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Vision and Method – (Re-)Reading of Ancient Greek Drama

Prof. Dr. Heinz-Uwe Haus

University of Delaware

Dept. of Theatre/PTTP/REP

Newark, DE 19716; USA

1. Trial of suffering

In understanding Ancient Greek drama, it helps to remember that the “aristocratic” and “heroic” ethos from the Past – as described in the Iliad and the Odyssey – lay in the distant past as a cultural memory of the profoundly egalitarian and democratic Present. This means that, in the tragedies, each world, the Past and the Present, confront and interrogate each other. The modern democratic polis critically contemplates its aristocratic, heroic heritage and that heritage, in turn, challenges the ethos of the modern, democratic present. In Sophocles’ plays the collision between the worlds – past and present – can be highly discomfiting.

In tragedy, the concepts of suffering, hubris and moral responsibility are all interrelated, as one simply would not exist without the other. Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* illuminates this. The Mystery Play format allows the audience to witness the characters unravel a truth known from the beginning, distancing actor from spectator while revealing the roles of these concepts. Political, social and cultural aspects from the era in which the play has been written are also visible in the work; however the play remains universal besides from the storyline and plot, it deals with the humanistic issue of confronting the truth.

In ancient Greek Theatre, suffering is presented as inevitable as well as irrevocable. According to

Aristotle, the tragic protagonist is responsible for his own suffering but it is only through his destruction can social harmony be restored. This then allows for *catharsis*, which can be defined as tragic satisfaction, to be felt by the audience, and experienced through the purgation of pity and fear along with the characters. In *King Oedipus*, the weight of the suffering experienced by the protagonist can best be examined in the later passages of the Chorus. The Chorus is essential to Greek Theatre as it accompanied actors with song, speech and movement. In *King Oedipus*, the Chorus is created to represent the citizens of Thebes and accounts for the occurrence of events through Theban eyes:

“Oh, child of Laius/If only I had never seen you. My lamentation pours forth in a great cry from my lips. Truth to tell, it was thanks to you that I breathed anew and rested my eyes in sleep.”

This scene then demonstrates the outcome of moving from “prosperity to ignorance to knowledge to misery.” In a political sense, the tragic act has had further repercussions on Thebes which has now entered a state of malaise due to its leader’s misfortune. The loyalty of the Chorus clearly professed in this scene makes us realize the greatness of Oedipus’ influence upon the Thebans. (The cultural explanation for this nature of worship is that leaders were perceived as god-like by the Ancient Greeks. In the play’s beginning Oedipus is presented as a savior to the Theban people.) The extensive misery contained in knowing the truth is strongly echoed by the masses which the Chorus embodies. The role of suffering in the social scope can be observed when Oedipus decides to blind himself:

“From/the brooches of beaten gold/lifting them high, struck his eyeballs in their sockets.”

Oedipus’ presence and status in society is destroyed by wisdom. This then drives him to blind himself, which ironically symbolizes possessing knowledge and, also echoing to the character of Teresias, the blind prophet. Although the audience does not witness such violent action onstage, the Chorus’ dialogue it shows the consequences of facing the truth driving men to take extreme measures.

The challenge for the theatre makers is, to find the latent content of the story. Today’s societies, who advertise a post-modern mindset, have set up a shadow world of “meanings”. Students grasp from the readings of tragedies: “We should do everything possible to protect ourselves and avoid unnecessary suffering and psychological harm.” Dr. Phil, Oprah and Dear Abby have done their job. From there it is usually a long way to clarify, as Susan Sontag would say, that to understand is to interpret. To really “fabulate” with the ancient story, students have to find out, that “interpretation itself has to be evaluated, within a historical view of human consciousness”(Sontag, 17) First one has to make the effort and try to understand what suffering means. When one thinks of suffering, one equates it with fear and imagines that all kinds of terrible situations lie ahead. Setback and tragedy are part of life yet the outcome of one’s suffering can prove to be very beneficial. Sooner or later each person confronts—but can hopefully endure—the trial of suffering. One who cannot accept a trial is very unfortunate because he will have gained nothing.

