

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF ATTIC TRAGEDY¹

What profit, then, did these fine tragedies bring to Athens to compare with the shrewdness of Themistocles which provided the city with a wall, with the diligence of Pericles which adorned the Acropolis, with the liberty which Miltiades bestowed, with the supremacy to which Cimon advanced her? . . . These [victories] are the things which have uplifted Athens to heights of glory and greatness. . . . But the compositions of the poets we may affirm to be but a childish pastime . . .

Plutarch, *On the Glory of the Athenians* 348c, 350a
(Loeb translation by F. C. Babbitt)

The time is long gone when literary men were happy to treat literature, and tragic poetry in particular, as something which exists serenely outside time, high up in the empyrean of unchanging validity and absolute values. Nowadays it is conventional, and seems natural, to insist that literature is produced within a particular society and a particular social setting: even its most gorgeous blooms have their roots in the soil of history. Its understanding requires us to understand the society which appreciated it, and for which it came into existence. In the particular case of the tragic poetry of Athens, the most influential body of recent criticism focuses on the relation of the drama to the realities of political and social life.

This paper will not be concerned with the many publications, some of them excellent, which set out to explain the political or historical significance of particular plays. It will concentrate on general accounts of the social function of Attic tragedy as a whole. Much is now being written on that subject, which clearly is of the highest importance for the interpretation and understanding, not only of tragedy, but also of the whole of fifth-century literature and history. It appears that something like an orthodoxy is emerging about the kind of answer which is appropriate to these questions. That view seems to me to be in important ways misleading, or at least gravely one-sided. It is perhaps now time to cast a critical eye over a sample of this recent work.

The discussion will open by criticizing in turn a series of increasingly sophisticated attempts to explain the phenomenon of Attic tragedy in terms of one influential view of society and literature. It will then take notice of some other recent accounts, which though not identical with that view seem to share with it some important assumptions. It will conclude by outlining a rather different approach, which promises a better solution to this important and complex question.

I

Let us open with a few generalities. In the Romantic era, when a critic spoke of the influence of society on literature, what he usually meant was the interplay between an

¹ This paper singles out for discussion some representative examples of a widespread approach to Attic tragedy. I have not, for example, discussed M. Griffith's challenging 'Brilliant dynasts: power and politics in the *Oresteia*', *CA* 15 (1995), 63–129. I am grateful to S. Said for letting me see her important and learned address, 'Tragedy and Politics', delivered to the 1995 CHS Colloquium entitled 'Democracy, Empire and the Arts in Fifth Century Athens'.

² 'Wer einen Zugang zur tragischen Dichtung der Griechen sucht, muss von den materiellen und geistigen Verhältnissen ihrer Umwelt ausgehen': H. Kuch, in H. Kuch (ed.), *Die griechische Tragödie in ihrer gesellschaftlichen Funktion* (Berlin, 1983), p. 7. S. Said observes, 'Scholars from various countries and different political opinions now fully agree about the political character of Greek tragedy. . . . But this broad consensus on the political nature of tragedy disappears as soon as one tries to [make] explicit one's definition of "politics" and "political"' (loc. cit., n. 1, pp. 3–4).

historical society and some great creative personality working within it. The plays of Shakespeare, it was often said, reflected the new self-confidence of England after the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The early poetry of T. S. Eliot expressed the cynicism bred by the Great War. And so on. Not so the modern school. Not, for them, any talk of great creative personalities. Individual genius is under a cloud, or it has disappeared altogether; and it is society itself, and especially its institutions, which gets the credit for the creation of artistic masterpieces.

An interesting recent book illustrates this currently popular approach very clearly: a much cited collection of essays published in 1990 under the title *Nothing To Do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*.³ In a very recent collection of essays on related topics, the editor in his Introduction singles out this book as one of two that have been 'particularly useful and influential'.⁴ It has the special advantage, for the present purpose, that the first four essays it contains are so arranged as to display a constant progression in sophistication.

In the first essay in the book, 'The Theater of the Polis', Oddone Longo writes (p. 13):

[We must] abandon the use of any concept that gives unwarranted privilege to the 'autonomy' of text or author. It would be more correct to say that the dramatic author can only [*sic*] be located as a moment of mediation, a nexus or transfer point between the patron or sponsor (the institution which organises and controls the Dionysian contests) and the public (the community at which the theatrical communication is aimed).

We can indeed be even more emphatic. Longo goes on to say (p. 15):

The concepts of artistic autonomy, of creative spontaneity, so dear to bourgeois aesthetics, must be radically reframed, when speaking of the Greek theater, by considerations of the complex institutional and social conditions within which the processes of literary production in fact took place.

At this point, I think, an obvious objection comes to mind. Did not the Greeks themselves think in some of these bourgeois terms? The conception of the Muse inspiring the poet expresses, one may think, something all too like the idea of 'creative spontaneity'; while the Greeks constantly discussed poetry in terms of the individual personalities of the poets. Aristophanes, for instance, in *Frogs* and also in *Thesmophoriazusae*, builds his whole play on the idea that poets like Aeschylus and Euripides and Agathon had each a strongly marked and idiosyncratic literary personality, which resembled his actual personality, and which differed strikingly from that of anyone else who wrote plays.⁵ A spectre, we might perhaps say, is haunting the academic literature of the West: the spectre of Marxism, which lingers on, after its death in the world of practical affairs, among the critics and the scholiasts.

To confirm that this is not merely a single eccentric voice, a Marxisant straw man, I quote from another important recent book.⁶ Richard Seaford, as we shall see, ascribes the origin of Attic tragedy to the *polis*; but he goes further and is also

³ Edd. J. J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin (Princeton, 1990).

⁴ C. Pelling in C. Pelling (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford, 1997), p. v. The other book named here is A. H. Sommerstein, S. Halliwell, J. Henderson, and B. Zimmermann (edd.), *Tragedy, Comedy, and the Polis* (Bari, 1993). Also important, but too recent for Pelling, is M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic* (Oxford, 1996).

⁵ 'The formal and stylistic preferences of the three great tragedians display considerable divergences, which are hard to explain solely by the methods of social anthropology', observes D. Bain, *JHS* 113 (1993), 187.

⁶ R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford, 1994).

confident that it is to institutions, and to the city-state itself, that the Homeric poems, too, are to be credited, saying (pp. 152, 153):

It was probably sixth-century institutional practice (such as we find at Athens) that allowed the final fixation and predominance of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and not, as Kirk would have it, an eighth-century genius. . . . Of course, there *may* have been a master poet more influential than the others, but the Homeric poems are undoubtedly also the product of a long tradition. . . . Among the qualities that ensured the predominance of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* over other possible versions of themselves and over the epic cycle was their exceptional embodiment of the aspirations of the early polis.

In this atmosphere it is natural for the author of a book on Euripides,⁷ to open (p. 3) with the statement 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 . . .

In the last generation the invisible forces that decided and determined everything were the classes, the dialectic, the class struggle, and the rest of the Marxian apparatus. They have now rather faded from our sight, but the stage of history is after all not to remain empty. There enters a new cast-list of agents to replace them: the institutions of society. And the Muse of tragedy, although of course her subject matter is kings and the mythical heads of dynastic houses, declares herself unreservedly a democrat.

The author, then, is no more than a nexus between public and commissioning patron. Fortunately, it soon emerges, we are in a position to know more than we used to about both sides of the equation. On the one hand, there is the audience, of which we can say, crisply, 'It may not be amiss to insist from the beginning on the collective or communitarian character of the Athenian theater public' (Longo, p. 13). On the other, there is the patron (p. 14); and here we can be no less decisive:

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'.

In fact, we can briskly speak of 'The goal pursued by the sponsoring institution that organised the dramatic events: the maintenance and reinforcement of community cohesion' (p. 18). We recall that for Seaford the ascendancy of the Homeric poems was because of their 'exceptional embodiment of the aspirations of the early polis'.

So: the audience was collective, the sponsoring institution aimed to use the plays for the simple purpose of reinforcing communal cohesion and consolidating social identity; and that (we subversively reflect) is why the Attic playwrights produced the sort of plays that they notoriously did—straightforward quasi-fascist hymns to the state⁸ and to the solidarity of citizens. That is why Attic tragedy is so free from dissent or subversion or difficulty. That is why Antigone has lived in Western thought as a villain and the prototype of treason, for resisting the government and jeopardizing citizen solidarity . . .⁹ Or has something gone wrong? When we turn to the actual

⁷ N. T. Croally, *Euripidean Polemic* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁸ G. Cerri does in fact go so far as to speak of tragedy as being 'vero e proprio apparato ideologico di stato', *Legislazione orale e tragedia greca* (Napoli, 1979), p. 269.

⁹ We do nowadays sometimes find her presented in a very negative light: see C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Assumptions and the creation of meaning: reading Sophocles' *Antigone*', *JHS* 109 (1989), 134–48. That goes with the view that her sex (she is a 'Bad Woman') told so heavily with an Athenian audience as to outweigh the fact that she is right. Cf. the recent judgement on *Lysistrata*, that 'more emphasis is needed on the fact [*sic*] that any message of the play would be

plays, does that look like a convincing account of what we find? Would the process of creation spelt out by Longo produce anything like the plays from the fifth century which we in fact possess?

Let us take first the assertion that the audience was 'collective'. What does it mean? What does it say that is peculiar to *this* audience, and why? In an obvious sense all audiences, whether at an opera or a football match, are collective. Their members, because they are members of an audience, have different experiences and behave in a different way from solitary individuals. But beyond that? Let us remind ourselves of a few of the people about whom we know something. The claim must be that an audience which contained such individuals as Socrates, and Sophocles, and Thucydides, and Agathon, and the skilled artisans who built the Parthenon, and the crude rustics, the herdsmen and peasants, the Strepsiadeses and Dicaeopolises of Aristophanic comedy (and Aristophanes does depict Dicaeopolis as going to tragedies, and Strepsiades as keen on Aeschylus), and the fathers whom Aristophanes presents as so strikingly different from their sons: that audience was uniform and collective, in some sense in which a modern audience is not. The assertion is, surely, by no means obviously true. Yet no evidence, beyond the bare assertion, seems to be thought necessary in its support.

