In classical Athens, the citizens took the lesson to heart, flocking each year to the Theater of Dionysus to ponder nine new tragedies exploring how and why bad things can and do happen to good, decent, noble people. Could there be a more fitting education for public administrators?

Among others, Meier (1993) explored why tragedy became such a valuable intellectual tool in classical Athens. According to him, the city's appropriation of universal Greek myth through its homegrown literary vehicle allowed its citizens to think through how to run their democracy and how to control their empire. Moreover, it permitted them to do so at a safe remove and so to explore without preconditions, without mental reservations, without foregone conclusions, the costs and benefits of each venture, both to themselves and to others. As Meier put it, tragedy became essential "for the mental venture of politics . . . refresh[ing], regenerat[ing], and further develop[ing] [its] ethical basis" (1993, p. 43). Simply put, tragedy offered all Athenians the rudiments of a liberal arts education.

Despite its civic trappings, the genre was not straightforwardly patriotic. Goldhill, for instance, has argued that the plays routinely subverted "key words in the discourse of social order," with deeply problematic results (1987,

p. 74). Zeitlin (1990) demonstrated that it did so, in part, via a strategy of displacement. By locating its disruptions long ago and far away (and, let us remember, by placing much of the blame for them on women), tragedy did two things simultaneously: It reinforced a strong sense of male citizen identity, and it depicted the real-world sufferings that all too often flowed from the exercise of power.

This point is worth repeating, in different words. Despite their Bronze Age settings and mythical plots, tragedies nevertheless took classical Athens as an important frame of reference. In retrospect, this is not surprising. Although the genre eschewed metatheatrical elements, its poets had few resources as they went about reimagining a vanished age. Lacking eyewitnesses, archives, and libraries and only dimly aware of the material remains of the past surrounding them, the tragedians had a far less developed historical consciousness than do we today. Thus, they relied above all on contemporary analogy to stage the ancient stories. In many instances, their recourse to the here and now was admittedly intuitive rather than conscious. Even so, the fifth-century BCE Athenian spectators, like the Romans watching Plautus some three centuries later, understood that *nostra res agitur*: It is our affairs that are being depicted on stage (Segal, 1987, p. 40).

AESCHYLUS' SUPPLIANT WOMEN

I now turn to a specific example drawn from my own research. Aeschylus' tragedy *The Suppliant Women* takes as its subject a Bronze Age myth, the flight of Danaus and his 50 daughters from Egypt to Greece. The women want to avoid marrying their 50 cousins, the sons of their uncle Aegyptus, and come to the territory of Argos seeking asylum. Their claim is that they are distantly related to Io, an Argive priestess once courted by Zeus. (Transformed into a cow and driven to Egypt by a stinging gadfly, this woman had once again been touched by the god and restored to human shape before giving birth to a son.) Now returned to their ancient homeland, the Danaids occupy a local sanctuary. They are soon confronted by King Pelasgus and his host of Argive warriors. After mutual introductions, the king expresses his sympathy but refuses to grant their request for asylum on his own say-so. When the women threaten suicide, however, he relents and refers the matter to the Argive assembly, which then meets offstage. The women soon receive the good news that the citizens have unanimously approved the request. But their jubilation is tempered by the arrival of their pursuing cousins, and Danaus goes off to get help. As the Egyptian herald and his men prepare to drag the women off to their ships, Pelasgus and the Argives return to save the day. They confront the Egyptians, who angrily depart while muttering dark threats of war. The play ends as the newcomers and natives depart together for the city center, discussing what the future may hold.

Classical scholars have naturally adopted many interpretive approaches to the play (Garvie, 2006, pp. 211–212). I am inclined to the view that the play deals primarily with the acculturation and incorporation of foreigners. However, while most critics, especially Zeitlin (1992, p. 211), read it as an example of successful integration, I argue that Aeschylus places the emphasis elsewhere. Within *Suppliant Women* itself, there are strong hints that the arrival of the Danaids will create unwelcome political, sexual, and economic complications: The interests of the newcomers are distinct from those of the natives. In the remaining plays of the trilogy, Argos suffers a siege, military defeat, and coup d'état, all of which are linked to the Danaids. On my reading, *Suppliant Women* is thus a drama emphasizing the limits to and dangers of civic incorporation.