2. Divine rationality

When Nietzsche said that one of the great glories of the Greeks is that they didn't put their best into reflection, he meant that the most powerful things that Greeks have to teach us about moral life are not to be learned from their philosophy. Tragedy presents these things in an unmediated and compelling way which brings them home far more powerfully than philosophical dialogue.

The Greek tragedians, even when they deal with ancient myths are, paradoxically, closer to us and our view of the world than are the philosophers who challenged those myths. This is because these great philosophers all wrote as if there was a rational order in the world and if only we could organize our thinking process properly, we could get in tune with that order. Aristotle thought that the world was at the center of the Universe and human rationality had a special relationship to divine rationality.

How can acquiring wisdom help a person through suffering? Wisdom can significantly help a person accept suffering. Acceptance is extremely important. Acquiring wisdom is for anyone who can understand this, a concept contained in an idea. Engage yourself in thinking about and exploring the concepts and ideas that are based on wisdom. Do this by making time to learn and acquire. Suffering is a great teacher. Suffering teaches you the limitations of your power; it reminds you of the frailty of your health, the instability of your possessions, and the inadequacy of your means which have only been lent to you and must be returned as soon as God desires it. Suffering visits you and teaches you the nothingness of your false greatness. It teaches you modesty. (Horeb, Vol. 1, p. 36)

Today it is widely known that Sophocles utilized many theatrical devices to stimulate such a critical attitude on the part of his audience. It is most likely that his theater looked and sounded more like an opera-ballet than a modern spoken drama. The ancient Greeks generally were on intimate terms with the body, they used movement as a major part of their drama. Body language must have played an important role. We are obliged to visualize the events of the play, if we want to grasp something of the spirit and the roots of the dramatic heritage of Sophocles. The Sophoclean choruses, for example, in their tense and mobile harmony of shifting sounds had an effect more powerful than mere narration and recitation, more immediate than plot. "There is a time for music and a time for reasoning", as Nietzsche insisted. But time is also full of contradictions. Sophocles makes the simplest words and phrases sound like the loftiest epic utterance, and he makes the loftiest epic utterance sound as natural as everyday speech.

3. Tragic myth versus social norm

Theatre makers can not remind themselves often enough, that the Ancient Greek dramatic world is not divided between good and evil, heroes and villains, virtuous and innocent characters. When characters suffer – Orestes, Oedipus, Antigone – it is not because they deserve it, or because there is some villainy at work, but because suffering is inescapable to human experience. Suffering is not wickedness, but “blindness”, ignorance or overwhelming passion. Moralizing commentators have misread Aristotle’s “hamartia” as meaning “tragic flaw”. Tragic heroes and heroines do not “deserve” their suffering. It is more due to appalling bad luck or misjudgment (Oedipus) or integrity (Antigone) – or, as with Ajax, Hippolytos, Pentheus, failing to give a deity its due.