Equally (it seems) in need of no support is the assertion that the polis had a simple and conscious aim in putting on the plays: that of strengthening social cohesion. The ancients, of course, have omitted to tell us so. In fact, Plato seems to think tragedy had something like the opposite effect.¹⁰ It follows that what we have here is an inference. That inference is either drawn from the plays themselves, or it is a purely *a priori* statement, drawn from a general view about literature and society. And, again, it is not obviously true that (for instance) a play like *Medea*, the harrowing record of a mythical princess murdering her own children in order to spite her unfaithful husband, not in Athens but in a distant city, had the aim of strengthening the social cohesion of Athenian citizens; or that it would have served it, if it had. No doubt the experience of being part of a large audience at a powerful and spectacular public presentation produced, among other things, a sense of pride in the city that put it on; but had the city had as its unambiguous purpose to foster civic consciousness, then it surely could have found many simpler and clearer ways. Nor is that the thing that one would pick out, after seeing or reading the plays, as the prime purpose of *Prometheus Vincetus*, or of *Hecuba*, or of *Orestes*.

A last assertion from the same chapter deals with that puzzling feature of Attic tragedy, the chorus. It is (p. 17) that 'The essence of the chorus . . . must be recognised

problematic because it comes through a woman' (A. M. Bowie in *JHS* 113 [1993], 168). One thinks of the Sibyls, and the Delphic prophetess, and the Spartan princess Gorgo (Herodotus 5.51.2), and Cassandra in *Agamemnon*, and the prayer of Jocasta to her sons not to fight (Eur., *Phoenissae* 528ff.), and the prophetic commands of Medea in the Fourth *Pythian* (13ff.), and even perhaps of the goddess Athena herself; and one wonders whether that fact is really so secure.

¹⁰ *Republic* 3.394d ff. argues that the citizens should each have a single *ἐπιτήδευμα* and not be influenced by the sinister versatility of tragedy into adjusting to several: οὐκ ἔστιν διπλοῦς ἀνὴρ παρ' ἡμῖν οὐδὲ πολλαπλοῦς, ἐπειδὴ ἑκάστος ἐν πράττει (397e1–2), and that is why we must not permit tragedy in our ideal city. Presumably that means that tragedy is being seen as a menace to homogeneity. With some subtlety B. Heiden, in *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (1993), p. 164, argues that Goldhill's mistake is not to see that Athenian citizens were *meant* to be versatile and πολύτροποι: 'The Athenians regarded themselves as typically changing roles and thus as existing in something like a permanent state of transition': the theatrical experience prepared them for this, and so it did not subvert but reinforce the values of the city. The point is perhaps a little too subtle for a city to have grasped and kept in mind for a century.

in its role as "representatives of the collective citizen body".¹¹ And *that*, no doubt, is why most plays have choruses that consist of women—mostly foreign women, sometimes not even Greek, sometimes not even human—or very old men, or Persians, or female avenging demons, or the nymphs, daughters of Ocean, who sing and dance in *Prometheus*. Perhaps two of the thirty-three surviving tragedies have choruses composed of Attic citizens: Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Euripides' *Heraclidae*. Again we might not have thought it so obvious that the purpose of all those exotic groups of characters was to represent, in any simple and straightforward way, the collective citizen body. There must indeed be some sense in which choruses are not individual people, and one of their functions is to articulate the views of ethical common sense;¹² but that is only one of the things that choruses do.¹³

The second essay in the book is by the late J. J. Winkler. It has two special interests: the military and the ephebes. Winkler tries to go a step further than bare general assertion that Attic tragedy had a social function, and to determine more exactly what particular social function it was that tragedy had. He too is anxious that the whole occasion of the staging of the tragedies shall be communal and political, but he adds that its emphasis was specifically military.¹⁴ The festival of the Dionysia, at which the plays were performed, was (pp. 20, 23):

the occasion for elaborate symbolic play on themes of proper and improper civic behavior, in which the principal component of proper male citizenship was military . . . the entire festival [sic] had a civic-military aura

This is an exaggerated statement of the fact that part of the festival was a parade of the tribute money from the subject cities of the Empire, and that at another moment the orphan sons of those who had fallen in battle for the city and who had attained maturity that year, having been brought up at the city's expense, were paraded in the theatre and presented with a suit of armour. There also was a procession, which no doubt aimed to impress both citizens and the envoys of foreign states.

This theory silently overlooks the fact that in addition to the tragedies there were also at the Dionysia both comedies and an elaborate competition between choruses in the dithyramb, a musical and poetic form about which we know less than we should like. Each year no fewer than ten choruses of fifty men and ten of fifty boys competed in that, one of each from each of the ten tribes: twenty choruses and a thousand participants in all, (and no very obvious emphasis on ephebes). It must have taken a long time, been very spectacular, and formed a very large part of the experience of

¹¹ J. Gould remarks, mildly, on the way that such statements by Longo are 'framed as a simple and trenchant assertion of established fact', see Silk, *Tragedy and the Tragic*, p. 219.

¹² Ethical, I think, rather than political. The question of the status and function of the chorus is interestingly discussed by J. Gould and S. Goldhill in Silk, *Tragedy and the Tragic*, pp. 217ff., 244ff. Gould points out that choruses, often exotic in personnel and always excluded from authority and action, could not be felt as standing for the authority of the democratic polis; some choruses, composed of foreign slave women, must have been 'perceived by the citizen body as doubly, or even triply, marginal' (p. 220). Goldhill replies that choruses nevertheless do speak with 'the full weight of a collective authority'. Most tragedy is not set in Athens or about Athenians: 'all response to tragedy involves projection, sympathy, idealization—a negotiation of "the other" to find meaning for the self' (p. 253).

¹³ Sometimes, for instance, they exhibit such unsocial emotions as panic in the face of the enemy (*Septem*, parodos), or indifference to the murder of their king by a foreign woman (*Medea*), or joy at the mutilation of their king by his own mother (*Bacchae*), or callous indifference to the suffering of the hero (*Philoctetes*, 843–64), or a short-sighted and hysterical rejection of the hero that has to be corrected by a worthier representative of the community (*O.C.*, parodos).

¹⁴ For criticism of Winkler's suggestion, see P. Vidal-Naquet in *PCPS* 32 (1986), 137f.

attending the Dionysia. Everybody must either have performed in a dithyrambic chorus or have known someone who did.

There is no reason to think these musical evocations of mythical stories had any military flavour; the extant fragments do not suggest it.¹⁵ No more did the comedies, which—we remind ourselves—were also enacted in competition at the Dionysia, and about which we are well enough informed to know that they were certainly not military in atmosphere. At least three of the eleven extant Old Comedies—*Acharnians*, *Peace*, and *Lysistrata*—are in fact outspokenly anti-military, and soldiers and military duty come for hard gibes in all three of them.¹⁶ Nor can we regard the triumph of the hero of *Acharnians* or *Birds* as exemplifying or consolidating civic virtue and public spirit.

To reinforce his analysis, Winkler asserts that the whole thing was ‘a social event focused on those young warriors, the ephebes’ (p. 37)—that is, on young men doing their military service. We can indeed go further: the members of the tragic choruses were themselves (he conjectures) ephebes; membership of a chorus was an equivalent of military service (p. 49); and their dancing ‘called for the same precision skills that were required for hoplite marching. . . . Performing in a tragic chorus must have been an athletic feat as exacting and grueling as any of the Olympic competitions’ (pp. 50, 56). It is almost embarrassing to break in on these flights of fantasy by pointing out that, for instance, the chorus of the *Agamemnon* introduce themselves as old men, already over military age ten years ago, who can barely hobble with the aid of their sticks,¹⁷ while the chorus of the *Trojan Women* are female captives who limit their strenuousness to lamentation and wailing. I do not think an Olympic wrestler would have been much impressed by that; nor a scout doing sentry duty on the frontier of Attica.¹⁸

Nor can I see that many of the extant plays centre on anything military,¹⁹ or that they would have done anything for the morale or the discipline of the troops. I think, for instance, of *Hippolytus*, or *Medea*, or *Helen*, or *Prometheus*, or the *Suppliant Women* of Aeschylus, or the *Women of Trachis* of Sophocles. What of military value would young warriors have learnt from the spectacle of love-lorn or suffering wives, or of young women in flight from unwanted suitors?

With the third essay in the book we come to an attempt to come to grips with just

¹⁵ H. Kuch advances the view, not easy to accept, that the dithyramb, a backward-looking form, was favoured by ‘die konservativen Aristokraten’, the democrats favouring the progressive form, tragedy (p. 28). Only by some such assumption can political significance be got into the matter of the dithyramb. But B. Zimmermann, *Dithyrambos: Geschichte einer Gattung = Hypomnemata* 98 (Göttingen, 1992), 36, has an opposite theory, more in line with the views discussed in this paper: he speaks of the form as possessing a ‘demokratische, egalitäre Charakter’. See also Zimmermann in *Tragedy, Comedy, and the Polis*, p. 43: the dithyramb competition came in with the ten Cleisthenic tribes, to strengthen the sense of solidarity, ‘das Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl’, in the new, democratic, units.

¹⁶ *Frogs* 1021ff. shows that it could be said in a comedy that some tragedies had the effect of encouraging warlike spirit. The *Septem* certainly has a martial atmosphere; but the reflective spectator will hardly have interpreted the climactic duel of the doomed brothers as an encouragement to make war.

¹⁷ The chorus of *Choephoroe* are mourning women, whose physical exertions can hardly have been great. It is true that the binding song of the Erinyes at *Eumenides* 307ff. must have been quite lively; note especially 372–6; and perhaps the satyrs in *Proteus* were active.

¹⁸ σφόδρα τάρ’ ἐσωζόμεν ἐγώ, / παρὰ τὴν ἔπαλιν ἐν φορυνῶ κατακείμενος: Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 71–2. On the question of exemption from military service for choreutae, see E. Csapo and W. J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Michigan, 1995), p. 352.

