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Contents

Understanding Greek tragedy

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Greek tragedy presents to modern man two very different sides at the same time. On one hand, when seeing a tragedy by Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides on stage, or when reading it ourselves, we often feel an immediate appeal, a sense of familiarity and truth, a delight in the manner of presentation, as if we were confronting something basic and universal, which it is easy to appreciate. It may be that this spontaneous feeling of understanding really reflects the basic similarity of human nature and thought through different ages and cultures, or it may be that it contains more insight into ourselves than into the Greeks. On the other hand, we may find the plays in many respects odd and old-fashioned, with strange conventions, like their formal structure and the presence of the singing and dancing chorus. This sense of temporal and cultural distance which is often felt by the general public is more than shared by the classical scholar, who is acutely aware of the fragmentary and uncertain character of the evidence available to explain the differences between that world and our own. This sense of distance can be productive: every generation must see the past through its own eyes, and the past responds to new approaches of study with new visions. But a scholar must always strive to reject his inherited system of values and his way of looking at life in order to understand better the ancient world. In the following, I shall discuss some approaches to Greek tragedy which,

I think, have been especially prominent during the last few years. I shall deal with questions concerning the stagecraft, the characters, the portrayal of women, the influence of ritual, and the language of tragedy.

Greek tragedy belongs to the theatre. A modern production of a Greek play in the theatre is – and must be – quite free to understand, emphasize and interpret the play in the way the director and the actors wish to. In fact, there have always been changes in the text and shifts of emphasis ever since the period of the great tragedians themselves. There is no sense in trying to reproduce on the modern stage the likeness of the first performance of a tragedy in fifth-century style. Scholarly study is another matter. It cannot be denied that the Greek plays have often been interpreted by the scholars mainly as texts, as something to be read from a book, not as something to be seen in theatre. Partly this is an inheritance from Aristotle, who in his Poetics concentrated on other things than *opsis,* the visualisation of the play.[1] But even he demanded that the poet, when composing his drama, should try to imagine everything happening before his eyes.[2] This is an exercise adopted recently by several scholars with considerable success.[3]

In this approach we need of course all possible help from the archaeologists to understand the concrete surroundings for which the poets wrote their plays. But for

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an attempt to understand the plays as dramatic performances, the evidence supplied by archaeological material is not enough: the main source is the texts of the plays. This poses several problems, as the original editions had no stage directions like modern plays, indicating the entrances and exits of the characters, their movements on the stage and so on;[4] mostly not even the names of the speakers were given, change of speaker being indicated only by a stroke between the lines.[5] A careful reading of the texts, however, does make it possible to conclude that every significant action taking place on the stage is, in one way or another, indicated by the poet in his text.

On the basis of the poet's words we can conjure before our eyes, in the form it was performed in Aeschylus' time, the memorable scene from **Agamemnon** where Clytemnestra meets her victorious husband and orders the maids to strew his path to the house with purple garments; how he, after yielding to her will, takes off his shoes and walks unknowingly to his doom along this path of ominous red.[7] Probably the garments are then gathered away, which makes the same approach to the house made by the second murder victim, Cassandra, stand in outward contrast to Agamemnon's, just as Cassandra's clear consciousness of her own doom and of the whole house's past and future woes contrasts implicitly with Agamemnon's incomprehension of the situation.[8] Thus, we can detect many stagecraft effects used by the playwrights which greatly enhance the force of the text itself.

