11. POLITICS

Αν. οἴμοι γελῶμαι. τί με, πρὸς θεῶν πατρῴων,	838/9
οὐκ οἰχομέναν ὑβρίζεις,	840
ἀλλ᾽ ἐπίφαντον;	
ὦ πόλις, ὦ πόλεως	
πολυκτήμονες ἄνδρες·	
ἰὼ Διρκαῖαι	
κρῆναι Θήβας τ᾽	844/5
εὐαρμάτου ἄλσος, ἔμ–	845
πας ξυμμάρτυρας ὔμμ᾽ ἐπικτῶμαι,	845/6
οἷα φίλων ἄκλαυτος, οἵοις νόμοις	847/8
πρὸς ἕρμα τυμβόχωστον ἔρ–	848/9
χομαι τάφου ποταινίου·	849
ἰὼ δύστανος,	850
βροτοῖς οὔτε < > νεκροῖσιν	
μέτοικος, οὐ ζῶσιν, οὐ θανοῦσιν.	

Antigone: Alas, I am mocked! Why, by the ancestral gods, do you not do me violence when I am gone, but while I am still manifest? O city, o wealthy men of the city! *Iô*, Dircaean springs and grove of Thebe rich in chariots, you at least I take as my witnesses, as to in what state, by what laws, unwept-for by friends I journey to the heaped-up tomb of an everlasting grave. *Iô*, wretch that I am, resident neither with mortals nor with corpses, not with the living, not with the dead. (*Antigone* 838/9–852)

This song comes from Antigone's final moments on stage, ahead of being buried alive. Forcefully rejecting the chorus-leader's qualification of her attempt to compare her fate with Niobe's, she calls upon the chorus as the wealthy citizens of Thebes; 'then, convinced that they have no word of comfort for her, she calls upon inanimate things' – the streams and grove of the Theban landscape.[1] The invocation of the city emphasizes her sense of rejection at its hands; her enemy is not simply Creon, but society as a whole, which has acquiesced in her punishment. Before calling on the city she appeals to her ancestral gods, which hints at a division fundamental to the play – between

[1] Burton 1980: 120.

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Antigone's birth family, for which she dies, and the city and its ordinances, which she defies.[2]

Antigone's characterization of herself as a μέτοικος expresses her liminal status – not dead, not living, but on the threshold, μέτοικοι at Athens being Greeks who lived in Attica but lacked the rights and prerogatives of citizenship. Later she expresses her political isolation still more clearly:

οὐ γάρ ποτ᾽ οὔτ᾽ ἂν εἰ τέκνων μήτηρ ἔφυν
οὔτ᾽ εἰ πόσις μοι κατθανὼν ἐτήκετο,
βίᾳ πολιτῶν τόνδ᾽ ἂν ᾑρόμην πόνον.

For if there were children of which I was the mother, or if my husband had died and was decaying, I would not have chosen this labour in defiance of the citizens.

Antigone 905–7[3]

'Ant[igone] here implicitly concedes Kreon's right to act for the whole city', as Griffith remarks.[4] In her view, as she implied earlier, Creon has Thebes on his side; she does not even consider the possibility that town and leader might diverge. Her statement indicates awareness of what a great matter it is to defy a city; even for Antigone, political dissidence is no easy choice.

Ironically, though, her standing with the city is better than she realizes, since Haemon, her betrothed, has previously told Creon that the people support her:

ἐμοὶ δ᾽ ἀκούειν ἔσθ᾽ ὑπὸ σκότου τάδε,
τὴν παῖδα ταύτην οἵ᾽ ὀδύρεται πόλις,
πασῶν γυναικῶν ὡς ἀναξιωτάτη
κάκιστ᾽ ἀπ᾽ ἔργων εὐκλεεστάτων φθίνει·
ἥτις τὸν αὑτῆς αὐτάδελφον ἐν φοναῖς
πεπτῶτ᾽ ἄθαπτον μήθ᾽ ὑπ᾽ ὠμηστῶν κυνῶν
εἴασ᾽ ὀλέσθαι μήθ᾽ ὑπ᾽ οἰωνῶν τινος·
οὐχ ἥδε χρυσῆς ἀξία τιμῆς λαχεῖν;
τοιάδ᾽ ἐρεμνὴ σῖγ᾽ ἐπέρχεται φάτις.