¹⁹ The centrality of war to the classical polis (except Sparta) can be exaggerated: see S. C. Humphreys in *JHS* 91 (1971), 191–3; B. Heiden in *Trag. Com. Pol.*, 165, n. 40.

that sort of issue. This can be seen as a step forward in sophistication, from the purely *a priori* to consideration of the actual texts. Froma Zeitlin addresses the question of the prominence of women in tragedy, assuming (as she also does) that tragedy had a social function of this didactic kind for Athenian citizens. We know that only men were citizens of Athens; yet many tragedies centre on the emotional lives and sufferings of female characters. What is the reason for this extraordinary fact, since it is not even clear whether any women were present in the theatre?²⁰ What was the lesson which, along this line of approach, was to be learned about civic solidarity and the duties of the citizen? The point is, says Zeitlin, that while the audience is indeed masculine, the display of the sufferings and the passivity of the female is put on for them, as an awful warning: a man may be undone by the female element in the world and in himself. Thus we read that 'The self that is really at stake is to be identified with the male, while the woman is assigned the role of the radical other' (p. 68). It follows from this that plays are never *about* women (p. 69):

Female characters may occupy centre stage and leave a far more indelible impression on their spectators than do their male counterparts . . . but *functionally* women are never an end in themselves, and nothing changes for them once they have lived out their drama onstage.

To meet the obvious objection that *Medea* appears to be about Medea, Zeitlin argues (p. 71):

Even in this revolutionary play the typology still holds. Medea's formal function in the plot is to punish Jason for breaking his sacred oath to her, through an exacting retribution of tragic justice, and she is the typical and appropriate agent, even if embodied in exotic form, for accomplishing that crucial end.

The words 'functionally' and 'formal function' have here an awful lot of work to do. No amount of talk about functionalism can for long conceal the obvious fact that it is and always was the tragedy of Medea, not that of Jason, which holds the stage and commands the attention and the memory of the audience. Nor is it obvious that nothing changes for the women of tragedy. At the beginning of her play Medea had two children; at the end she has no children and the guilt of having murdered them. At the beginning of the *Women of Trachis* Deianira was an anxious but loyal wife; at the end she has caused her husband's death and killed herself. And so on. It is not easy to think of greater changes.

Zeitlin makes an interesting attempt to add to the lesson which these plays were to teach. Not content with the bald assertion that they contribute to social cohesion, nor with an unconvincing stab at deriving specifically military lessons from such apparently unmilitary material, she finds a social function for the large female element (p. 86):

Drama tests masculine values only to find that these alone are inadequate to the complexity of the new situation . . . it most often shows that manliness and self-assertion need no longer compete with pity and even forgiveness.

In this way tragedy 'uses the feminine for the purpose of imagining a fuller model for the masculine self, and "playing the other" opens the self to those often banned emotions of pity and fear' (p. 85).

That reads attractively. For the first time, after so many purely theoretical assertions, we feel ourselves in touch with something of the real experience of tragedy.

²⁰ For what it is worth, I agree with the authors of the most recent discussion, Csapo and Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama*, p. 286: 'In our opinion the testimony of ancient authors [mostly Plato, I observe] shows clearly that women (and boys) were present in the audience.'

But two thoughts must surely suggest themselves. The first is that long before the Attic theatre (and any 'new situation') the poems of Homer taught a rather similar lesson. In the *Iliad* we pity not only the Achaeans but also the Trojans who suffer and die. Zeus himself, the poet tells us, grieves for the death of Hector and the doom of Troy (*Iliad* 22.168f., 4.1–49); the gods pity the abuse of Hector's body (24.23); and Zeus says of the warriors on both sides, 'I care for them, though they perish' (20.21). Above all, the climactic last Book of the *Iliad* shows us the very greatest of heroes, Achilles himself, pitying his aged enemy Priam, his white head and white beard, and weeping with him for the common doom of humankind (24.513ff.). Both Agamemnon, in the *Iliad*, and Odysseus, in the *Odyssey*, are repeatedly seen weeping copiously.

Odysseus, indeed, wept (we are told) at the song of the fall of Troy 'like a woman' (*Od.* 8.521ff.); and when confronted with the unhappiness of poor lonely Penelope, 'he felt pity for his wife' (*Od.* 19.210), and only by a supreme effort of will kept from betraying his true identity by weeping with her. When they are finally reunited, Penelope of course bursts into tears, but so does the much-enduring hero: 'he wept, embracing his dear wife'; in fact, rosy-fingered Dawn would have found the pair still sobbing, had not Athena lengthened the night and delayed the coming of morning (*Od.* 23.231–46). There is therefore nothing startlingly new, and certainly nothing peculiar either to tragedy or to democratic Athens, in a message of that sort.

It must be said that writers on tragedy who belong to this school tend to take a rather simple view of Homer. We read, for instance, that part of the importance of the theme of war for fifth-century Athens was 'the existence and authority of the *Iliad*', speaking of which, 'Specifically, it championed war as the ultimate human experience, where valour could be proved and everlasting fame won.'²¹ That overlooks the central importance in the poem of softer qualities and of the suffering of the victims.²² The *Iliad*, which insists on showing us Priam and Hecuba, Andromache and her child, is by no means unambiguous about war;²³ and we see its influence in the sympathetic presentation even of the three-bodied monster Geryon in the lyric poems of Stesichorus (fragments S11–S15 Davies) and Pindar (fragment 169 Snell-Maehler). Even he receives the sympathy of poet and audience.

The second thought is a question. One can imagine a state like Athens, a sturdy and aggressive democracy, wishing to indoctrinate its citizens with manly, or martial, or public-spirited attitudes. The poetry of Tyrtaeus or Callinus might show how it would be. One can indeed imagine that Attic tragedy might have been a genre that fulfilled such a purpose: much simpler, and much less interesting, than it is. But surely it is a lot harder to imagine such a state indoctrinating its citizens with the more humane and complex ideology which is outlined by Zeitlin. Has any state—as opposed to any poet—ever meant to do it?

The fourth paper in the book continues the process we have detected, of increase in sophistication. Simon Goldhill sets out the patriotic aspects of the festival of the Dionysia, emphasizing their intention as propaganda.²⁴ The procession was (p. 102):

a demonstration before the city and its many international visitors of the power of the *polis* of Athens.

²¹ Croally, *Euripidean Polemic*, p. 50.

²² See J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 103–43; C. W. Macleod, *Commentary on Iliad 24* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 1–16.

²³ Not only μάχην κυδιάνειραν but also πόλεμον δακρύνοντα: war in Homer brings tears as well as glory.

²⁴ This argument of Goldhill is criticized by R. Friedrich, and defended by Goldhill, in *Tragedy and the Tragic*, pp. 263ff.

That seems reasonable, as a description of the procession that came before the dramatic performances. But it is of course a very different thing to argue from the character of part of a festival—I remind the reader of what was said above about the dithyrambs and the comedies—to that of the festival as a whole. At the Football Association Cup Final in England hymns are sung, and a military band plays martial music; but to infer that the character of the occasion as a whole was either religious or military would be highly injudicious.

There is another interesting and controversial point here. Goldhill goes on to say that the whole occasion was not just patriotic, it was specifically *democratic*. 'This is fundamentally and essentially [*sic*] a festival of the democratic *polis*' (p. 115). One feels, I think, that the adverbs 'fundamentally and essentially' are contributing more to the rhetoric than to the argument. What is meant by saying that the Dionysia was 'essentially' a festival of the democratic *polis*?²⁵ On the one hand the festival, and with it the first performance of tragedies, was instituted in the sixth century, by the tyrants, a generation before the establishment of democracy in Athens.²⁶ It is, by the way, interesting to observe that other scholars, no less convinced that the function of tragedy was to reinforce communal solidarity, are happy to ascribe it, and its ideology, not to the democracy but to the tyranny: all centred on the tyrant himself.²⁷ On the other hand, the Dionysia continued to be celebrated long after the Macedonians had put an end to democracy in Attica.²⁸ It seems that all we can really mean is that in the heyday of Attic tragedy Athens was a democracy, and so the festival at which the tragedies were produced, an occasion which had a patriotic element, was at that time a festival of the democracy.²⁹

²⁵ The view in the DDR was that 'tragedy included democratic elements', e.g. H. Kuch in *Die gr. Tragödie* (above, n. 1), pp. 27ff: specifically, 'Mit den immanenten Elementen demokratischer Natur wie Diskussion, Verantwortung, Entscheidung, vielleicht schon sozialer Phantasie, entsprach das Dialektisch-Dialogische der Tragödie dem Trend zur Demokratie' (p. 28).

²⁶ 'What seems certain is that it was in the sixth century that the festival [the City Dionysia] became important, probably through the policy of Pisistratus': A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 2nd edn, rev. J. Gould and D. M. Lewis (Oxford, 1988), p. 58. The date of the introduction of competition in tragedies at the Dionysia is unfortunately uncertain (*ibid.*, p. 103). Thespis is said to have won a prize for tragedy in 535/2 B.C.; Gould and Lewis list it under 'City Dionysia' (p. 124). M. L. West points out that these assertions about the very early years of tragedy are not firmly reliable: *CQ* 39 (1989), 251–4. But there seems to be no evidence that tragedies were first introduced by the democracy. An interesting speculative case is made for that, and for a post-tyranny date for the City Dionysia, by W. R. Connor, 'City Dionysia and Athenian democracy', *C&M* 40 (1989), 7–32.

²⁷ So Csapo and Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama*, pp. 103–4: 'The purpose of the new festivals was to foster and display the power of the unified state, centered politically upon the city and ultimately upon the tyrant himself, and to promote a common cultural identity and a system of values consistent with the new political reality.' Nothing here about democracy; but otherwise the story is the same. Evidently the Dionysia, and tragedy, could serve democratic and tyrannical regimes and ideologies equally well.

²⁸ E.g. W. S. Ferguson, *Hellenistic Athens* (London, 1911), pp. 290f.; C. Schneider, *Kulturgeschichte des Hellenismus* (München, 1971), vol. II, pp. 188, 245. New tragedies continued to be performed, and to be an important part of the festival. 'The competitions went on, and proclamations of honour were made and crowns bestowed *καινοῖς τραγωδοῖς* or *τραγωδῶν ἐν τῷ ᾄγωνι* at the Dionysia down to the first century B.C.' (Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, p. 82).