The question of the character of the heroes of Greek tragedy has risen much to the fore in recent research.[9] The characters of tragedy have earlier – with the exception of a few scholars[10] – been interpreted as psychologically explicable personalities, whose actions are governed by conscious motives and subconscious drives which can be seen in the poet's text or, if they cannot – as often happens – can and

should be deduced from the actions of the play.[11] It is true that Aristotle had already demanded that the characters – *ēthē* – of the dramatic persons should have consistency and probability.[12] Moreover, we are used to many-sided character portrayals in our literature. And naturally, many of the heroes of Greek drama make upon us the strong impression of a clearly cut character. Who could forget for instance the powerful impact made by Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' **Agamemnon,** that woman "with a mind of a man" *(androboulon kear),* who after all her deceitful speeches of welcome stands there beside her husband's corpse, weapon in hand, exulting in the blood that sprinkled her in the act of murder? But are we justified in probing deeper into her psychology – in stressing as her motive her hate of her husband, or her love for her paramour, or her envy of the male dominance in the society?[13] It is, I think, more true to the Aeschylean drama to see her rather as a part of the whole drama than as an individual portrayed in her own right.[14] Her perverted ideas of sexuality, parenthood, power and justice are a part of the picture of perversion and injustice which is portrayed by the whole of the play, by all its characters and, in no small measure, by its language and metaphors,[15] and this picture again is a part of the dramatic whole of the trilogy, at the end of which the perversions give way to justice, health, and prosperity.[16] In this discussion of the character of a Greek hero, I believe that rather than subject the characters to modern psychoanalysis we should study them as moulded by the dramatic action and by their speeches, which often are more determined by rhetoric, means of persuasion and argument, than by psychology.

A separate problem is the presentation of female characters in Greek drama. This is a problem of interaction between society and drama. The question of the position of women in Greek society has recently received much attention.[17] Quite apart from

being a fashionable subject, it is also certainly a worthwhile subject. The women of tragedy have sometimes been used as evidence for the existence of a more independent and esteemed position of women in Athenian society than is allowed for by the traditional picture, where women are seen as strictly confined to their house, without any freedom of movement or speech in the male world.[18] Many women of tragedy seem to contradict this picture – think of Antigone acting courageously against the orders of the ruler, listening only to her conscience and defending her view freely in public; or Medea, taking the law into her own hands and contriving security for herself, revenge on her husband and destruction to her enemies. But the peculiar character of the art-form must be taken into account. These women are women of mythology, and their actions are for the most part determined by the myth.[19] Moreover, all writers of Greek tragedy were men, all actors were men, dressed as women for the women's roles – it has been argued that these aspects, together with the public character of Greek tragedy, may account for the fact that many women in tragedy behave like men and support male values. For instance Medea and Antigone both have a fear of losing their honour by being humiliated by the laughter of their enemies – a typically masculine trait in Greek literature.[20] I think that future research will have much to say about the tragedians' attitude to the role of women in Greek society.[21] Several of their plays show that they were conscious of the social and emotional problems of women and had an understanding of the woman's point of view, too.

Another aspect for which the social and mental environment of fifth-century theatre must be taken into account when trying to understand the composition and effect of Greek tragedy, is its connection with religion and ritual. The institution of the theatre in Athens as such was born in connection with the cult of Dionysus, and even before the organization of the Dionysiac festivals, the early forms of tragedy apparently grew up from various ritual practices. The existing tragedies may contain features which still reflect these practices, and can help in explaining the much-discussed problem of the origins of tragedy.[22] But more relevant to the understanding of Greek tragedy, such as it stands before us in the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, is its relation to the cults and religious feeling of its own day. The tragedies themselves had not much to do with Dionysus – this fact was proverbial in those days – but nevertheless the gods actually appeared on stage, and many rituals, such as purification from pollution, sacrifice, supplication, were central to the actions of the plays. If we want to understand how the tragedy was felt and understood by its fifth-century public, we must take into account the cult practices and their relevance to the men of that time also outside the theatre.[23]

But the influence of religion and ritual goes deeper: it shapes the tragedy, it is the formative factor in the development of the action in many scenes.[24] It may be the central theme of the tragedy, as in Sophocles' **Antigone,** where the whole drama is built upon the question of the right of performing burial rites. It is felt also at the level of language: for instance in Aeschylus' **Oresteia,** the actual sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis, which is described in the first choral song, is reflected throughout the trilogy in the metaphorical use of sacrificial language, in connection with every murder committed or described in the plays. This metaphor of corrupted sacrifice is a part of the central idea of the **Oresteia,** the idea of divine justice perverted by man.[25]

