

# POLITICS IN GREEK TRAGEDY

WALTER R. AGARD

THE present dictator of Greece, according to newspaper reports, has ordered his minister of public instruction to censor the ancient Greek literature taught in the schools. All references to liberty and democracy, he says, must be deleted. A more difficult task for a censor could hardly be devised, for no literature has been more friendly to those two themes than the Greek. When he completes his work, the healthy body of Hellenic history, philosophy and lyric poetry will be cruelly mutilated. It is not so apparent, perhaps, how the tragic drama will suffer. Are there implicit in the tragedies, also, principles of government which will not be tolerated in the Greek schools of to-day?

Countless allusions to politics occur in the comedies of Aristophanes, since much of their caustic wit was aimed at party leaders. We see clearly revealed in them the bias of Aristophanes, a conservative country gentleman who fought without compromise against the dominance of the lower middle class in government, demagogic leadership, and the imperialism of Athens. But the tragedies give us no such obvious insight into the political faiths of their writers. In this nobler art our chief concern has been with those qualities which, as Gilbert Murray says, "speak to us across the footlights of the centuries"—beauty of structure and phrasing, the ethical and philosophical significance of human purposes in conflict against one another and against forces greater than they. To such general issues Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides devoted their genius.

Yet we could hardly expect playwrights for a fifth century Athenian audience to have remained in an ivory tower, remote from the pressing immediate problems of their fellow citizens. Greek tragedy was an art deeply rooted in the soil of its own daily life, as well as that of universal human experience; the plays were chosen for presentation, produced and judged by the community; and the community, politically minded as few have ever been, was involved at that time not only in exciting domestic policies but also in the creation, control and defence of an empire. It would be strange indeed if in the plays there were no reflection of such vital concerns.

Aristophanes suggested that there was, in the *Frogs*, when he pictured the god Dionysus going to Hades to bring back

a tragedian to save the city by his advice, and had Euripides say that a poet deserves praise when he makes better citizens and Aeschylus boast that he had done it. This claim Aeschylus did his best to justify in the *Persians*; but apart from that play we have none surviving that deal directly with contemporary events. Yet, in spite of the fact that the setting of the other tragedies was laid in the heroic past of the Greek people, and usually far from Athens, the situations chosen and the sentiments expressed must have stimulated the audiences to make contemporary applications, thus enforcing the emotional effect by associations with their own experience.

Can we discover what some of those associations were? Can we conclude from them what were the political faiths of the writers? The effort is worth making, although the difficulties must be clearly recognized. Only a small fraction of the plays that were produced remain for us to judge by; the dates of many of them are uncertain, and the tendency to draw dogmatic conclusions from situations dictated by the dramatic necessities of the heroic plots must be avoided. Yet, with all these handicaps, we find considerable evidence to indicate that the tragedies had contemporary political as well as universal philosophical and aesthetic meaning.

The most obvious way in which the dramatists revealed their own devotion to the city, and sought to arouse the patriotic feeling and thought of their audience, was by inserting references to Athens. Aeschylus, who proved his patriotism by fighting at Marathon, was equally loyal in his plays, often mentioning Athens as a beautiful and prosperous city, preserved in liberty by the gods and the citizens. Sophocles described the physical beauty of its surroundings, and put praise of its power even in the mouth of its enemies. But it was Euripides who most unblushingly included comments about his mother country. His favorite epithet was "illustrious"; but he also wrote of it as prosperous, a shining city, built by the gods, land of heroes, free, the lovely land of the Graces. In the *Medea* the women of Corinth were ironically made to sing the glory of their most bitter commercial rival. Even prisoners of war seemed to find solace in the thought of going to such an attractive place.

Of all its characteristics, none was approved more earnestly than its reception of refugees. Pericles's boast in the Funeral Speech, "We throw our city open to the world," was repeatedly voiced by the poets. Two plays of Aeschylus dealt with this theme. Sophocles made Oedipus, seeking refuge from Thebes,

declare that Athens alone gave hospitality and security to unfortunate aliens. The point was emphasized by Euripides. He pictured Medea finding refuge there when she fled from Corinth; the suffering Heracles was warmly welcomed by Theseus, and his children were received by a king who said, "To yield up suppliants to another country I consider as bad as being hanged." When the Suppliant Women confidently turned to Athens, declaring that it always protected the wretched, they, too, were gallantly welcomed.

The dramatists were unsparing in their criticism of the traditional enemies of Athens, Thebes and Sparta. It is surely not coincidence that they so often chose the legends of Thebes, picturing the early woes of that city with its dictatorship and intolerance, incest, patricide, banishments and agony; or that so often its rulers were made to suspect their subjects of base motives.