²⁹ It is of course not even the case that all tragedies were put on at the Great City Dionysia. Some were staged at the Lenaia, at which the allies were not present to be impressed; though we are not well informed about that, and it seems always to have been the minority option (Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, p. 41). There were also many performances at Rural Dionysia: they are known in thirteen demes. See conveniently Csapo and

Goldhill looks at the tragedies we actually have, and he does not fail to observe that many of them do not seem, in any obvious sense, to be propaganda for the specifically democratic virtues. We might add that the few that are—one thinks first of the *Supplices* and *Heracleidae* of Euripides—do not seem to us to be among the most interesting and most distinguished tragedies that we have, and that there is no sign that they enjoyed particularly high standing or fame.

Many tragedies centre on the sufferings of women, others on horrors within the family: incest, parricide, human sacrifice, the killing of children. A considerable number deal with the defiance, resistance, and eventual destruction of some hero of great stature and iron self-will, an Ajax or a Heracles. Aware of this misfit, on the obvious level, between his *a priori* determination of what the texts must exist to say, and the irreducible facts of what they actually do say—as he prefers to put it, ‘there is a sense of tension between the texts of tragedy and the ideology of the city’ (p. 115)—Goldhill produces the most sophisticated version yet: the Athenian democracy commissioned and staged tragedies, in order to teach its citizens to question its own values. The self-willed heroes and heroines of Sophocles, an Ajax or an Antigone, seem to question and set at risk the direct assertion of ideology that the pre-play ceremonies seem to proclaim (p. 123). In fact, ‘rather than simply reflecting the cultural values of a fifth-century audience, then, rather than offering simple didactic messages from the city’s poets to the citizens, tragedy seems deliberately to make difficult the assumption of the values of the civic discourse’ (p. 124).

At this point it surely seems that the whole assumption, that the city put on these plays in order to inculcate social cohesion, is about to be given up. After all, it is only an assumption. The plays, it now appears, actually set out to make acceptance of such values more difficult.³⁰ Again we remember that the *Iliad* of Homer had already called into question the heroism of Achilles, magnificent but anti-social, which was the cause of misery both for his people and for himself.³¹ It also showed Hector, trapped between retreating into safety in Troy and facing a greater hero who will kill him, taking the heroic decision that he cannot live with the shame of retreat, and so fighting, dying, and dooming his city to destruction. Heroism can hardly emerge unquestioned from such a poem.³² The questioning of such values was not something new with tragedy; it was not, either, something specifically connected with democracy.

Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama*, p. 107. Fans of the theatre could go round from one performance to another: Plato, *Republic* 475d.

³⁰ Cf. S. Goldhill, ‘Battle narrative and politics in Aeschylus’ *Persae*’, *JHS* 108 (1988), 188–93: p. 192, the play ‘may not demonstrate the ironic questioning of an Euripides, but it is not hard to see it investigating attitudes within the *polis* to the recent victory’. Such attitudes, I think, would be religious, rather than political. For Goldhill, the fact that Greeks are not named, while Persians are, is because of the ‘subsumption of the individual into the collectivity of the *polis*’ (ibid.). That, too, seems to me to have an important religious element: it is the gods who have done this, not individual Hellenes. We recall the words of Themistocles in Herodotus, 8.109.3: τὰδε γὰρ οὐχ ἡμεῖς κατεργασάμεθα, ἀλλὰ θεοί τε καὶ ἥρωες, οἳ ἐφθόνησαν ἄνδρα ἓνα τῆς τε Ἀσίης καὶ τῆς Εὐρώπης βασιλεῦσαι . . . Nowadays the polis and its collectivity gets in everywhere; but Herodotus’ Themistocles meant not one polis, with its collectivity contrasted with its individual aristocrats, but the whole of Hellas, as mortal men contrasted with the divine.

³¹ Cf. the memorable rebuke given to Achilles by the wise Nestor, *Iliad* 11.762–4:

ὦς ἔον, εἴ ποτ’ ἔον γε, μετ’ ἀνδράσιν. αὐτὰρ Ἀχιλλεὺς
οἶος τῆς ἀρετῆς ἀπονῆσεται· ἦ τέ μιν οἶω
πολλὰ μετακλαύσεσθαι, ἐπεὶ κ’ ἀπὸ λαὸς ὀληται.

Cf. also 16.29ff., 18.97ff. I agree with J. B. Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic* (California, 1991), p. 8, that the *Iliad* is ‘about heroism, specifically about heroic honour, and its effect and price’.

³² This was of course the view of Homer taken in antiquity by the poet Horace in *Epistles* 1.2: the *Iliad* is a better teacher of ethics, and specifically of the control of the passions, than the

A great source, probably the main source, of that strain in Athenian literature must have been the poems of Homer. Nor is it so clear that the parade of the orphans was itself unambiguously imperialistic in tone. Pelling shrewdly points out that 'even here there is emphasis on the cost and sacrifice . . . as well as the glory'.³³

And so, yet again, it is hard to be convinced, even by this development of the theory. Goldhill indeed bravely says (p. 125):

I do stress [*sic*] the connection between tragedy as a didactic and questioning medium and the affirmation of the duties and obligations of a citizen.

'A didactic *and* questioning medium': the phrase is an interesting one. We have seen that the Homeric epic can, in important respects, be called questioning, but hardly didactic. The didactic poetry of archaic and classical Greece, by contrast, is characteristically straightforward and unproblematic, and when poetry is spoken of as didactic, it is not suggested that the didactic function of poetry included—even, perhaps, included by definition—questioning the values of the community.

That the citizen of a democratic state has a duty to question its values may be what is believed by liberal thinkers in a modern democracy; it was perhaps maintained by Socrates; but one would like to see some positive evidence that the Athens of Aeschylus actually wanted to inculcate a duty of that kind.³⁴ I see little likelihood that fifth-century Athens, a city whose patriotism so often was of a very straightforward kind, and whose proclamation of democracy was unambiguous, would have pursued, for a century, this extraordinarily oblique and ironic form of education against its own cherished values. That is certainly not what we find in the elaborate praises of itself which the city was so fond of hearing, in the fifth and fourth centuries, in funeral speeches and elsewhere.³⁵ There Athens appears as the sole historic defender and civilizer of mankind: no obliqueness and no irony.³⁶ But again other modern writers agree:

But what is ideology? How do we now reconstruct Athenian ideology so that we may understand and identify the ideology as it is represented in tragedy? . . . Here I shall simply state that my working definition of ideology is: *the authoritative self-definition of the Athenian citizen* . . . [Though sponsored by the *polis* to be performed on a great civic occasion], tragedy questions as well as affirms ideology.³⁷

Croally makes an interesting attempt to render more plausible the idea that Athens

professional philosophers. *Quidquid delirant reges, plectuntur Achivi*. Cf. the comments of Nicholas Richardson, *Commentary on the Iliad*, vol. VI (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 14–19.

³³ *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, p. 234. We may add a reference to the statement of Isocrates, that by parading them the city 'revealed to the rest of Greece the number of the orphans and the disasters caused by this policy of imperialism', τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ὀρφανῶν καὶ τὰς συμφορὰς τὰς διὰ τὴν πλεονεξίαν ταύτην γιγνομένης, Isocr. 8 (*On the Peace*), 82.

³⁴ What we do find, of course, is the allegation in comedy that in the good old days of Aeschylus the citizens learnt from tragedy to shut up and not question orders; only with Euripides did horrid questioning come in. So Ar. *Frogs* 1013ff., esp. 1071–3: [Aeschylus] 'Now, thanks to you, Euripides, the rowers on the war-ships answer back to their officers; when I was alive, all they knew was to call for their grub and shout "Yo heave ho!"' Also *Clouds* 998f.: in the days of the men of Marathon, boys never answered their fathers back. All this questioning was by no means felt to be clearly democratic and laudable. But see J. P. Euben in J. P. Euben (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley, 1986), p. 24: tragedy helped to 'define, sustain and question democratic culture' (my italics).

³⁵ Cf. N. Loraux, *L'invention d'Athènes* (Paris, 1981). A different genre, admittedly, but a form intended for essentially the same audience.

³⁶ Except in the Platonic *Menexenus*, which is not a real example of the genre.

³⁷ Croally, *Euripidean Polemic*, pp. 44f. Cf., for example, Kuch (n. 2 above), p. 38: 'Die attische Tragödie wurde so zu einem Organ für das Selbstverständnis der Polisbürger', etc.

would consciously set out to question its own ideology, by pointing out that Socrates thought it important to do just that; and (p. 45)

Socrates did not just appear from nowhere—he was *Athenaios* after all—and his statement [at Plato, *Apology* 38a5–6] may be taken as indicative of at least the possibility that his expressed value was shared by other Athenian citizens.

Plato, of course, did not believe that. On the contrary, he thought that his Socrates was, in just that way, exceedingly untypical of democratic Athens; and he makes him follow up his assertion to the jury of the unique value of the examined life with the rueful words: 'But if I tell you that, you will believe me even less.'³⁸ When we find ourselves forced to quote this passage as evidence that Athenians generally accepted such an obligation, that surely suggests that such evidence is exceedingly hard to find.³⁹

Finally, an argument which seems to tell heavily against all these attempts to explain Athens' purpose with tragedy as the indoctrination of the citizens. No doubt they would have protested, had they really thought a poet was actually debauching the populace; but if they had thought of the tragedies as a part of the civic training of a citizen, would the city have charged, and charged quite a high price, for admission? A. Sommerstein is right to draw attention to this rather neglected fact, and to insist on the very exceptional nature of the charge; religious spectacles were of course in general free.⁴⁰ We might go on to point out the difficulty which these facts create for any straightforward theory of state indoctrination.