The study of the meaning of ritual in Greek tragedy and also, more generally, the meaning of the myths forming the subject matter of the tragedies, has benefited much from the findings of modern anthropology and history of religion in

cultures widely distant in time and space from the ancient Greeks.[26] Such research can bring insights into the feeling of the basic relevance of Greek tragedy to ourselves. I mention especially the structuralistic approach to myth and ritual.[27] This method developed from structural linguistics, which presupposes the existence of general, unconscious structures common to all speakers of a language, and even universal ones common to all languages. These structures are realized in speech in different individualized forms. A structural pattern much used in the interpretation of myth and ritual is the pattern of binary opposition. Such structures of opposition, for instance of life and death, tame and wild, raw and cooked, appear also in the form of myths and rituals whose function is to overcome this opposition by showing a mediating factor between the opposites. Thus, myths telling of hunters and their prey may act as mediators by giving expression to killing on one hand and the providing of food, necessary for maintaining life, on the other.[28] Such structures can also be realized in other codes in addition to myth and ritual, for instance in the codes of language or food, and they can be used to interpret Greek tragedy, too, from many viewpoints.[29] The structuralistic models used in the interpretation of Greek tragedy may stress too much the binary oppositions functioning as their starting point, and result sometimes in interpretations which are too schematic, but the approach has nevertheless focused attention on many points which have previously passed unnoticed.

I have spoken about some ways of approaching Greek tragedy which take into account a larger frame of reference than the text itself – the stagecraft, the society, the religion and ritual. However, we could say that the study of the text has become even more important with the development of these other approaches. I would like to point out two approaches to the language that have in recent years yielded results which have greatly contributed to the understanding of Greek tragedy. Firstly, many conventions of the language of Greek tragedy which seem odd and undramatic to the modern reader and spectator are seen to have special force.[30] I take as an example the line-to-line dialogue between two actors, the questions and answers usually comprising exactly one line each. These scenes mostly occur at moments of great dramatic tension, as for instance the many recognition scenes. But the tension is not expressed by a life-like imitation of the meeting of two people, but roused to a high pitch by the very formalism of the rapid dialogue, which the public of the theatre knew to belong to the tradition of such scenes.[31]

Secondly, the images and metaphors used by the dramatists have received attention, not just as elements of language, but as elements of the whole drama, underlining the significance of the action of the play.[32] I have already mentioned as an example the imagery of sacrifice in Aeschylus' **Oresteia**.[33] The Aeschylean images develop during the play, they undergo changes of meaning and acquire new associations, and their whole force can often be realized only at the end of the drama.[34] This brings about a problem of criticism: should we interpret the imagery from the point of view of the modern reader who has the possibility of reading and re-reading the text, or start from the experience of the spectator of the drama, who can follow the development of imagery only along with the development of the events of the play? And this brings us back to the question whether we should approach Greek tragedy trying to analyze the experience it offers especially to the readers of our time, or whether we should seek the way in which the ancient Greeks understood the theatre of their own day.

It is clear that no approach can alone give satisfactory results. But it is this very fact that makes the study of tragedy such a rewarding experience – and not only to the

scholar, but to the wider public of readers, spectators, actors, modern writers, and other artists. The study of tragedy is only one example of the study of cultural characteristics, of cultural heritage, of cultural interrelation, which, I hope, will form part of the work done in the Finnish Institute at Athens. I have chosen this example partly because Greek tragedy is dear to me, partly because it is this place in the world where it sprang up, but mainly because in trying to understand Greek tragedy we are compelled to try to understand both ourselves and the foreign, faraway elements of our world, and this is perhaps the most human task of the study of the humanities.

