CLST 3100 - Essay

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When Myth Meets the Moment: How the Ancient Greek Tragedians Constructed the Age of Heroes to Explore Their Contemporary Society

The mythic world depicted in the fifth-century Athenian tragedies features real places existing at a real, albeit poorly understood, time period, but within these (actually rather loose) boundaries the tragedians are free to design whatever kind of society best serves the story they want to tell. As with any fictional society, if the writer wants it to resonate with their audience, it should to some extent resemble the society in which that audience lives. Conflicts that arise from familiar situations and common concerns are more likely to grip an audience's attention as they see scenes from their own lives play out in front of them and set their hopes on a favourable outcome. The fact that these plays were so popular suggests that the conflicts faced by their characters must have been very familiar indeed. The tragedies explore contemporary concerns in Athenian society in two ways: either by presenting the fictionalised mythic Athens as an allegory for contemporary Athens, or by inserting mythic characters into situations commonly faced by contemporary Athenians, adapting the mythic world to resemble the contemporary one where necessary. Four of these concerns are explored in particular depth in the tragedies: concerns about promoting a positive image of Athens, exposing the merits and faults of democracy, controlling female morality, and justifying the institution of slavery.

Mythic Athens is consistently portrayed positively in the tragedies, showing how concerned Athenians were with promoting a positive image of Athens. Several themes of this idealising representation recur frequently in the plays in which Athens and its citizens are depicted, especially in *Oedipus at Kolonos*, which takes place in Athens and casts it in the most positive possible light. One of these is the theme of Athenians as extremely pious. The

Athenians in *Oedipus at Kolonos* take Oedipus' trespass on the sacred grove of the Eumenides very seriously, motivated by a healthy fear of the goddesses' violent power (Soph. *OC*. 133-146). The chorus leader strongly insists that Oedipus not even speak until he is fully removed from the grove, directing him to the proper spot in an almost comical display of fussiness (Soph. *OC*. 182-217). Another theme is of Athens as a safe haven for suppliants. In the same play, the king of Athens receives Oedipus warmly, assuring him that he would "never refuse a homeless man… [his] help" (Soph. *OC*. 622-623) and going so far as to immediately give him Athenian citizenship (Soph. *OC*. 690-698). Likewise, in *Medea*, the king of Athens promises the exiled Medea sanctuary (Eur. *Med.* 710-731). It is notable that her protection at Athens spares her from justice, giving this pillar of Athens' reputation a darker dimension, but for the most part, Athens is portrayed as a place where justice and the rule of law is respected. The king of Athens in *Oedipus at Kolonos* claims that Athens is "a city that loves justice" and "will do nothing contrary to the law" (Soph. *OC*. 995-996). This is demonstrated in *Eumenides* when Athenian law and order is the only remedy for the cycle of revenge plaguing Orestes' family (Aesch. *Eum*. 470-489). One could argue that mythic Athens is too different from contemporary Athens to invite direct comparison, since it is a monarchy and not a democracy. However, the positive qualities that mythic Athens has in the tragedies, namely its piety, its culture of protecting suppliants and its respect for the rule of law, are independent of its form of government.

The tragedies further emphasise this idealised representation of mythic Athens by contrasting it with unfavourable representations of other Greek cities. Jon Hesk observes that Athens "is often the site of refuge from, or (partial) resolution of, crimes and sacrilegious acts committed in other Greek cities" (2007: par. 15). In *Oedipus at Kolonos*, the war for the Theban throne is a conflict between Thebans and Argives (Soph. *OC*. 1413-1431) and requires the protection of the king of Athens to prevent Oedipus and his daughters from being

dragged into it (Soph. *OC*. 434-448, 714-720, 977-984). Likewise, the cycle of revenge in the *Oresteia* is a problem of the Argive royal house (Aesch. *Eum*. 455-464) and—as previously mentioned—requires Athenian law and order to resolve (Aesch. *Eum*. 748-752). In *Bakkhai*, the portrait of the king of Thebes is especially unflattering, showing him as senseless (Eur. *Bacch*. 311-314), mad (Eur. *Bacch*. 422-424), violent (Eur. *Bacch*. 406-420) and impious (Eur. *Bacch*. 441-444). In *Andromache*, Andromache describes Spartans as schemers, liars, crooked, murderous, and corrupt (Eur. *Andr*. 445-453), and Peleus condemns the liberty afforded to Spartan women as morally deleterious (Eur. *Andr*. 596-601). Athens was at war with Sparta during the original production of this play, so its Athenian audience would have been particularly hungry for negative representations of Sparta to contrast with Athens.