II

I shall discuss briefly two further attempts to explain tragedy along this sort of line, as making a specific contribution to the values and the problems of the democratic city. Christian Meier finds another way, interesting but quite different, which he sets out in his book *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*.⁴¹ What strikes Meier is the problems that the Athenians must have faced in running the empire which they had acquired so quickly after the defeat of the Persian invasion of 480 b.c. (pp. 2f.):

The Attic citizenry, mainly men of little education or experience who had hitherto existed within the confines of a provincial horizon, gained wide dominions as a result of the Persian Wars. . . . Shortly afterwards they toppled the aristocratic Council of the Areopagus and assumed sole responsibility for Athens and its empire . . . a great torrent of change. . . . The Athenians had to engage in politics on a grand scale, to exercise sovereignty; they had to have answers ready for all the conscious and unconscious questions and doubts that arose. . . . In tragedy the received mythological way of thinking engaged with a new rationality. . . . Might it not have served to play out recurrently, by way of myth, the concerns of the citizens as citizens?

Again, an interesting suggestion, and one that appeals to us. We too are concerned about imperialism and its problems and discontents. But, again, those tiresome doubts will not go away. What, in fact, are the new problems that the acquisition of

³⁸ Plato, *Apology* 38a5.

³⁹ Pelling, however (*Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, pp. 224ff.), accepts this view of 'ideology as question'. He goes on, 'This is a very self-critical and self-analysing people. We have already noted Athens' pride in herself as a home of discourse' (p. 229). I think an uncharacteristic looseness of thought mars this passage of Pelling's distinguished essay.

⁴⁰ A. Sommerstein in *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, pp. 65ff. The *theorikon* seems to have been a fourth-century innovation, and the charge in the second half of the fifth century to have been two obols: not inconsiderable! For the evidence, see Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, pp. 265–8.

⁴¹ English translation: Polity Press, 1993.

the empire posed for the Athenians?⁴² Why is it that in the extant plays there is nothing to be found that bears on the obvious and engrossing difficulties, political and moral, of ruling over another city or over a foreign people: on the problems, in fact, so urgently raised by possession of the empire?⁴³ Why are there no plots that turn on the temptations faced by essentially virtuous agents, in positions of responsibility, away from home? Why is there nobody, for instance, in the position of power and trust which is abused by Angelo in *Measure for Measure*?⁴⁴ Yet more suggestively, why can we not point to sympathetic treatments of the problems faced by the leader of an army containing allied contingents? The wriggling Agamemnon of *Iphigeneia in Aulis* is hardly a model for Athenian commanders, nor the feeble Agamemnon of *Hecuba*, nor the bullying Agamemnon of *Ajax*. Supreme commanders seem to be only negative paradigms, and in tragedy attractive (Athenian) chieftains like Theseus (Eur., *Suppl.*; Soph., *O.C.*) command only Athenians, not mixed armies or contingents of allies. Even less does anything appear that might bear on the question, so hotly discussed in reality, of the morality of spending on the adornment of Athens the treasures contributed for their defence by the member states of the Delian League.⁴⁵

We do find the question of conquest and destruction repeatedly discussed in all those plays that deal with the Trojan War, but the conquest of Troy is not presented in a way calculated to give comfort to the imperialist, whether in *Agamemnon* or in *Hecuba* or in *Troades*. And we find nothing about the task of governing a subject or friendly people. Even more discouragingly, when the theme is presented of a powerful state attempting to interfere in the affairs of another—Egyptians in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, Spartans in *Andromache*, Argives in *Heraclidae*, Thebans in Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and in *Oedipus at Colonus*—it is invariably right to resist and defy them. No 'imperial' power ever seems to be justified or to deserve our sympathy, and Athens herself never interferes, except to right some grievous wrong and then promptly withdraw (*Heraclidae*, *Supplices*, *Oedipus at Colonus*).⁴⁶

Again, why do we not find anything about the really live issue in Athenian internal politics: the conflict between democracy and aristocracy/oligarchy? Instead we find

⁴² P. Easterling mentions 'such things as tension between loyalty to the city and loyalty to the family, to mention one of the many conflicting claims that we talk of nowadays as constituting the subject-matter of tragic discourse' (*Trag. Com. Polis*, 561). Such tensions, of course, are not specifically democratic; they would be no less likely to come up for members of powerful and prominent families under oligarchy or tyranny.

⁴³ The argument of A. T. von S. Bradshaw, that Sophocles' Ajax fails in *aidos*, and that that failure is relevant to the relations of Athens with her allies (in D. C. Pozzi and J. M. Wickersham [edd.], *Myth and the Polis* [Cornell, 1991]) is well criticized by C. Sourvinou-Inwood, *CR* 46 (1996), 82.

⁴⁴ Or that, for instance, of the Athenian general Eurymedon at Corcyra, Thuc. 3.81.4: 'In the seven days that Eurymedon was there with his sixty ships, the Corcyreans butchered their enemies'.

⁴⁵ It is suggested by Osborne that the competition between tragedies was itself important: 'Just as the city's promotion of other forms of competition implies a confidence that the political effects of promoting particular individuals can be controlled, so the city's promotion of dramatic competition implies a confidence that the political effects of promoting issues can be controlled' (*Tragedy, Comedy, and the Polis*, pp. 34f.). The point is an interesting one for Athenian social history, but it does not greatly illuminate the plays themselves.

⁴⁶ Theseus stays within his own country and repels invaders in *Oedipus at Colonus*; he arrives after the killing of the usurper in *Heracles* and offers the shattered hero shelter in Attica. Aegeus, in *Medea*, similarly has no trace of violence or aggression; he simply offers the heroine sanctuary (an offer of course, which she will abuse; but that is not his fault). Nowhere do these edifying Athenian rulers show a trace of imperialism.

discussions only between democracy and monarchy—a form of government not seriously on the agenda for fifth-century Athens. When the old men of the chorus in *Wasps* denounce the hero for *tyrannis*, he replies, ‘How everything is tyranny and conspiracy with you! I hadn’t even heard the name in the last fifty years.’⁴⁷ In reality it was the oligarchs who argued a serious case, who presented the threat to the democracy, and who conspired against it. And again, plays like *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, *Alcestitis*, *Women of Trachis*, and many others, simply do not seem to be about anything of this kind. The passion of Phaedra for her stepson, the rage of Medea with her husband, the jealousy and despair of Deianira—these are hardly the themes suggested by the acquisition of empire.

We come to the book of Richard Seaford, to which reference has already been made.⁴⁸ His special variant on the theme of the ideology of the democracy is the suggestion that Attic tragedies celebrate the fall of the monarchic dynasties that ruled over Greece in earlier times, which provide the persons and families who appear in tragedy, and whose ruin leads to the establishment, after the fall of the dynasties, of democracy. The doom of the heroic families is ‘to the benefit of the polis’ (p. 367). The destruction of great but unco-operative and impossible heroes like Ajax and Philoctetes is followed by the establishment of hero cults for their worship, cult ‘both permanent and collective’ (again that *Leitmotif*: collectivity) by the whole city (p. 135): ‘The private grief of kin must give way to the collective, permanent benefit of hero-cult’, and (we read, by now with no surprise) the effect of this cult is to ‘bind the community’ (p. 137). ‘In conclusion, then, tragedy allows us to observe that the social power of hero-cult to deploy death-ritual, which has been an instrument of reciprocal violence, as an instrument of communal solidarity is reflected in the mythical consciousness of the Athenians’ (p. 138).

An obvious difficulty about this is that to the unprejudiced eye there appears to be little or no mention in these plays of hero cult, whether or not collective, either for Ajax or for Philoctetes. Even in the case of Oedipus in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, who actually does find burial in Attic ground, enabling Seaford to say that the play ends with ‘cult, both permanent and [of course] collective’ (p. 135), what we find in the play is an insistence that the grave shall be secret, its position known only to one person, the king; it is not to be approached by anyone, nor to be the scene of any lamentation (pp. 1760ff.).⁴⁹ ‘The play ends in a refusal of ritual’, is the crisp verdict of P. E. Easterling,

⁴⁷ ὥς ἄπανθ’ ὑμῖν τυραννίς ἐστι καὶ ξυνωμόται . . .

ἥς ἐγὼ οὐκ ἤκουσα τοῦνομ’ οὐδὲ πεντήκοντ’ ἐτῶν: 489, 491.

This prattle about tyranny, says he, is absurd. Kingship *versus* democracy: Aeschylus, *Persians* 241ff., Eur. *Suppl.* 399ff. with C. Collard’s Commentary (Groningen, 1975). Collard notes, following J. de Romilly, that in the closely similar discussion in Herodotus 3.80–3, all three alternatives are mooted and discussed: democracy, monarchy, and aristocracy. Tragedy prefers to omit one, and the one more relevant to contemporary Athenian politics. Plato, in *Republic* 8, takes as basic all three forms: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.

⁴⁸ See n. 7 above.

⁴⁹ It is a question whether there actually was cult of Oedipus at Colonus, outside the pages, or the influence, of Sophocles. There is a dearth of evidence; there is another reported cult in Athens, below the Areopagus; and the insistence in the play that nobody except the king and his successors in each generation should know the place of the grave is hard to reconcile with any public cult. F. Pfister, in his classic work *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum* (Berlin, 1909), pp. 110ff., is confident that Sophocles cannot have invented the Colonus cult. E. Kearns, *The Heroes of Attica* (BICS Supplement 57, London, 1989), p. 50, is more sceptical but concludes her thorough discussion with the judgement: ‘I am inclined to feel that there is a little too much evidence connecting Oedipus with Kolonos to be explained simply by the influence of Sophocles’ play’ (p. 209).

who has no axe to grind.⁵⁰ In not one of these three plays, in fact, is 'permanent and collective cult' ever actually mentioned.⁵¹ And the number of plays that do end with the establishment of a cult of any relevance to Athenian citizens is not as great as is sometimes implied.⁵²

Can we really be happy to interpret the plays primarily in the light of something which is mentioned elliptically or not at all? The question is not merely rhetorical. It recurs when we consider Seaford's other contention, that the destruction of great heroes like Ajax and Oedipus is to be seen as a benefit for the polis, because better institutions take the place of the old royal families. At the end of the *Bacchae*, then, 'salvation [is] brought to the polis by the death of Pentheus' (p. 311).⁵³ At the end of the *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, 'the whole polis is by implication [*sic*] saved by the self-destruction or removal of the family with which the drama culminates' (p. 349). So too at the end of *Seven against Thebes*, when the two sons of Oedipus have slain each other in single combat, 'the polis is saved not only because the besiegers are beaten off but also, it is clear [*sic*], because the royal family is no more' (p. 346).