Abbreviations

AJP   = American Journal of Philology
AU   = Der Altsprachliche Unterricht
BICS   = Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, University of London
CB   = Classical Bulletin
CP   = Classical Philology
CQ   = Classical Quarterly
CW   = Classical World
G&R   = Greece and Rome
GRBS = Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies
HSCP = Harvard Studies in Classical Philology
JHS   = Journal of Hellenic Studies
PCPS = Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society
PP   = Parola del Passato
TAPA = Transactions of the American Philological Association
YCS   = Yale Classical Studies

Notes

1 Cf. Aristot. Poet. 1450b17ff. See O. Taplin, *The stagecraft of Aeschylus: observations on the dramatic use of exits and entrances in Greek tragedy* (Oxford 1977), Appendix F, 477–479.

2 Aristot. Poet. 1455a23ff.

3 The viewpoint of tragedy in performance and the stagecraft of the author is emphasized e.g. in N.C. Hourmouziades, *Production and imagination in Euripides: form and function of the scenic space* (Athens 1965), W. Steidle, *Studien zum antiken Drama unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Bühnenspiels* (Munich 1968), H. Ortkemper, *Szenische Techniken des Euripides: Untersuchungen zur Gebärdensprache im antiken Theater* (Diss. Berlin 1969), S. Melchinger, *Das Theater der Tragödie: Aischylos, Sophokles und Euripides auf der Bühne ihrer Zeit* (Munich 1974), P. Walcot, *Greek drama in its theatrical and social context* (Cardiff 1976), O. Taplin, *The stagecraft of Aeschylus* (n. 1), *idem, Greek tragedy in action* (London 1978), D. Seale, *Vision and stagecraft in Sophocles* (London 1982), J.M. Walton, *The Greek sense of theatre* (London 1984), M.R. Halleran, *Stagecraft in Euripides* (London & Sydney 1985).

4 See O. Taplin, "Did Greek dramatists write stage instructions?", *PCPS* n.s. 23 (1977) 121–32.

5 Discussion of the evidence for attribution of parts to speakers in J. Andrieu, *La dialogue antique: structure et présentation* (Paris 1954) 258ff., J.C.B. Lowe, "The manuscript evidence for changes of speaker in Aristophanes", *BICS* 9 (1962) 27–42.

6 See O. Taplin, *PCPS* n.s. 23 (1977) 129f., *idem, The stagecraft of Aeschylus,* 28ff.

7 The association of the colour of the cloth with blood is emphasized by R.F. Goheen, "Aspects of dramatic symbolism: three studies in the *Oresteia*", *AJP* 76 (1955) 115–26.

8 See K. Reinhardt, *Aischylos als Regisseur und Theologe* (Bern 1949) 96–105, O. Taplin, *The stagecraft of Aeschylus*, 309ff., 321f.

9 A short survey of the problems connected with the character of the heroes and of the literature on this subject is given in R.G.A. Buxton, *Sophocles. Greece & Rome: new surveys in the classics No. 16* (Oxford 1984) 12–15. Cf. J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek tragedy* (London 1962), *passim*, esp. 29ff., C. Garton, "Characterisation in Greek tragedy", *JHS* 77 (1957) 247–54, *idem, Personal aspects of the Roman theatre* (Toronto 1972) 3–40, P.E. Easterling, "Presentation of character in Aeschylus", *G&R* 20 (1973) 3–19, "Character in Sophocles", *G&R* 24 (1977) 121–9, J. Gould, "Dramatic character and 'human intelligibility' in Greek tragedy", *PCPS* n.s. 24 (1978) 43–67, A.N. Michelini, "Characters and character change in Aeschylus", *Ramus* 8 (1980) 153–64, R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: an interpretation* (Cambridge 1980) 6–8.

10 The most famous attack against the concept of a consistent, psychologically explicable character in drama is found in Tycho von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin 1917).