But I can hear the following under the cover of darkness – how the city mourns for this girl, saying that she perishes most wretchedly after the most glorious deeds, the most

[2] For this division see Holt 1999; Liapis 2013.

[3] These lines come from a passage whose authenticity has been debated since the 1820s, but there is no good reason to reject it: see Murnaghan 1986; Sourvinou-Inwood 1987–8; Neuburg 1990; Rösler 1993; Cropp 1997; Mader 2005.

[4] Griffith 1999 on *Ant.* 907.

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undeserving of all women. She it was who did not let her very own brother, who had died, remain unburied amid the gore, to be destroyed by flesh-eating dogs or by birds. Is she not worthy of receiving golden honour? Such is the dark saying that silently does the rounds. (*Antigone* 692–700)

There is no reason to think that Haemon is lying or mistaken; Creon makes no attempt to contradict him, and independent confirmation, as if this were a trial rather than a play, is hardly required.[5] The superlatives and other emotional phrasing highlight the passion of the city's assessment, and Creon reacts with passion of his own, decrying the idea that he needs to take anyone else's view into account. But Antigone never hears the city's opinion. Just as she goes to her tomb questioning whether the gods are on her side (922–8), so too her final speech begins 'o city of the land of Thebe and gods of my ancestors' (ὦ γῆς Θήβης ἄστυ πατρῷον | καὶ θεοὶ προγενεῖς, 937–8), referring to the powers by which she believes she has been abandoned – even though she has acted correctly in their judgement, and even though the gods (through Tiresias) and the city (through the chorus, at 1095–1114) will both intervene to make that clear, albeit too late to do her any good. 'By such means Sophocles emphasizes the irony, the loneliness, and the bitter pathos of her position';[6] Antigone is more a creature of the city that she realizes, and the apparently obvious opposition in the play between state and family, under further inspection, breaks down.

Electra, too, invokes the citizenry at a time of profound personal upheaval:

Ηλ. ὦ φίλτατον φῶς. Ορ. φίλτατον, συμμαρτυρῶ.
Ηλ. ὦ φθέγμ', ἀφίκου; Ορ. μηκέτ' ἄλλοθεν πύθῃ. 1225
Ηλ. ἔχω σε χερσίν; Ορ. ὡς τὰ λοίπ' ἔχοις ἀεί.
Ηλ. ὦ φίλταται γυναῖκες, ὦ πολίτιδες,
ὁρᾶτ' Ὀρέστην τόνδε, μηχαναῖσι μὲν
θανόντα, νῦν δὲ μηχαναῖς σεσωμένον.

Electra: O dearest light!
Orestes: Dearest, I bear witness.
Electra: O voice, have you come?
Orestes: Do not seek for me from anywhere else.
Electra: Do I hold you in my arms?
Orestes: May you always hold me in the future!

[5] Van Erp Taalman Kip 1996: 521–4.
[6] Burton 1980: 120.

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Electra: O dearest women, o citizenesses, behold Orestes here, who died through deceit, and who now through deceit is saved! (*Electra* 1224–9)

Calling the chorus to witness her supreme happiness is not itself unusual (Electra later does so again, singing 'Friends, I heard a voice which I would never have hoped to hear', ὦ φίλαι, ἔκλυον ἂν ἐγὼ οὐδ' ἂν ἤλπισ' αὐδάν, 1281/2). Yet the rare word πολίτιδες, 'citizenesses', foregrounds the political at a moment when Electra could be forgiven for concentrating on familial considerations.[7] She has moved from despair to joy thanks to her brother's return; nevertheless, she gestures towards the wider political context. Sophocles' *Electra* is not as concerned with the city as is Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, in which the presence of Argos, and subsequently of Athens, is strongly felt; Sophocles scales back that part of Aeschylus' treatment to focus on Electra and her emotions.[8] The political sphere, though, remains in the background. By foregrounding it at moments like this Sophocles indicates the wider consequences of the action, elevating its significance without ever occluding Electra herself. Here Orestes' return has brought the chorus back their birthright; as Mycenaean citizens, they rejoice in the royal line's return. Electra's capacity to see the chorus in such terms hints at a character with a surprisingly broad vision, one capable of sharing personal joy with a wider group.