'By implication'; 'it is clear': the phrases betray the uncomfortable truth that in these plays nothing of the sort is actually said. It is not even true that at the end of *Oedipus the King* and *Seven against Thebes* the royal family 'is no more'. On the contrary, it is still on the throne; and the city has not yet reached clear water. The chorus of the *Seven*, commenting on the death of the two princes, still says 'My anxiety is about the city, μέριμνα δ' ἀμφὶ πόλιν—oracles keep their sharpness' (pp. 843f.). What does lie ahead, of course, but ἔξω τοῦ δράματος, is yet another disastrous family business: the prohibition of burial of Polynices' corpse and the breach of that prohibition by Antigone. But even if we overlook that not unimportant

⁵⁰ *Tragedy and the Tragic*, p. 175.

⁵¹ That cult of Philoctetes is mentioned in his play is suggested by S. J. Harrison, *JHS* 109 (1989), 173–5. His argument is that vv. 1418–22, spoken from the machina by Heracles, which promise Philoctetes a glorious existence like his own after all his sufferings, 'subtly suggest' posthumous cult. If so, this cult must be one to which Appian once alludes, 'on an island near Lemnos'; this island must be Chryse, a few miles from Lemnos; Lemnos itself had been acquired for Athens by Miltiades and was an Athenian possession. Thus 'there is at least some possibility that this cult of Philoctetes on Chryse existed in the fifth century B.C. and was known to Sophocles and his audience' (p. 175). The argument is subtle, but several steps in it are speculative, and the supposed allusion is fleeting and elusive; to make it a central plank in the interpretation of the play must be very bold. And even if it is accepted, the awkward fact remains that Sophocles has placed such allusion as there is to cult entirely on the recipient. There is no mention of the worshippers or of 'collectivity'.

⁵² No cult, for instance, at the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Electra*, or *Antigone* (an eminently impossible heroine); nor of *Alcestis*, *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, *Troades*. Other plays end with predictions that are not of cult: the vote of Athena (Eur., *Electra* 1267), or the origin of the place name Oresteion (*Orestes* 1647), or the future glories of the descendants of Ion (*Ion* 1571ff.), or the future sufferings of Hecuba and Agamemnon (*Hecuba* 1259ff.). Prophecy of something, rather than establishment of cult, seems to be the point. And even when a ritual is announced, it may give no key to the action of the play: the Corinthian ritual in memory of Medea's children (*Medea* 1381) does very little to help us understand Jason and Medea (both, of course, still alive).

⁵³ It is an obvious difficulty that the cult made possible at the end of the *Bacchae*, and partly lost in the lacuna, is not of the hero Pentheus but of the god Dionysus. Seaford tries to meet it by suggesting that Pentheus, too, is to receive cult (*Reciprocity and Ritual*, pp. 295, n. 68, and 312, n. 124): 'Pentheus is explicitly connected with cult only in Pausanias 2.2.7', but 'Pentheus may in fact have received cult along with Dionysus'. At Paus. 2.2.5–6 what we read is that outside Corinth a shrine contains two *xoana* of Dionysus, one named Lysios, the other Baccheios, made of the wood of the tree which Pentheus climbed to spy on the Maenads. The Delphic oracle told the Corinthians to find that tree and to honour it like the god: that is why the statues were made of it. There is no suggestion of honour being paid to Pentheus.

fact, it remains true that these plays do not, any more than the *Bacchae*, end on an up-beat note and the promise of a happy future of democratic collectivity. Such things are not mentioned. What the plays end with is lamentation. Seaford indeed says, with engaging frankness (p. 363):

I would prefer to emphasise [*sic*] the complementarity between this celebration of polis unity and the regular tragic theme of the irreversible self-destruction of autonomous ruling families.

At the end of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* there enters the competent prince Fortinbras, military in name and in career. He will be the next king of Denmark, and he will probably make a better job of it than the moody and eccentric Hamlet; but it would surely be an obtuse audience of the play which left the theatre with that comforting thought uppermost, or even importantly present, in its mind. And in the case of the *Seven*, and of *Antigone*, perhaps even of the *Bacchae*, the careless playwrights have failed to give us even so much of a hint. They have done nothing to direct our minds to the question of the political and social set-up after the passing of the great, the central, the interesting characters. What do we care about the constitutional position in Thebes which will follow the disaster of Pentheus, torn to pieces by his own mother, and Cadmus, in exile and doomed to be changed into a serpent? Even if we did care, there is no hint that what follows will be democracy. Are we, once more, to interpret these works primarily in the light of things which they systematically fail to mention?

III

So much for destructive criticism. What, then, can really be said about tragedy and society? Why, after all, did the Athenians pay to put it on? Literature, we agree, is not to be disconnected from society and history; is it possible to find connections between them that will be less vulnerable to attack? Let us begin by casting a sceptical eye on the whole idea that the city of Athens could have had a consistent policy, at least of any complexity, in the commissioning of these plays. Our collectivists like to speak of 'the polis' commissioning the tragedies, as if there existed a permanent body to take such decisions, like the Arts Council in Britain, or more, perhaps, like the Ministry of Culture in the old Soviet Union. But in fact the choruses were allotted to the poets by one of the archons, a man chosen by lot, every year, from a body of men chosen by election. The archons were 'routine officials, with duties which any loyal citizen could be trusted to perform'.⁵⁴ It is hard to see how a sophisticated policy, especially one of encouraging audiences to criticize the values of the city, could have been consistently pursued by these transient and light-weight figures, with little or no secretariat or enduring bureaucracy to back them. The state existed only in skeletal form in fifth-century Athens. It is more natural to suppose that the archons simply tried to select the poets whom they thought their fellow citizens wanted to hear. In any case, in the words of Robin Osborne, 'We have no evidence about how the archon came to a decision and no reason to think that the archon's decisions were, or were even suspected to be, political'.⁵⁵

The audience was in some sense, like all audiences, collective; but it was also individual. The rhetorician and thinker Gorgias, contemporary of Sophocles and

⁵⁴ *Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1992), Vol. V, pp. 75.

⁵⁵ *Tragedy and the Polis*, p. 34. Csapo and Slater assert (p. 105), that in refusing a poet a chorus 'factors other than quality control clearly [*sic*] came into play'; but they produce no evidence for this but Cratinus, *PCG* f.17, which seems to me incapable of proving it.

Euripides, said in a celebrated passage (*Helen* 9) that

Those who listen to poetry experience the shudders of fear, the tears of pity, the yearnings of grief. Through the medium of words the soul experiences a reaction of its own to the successes and disasters in the affairs and persons of others.

Plato complains bitterly (*Republic* 605cd) about 'Homer and any other of the tragedy writers'—he seems not to see that the tragedians are different from Homer in being specifically democratic—that their audiences

take delight in their displays of pathos, in the heroes as they suffer making long speeches and lamenting and singing and beating their breasts; we relish it and give ourselves up to it and follow where it leads, sympathising and taking it seriously; and we praise as the best poet the one who most puts us into this emotional state.

These accounts, produced by men who had actually sat in the theatre at Athens, sound more like the real effect of experienced tragedy than the one-sided modern emphasis on the 'collectivity' of the audience and its ideological concerns. These accounts are not entirely different from what one might say nowadays, of an audience at a successful performance of an opera or a play. Gorgias speaks with apparent approval, and Plato with great disapproval, of a characteristic emotional experience, a strange mixture of pleasure and pain. The special pleasure which is to be had from tragedy, the 'pity and alarm' of which Aristotle speaks,⁵⁶ is an experience of the individual soul: made more possible, no doubt, by being in a crowd of people similarly attentive and similarly moved, but not one which there is any particular point in calling collective. As for the uniquely democratic character of public poetic performances, we are credibly informed that the Pisistratid tyranny led the way by arranging public recitations of the Homeric epics.⁵⁷ That will have given a taste for performances in the high poetical style on mythical themes, with a full representation of pathos, which doubtless encouraged the developing form of tragedy and in turn was fed by it.

It is something of a puzzle why so many of our contemporaries are so determined that the creation of Greek literature, both Homer and tragedy, must be a matter of collective creation and ideologically determined content. It is noteworthy that these historicizing and collectivist scholars not only have to make the plays say and mean things which, without special pleading, they seem not to say and mean. They also say little or nothing about two great features which really are characteristic of them. One is the role of the gods. The other is a pleasure, complex, emotional, and particular.⁵⁸ Of pleasure, however, it can be said that it has no history. Perhaps it cannot be very usefully discussed; we can only point towards its presence and emphasize its importance.

⁵⁶ *Poetics* 1449b27, 1453b12.

⁵⁷ On this tradition, not recorded in evidence as early as we should ideally like, see e.g. R. Merkelbach, *Untersuchungen zur Odyssee* = *Zetemata* 2 (München, 1969), pp. 239–62; S. R. West in the *Oxford Commentary on the Odyssey*, vol. I (Oxford, 1988), pp. 36–40.

⁵⁸ On this point I have a lot of sympathy with the challenging book of Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (Duckworth, 1987); but in my view he goes too far in the opposite direction, allowing too little space for anything other than emotion and pleasure in his analysis of tragedy. The plays do contain a serious vision of the world and of the relation of men and gods; that cannot simply be disposed of by declaring that the taste for such things is a mere modern fad (p. 78). But he is right to say that tragedy, like other forms, may be 'political' in the sense of glorifying the *polis* (p. 64), not necessarily in any other; and he speaks well of tragedy as providing 'intense but ordered emotion, controlled not by intellectual interests, but by the coherence of the whole simply as an emotional experience, by the aesthetic satisfaction which the audience receives through its experience of the emotions as an ordered sequence' (p. 80).