Let’s for a moment put aside the term “tragic” to describe the theater of Sophocles and consider replacing it with the term “antagonistic contradictory”, which leads us to a “dialectical” approach. The term “tragic” tends to narrow our perception and I found it formalistic, that is, emphasizing the formal rather than the methodological and philosophical aspects of his theater. “Dialectical” refers to the process of change in nature and society and a method of understanding this change. And it was this aspect—social change and transformation—that Sophocles made the central concern of his theater. He believed that man, society, and nature are everywhere and at all times in a process of change and flux; and as such, they can also be changed by man. Thus, it became the purpose of Sophocles’ theater to represent man and his world in such a way that both can be changed. It is obvious that one of the sources of myths powerful hold on Sophocles and his audience, was the authority of what we would call “history”. The fifth-century Athenians, held a vision of the past, of their own history, that was poetic from the start. People and events were symbolic representations of every aspect of man’s life on earth, of his strength and weakness in the struggle against his fellow men, and the forces of nature, and of the bleak fact of his own mortality. The remote mythic plot was filtered through the Chorus to the audience. The Chorus represented the “ethos” of the polis. As the social “norm” they viewed the protagonists with fear, dismay, disapproval, sympathy, but they themselves stayed “outside” the zone of danger. They in fact might be seen as “conductors” between the charged and mythic arena of the story and the world of the contemporary audience. The Chorus conducted and interrogated the rise and fall of the Protagonists. The Protagonists were those who had separated themselves, individually, from the safety of the choric conventional consciousness. This gave them a greater individual status than the Chorus member, but it also exposed them to the danger of tragedy. The protagonists were often the transgressors whose consequent suffering confirmed the laws transgressed and which the Chorus honored. The protagonists belonged to the distant, “charged”, heroic Mykanean period. They were aristocratic, hubristic, or caught in extraordinary (mythic) situations very different from the modern, sophisticated world of the democratic polis. The masked actors in the theater of Dionysus presented the audience not only the historical figures of the hear-say past, but also its own ambitions, fate, and social cohesion. Sophocles contrasted the theater of his age with that of the previous age, remarking that in earlier times man was considered the plaything of the gods or fates, subject to incomprehensible natural and social forces. 2500 years later, our attitude is not dissimilar.

4. The bigger they are, the harder they fall

In portraying his characters, Sophocles raises the depiction of antagonistic contradictions to high art, making the characters unwitting victims of fate or their own shortcomings. The irony is both verbal (with characters speaking words laden with meaning unknown to them) and dramatic (with characters ensnaring themselves in predicaments charged with danger that they do not recognize but that the audience well knows will lead to disaster). The audience knows, for example, what Oedipus does not know (until the end of *King Oedipus*): that the man he killed and the woman he married were his father and mother. This type of dramaturgy occurs often in Sophocles' plays, allowing the audience to become engrossed with a character's response to a situation rather than the eventual outcome of the situation. In all events the audience observes how wisdom accompanies suffering. A central focus is the misbehaviors of the character through pride.

Pride is considered a grave sin because it places too much emphasis on individual will, thereby downplaying the will of the state and endangering the community as a whole. Because pride makes people unwilling to accept wise council, they act rashly and make bad decisions.

The Theban plays lay bare pain, frenzy and their treatment in the dramatic event

Oedipus as king of Thebes exhibits great pride (hubris) that blinds his ability to accept the truth. By contrast, the blind prophet Teiresias readily "sees" the truth. Thanks to whims of fate and his own pride and arrogance, Oedipus tumbles headlong into an abyss of humiliation, grief, and remorse in a single day.

Oedipus at Colonus achieves redemption through love, piety, and hardship. Stripped of dignity, he wanders in a wilderness of suffering for many years. Though blind, he begins to "see" again with the eye of his soul, recognizing his faults and realizing the importance of love and right living with the help of his daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

The events around Antigone's action demonstrate too how intractability and pride cause the downfall of even the noblest humans. Both Creon and Antigone doom themselves with their recalcitrance. Overriding divine law with the law of the state leads to ruin. Creon's refusal to permit Antigone to bury her brother Polynices was a violation of moral law even though Polynices had rebelled against Creon's rule as King of Thebes. To uphold the moral law Antigone breaks the civil law. Down through the ages and into modern times, citizens have used this theme to guide them in redressing their grievances. All over the world protesters took the role of Antigone as they demonstrated and sometimes rioted against their government's war policy.