The city is referenced at another emotional high point, when Clytemnestra is killed off-stage:

Κλ. ὦ τέκνον τέκνον, 1410
οἴκτιρε τὴν τεκοῦσαν. Ηλ. ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐκ σέθεν
ᾠκτίρεθ' οὗτος οὔθ' ὁ γεννήσας πατήρ.
Χο. ὦ πόλις, ὦ γενεὰ τάλαινα, νῦν σοι
μοῖρα καθημερία φθίνει φθίνει.
Κλ. ὤμοι πέπληγμαι. Ηλ. παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν. 1415

Clytemnestra: O child, child, take pity on your mother!
Electra: But he received no pity from you, nor did the father who begot him.

[7] Finglass 2005.
[8] Griffin 1999a.

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Chorus: O city, o wretched race, now the fate which has been yours day by day is perishing, is perishing.
Clytemnestra: *Ôimoi*, I am struck!
Electra: Strike twice as hard, if you have the strength!
(*Electra* 1410–15)

The chorus comment not on Electra's callous words, or on the homicide itself, but on its consequences for city and family. Electra concentrates on present and past killing in the house, but the chorus take a wider view, highlighting both the wretchedness of a family in which such violence has proved necessary, and the relief from suffering that Clytemnestra's death will bring the city: as she perishes, so does the poisonous fate which she brought upon Mycenae. Electra's daily agony is linked with the political suffering caused by the usurpation, complicating the audience's response and forcing them to think beyond even the screams of Clytemnestra and Electra's hard-heartedness.

The wider perspective encouraged by addresses to the *polis* reappears, unexpectedly, in *Philoctetes*, after the protagonist has declared that he is intent on suicide:

Χο. τί ποτε; Φι. πατέρα ματεύων. 1210
Χο. ποῖ γᾶς; Φι. ἐς Ἅιδου.
οὐ γάρ ἐστ᾽ ἐν φάει γ᾽ ἔτι.
ὦ πόλις πόλις πατρία,
πῶς ἂν εἰσίδοιμί σ᾽ ἄθλιός γ᾽ ἀνήρ,
ὅς γε σὰν λιπὼν ἱερὰν 1215
λιβάδ᾽ ἐχθροῖς ἔβαν Δαναοῖς
ἀρωγός· ἔτ᾽ οὐδέν εἰμι.

Chorus: For whatever purpose?
Philoctetes: Seeking for my father.
Chorus: To what land?
Philoctetes: To Hades; for he is no longer in the light. O city, ancestral city, how might I look upon you, wretched man that I am, who left your holy stream and went as a help to the hostile Argives. I no longer exist.
(*Philoctetes* 1210–17)

Philoctetes has long wished to return to Greece, to father and home; his repeated sung invocation of the *polis* (its only appearance in the play) signals how rejoining the wider community is important for him too. He demonstrates this desire at a moment when his recently revived hope of return seems permanently dashed, through his betrayal by

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Neoptolemus and the loss of his bow; his invocation of the *polis* is juxtaposed with his determination to go to Hades, and is followed by his retreat back within his solitary dwelling, the cave.[9] Still, the desire for the wider community from which (he thinks) he has been permanently excluded moderates the picture of a man grown wild and unsociable in his loneliness (p. 43 above). A climactic, glancing reference to a wider political community is also found in *Ajax* (another play whose characters long to return to their *poleis*, as the chorus sing at the end of the final stasimon), when Ajax imagines the city-wide lamentation stimulated by his mother at his death, showing his civic awareness moments before his suicide.[10]

The protagonist of *Oedipus at Colonus*, like those of *Philoctetes* and *Ajax*, is separated from his city; his play, however, portrays how he manages to find a new one. He appeals to Athens on taking his seat in the grove of the Erinyes at Colonus:

> ἴτ', ὦ γλυκεῖαι παῖδες ἀρχαίου Σκότου·
> ἴτ', ὦ μεγίστης Παλλάδος καλούμεναι
> πασῶν Ἀθῆναι τιμιωτάτη πόλις,
> οἰκτίρατ' ἀνδρὸς Οἰδίπου τόδ' ἄθλιον
> εἴδωλον· οὐ γὰρ δὴ τό γ' ἀρχαῖον δέμας. 110
>
> Come, sweet children of ancient Darkness! Come, Athens, you who are called the city, most honoured of all, that belongs to greatest Pallas, pity this wretched image of the man Oedipus; for it is certainly not the form that he had of old.
>
> (*Oedipus at Colonus* 106–10)

