



the poetry of greek tragedy

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THE
POETRY OF
GREEK
TRAGEDY



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Foreword



THESE six lectures were given at The Johns Hopkins University in January, 1957, on the Percy Turnbull Memorial Lectureship of Poetry. They are here printed without substantial alteration. The notes and bibliography are not supposed to represent an adequate guide to the critical literature on an enormous subject, but are rather intended as an acknowledgment of principal works consulted in preparing these limited studies.¹

The translations in the text are all my own. The University of Chicago Press holds the copyright for the translations from Euripides, *Alcestis* and *Helen*.

I wish here to express my thanks to the donors of The Percy Turnbull Memorial Lectureship and to The Johns Hopkins Press for making this book possible, and to the academic community of The Johns Hopkins University for abundant generosity and kindness at the time of the lectures.

¹ The rather few references to critical works in the notes are given in the simplest possible form. Bibliographical information on these works will be found in the bibliography at the end of the book.

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The Poetry of Greek Tragedy

Introduction



WHAT is an Attic tragedy? Its essential nature must be defined by those features which qualified a play for presentation in the formal competition for a prize at the city Dionysia (perhaps in other public, religious competitions as well).¹ If we knew the origin and early history of this form, we should have to take it into account. But we do not.² We have to enter from the other end, and work from the common elements which are found in the corpus of extant tragedy: thirty-two complete tragedies, plus a large number of fragments and résumés.

As for quality, a tragedy was required to be dignified and serious. The principal purpose was to enact a heroic story, drawn from legend. There were few exceptions. The plays

¹ After writing the first pages of these studies, I came across the following statement (read ten years earlier and since half forgotten) of Wilamowitz, Introduction to Euripides: *Herakles*, p. 107: "Wir stehen am schlusse: es ist nur noch nötig, den ertrag unserer betrachtungen zusammenzuziehen, damit die frage beantwortet werde, was ist eine attische tragödie? eine attische tragödie ist ein in sich abgeschlossenes stück der heldensage, poetisch bearbeitet in erhabenen stile für die darstellung durch einen attischen bürgerchor und zwei bis drei schauspieler, und bestimmt als teil des öffentlichen gottesdienstes im heiligtume des Dionysos aufgeführt zu werden." For the circumstances and rules governing competitive performance, see Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*.

² Consider, for example, the remark of Aristotle *Poetics* 4.1449A: "Tragedy began as improvisation . . . by those who led off the dithyramb." I cannot dispute this, nor can I make the slightest use of it in trying to understand the tragedy (or dithyramb) which has come down to us. I do not mean to question the value of studies in the origin of tragedy.

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were presented impersonally: that is, even when present day stories were used, present day public characters could not be named; nor could the poet speak in his own person.

A tragedy, as entrant for competition, had to be so constructed as not to require more than a stated allowance of players, that is, actors, supernumeraries, and chorus. It had to be written in verse, not prose, and had to use language which was not always the language of prose.³ The verse was unrhymed but, whether it was blank verse or stanzaic (spoken or sung), it obeyed canons more strict than any which have ever been observed in (for instance) English verse.

From these bare essentials, other common features of tragedy follow. The requirement that a tragedy be serious and dignified allows wit, but precludes horseplay; the same requirement perhaps accounts for the tragic poet's habit of reporting violent action rather than staging it;⁴ and for the avoidance of certain metrical forms which were used in comedy.⁵ It is important to remember that dignity and

³ Take as an instance Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Maidens* 93-95:

δauλoι γὰρ πpaπίδων
δάσκιoι τε τείνουσιν πόροι
κατιδεῖν ἄφραστοι.

These lines belong characteristically to tragedy, not only in virtue of the ideas, imagery, and meter, but also in the use of the words δauλός, πpaπίδες, and δασκίός, and in the arrangement of δauλoι and ἄφραστοι in relation to the subject and main verb of the sentence.

⁴ Horseplay, including slapstick pursuits, fisticuffs, etc., seems to be required in Attic Old Comedy, a form which, despite its apparent looseness, has far more readily discernible "required elements" than tragedy.

⁵ Comedy uses anapaestic tetrameter catalectic frequently, iambic tetrameter catalectic occasionally; tragedy does not use these at all, so far as I have found, for Aeschylus frg. 87 and Sophocles frg. 804 (Nauck) are both Aristophanic lines and may very well have been adapted by the comic poet to his own meters. There are many other differences, and dignity is probably not the only consideration. It is worth noting that

seriousness do not require that a tragedy be "tragical" in the modern sense that it must be the story of a disaster. Whether or not the play has a happy ending depends principally on the way the legend (or myth) ends. The story of Oedipus demands an unhappy ending: the story of Philoctetes, which is an equally popular legend for tragedy, demands a happy ending. We are justified in using such terms as "romantic comedy" which are helpful toward definition by modern standards, but we ought to remember that, technically speaking, *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Helen* are tragedies, just as certainly as *Medea* and *The Trojan Women* are. Otherwise, the danger is that we shall form a set of tragic standards based on a few plays, and then try to torture the other plays into conforming to those standards.