Moreover, the play should be understood in light of a crucial historical phenomenon in the years surrounding its production: large-scale immigration to Athens. Under the Peisistratids in the sixth century B.C.E., the city had experienced an increased flow of foreigners from various parts of the Mediterranean and beyond. After the liberation from tyrants, and after the reforms of Cleisthenes and the victories of the Persian Wars, this flow of immigrants became a flood. As fifth-century B.C.E. Athenians became increasingly conscious of their collective identity, their ongoing attempts to define themselves resulted in the exclusion of others (Patterson, 1981; Grethlein, 2003, pp. 45–108). Among their most important actions in this regard was the creation of a formal legal status to designate free noncitizens living among them. These people, neither citizens nor slaves, were called metics (*metoikoi*, i.e., lives with) and their status *metoikia*. The flight of Danaus and his daughters to Argos was a legend. If there was any basis at all to the tradition, it was rooted in a distant, inaccessible past removed from Aeschylus by more than 500 years, during most of which time the Greeks had lacked the ability to read and write. Thus, when he went to stage the story, he did so in the idiom of his own age. Time and again, both directly and indirectly, the poet made Danaus and his daughters into metics and emphasized the fact with particulars drawn from the legal vocabulary of his day (Bakewell, 1997).

The Athenian process of self-definition was marked by both consolidation of power in the city's center and the demarcation of boundaries, both geographical and human (Anderson, 2003, pp. 87–103; Cole, 2004, pp. 78–79). By defining itself, the *polis* created, in effect, not just insiders, but outsiders as well. Athenians originally had little difficulty differentiating themselves from slaves and transients; among the long-standing residents of Attica, the primary distinctions were those of class (Manville, 1990, p. 183). However, in the course of the sixth and especially the fifth centuries B.C.E., the number of foreigners residing in Athens increased exponentially. Conceptually speaking, the influx was, at first, accommodated by two traditional notions: that of Athens as a place of refuge from time immemorial and that of aristocratic

guest-friendship (*xenia*). As the democratic character of Athens became more pronounced, the idea of autochthony developed (Rosivach, 1987) and the citizens felt an increased need to differentiate themselves further from the Others now living more or less permanently among them (Whitehead, 1977, p. 140). They did so primarily by imagining themselves as a homogeneous, earth-born national³ community.

The *metoikia* they awarded to those who did not belong was not an altruistic gesture. A century ago, scholars could argue that the status was a quasi-citizenship, a generous expression of *noblesse oblige* (Clerc, 1893; Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, 1887). As Whitehead (1977) showed, *metoikia* was more a matter of calculated self-interest. Metics made crucial contributions to Athens in a number of ways, and thus the city had to tolerate and even encourage their presence. Yet these same people were outsiders, and the citizens went to great lengths to make sure they would remain so, restricting their abilities to cultivate political, economic, and marital ties with citizens. Conceptually speaking, *metoikia* remained an ambiguous blend of concession and obligation, a deal struck by a city eager to maximize its gain while minimizing its risk. Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* demonstrates that the Athenian anxieties attendant on this balancing act were already present at the creation of this new legal status in the years just prior to the play's production in the second half of the 460s B.C.E. Those watching the trilogy were left to ponder the possible connection between the Argives' fateful decision to admit the Danaids, and the destruction of their city.

CONCLUSION

In ancient Athens, the theater provided a space—a laboratory, if you will—for the city to gather and observe itself. That is to say, the spectators watched prominent individuals interact with their broader political and social communities in ways that were largely familiar. These characters were forced to make important choices amid trying circumstances. Their choices, while understandable and sometimes necessary, nevertheless led almost invariably to calamity. Tragedies thus served as demonstrations of the relation between choice and outcome, reminders that the link between cause and effect was ultimately as inexorable as it was initially invisible.

The historian Thucydides famously depicted political affairs as matters of *realpolitik*, with both human beings and cities calculating and pursuing their own advantage relentlessly. One might, therefore, say that tragedy functioned as a sort of educational counterweight. By evoking in the audience pity for its characters, the genre generated empathy for Others. By evoking fear that something similar could happen to themselves, it provided a salutary caution (Aristotle, 1958, *Poetics*, 1453a). If even the greatest and wisest of heroes, acting from the best possible motives, could be mistaken and brought low in an unexpected way, how much more might this be true of the spectators

themselves and their own decisions? It is at any time difficult to learn from the mistakes of others. Yet the Athenians sought to do so via tragedy, enlarging their humane sympathies and honing their intellects with the plays staged each March in the Theater of Dionysus. Time and again, they discovered that language, reasoned argument, and intellectual analysis (in a word, *logos*), although flawed, nevertheless remained the best tools they had for understanding themselves and the complicated, dangerous world around them. This process, I argue, was the mental education that best prepared them to take up their political duties in the assembly, council, and law courts.

NOTES

1. My brief sketch of Athenian democracy derives largely from Hansen (1999).

2. Pausanias 1.22.3 said that Theseus instituted a shrine to Peitho and to Aphrodite Pandemos. The depiction of both goddesses on the south frieze of the classical temple of Athena Nike above their own sanctuary (Hurwit 1999, p. 212) suggests that the worship of Peitho there predates 425 B.C.E.

3. I use the term *national* as a means of identifying those Greeks hailing from various non-Athenian *poleis* and non-Greeks of various *ethne*. On the *ethnos* (nation) as a useful basis for studying Athenian history, see Cohen (2000).

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