11 The psychological view of dramatic characters is by no means lacking in recent studies, either, as is made clear by the debate expressed e.g. in the studies cited in n. 9. Tragedy has been read also in the light of modern psychoanalysis – two heroes particularly susceptible to this kind of treatment are Euripides' Hippolytus and Pentheus of the *Bacchae*; see e.g. W. Sale, "The psychoanalysis of Pentheus in the *Bacchae* of Euripides", *YCS* 22 (1972) 63–82, A.V. Rankin, "Euripides' Hippolytus: a psychoanalytical hero", *Arethusa* 7 (1974) 71–94, J.J. Smoot, "Hippolytus as Narcissus: an amplification", *Arethusa* 9 (1976) 37–51, C. Segal, "Pentheus and Hippolytus on the couch and on the grid: psychoanalytic and structuralistic reading of Greek tragedy", *CW* 72 (1978) 129–48.

12 Aristot. Poet. 1454a16ff.

13 Cf. e.g. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, *PP* 28 (1973) 445–452, R.P. Winnington-Ingram, "Clytemnestra and the vote of Athena", *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge 1983) = *JHS* 68 (1949) 130–47.

14 See J. Gould, *PCPS* n.s. 24 (1978) 58–61.

15 See below p. 8 and n. 32.

16 The movement from sinister associations to positive values is seen e.g. in connection with the colour red (R.F. Goheen, *AJP* 76 [1955] 122–32), nature imagery (J.J. Peradotto, *AJP* 85 [1964] 379, 393), the motif of sacrifice (F.I. Zeitlin, *TAPA* 96 [1965] 499ff., 506ff.), wind imagery (W.C. Scott, TAPA 97 [1966] 459–71), fire imagery (T.N. Gantz, *JHS* 97 [1977] 28, 38), the choral refrains (H.E. Moritz, *CP* 74 [1979] 209ff.), the benefits promised by the Eumenides (C. Macleod, *JHS* 102 [1982] 136ff.), the concept of victory (M. Kaimio, *Arctos Suppl.* 2 [1985] 89f.). For an opposite view of the end of the trilogy, see P. Vellacott, "Has Good prevailed? A further study of the Oresteia", *HSCP* 81 (1977) 113–22.

17 See the "Selected bibliography on women in classical antiquity" by S.B. Pomeroy in *Women in the ancient world: the Arethusa papers*, ed. by J. Peradotto and J.P. Sullivan (Albany 1984) 315–372.

18 The most important exposition of this view of women in tragedy is A.W. Gomme, "The position of women in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.", *CP* 20 (1925) 1–25 = *Essays in Greek history and literature* (Oxford 1937), 89–115.

19 For the role of women in Greek mythology, see J. Gould, "Law, custom and myth: aspects of the social position of women in classical Athens", *JHS* 100 (1980) 38–59, esp. 52ff. Cf. P. Slater, *The glory of Hera: Greek mythology and the Greek family* (Boston 1968), J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en*

Grèce ancienne (Paris 1972).

20 See J. Gould, *PCPS* n.s. 24 (1978) 46, 49f., *JHS* 100 (1980) 57, cf. M. Shaw, *CP* 70 (1975) 261f.

21 Recent discussions on the subject are found e.g. in S.T. Simon, "Euripides' defence of women", *CB* 50 (1974) 39–42, M. Shaw, "The female intruder: women in fifth-century drama", *CP* 70 (1975) 255–66, M. Gagarin, *Aeschylean drama* (Berkeley & Los Angeles 1976), 87ff., M.R. Lefkowitz, "L' héroisme de la femme", Bull. de l'Association G. Budé 1981:3, 284–92 = (in English) *Heroines and hysterics* (New York 1981), 1–11, H. Foley, "The concept of women in Athenian drama", *Reflections of women in antiquity*, ed. H. Foley (London 1982).

22 See W. Burkert, "Greek tragedy and sacrificial ritual", *GRBS* 7:2 (1966) 87–121.

23 Recent studies where this is done are e.g. J. Gould, "Hiketeia", *JHS* 93 (1973) 74–103, W. Burkert, "Opferritual bei Sophokles: Pragmatik – Symbolik – Theater", *AU* 18:2 (1985) 5–20.