Now, if a play, in order to be called tragedy, does not necessarily have to tell the story of extreme suffering or disaster, it will follow *a fortiori* (or so I think) that those moral or spiritual narrative concepts which, so to speak, justify suffering and disaster—such as pride and punishment, tragic fault, learning through suffering—are not part of the essential definition of tragedy. This does not mean that we are wrong to interpret in these terms, when the terms work. Sometimes, but not always, the poets themselves seem to use such concepts. Again, the serious tone and the solemn occasion do, in fact, dictate moralizing (though not any one particular group of morals); and the implicit or explicit use of divinity and religion (though not of any particular gods or any particular rituals).

What we can put down, then, as the essential *facts* of tragedy are:

iambic tetrameter catalectic is the standard verse for folk ballads and heroic poetry in Modern Greek.

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The presentation under strict competitive rules on a public occasion which, like all public occasions in Athens, was under religious sanction.

Dignity and seriousness and objectivity (as contrasted with comedy and satyr-play).

Contingent upon these: the raising of moral and religious issues.

The primary purpose, to enact a story from Greek legend.

The facts of poetry.

The critics of Greek tragedy have, however, disagreed over what is essential, what is secondary and derivative, and likewise what is important or interesting.⁶ Some have held that tragedy began as a sacred, ceremonial story and remained essentially that, even where it appears most secular and heroic.⁷ Others have emphasized the moral and theological aspects, and have seen the tragic poet as a prophet with a vocation who through drama tried to interpret the gods to his people and teach them the way of right action.⁸ Others again have read the tragedies as purely dramatic constructions,⁹ emphasizing plot, motivation, or character, according to the critic's main interest. In addition to these

⁶ See, in general, Schmid, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, II, 27-50, and especially p. 29, with bibliography to date.

⁷ The best known form of this type of interpretation is perhaps that stated by Murray, "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy," incorporated in Harrison, *Themis*, pp. 340-63; restated and defended, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Drama."

⁸ See, above all, Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie*, p. 31. The calling of the tragic poet involved "das Recht und die Verantwortung dafür, Lehrer seines Volkes zu sein." The view is consistently maintained. A similar position, differently developed, is maintained by Jaeger, *Paideia* I, pp. 237-85, 332-81.

⁹ This is the approach of, for instance, Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*; Waldo, *Sophocles the Dramatist*; T.v. Wilamowitz, *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles*.

general views, there have been many special technical studies of particular aspects: indispensable works on the anatomy of verse, for example, proceeding through analysis and statistics, treating the meters of Greek tragedy scientifically without more than secondary regard to the nature of the plays as a whole. Apart from such studies, however, I have found relatively little interest in the poetry of Greek tragedy. What I have said of the moralizing approach seems equally true of the literary approach: most critics might most of the time be discussing plays which were written in plain prose.

I do not here wish to reverse the trend of criticism, nor to question, except incidentally, the validity of approaches other than mine. Is Sophocles the artificer of lines, the master of sound combinations, the painter of images and architect of rhetorical figures, more important, more basic, more the true Sophocles, than Sophocles the moralist, Sophocles the student of character, or Sophocles the storyteller? I may have my notions, but I do not mean to argue them. I suspect myself of creating a separation of aspects which are not entirely separable. But I wish to show, if I can, some of the ways in which the poetry as poetry contributes to the effect of the drama as drama—realizing that if the drama is written as poetry, not merely in verse, the distinction between the poetry as poetry and the drama as drama may sometimes be artificial and strained, sometimes even false.

I realize also that what I want to do is difficult and perhaps impossible, since I shall have to use translations which, though made to order for such use, will be inadequate, and since I cannot thrust my victim's head into the Greek text. Using translations, however, I shall try to do some such brutal thing, though I stand in the shadow of Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve, who himself had a weakness

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for verse translation but could never have dreamed of confusing it with scholarship. It is not easy at this point even to define what I mean by poetry, aside from the obvious facts of metrical and rhetorical structure, imagery, the use of words and forms not used in prose—subjects which can scarcely be dealt with except in a technical study. It is only easy to illustrate, piecemeal. Before I do this, I shall suggest some tentative and imperfect working formulas. One might investigate, for instance, the implications of this axiom: when you have outlined the plot, analyzed character and motive, articulated the moral issues—the residue is the poetry. This would be more nearly true if it were possible for all tragedies to be summarized without taking the poetry into consideration. We would not so account for the fact, if fact it is, that Euripides' *The Children of Heracles* contains very little poetry and his *Hippolytus* contains very little else. Or shall we say that what is directed neither to the emotion nor the intellect, but to the imagination, is the poetry of the plays? This is better: plays do not merely enact and instruct; they make us see what is not there. But imagination does not exhaust the content of the poetical either.