As for the relevance of contemporary history and politics for tragedy, we should begin by emphasizing again the vast importance for tragedy of the Homeric poems. The *Iliad* showed the problem of an over-mighty subordinate in conflict with his chief, and also the eternal problem of the clash of individual self-assertion against the good of the community. That meant questioning the limits and the value of heroism. Such questions are not only moral but also political. The *Odyssey* showed the conflict between the hereditary right of the son of the king and the aspirations of the young aristocrats who hope to oust him; it dwelt on loyalty and disloyalty, trust and distrust. We even find in Homer political meetings (on Ithaca, *Od.* 2, cf. 24.420 ff.; on Olympus, *Il. passim*; in Troy, *Iliad* 2.786ff., 7.346ff.; in a military context, *Iliad* 1, 7, 9, 14, 19). We see, of course, also the high style, a style in which gods can speak, and in which heroes and heroines can act and suffer.

What does tragedy add?⁵⁹ First, a much wider range of metre and music: Attic tragedy is, in our terms, somewhere between Shakespeare and grand opera, and the new musical variety created new potential, especially, for the piercing representation of emotion.⁶⁰ Second, a focus on those aspects of the myth which Homeric epic avoided:⁶¹ the grisly and the horrible in human life—sacrilege, human sacrifice, killing within the family, killing of children, cannibalism, incest. Now, neither of these cardinal facts is ‘political’ in any obvious sense, let alone specifically democratic; nor does it seem to be crucially important that the audience for it should be either democratic or collective.

Third, we come to the predilection of tragedy for other kinds of extreme scene and situation. Tragedy repeatedly shows us helpless supplicants in their despair taking refuge at the altars of the gods, pursued by enemies and menaced with slavery or death (Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women*; *Heraclidae*, *Andromache*, *Heracles*, *Ion*, *Helen*). It loves scenes in which tyrannical power forbids the burial of the dead and is defied (*Ajax*, *Antigone*; Euripides’ *Suppliant Women*). It relishes events in which some mistake brings the characters to the very verge of crime or disaster (Iphigeneia about to sacrifice her brother, in *I.T.*; *Ion* on the point of killing his mother, after she has tried to kill him, in *Ion*; Aerope in *Cresphontes* trying to kill her sleeping son as that son’s supposed murderer); or mistakes which cause actual disaster, subsequently recognized and lamented (*Oedipus the King*, *Trachiniae*, *Hippolytus*, *Bacchae*); or where suffering is doubled in its impact by being combined with blasphemy (Cassandra stripping off and trampling the prophetic insignia in *Agamemnon*; her ‘wedding song’ in *Troades*; the dragging of the Danaids from the altars in Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women*; the opening scenes of *Heracles*). All this naturally made for scenes of the most intense and harrowing pathos.⁶²

It is important here to make a connection, often missed, with the history of the fifth century. Scenes of just these types occur also in real life, and on very spectacular occasions; and they figure prominently in the works of the fifth-century historians. We must reflect what a small fraction we can know of the events of that crowded period, and how many such scenes we still find. Thus King Pausanias of Sparta, hero of the Persian War but later suspected of treason, took refuge in a temple; the Spartans did not like to intrude on the sacred place, so they starved him there, dragging him out in

⁵⁹ ‘Tragedy could claim to be the true inheritor of epic, and to have discernible links, too, with the choral traditions of the wider Greek world, at the same time as being a truly Athenian invention’ (Easterling, *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, p. 25).

⁶⁰ See J. Herington’s important book, *Poetry into Drama* (California, 1985).

⁶¹ See J. Griffin, ‘The Epic Cycle and the uniqueness of Homer’, *JHS* 97 (1977), 39–53.

⁶² See J. de Romilly, *L’évolution du pathétique d’Eschyle à Euripide* (Paris, 1961).

the end so that he should expire in the open air. The Delphic oracle ruled that despite this legalistic evasion the action was indeed sacrilege; and it was used in propaganda against Sparta by the Athenians years later. All this is recorded in the sober pages of Thucydides (1.128, 134).⁶³ Fifty years after that, in the civil war on the island of Corcyra, we read in the same historian of horrors of the desecration of altars and violation of sanctuary (3.81.5):

People were dragged out of temples and killed at them, and some were actually bricked up in the shrine of Dionysus and perished there.

And at Corcyra, we read, the horrors of the *stasis* included another crime of mythical ghastliness, when 'father slew son'.

The theme of violation of sanctuary, dramatized (among extant plays) by Aeschylus in his *Suppliant Women* and by Euripides in his *Andromache* and *Heracles*, recurs in history. For instance, in the dramatic scene of the judicial murder of the Athenian politician Theramenes in 403 B.C. the historian Xenophon, rising to unusual eloquence, reports that he jumped on to the altar in the council-house, shouting (*Hellenica* 2.3.52):

'I know very well that this altar will not protect me, but I want to show that these people are not only criminals in their treatment of human beings but also great sinners against the gods.' . . . As he was dragged from the altar he of course kept calling on gods and men alike to witness what was happening . . .

It is in places like this, I suggest, that we are to look for one of the most important links between tragedy and history: not in the subfusc area of political institutions, but in dramatic confrontations, great temptations, and terrible crimes. I emphasize that what is being suggested here is not that a particular historical event gave the stimulus for a particular tragedy or episode in a tragedy: the Battle of Delium, for instance, for Euripides' *Suppliant Women*. No doubt that did sometimes happen, though it will usually be hard for us to prove it, especially as the date of so many tragedies is not certainly known. What I am concerned with is the general character of the political world in the fifth century, full of such episodes, and (at least equally important) populated by people who saw history in terms of such patterns and such dramatic confrontations.

Perhaps it is partly our own changing taste in historiography that is responsible for our reluctance or inability to share that perspective. Our academic historians do not write or think, as Macaulay did, in terms of such intense and celebrated scenes: of the trial of the seven bishops, or the siege of Londonderry. Rather, it is institutional and social history that fills the books and articles of the esteemed historians of the age. The scene just quoted from Xenophon describing the death of Theramenes will be sought in vain in the latest edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*.⁶⁴ As a result, we need to make a conscious adjustment in order to share the vision of people who saw

⁶³ See the classic article by John Gould, 'Hiketia', *JHS* 93 (1973), 74–103.

⁶⁴ *CAH*, 2nd edn, vol. VI: *The Fourth Century* (Cambridge, 1994). That well-mannered volume says only (p. 35): 'Critias had enough armed support at his disposal to convince the Council and force Theramenes' execution.' We observe how neatly the colour, the particularity, the sense of period and place, have all been drained away; we might be reading about events of any place, at any time. That is not the way to get an insight into the history of the period, as it presented itself to the minds of those who made and endured it. The flight of Themistocles, similarly, is described, in Vol. V: *The Fifth Century* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 65, without reference to his enforced supplication of the queen of the Molossians (simply, 'Admetus of the Molossi refused either to surrender him or to allow him to stay'). Those details, occurring in a first-rate source, and very revealing for the *mentalité* of the period, are presumably left to the students of ancient religion

history so much in terms of striking events, as they also did in terms of great personalities: a Pericles, an Alcibiades, determined for them the course of history. In the fifth century such a perspective was usual, and it prevailed both in the appreciation of what we might call poetry or fiction, and in the interpretation of what we might call history. These people, after all, saw long-dead heroes in action in their battles: Echelus mowed down Persians with his plough at Marathon; Theseus and the hero Marathon himself rose out of the earth to help—all duly represented at Athens, along with Heracles and Athena, in the famous painting of the battle publicly commissioned and displayed in the Stoa Poikile.⁶⁵ It was of course familiar to the tragedians and their audiences.

In Euripides' *Heracles*, persecutor and victims argue out on stage the respective merits of surrender to hopeless odds and of persevering and hoping for deliverance; there is a similar argument in *Andromache*. In real political history, the affairs of the massacre of the Plataeans by the Spartans and Thebans, and of the Melians by the Athenians, with elaborate arguments between the sides,⁶⁶ form unforgettable high points of the Third and Fifth Books of Thucydides, and each time history might be said to be still more tragic than tragedy itself.⁶⁷

We find in the work of a scientific historian, writing about real life, even such a piece of apparently 'pure' literature as the story of a fugitive, on the run for his life, forced to take refuge with an enemy; finding him not at home, and being told by his wife to hold the baby and squat at the most sacred place in the house, the hearth: 'and that was the supreme gesture of supplication'. Thucydides is our source for that, too, in his account of the career of Themistocles (1.136). The story of Telephus, opponent of Achilles at Troy and subject of a famous play by Euripides, is extraordinarily similar. The problem raised in Euripides' *Ion*: who should be allowed to claim sanctuary? Is it only for the virtuous, or can sinners avail themselves of it? (1312ff.)—that question is also discussed in an urgent situation, by combatants on the battlefield, in Thucydides (4.98.6).

Another question, to us literary and remote, repeatedly surfaces in history: the refusal of burial to the dead, so familiar as a theme in Attic tragedy (*Ajax*, *Antigone*; Euripides' *Suppliant Women*), and of course highly important in the last three books of the *Iliad*. It is used in propaganda and as ammunition between enemies after a battle: Athenians and Thebans charged each other with it after the Battle of Delium in 424 B.C. (Thuc. 4.98f.).⁶⁸ It was the failure of the victorious Athenian generals to pick up the bodies of the dead after the Battle of Arginusae in 406 which led to their execution. Herodotus, too, tells us that after Plataea the Spartan king Pausanias was tempted by an Aeginetan to mutilate the corpse of Mardonius, but found the strength to refuse with noble words of indignation (Herodotus 9.78–9). It is also, of course, a

and literature. Clio, the austere Muse of serious modern historiography, draws her skirts aside; she prefers, she says, a diet of very dry bread.

⁶⁵ *Locus classicus*: Pausanias 1.15. It was the local heroes Phylacus and Autonous who put the Persian raiders to flight at Delphi: Herodotus 8.38–9. 'It is not we who have done this but the gods and the heroes', said the Themistocles of Herodotus after the Battle of Salamis (8.109.3): the heroes whom the Greeks had invoked before the battle (Hdt. 7.189; Simonides fragment 3 West).