Aeschylus described Thebes as the town of Ares, whose ruler declares: "Anyone who refuses to obey my authority shall die." Sophocles showed in the *Antigone* how such tyranny results in disaster, and in the *Oedipus at Colonus* foretold how Thebes would one day be defeated by the free city of Athens. Euripides was especially bitter toward the Thebans. The most dastardly tyrant in Greek drama is Lycus, a native of that city. In the *Suppliant Women* the Thebans are condemned as "insolent and evil-hearted", and their cruelty is vividly contrasted with the warm human sympathy of Theseus of Athens.

But Euripides's most bitter criticism was directed at Sparta. Sparta is "heartless and variable in her ways"; her king, Menelaus, is insolent and brutal toward women and children, cowardly, deceitful and shameless. The *Andromache*, written probably after eight years of war, rings with the most violent denunciation of the Spartans; if their military reputation were taken away, they would be accounted utterly worthless; their morals are scandalous; undeserving of their good luck, they are "the most hateful of men, tricksters, lords of lies, weavers of evil, crooked, unhealthy and devious in mind, wholesale murderers, lustful for gain, always saying one thing but contriving something else". Seldom has patriotic hostility found such spirited expression on any stage!

Much of this patriotism might have served a purely nationalistic purpose; but as we examine the attitude of the three tragedians toward the evolution of democracy in Athens, the political references become more significant.

Aeschylus, writing during the period of Cimon's conservative leadership, rejoiced in the responsible freedom which Athens had achieved for her citizens; she had guaranteed personal liberty for all, and because of her victory at Salamis, those cities which were previously subject to Persia had regained freedom of speech and action. But as time went on, he grew somewhat apprehensive regarding the radical tendencies of the democratic movement, especially its overthrow of the powers of the traditional court of the Areopagus. In the *Eumenides* Athena warns the citizens against anarchy as well as tyranny, and advises them to regard with reverence the ancient customs. According to Plutarch, when the Athenian audience heard Amphiaraus described, in the *Seven against Thebes*, as a man of modesty, integrity and profound insight, they all turned and looked toward Aristides, that conservative leader, believing that the words were meant for him. Whether or not the story is true, the implication is doubtless correct; Aeschylus admired such elder statesmen.

It is safe to conclude that Sophocles was warmly in sympathy with the middle-of-the-road Periclean democracy. His most eloquent argument for it is the *Antigone*, which must be regarded as a democratic document of the utmost importance; the criticism of dictatorial rule is unsparing, and Haemon, King Creon's son, makes the superiority of democratic methods of government very explicit:

*Creon:* Am I to govern this land according to my own views or other people's?

*Haemon:* The state which one man owns is no state at all.

*Creon:* Isn't a state supposed to belong to its ruler?

*Haemon:* You would be a wonderful ruler of a desert!

(Compare with this Pericles's words: "Our government is called a democracy, because it is controlled, not by the few, but by the many. . . We Athenians decide public questions for ourselves, in the belief that action is jeopardized when undertaken without full discussion.") When Creon insists that a ruler must be obeyed in everything, right or wrong, Haemon again disagrees with him sharply. Another Athenian conception is stated: the identity of the welfare of the community and of the individual. And the outcome of the play demonstrates the folly of a dictator who tries to enforce his decrees against people who have the courage to resist.

In the *Oedipus the King* and *Electra*, probably written shortly after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, we can

discern less enthusiasm for the prevailing spirit of the people. The line, "What hate and envy accompany outstanding excellence!" is doubtless a veiled comment on the current criticism of Pericles, and "Set in the midst of evil, we must do evil, too" may reflect the poet's sad awareness of the growing cruelties of imperialistic policy. The *Philoctetes*, written after twenty years of war, points the conflict between young Neoptolemus, representing honesty and kindness, and Odysseus, who demands that these be sacrificed for the sake of public expediency; here is a dilemma which must have seemed very real and perplexing to the Athenian audience, and it is not strange that Sophocles required a *deus ex machina* to resolve it. In the character of Odysseus we see pictured the type of political leader that Sophocles plainly disliked: the man who exercises control by specious words rather than just deeds, and who feels no shame in causing suffering to innocent people if the success of his schemes depends upon it.

The conservatism of Aeschylus and the moderate liberalism of Sophocles did not satisfy Euripides, who showed throughout his plays a profound sympathy for the common man, and confidence in his integrity, common sense, and usefulness. We would therefore expect him to favor the more radical democratic policy, in internal affairs if not in its ultimate imperialistic objectives.