Seeing as Athens was the only democratic Greek state in the fifth century, it should come as no surprise that a major aspect of its reputation was its democracy. Although the mythic past of the tragedies does not contain any true democratic states, it is often adapted to feature characteristics of democracy such as voting and rhetorical debates, exploring contemporary concerns about the merits and faults of democracy as a governmental system. Athenians treasured their democracy dearly, thus it is typically portrayed favourably in the tragedies. In *Eumenides*, a fair trial judged by the vote of the Athenian assembly is the only hope of achieving justice for Orestes' family (Aesch. *Eum*. 470-489). Freedom of speech, on which a well-functioning democracy relies, is staunchly defended in the tragedies. In *The Trojan Women*, Hecuba insists that Helen be allowed to defend herself against the death penalty, confident that the debate will result in a just outcome (Eur. *Tro*. 908-912). The plays of Euripides in particular feature lengthy rhetorical debates, notably those of Helen versus Hecuba in *The Trojan Women* (Eur. *Tro*. 915-1032) and Tyndareos versus Orestes in *Orestes* (Eur. *Or*. 497-623).

In keeping with the tendency to make Athens look good by comparison, democracy is contrasted favourably with the monarchies of other Greek cities. The freedom of speech enjoyed by Athenians is not respected in the monarchies of other cities: in *Bakkhai*, the messenger is hesitant to speak freely to the Theban king, afraid of his “kingly temper” (Eur. *Bacch*. 773-777), and in *Antigone*, the Theban king’s guards are afraid of being punished simply for delivering bad news to him (Soph. *Ant*. 256-263). The Thebes depicted in *Antigone* is held up as a prime example of the worst consequences of living under an autocratic monarch. Even after all of Thebes cries out for their king to spare Antigone’s life (Soph. *Ant*. 768-776), he refuses to listen to any of them, thinking his own authority to be sufficient justification for his decision (Soph. *Ant*. 805-814). In response, his son makes the powerful point that “It’s not a *city* if one man owns it” (Soph. *Ant*. 815). One can imagine the democratic Athenians in the audience swell with pride at this proclamation of their own autonomy, feeling all the more like the “king of his own oar” (Aesch. *Pers*. 378).

Despite this generally laudatory tone, the weaknesses of democracy are also explored in the tragedies, especially those of Euripides. In his *Medea*, Medea uses skilful rhetorical arguments to accomplish her evil schemes, persuading her listeners to do what she wants just as nefarious orators may influence a democratic assembly: she persuades the king of Corinth to allow her to remain in Corinth for one more day by exploiting his penchant for mercy (Eur. *Med*. 340-351), and convinces Jason that she has given up her anger toward him by persuasively arguing in favour of his side of their debate (Eur. *Med*. 872-877). In *Orestes*, Menelaos describes the best way to manipulate the will of the people: to wait for their fury to burn out and to take advantage of their pity at the right moment (Eur. *Or*. 730-738). Later, corrupt speakers influence the Argive assembly and persuade them to condemn Orestes to death (Eur. *Or*. 929-938, 943-950, 982-983). This would have been particularly relevant to the play’s original Athenian audience: Hesk notes that, only three years before *Orestes* was

produced, a group of "oligarchic plotters" persuaded the Athenian assembly to suspend full democracy in exchange for financial aid from the Persians (2007: par. 27). Democracy was restored soon after, but surely *Orestes* must have been "a reminder of democracy's vulnerability to internal and external subversion" (Hesk 2007: par. 29).

The constant threat of the breakdown of society is a recurring concern of the tragedies, and a common source of societal instability in these plays is transgressive women. Women whose behaviour is out of line with conventional expectations of women are the source of many of the conflicts in the tragedies, resonating with contemporary concerns about controlling female morality. In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra, who "plans like a man" (Aesch. *Ag*. 10), conspires with her new lover to kill her husband when he returns from the Trojan War (Aesch. *Ag*. 1379-1406, 1625-1637). Female infidelity would have been particularly relevant to the soldiers of imperialist Athens who likewise spent long stretches of time campaigning far from the city. Edith Hall notes that "One of the ancient Athenians' greatest fears was that his household would be extinguished by his lack of an heir" (2010: 135), and this fear manifests in the tragedies as transgressive women deprive men of their natural heirs. In *Medea*, Medea does not kill Jason himself but considers it a worse fate to kill his wife and children instead, extinguishing his family line (Eur. *Med.* 802-817). In contemporary Athenian political theory, the health of the entire polis depended on the health of the household, since "The polis consisted of multiple households" (Hall 2010: 129). Hence, in the tragedies, domestic problems caused by female transgressions have negative impacts on society as a whole. In *Libation Bearers*, Clytemnestra, now the official co-ruler of Argos, is hated by her subjects (Aesch. *Cho*. 264-267). In several of the tragedies but especially in *The Trojan Women*, Helen's supposed infidelity, permitted by the absence of Menelaos, is considered to be the cause of the Trojan War (Eur. *Tro*. 368-373), an extremely devastating consequence of men relaxing their control over women.