5. Compassion to stand suffering and gain wisdom

In his sixty-three years of the current reincarnation, the Dalai Lama has grown from a simple undiscovered child to a world-reknowned symbol of peace. His philosophies are inspired by the early sufferings that were imposed by environmental, cultural, religious, and political suppressions. The

wretchednesses and the difficulties that he has encountered lead to his wisdom, as do his never-ending desire to learn and communicate. The Dalai Lama's philosophies have not only touched the hearts of the six million Tibetan people, but also acquired general acceptance in terms of his teaching of spiritual and mental enrichments. It is hard to imagine the woes that he suffered. Consequently, dressed in saffron-and-maroon-colored robes, speaking in an often broken English, and peering at the world through eyes that have lost none of their wonder and decency despite the horrors he has witnessed, the Dalai Lama is seemingly out of place in the modern world.

Based on his autobiography *My Land and My People*, we learn that the exiled leader has seen all the myriad dangers facing the modern world and unleashed upon his own country: wars, ecological destruction, and the trampling of human rights, political justice, and religious freedoms, all in the name of supposed political, economic, and ideological progress (The Dalai Lama of Tibet 15). According to the autobiography of the Dalai Lama, as early as 1950, he was confronted with China's desire to occupy Tibet. By 1951, this so-called "peaceful liberation" created a heretofore unknown starvation and heavy inflation in the Tibetan population as well (The Dalai Lama 85). Because the Tibetan culture is centered on its strong Buddhist heritage, the subsequent burnings of the temples, the banishment and massacre of the monks, and Mao's imposed belief that "Religion is poison" threatened the annihilation of the Tibetan people (The Dalai Lama 296). They resisted the oppression, and the Chinese communist regime responded with brutal crackdowns, arrests, and imprisonments. Last but not least, while in exile, the Dalai Lama witnessed China's announcement to dissolve the Tibetan government and relieve its right to rule, thereby destroying the political system that was established and practiced for centuries (The Dalai Lama of Tibet 172).

It is his first-hand experience with the many faces of suffering that makes the Dalai Lama so authentic a teacher. As the "Buddha of Compassion", which is what Tibetans call him, he holds the strong belief the "compassion is not an element of religion, but a basic characteristic of humanity" (The Dalai Lama 6). He thinks that compassion is fundamentally a human quality; so its development is not restricted to those who practice religion (Bunson 76). From his book "Worlds in harmony" dialogues on compassionate action," we know that he preaches that the ultimate goal of life is the pursuit of contentment and happiness, resulting from an inner peace and originating from true love of all living things (His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama 7). He believes that compassion leads to inner peace (Bunson 70), and furthermore holds the idea that as we ourselves learn to remain in peace, we can demonstrate in society in a way that makes a real statement. Finally, he states that "Warfare and hatred are always based on misunderstanding about human happiness and on mistrust between people" (Bunson 150).

6. The cult of Dionysus and the modern guise of divinity

Audiences in ancient Athens did not go to a play to be entertained by a plot with a surprise ending. They already knew the ending. They went to a play to see how the characters reacted to the forces working for or against them—mostly against.

Remember the story of *The Bacchae*:

Dionysus returns to his birthplace, where Pentheus is king. He has returned to punish the women for denying that he is a god and born of a god. Pentheus is enraged at the worship of Dionysus and forbids it, but he cannot stop the women, including his mother Agave, or even the elder statesmen of the kingdom from swarming to the wilds to join the Maenads (women under the ecstatic spell of Dionysus).

Pentheus, has the “Eastern Stranger” (Dionysus disguised) captured, but he easily escapes. The Maenad’s are loosed. Pentheus, obsessed by Dionysus and propelled by his own curiosity, goes to the hills dressed as a woman to spy on the orgiastic rites of the Bacchants. He is caught and, led by his own mother Agave, is torn to pieces in a frenzy.

As a theatre maker I am confronted with both: the cult of Dionysus and the modern guise of divinity.

“This is the effect of your wine for wine is a crazy thing. It sets the wisest man singing and giggling like a girl; it lures him on to dance and it makes him blurt out what were better left unsaid.” [Odysseus to Eumaeus 1. Homer, *Odyssey*. 14.464]

I remember the very intense, physical demanding rehearsals of the play. One of the actors, Ricardo Zeger, stated his experience: “It can no longer be left unsaid that when the contemporary theatre artist becomes engaged in a dramatic representation he is in some way or other taking part in the cult of Dionysus.” Appropriately, Dionysus was the suffering god. He was also the god of all people, men, women, and slaves. Therefore he dissolved the boundaries that existed in daily public life.