Often in his earlier plays Euripides stated the superiority of democratic rule over dictatorship. In the *Suppliant Women* Theseus declares: "I have made Athens a free city, with equal votes for all. Our city is not ruled by one man; Athens is free, the people rule it, and they bestow equal rights on rich and poor." An Argive herald and he proceed to debate the subject. The herald argues that in a democracy the ignorant mob rules, and demagogues, previously nobodies, sway the people for personal gain. Theseus replies that there is no worse foe to a community than a dictator, under whom equality before the law vanishes and the weak and poor are oppressed; but in a democracy, youth, wisdom and excellence have a fair chance to serve the common welfare. These sentiments were often repeated by Euripides. Despotism is declared to be injustice masquerading as prosperity; a dictator chooses vile men for his friends, and must always live in fear of death.

But the privileges of democracy also entail responsibilities. Echoes of Pericles's Funeral Speech appear in the *Children of Heracles*, when Iolaus speaks of the duty of a good man to

subordinate self to the common good, and Macaria gladly gives her life for the safety of the city; also in the *Hippolytus*, where apathy and the pursuit of pleasure are deplored, and in the *Suppliant Women*, where the ideal citizen is described.

As the war dragged on, Euripides began to realize, in spite of his faith in democracy, the dangers inherent in it which were being realized under the stress of the struggle. The most spirited indictment is stated by Ion, who says that the mass of men hate those who are wiser than themselves, especially those who mind their own business in a city "full of criticism"; demagogues fear unselfish youthful ardor and real merit, and crush them. A similar charge is made by Hecuba, who warns against the rabble which makes a man act contrary to his better judgment because of the fear of popular disapproval. "Terrible are the rabble when they have bad leaders," says Orestes. Against such leaders Euripides directed his most barbed shafts, for he still believed in the essential good will of the "unnumbered men"—the word recalls Lincoln's observation that God must love the common people, because he made so many of them. It is the glib of tongue who lead the people astray, the unprincipled seekers after power who will use any means to win control; these men he lashed unmercifully as the enemies of the state. It may be inferred that he had one of these radical demagogues in mind when he described "a man of unbridled speech, blustering in insolence, relying on sheer noise and boorish licence, yet credible enough to involve the citizens in mischief." "When a person of persuasive words but evil intentions wins the crowd to his will, it bodes ill for the city."

Pondering on these evils of an unbridled democracy and the civil strife which it engendered as the war continued, Euripides apparently came to the conclusion (as Aristotle did later) that in a dominant middle class lay the best hope of stability and civic welfare. He grew heartsick over the factional wrangling in Athens. It is the greed of the rich and the envy of the poor, he declared, that bring about such strife; but "the middle class saves states, guarding that order which the community establishes"; good will and moderation are the saving virtues.

In spite of their praise of Athens and their vigorous denunciation of her enemies, the playwrights were by no means eager to sing the glories of war and empire; their international predilections, it appears, were for peace. Aeschylus praised men who defend their country, but war waged on foreign soil he viewed quite differently. How vivid is the picture of the soldiers'

ordeals and the suffering of non-combatants given by Clytemnestra, the Chorus and the herald in the *Agamemnon*! Sophocles, in the *Ajax*, described war as a shame and reproach to Greece, the cause of pain and sorrow, the plague and ruin of men. But both yield to Euripides, who came to detest with utter loathing the effects that war had wrought on men and cities, especially as he saw the brutality with which Athens forced to submission her so-called allies. After one of these outrages, in the *Hecuba* and *Andromache* he portrayed with deep compassion the woes of helpless captives. Later, in the *Suppliants*, the lament of mothers and children over their dead must have poignantly recalled their own losses to the audience in the theatre; and for the young Athenians needlessly slaughtered in the Sicilian expedition he wrote a touching epitaph: "They, the glory of their fatherland, have vanished, vanished, they have left the plain where horses' hoofs thundered and the gymnasiums where youths contend." His greatest anti-war play, the *Trojan Women*, must have shamed at least some Athenians to realize that a victory like the recent one over the small neutral state of Melos was in reality an humiliating defeat.

"If only you would settle these controversies by intelligence instead of by fighting!" This is the advice that Euripides gave to all Greece. We read it in the *Suppliant Women*: "Foolish states, which have the opportunity to end evils by conference, yet choose to settle them by murder. . . Unlucky men, why do you seize spears and kill one another? In peace preserve your towns. Life is short, and one should pass through it as happily as one can." Again, we are told that if when men voted for war, they did not delude themselves about their own future, they would forbear; then the war-frenzied states would be restored to sanity.

But the advice was given an unheeding world. Small wonder that finally Euripides, heartsick at the woes self-inflicted by his people, exclaimed: "Ill-fated Hellas! I mourn for her. She has the will to create something excellent, but will become instead the laughing-stock of worthless barbarians. . . God has made Hellas sick." In his final play, written far from that tragic scene, he invoked, with hopeless longing, "Her who brings prosperity, Peace."

In one respect, however, Euripides might to-day find grim satisfaction. Along with his fellow Athenian dramatists, he succeeded in keeping a military dictator's censor busy.