By contrast, women who stay strictly within their accepted roles are shown to provide benefits to the men and society in the tragedies. In *Libation Bearers*, women who display standard qualities of Athenian female virtue are directly contrasted with the transgressive Clytemnestra. Electra prays to be more chaste than Clytemnestra and for revenge to be exacted on her for Agamemnon's death (Aesch. *Cho*. 139-144). The chorus condemns Clytemnestra for taking on a dominant role, saying that they "honour a hearth unheated by passion, its women not emboldened to assume command" (Aesch. *Cho*. 629-630). The dutiful nurse, who cared for the infant Orestes as his mother Clytemnestra never did (Aesch. *Cho*. 747-763), condemns Clytemnestra's false display of mourning for him (Aesch. *Cho*. 737-739). All of these women go on to assist in Clytemnestra's death, the "good" women rescuing society from the bad (Aesch. *Cho*. 579-582, 766-782). It is notable that perhaps the only transgressive woman in the tragedies with a positive effect on society, that is Antigone in *Antigone*, is specifically contrasted with the tyrannical Kreon. Although she fits the profile of the transgressive woman who acts on her own initiative in defiance of men, she is shown to act in the people's best interests: the Theban people praise her for burying Polyneikes (Soph. *Ant*. 768-776), and after Kreon sends her to her death, Teiresias reports that the gods will no longer accept their prayers (Soph. *Ant*. 1102-1130). This positive portrayal was certainly not intended to praise female transgression but to emphasise that even a transgressive woman, a terrible thing by all accounts, is still better than a tyrant.

Like women, slaves are another demographic group with strictly defined roles and expectations in the tragedies, but faced an even more repressive kind of ideological subjugation. Unlike women, slaves essentially never breach the limitations of their roles even in the fictionalised world of the tragedies, showing how unthinkable this must have been for a free Athenian; surely a society in which this could happen would not only fall apart but could hardly exist in the first place. By emphasising the supposedly inherent differences between

free people and slaves, and treating slavery as inevitable and natural, the tragedies justify the institution of slavery, which was just as prevalent in contemporary Athens as it was in the mythic past. One of the distinctions drawn between free people and slaves is that lifelong slaves are better equipped for slavery than once-free people who are not accustomed to it. In *Helen*, Menelaos complains that higborn people find adversity harder to bear than people "long acquainted with misery" (Eur. *Hel.* 417-419). Hence, when free people become slaves, it is portrayed as more tragic than when people are slaves from birth. In *The Trojan Women*, Hecuba describes the privilege and prosperity she once enjoyed to emphasize the tragic nature of her impending slavery (Eur. *Tro.* 191-196, 489-498), as does Andromache in *Andromache* (Eur. *Andr.* 5-13). However, once Andromache becomes a slave, she is treated as any other slave would be: her lengthy Euripidean rhetorical speeches are dismissed by her masters out of hand on account of her servile status (Eur. *Andr.* 192-235, 334-367). Throughout the plays, slavery is unequivocally treated as natural and good. In *Agamemnon*, the chorus encourages Cassandra to accept her slavery, describing it as "what is best in the circumstances" (Aesch. *Ag.* 1046-1071), implying that it would be futile and even detrimental to fight against it. Likewise in *Libation Bearers*, the chorus of war-captives proclaim that the "proper" thing for them to do is to suppress their resentment and accept their slavery (Aesch. *Cho.* 75-83).

Although the tragedies treat slavery as inevitable and no character suggests abolishing it, the plight of slaves is portrayed sympathetically. The way that characters treat their slaves is a standard part of the portrait of their moral constitution: as previously discussed, in both *Antigone* and *Bakkhai*, the tyrannical Theban king's slaves are terrified to speak freely to him, and in *Helen*, the old woman slave only speaks against the Greeks out of fear of her master (Eur. *Hel.* 481-482). Euripides even stunningly challenges the idea—later expressed by Aristotle—that slaves lack the deliberative faculty (Hall 2010: 134): in *Helen*, a slave

from birth proudly proclaims: “though I am called a slave, at least may I have a free man’s thoughts” (Eur. *Hel.* 730-731). This expresses what must have been a deeply held desire of all slaves in Athens to be recognized as a human being with human thoughts. This could potentially give the impression that the tragedies are anti-slavery, however none of these examples seriously challenge the institution of slavery. The way that free people treat slaves reflects more on the inhumanity of the free people than the humanity of the slaves: the tragedies could just as easily show free people being cruel to animals and achieve essentially the same effect. Ultimately, although the tragedies acknowledge slavery as hard to bear for anyone, they almost never question the rationales used to justify it nor do they envision a world without it, even in their most utopic of visions.

It should by now be clear that the tragedians have a lot of freedom to adapt the mythic world to suit the stories they want to tell and make generous use of this freedom to explore contemporary concerns in Athenian society. The concerns of fifth-century Athenians can be largely assumed based on the prevalence of certain recurring themes in the tragedies. Their depictions of mythic Athens reflect an image of contemporary Athens that Athenians wanted to promote, and negative depictions of other cities serve to magnify their own city’s better qualities. Democracy is one of the most cherished of these qualities and the tragedians make a special effort to adapt the mythic world to include it, although not always in an uncritical way. The democratic society that Athenians held so dear is often threatened in the tragedies by women who transgress accepted gender roles, demonstrating the importance that Athenians ascribed to controlling their women. Slaves are not even permitted enough autonomy to threaten society in the tragedies, which instead reference slavery mostly in a manner that justifies it to their slave-owning audience. It is fortunate for classicists that even this many of the tragedies have survived, since they may do more to illuminate the inner emotional life of the average Athenian than dry historical facts ever could.

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