Some of you may remember the Suzuki – inspired production, presented during the Ancient Greek Drama Festival in Droushia, at the mountain village of Droushia.

This short performance was composed of two scenes extracted from the play (“the meeting” and “the conversion”), characteristic for the transformative function of the dramatic events.

The Meeting:

Dionysus, or the man claiming to be the god is a foreigner, out of time and place; comparable in our day probably only to a celebrity rock star on a world tour, a secret agent working to uncover an international conspiracy or even a member of a dangerous mafia plotting acts of terrorism. At a first glance we know he is a stranger to any possible notion of divinity. It is no wonder Pentheus doubts him and his motives. We know by looking at him by listening to the way he wrestles with words that this self-proclaimed god’s most dangerous weapon is not his staff, but his “otherness” and the alienation that it creates around him.

Pentheus is a citizen of the past, rooted in tradition, the embodiment of the state; the strict stiffness of bureaucracy and the church; the inevitable inertia of mundane and ordinary everyday life.

Old notions and rules of behavior clash against new codes of conduct.

In other words:

“Old gods don’t die, they just briefly exit the stage to take a break and change costume.”

Like on the orchestra of Ancient times, there always exist preconceived notions about what the right way is for the dramatic events to be performed. The Ancient Greek dramatist's lesson is, not to know how to do but how not to do. So when Dionysus' appearance is unfamiliar ("non-mythical"), not unlike Pentheus' reaction to this "new" and "foreign" god, we are challenged.

For example, we wonder, why Dionysus chooses not to fight, instead he uses Pentheus' own inertia to instill and preserve the new mysteries. How cunning and deceitful can one be and still remain in charge?

The Conversion:

"Inertia: 1. The tendency of a body at rest to remain at rest or of a body in motion to stay in motion in a straight line unless acted on by an outside force. 2. Resistance or disinclination to motion, action, or change."

Dionysus utilizes Pentheus' own righteousness, doubt, resistance and incredulity to create in him a need to know, a need to see. The new uses the old to perpetuate itself, much like the way Dionysus breaks with the old and escapes captivity by using the patterns of tradition, and transforming them. Pentheus too is transformed, of his own accord, into a woman to satisfy his curiosity and ultimately becomes the perfect tool to preserve that which he was eager to stop.

The highest tragedy of the *Bacchae* resides perhaps in Pentheus becoming the primordial element of perpetuating that which he vehemently strove to bring to an end.

The Greek-Cypriot audience, familiar with their mythic heritage, could not ignore the presence of Dionysus, who as a god of ecstasy also dissolved the boundary between Reason and Emotion – even Madness. It comes to mind, that the rituals of his worshippers involves acts of frenzy like tearing apart living animals and eating them raw (sparagmos). He is an appropriate god for a tragic festival. And, we see, tragedy gives voice to those who had no public voice in the polis. The fact, that the audience carry the myth as inherited and its "own" creates an ideal "complementary perspective". But in addition we also touch the actual question of identity. It is a rule of thumb: all identities require an other - some other in and through a relationship with which self-identity is actualized. The "other" in the *Bacchae* is an agent of contrast, the pressure of its influence implies perspective. When the object under scrutiny is the self, the operation of perspective encourages the subject's avowal of subjectivity: the self comes to be "out there" not "in here" and can therefore be studied more easily. The Choric consciousness elucidates the drama.

Notes

Susan Sontag: *Against Interpretation*. Dell Publishing CO, Inc., New York, 1961

His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama: *My Land and My People*. Warner Books, New York

Elladios Chandriotis: The Three Tragedians—Notes On Three Parallel Plays. Cyprus Centre I.T.I., Nicosia, 2005

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