⁶⁶ The Plataeans make all the 'tragic' appeals: to the rights of suppliants, to the graves of ancestors, and to the altars of gods (3.58–9). The Melian Dialogue, of course, is conducted in very different terms.

⁶⁷ Thucydides 3.52–69; 5.84–116.

⁶⁸ Some have seen a connection between these events and Euripides' *Suppliant Women*; for references and discussion, see C. Collard's edition of the play (Groningen, 1975), Vol. I, pp. 8ff.

stock theme in the praise of Athens in the Funeral Speeches: it was Athens that forced the Thebans to bow to the divine law and allow the burial of the bodies of the Seven.⁶⁹

It is clear that both Herodotus and Thucydides rely upon set scenes of this sort as one of their chief devices. They serve to enliven the narrative and make it memorable, and also to dramatize and bring out the deeper meaning of history. The sharp contrasts and dramatic tension of the Mitylenean Debate in Thucydides' third book are immediately followed by the doom of Plataea; the same book also contains the impressive horrors of the Corcyra *stasis*, and it ends with a herald so overwhelmed by the greatness of his people's disaster that he does not even remember to ask for the return of the bodies of the dead (3.113). No less rich in pathos is the narration of the plague in Book Two. The historian tells us that recourse to supplication in holy places was useless, and that finally men neglected even the duty to bury the dead (2.47.4, 2.52): the same motifs as are familiar in tragedy, and in a no less 'dramatic' setting. More examples could be adduced in Thucydides.

Herodotus also loves such intense and dramatic scenes, from the deadly dilemma of Gyges (1.8–12), and the doom of Adrestus the Phrygian homicide who killed the son of his benefactor (1.34–45), and the severed head of Cyrus plunged in a bucket of blood as a judgment on his bloody career (1.214), and the horror stories about Cambyses in Book Three, all the way to the gruesome tale of the wife of Masistes at the very end of the Histories (9.107–13). On the one hand, such events really happened, more often and more spectacularly than we, with our mild politics and our abstract ways of thought, find it natural or easy to remember; in the light of our own terrible century, that should, after all, not be so hard to believe. On the other hand, they are the very events to which the historians, like the tragedians, attach great emotional power and also great illustrative and paradigmatic force. *This* is how things are; *this* is what can happen.

It is thus very important to see that in the age of the tragic poets and their audiences the old moral questions were still alive and still interesting. The burial of Hector is already a very important issue in the *Iliad*, and supplicants beg for succour and for mercy, not always in vain, in the *Odyssey*. There was no need for a new political set-up to force them on the attention as startling innovations. But what of the other favourite moral horrors of tragedy: incest, parricide, infanticide, human sacrifice? What of the brides murdering their husbands on the first night as they sleep, as in the Danaid trilogy of Aeschylus? What of the oracles demanding human sacrifice, as in *Agamemnon*, *Heraclidae*, *Phoenissae*, *Erechtheus*, and *Iphigeneia in Aulis*? What of a son ordered by a god to avenge his father by killing his mother, like Orestes? What of the horrid career of Oedipus, or the crime of Atreus against his brother's children, or the mothers who instead of nurturing their children suddenly murder them, like Ino and Procne and Agave and Medea?

These terrible dilemmas and monstrous actions, and many others like them in fifth-century tragedy, are neither new in the democratic *polis* nor specific to it. Many of them surely come from a different and deeper level of the mind than that of politics or constitutions. They relate to primitive and universal taboos and anxieties. They pullulate in the myths; and on what we might call the level of prose they can also be projected on to dead tyrants and Eastern potentates. Hence the horror stories in Herodotus about the family of Periander (3.48–53), and the court of Cambyses (3.14–15, 30–8), and the sexual offence and its ghastly consequences in the affair of

⁶⁹ Lysias 2.7–10; Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 54–8; id., *Panathenaicus* 168–74; Demosthenes 60.8. See N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens* (Eng. trans., Harvard, 1986), p. 216.

King Xerxes and Masistes' Semele-like wife.⁷⁰ Nor, for the most part, is their moral problematic. To most of them everybody knew the answer: of course one should not withhold burial, or mutilate the dead, or kill one's children, or violate sanctuary. What was difficult was not to know the answer but to carry it out, when tempted by anger or vengeance or the insolence of power.

What the Athenians experienced together in the theatre was not, then, something which is to be seen as primarily or by definition political, democratic, and ideologically motivated by the conscious desire to maximize social cohesion. In some plays that sort of political motive can indeed be seen to be at work. Something like it can be among the principal motives, as in the third play of the *Oresteia*, or even perhaps the single main motive, as in the *Suppliant Women* of Euripides; but even that tragedy contains things of a very different tendency. The suttee of Evadne, for instance, and the grief of her father, can only be a piece of almost pure pathos, not to say melodrama, which was surely meant to grip the audience far too tightly for them to be speculating about the implications of all this for the funerary ideology of the democratic polis. Even as the audience reflected afterwards on what it had seen and heard, these unforgettable events must have formed a prominent element in their meditations.

Tragedy is, rather, to be seen as providing a uniquely vivid and piercingly pleasurable enactment of human suffering, magnified in scale and dignity by the fact that the agents were the famous people of myth, and winged with every refinement of poetry and music. It required the creation of scenes and events of the sharpest intensity. Some of the plays raised moral and political issues which also presented themselves in national or international affairs. All of them must, in some sense and at some level, illustrate the ways in which the world is run by the divine: by the gods, in the plays so constantly active, but by the collectivist school of criticism so seldom mentioned.

Tragedy was a form so powerful and so delightful that very soon every Greek city, whether or not it was democratic, found itself building a theatre. There they put on the plays of the great Athenian masters. Long after democracy had been stamped out, first by the Macedonians and then by the Romans, the masterpieces of Attic drama retained their appeal. The Romans even imitated them, in their own barbaric language and their own eminently undemocratic city; where it is, if possible, even harder to imagine of Roman magistrates than of Athenian archons that their motive, in staging at public festivals tragedies based upon Euripides and Sophocles, was to teach their citizens to question the values of their own society. That was not among the ideals of the aristocrats of Republican Rome; nor was propaganda in favour of democracy.

The reason why they all did it was, above all, because of that special tragic pleasure: a pleasure that combined debate with reportage, rhetoric with divine revelation, lamentation and hymns with reasoned argument, all seasoned with pathos and music and the dance. I have no wish to deny that one element of the pleasure of the audience, or of some members of it, was to see their shared beliefs and values satisfyingly restated, refurbished, revealed again as capable of explaining the complexity of the world and of events. The same was doubtless true of the audience of Pindar, too. The account given in this paper, which is long enough already, is to that extent one-sided. But it is worth insisting that by no means all those ideas and values were connected

⁷⁰ Cf. J.-P. Vernant, 'Le tyran boiteux: d'Oedipe à Périandre', in J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie deus* (Paris, 1986), pp. 45–78; K. Reinhardt, 'Herodots Persergeschichten', *Vermächtnis der Antike* (Göttingen, 1960), 133–74 = *Herodot.*, ed. W. Marg (Wd.F.26, 1965), pp. 320–69; E. Wolff, 'Das Weib des Masistes', *ibid.*, pp. 668–78 = *Hermes* 92 (1964), 51–8.

with democracy; to take an obvious example, the prohibition of leaving the dead unburied, a great tragic theme, was a universal Greek rule, not political but religious in character, already argued out in the *Iliad*. And it was above all pleasure that the state was paying for,⁷¹ and that the citizens wanted (and paid for); a refined, sophisticated, and thoughtful pleasure, at the highest flight of art, but pleasure none the less.

That is why Attic tragedy, not parochial in time or place, so long survived the passing of the Attic democracy. That is why, so many centuries later, it is still alive. It confronts us, at moments, with things that are radically strange to us. At others it confronts us with something that resembles our own ideas (liberal, democratic, questioning). It must always be remembered that it was not for us that it was composed, and that it is consequently impossible to reduce it without remainder to our familiar terms. The more exactly an ancient work seems to chime with our own most cherished notions, to sympathize with our liberal ideas about the state, to support our modern conceptions of ideology, the more carefully we should look at our analysis, to see where we have gone wrong.⁷²

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APPENDICULA

There exists a striking piece of evidence which at least purports to show how an Athenian audience of the late fifth century looked at tragedy and history. The speech *Against Alcibiades* ascribed to Andocides denounces him, among other things, for his monstrous conduct in having a child by a woman from Melos:

After recommending that the people of Melos be sold into slavery, he purchased a woman from among the prisoners and has since had a son by her, a child whose birth was more unnatural than that of Aegisthus, since he is sprung from parents who are each others's deadliest enemies. . . . When you are shown things of this kind on the tragic stage, you regard them with horror
(Andocides 4.22–3, Loeb trans. by K. J. Maidment)

That suggests that the audience saw tragedy more in the way suggested here, as rich in terrible situations and towering personalities, than as a show-case either of democratic values or of their breach. There is of course nothing specific to the democracy, or indeed to the fifth century, about this motif, in literature or in life. We can compare the position of Andromache in her name play: the slave mother of the son of her conqueror.

The passage is here relegated to an appendix because the date of the speech is controversial. Good scholars still date it to 415, but see now P. J. Rhodes in R. Osborne and S. Hornblower (edd.), *Ritual, Finance, Politics* (Festschrift D. M. Lewis), (Oxford, 1994), pp. 88–91, who suggests a date 'after the Peloponnesian War' (p. 91).

⁷¹ It will be recalled that Thucydides makes Pericles speak of 'the many rest periods from exertion' (τῶν πόνων πλείστας ἀναπαύλας) offered to her people by the city, with its 'competitions and sacrifices through the year' (2.38.1); doubtless he included the tragic performances. Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 653cd.

⁷² The ideas in this paper began to be worked out for the Stubbs Lecture, given at University College, University of Toronto, at Easter 1996. I am grateful for the invitation, and for helpful discussion of the paper.