Nor are the three tragic poets alike. I suggest that we look for the special contribution of the poetry in some such phenomena as these: for Aeschylus, in enlargement; for Sophocles, in anomaly; for Euripides, in relief or idealization. For Aeschylus, poetry is basic—it comes first: this blows the simple plot and limited characterization into full scale drama. For Sophocles, drama comes first: in what puzzles or disturbs the coherent interpretation of complete drama, or at least stands unaccounted for in the economy, we may look for the poetry. For Euripides, sometimes at least, the point comes first. We may find his poetry in what seems to have nothing to do with the drama or in what is

merely contrasted to it, or we may find his poetry, after all, in certain ideas or themes, succinctly expressed only in lyric terms, which yet hold all the meaning of the dramatic action. I hope these propositions are at least suggestive; I know that they are far too general to be of any use unless carried into particulars.

Before I proceed to such particulars, let me say as clearly as I can what my purpose in these studies will be. I am not trying to make a new definition of tragedy, nor to prove that the most important or interesting aspect of a given play is one aspect rather than another. I am not, principally, trying to prove anything. I am trying only to suggest ways of enlarging, and further vitalizing, our appreciation of what we are given.

I

A E S C H Y L U S

The Suppliant Maidens



I WILL begin with the play which, though it can no longer be thought of as the earliest extant tragedy, yet stands closest to the form of dramatic lyric out of which tragedy may have been shaped. This is *The Suppliant Maidens* of Aeschylus.¹ Io, daughter of Inachus and

¹ The trilogy plus satyr-play probably consists of *The Suppliant Maidens*, *The Egyptians* or *The Builders* (Θαλαμῶνται), *The Danaids* and *Amymone*. Despite two attractive fragments of *The Danaids*, one of which seems to show that Aphrodite herself spoke in the play, we know very little about the second two tragedies. See Smyth on frgs. 24 and 25 (frgs. 43 and 44, Nauck). Scholars in the past have almost unanimously assumed that *The Suppliant Maidens* was the earliest extant tragedy, with tentative dates ranging from 500 to 480 B.C. Such dates have been based on the "primitive" characteristics of the play: the simplicity of the dramatic action, the predominance of the Chorus, the thinly characterized acting parts, etc. A recently discovered papyrus, however, testifies that a group of Aeschylean plays which includes *The Danaids* and *Amymone* was successful against Sophocles; see E. Lobel, E. P. Wegener, C. H. Roberts, *The Oxyrynchus Papyri* (London, 1952), xx, no. 2256, fig. 3, pp. 30-31, with the remarks of E. Lobel, who suggests that "a *terminus post quem* of 470

princess of Argos, was loved by Zeus and hated by Hera. Transformed into a cow and harried by the stinging fly which was the ghost of the herdsman Argos, she fled across the world to Egypt. There Zeus stroked her with his hand, and she conceived and bore a son, Epaphus (meaning "born of the touch"). From him, three generations later, were descended Danaus and Aegyptus. The fifty sons of Aegyptus desired to marry the fifty daughters of Danaus. These refused them and with their father fled across the sea, pursued by their suitors, to Argos. Here they took up a position as suppliants to the gods and the soil of Argos, their ancestral home, and threw themselves on the mercy of the Argive King, Pelasgus. He took responsibility for them and drove away the herald of the Egyptians who tried to pull them off by force. But subsequently the fifty girls were, after all, constrained to marry the fifty sons of Aegyptus. All but one murdered their husbands: Hypermestra alone, magnificently mendacious, spared hers, Lynceus.

Such is the legend followed by Aeschylus in a trilogy of which only the first play, *The Suppliant Maidens*, has come down to us. The tragedy begins with the entrance of the Danaids and closes with their departure to Argos after the repulse of the Egyptian Herald. The ancestral legend of Io and Egypt is presented through choral utterance and dialogue; the end of the myth, the sequels to *The Suppliant*

B.C. will hardly err by being too late." It might be well to consider once again whether *The Suppliant Maidens* is really more primitive than *The Persians* (472 B.C.) or *The Seven against Thebes* (467 B.C.), or, if it is, whether its character might not be dictated by the nature of the story. Mr. Lobel rightly reminds us that date of composition and date of performance are not necessarily the same thing; but to postulate that Aeschylus put this one on ice for years and then brought it out seems to me to be a desperate means of defense for a position which may not be worth defending.