24 See for instance the analysis of the scenes between Creon and Medea Eur. Med. 324ff. and the Nurse and Phaedra Eur. Hipp. 176ff. by Gould, *JHS* 93 (1973) 85–87, and (of the latter scene) by O. Taplin, Greek tragedy in action, Cambridge 1978, 69f., of the scene Soph. OC 461ff. by Burkert, *AU* 18:2 (1985) 8–14.

25 See F. Zeitlin, "The motif of corrupted sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*", *TAPA* 96 (1965) 463–508, "Postscript to sacrificial imagery in the *Oresteia*", *TAPA* 97 (1966) 645–53.

26 Cf. e.g. G.S. Kirk, *Myth: its meaning and function in ancient and other cultures* (Berkeley 1970), W. Burkert, *Structure and history in Greek mythology and ritual*, Sather classical lectures 47 (Berkeley & Los Angeles & London 1979).

27 The theories of C. Lévi-Strauss (*Anthropologie structurale* [Paris 1958], *La pensée sauvage* [Paris 1962], *Mythologiques I–IV* [Paris 1964–71], *Anthropolo-*

gie structurale deux [Paris 1973]) are developed and applied to classical studies by J.-P. Vernant (*Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*[3] [Paris 1974], *Mythe et societé en Grèce ancienne* [Paris 1972]), P. Vidal-Naquet (J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragedie en Grèce ancienne* [Paris 1972]) and M. Detienne (*Les jardins d' Adonis* [Paris 1972], *Dionysos mis à mort* [Paris 1977], *L'invention de la mythologie* [Paris 1981]) ; see also e.g. E. Leach, ed., *The structural study of myth and totemism* (London 1967), J. Peradotto, *Classical mythology: an annotated bibliographical survey* (Urbana Ill. 1973) 40ff.

28 C. Lévi-Strauss, "The structural study of Myth", *Myth: a symposium, Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1955) 428–444 = *Anthropologie structurale* 243ff.

29 An important contribution to the structuralistic approach to Greek tragedy is C. Segal, *Tragedy and civilization: an interpretation of Sophocles* (Harvard 1981).

30 See e.g. the contributions in W. Jens, ed., *Die Bauformen der griechischen Tragödie* (Munich 1971), D. Bain, "Audience address in Greek tragedy", *CQ* 25 (1975) 13–25, *Actors and audience: a study of asides and related conventions in Greek drama* (Oxford 1977), *Masters, servants and orders in Greek tragedy: a study of some aspects of dramatic technique and convention* (Manchester 1981), O. Taplin, *The stagecraft of Aeschylus* (see n. 1), R. Hamilton, "Announced entrances in Greek tragedy", *HSCP* 82 (1978) 63–82, D.J. Mastronarde, *Contact and discontinuity: some conventions of speech and action on the Greek tragic stage* (Berkeley & Los Angeles & London 1979), R.G.A. Buxton, *Persuasion in Greek tragedy: a study of peitho* (Cambridge 1982).

31 See J. Gould, *PCPS* n.s. 24 (1978) 55, cf. also W. Jens, *Die Stichomythie in der frühen griechischen Tragödie*, Zetemata 11 (Munich 1955), E.R. Schwinge, *Die Verwendung der Stichomythie in den*

Dramen des Euripides (Heidelberg 1968), B. Seidensticker, "Die Stichomythie" in W. Jens, ed., *Die Bauformen* (see n. 30), 183–220.

32 A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia: a study in language and structure* (Cambridge, Mass. 1971); see also the articles on imagery cited in n. 16 by Peradotto, Zeitlin, Scott, Gantz, and S. Goldhill, *Language, sexuality, narrative: the Oresteia* (Cambridge 1984); R.F. Goheen, *The imagery of Sophocles' 'Antigone': a study of poetic language and structure* (Princeton 1951); other recent works on Sophoclean imagery are mentioned by Buxton in his survey of Sophoclean studies (see n. 9), p. 11 n. 10, 11, 16; S. Barlow, *The imagery of Euripides* (London 1971).

33 P. 7 with n. 25.

34 See especially the work by A. Lebeck cited in n. 32.