This early invocation, though, is not followed by the compassion which Oedipus seeks; the chorus who enter are horrified by Oedipus and attempt to drive him from their land. Even after King Theseus has welcomed him, he must appeal to the city when Creon attempts to take his daughters:

> Κρ. οὐχ ἅψομαι τοῦδ' ἀνδρός, ἀλλὰ τῆς ἐμῆς. 830
> Οι. ὦ γῆς ἄνακτες. Χο. ὦ ξέν', οὐ δίκαια δρᾷς.
> Κρ. δίκαια. Χο. πῶς δίκαια; Κρ. τοὺς ἐμοὺς ἄγω.
> Οι. ἰὼ πόλις.
> Χο. τί δρᾷς, ὦ ξέν'; οὐκ ἀφήσεις; τάχ' ἐς βάσανον εἶ χερῶν. 834/5

[9] Taplin 1971: 39–40.
[10] *Ajax* 850–1; Finglass 2017i: 307–8; p. 56 above.

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Creon: I will not lay hold of this man, but on this girl, my property!
Oedipus: O lords of the land!
Chorus: Stranger, your action is not just!
Creon: It is!
Chorus: Howso just?
Creon: I am carrying off my own.
Oedipus: *Iô* city!
Chorus: What are you doing, stranger? Won't you let go? You will soon come to the test of fisticuffs. (*Oedipus at Colonus* 830–834/5)

The former king of Thebes is reduced to calling (in song) on the city of Athens for help. This is the cry not of a man in command, but of a powerless person appealing to the wider community – a βοή (literally 'shout'), the public imploring of assistance which was characteristically the last resort of the weak.[11] The continued assault of Creon provokes the chorus to lament 'the city, my city, is being slaughtered by strength' (πόλις ἐναίρεται, πόλις ἐμά, σθένει, 842): such behaviour constitutes an attack on Athens, which has promised Oedipus hospitality. But Athens subsequently avenges itself by recovering Oedipus' daughters, and Oedipus repays that city by having his body buried in its land, strengthening it against its foes for evermore. Creon is no simple representative of Thebes, which cannot be condemned on the basis of his actions and which Theseus carefully distinguishes from its ruler.[12] Yet Athens treats Oedipus with a generosity that Thebes did not, and thus reaps the reward of Oedipus' transformation, from the person who implores the city for aid into the corpse who provides aid for the city.

Almost the same cry is uttered by Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*, also during an altercation with Creon:

Κρ. οὐ γὰρ φρονοῦντά σ' εὖ βλέπω. Οι. τὸ γοῦν ἐμόν.
Κρ. ἀλλ' ἐξ ἴσου δεῖ κἀμόν. Οι. ἀλλ' ἔφυς κακός.
Κρ. εἰ δὲ ξυνίης μηδέν; Οι. ἀρκτέον γ' ὅμως.
Κρ. οὔτοι κακῶς γ' ἄρχοντος. Οι. ὦ πόλις πόλις.
Κρ. κἀμοὶ πόλεως μέτεστιν, οὐχὶ σοὶ μόνῳ. 630

Creon: No, because I do not see that you are sane.
Oedipus: I am sane, when it comes to my own interest.
Creon: But you ought to be equally sane when it comes to mine.
Oedipus: But you are a traitor!

[11] Finglass 2007d on *El.* 642.
[12] *Oedipus at Colonus* 919–23; Finglass 2012b.

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Creon: And if you have no understanding?
Oedipus: Nevertheless, you must be ruled.
Creon: Not when a ruler rules badly.
Oedipus: O city, city!
Creon: I too have a share in the city, not you alone.
(*Oedipus the King* 626–30)

The context is quite different, however: Oedipus is not calling upon the city to aid him, but apostrophizing it, implying that Creon's supposed treachery poses a civic peril, not just a threat to Oedipus. Just as Oedipus' earlier anger against Tiresias must be contextualized as the reaction of man appalled at the seer's apparent unconcern for the city, so too his (less justifiable) accusations of conspiracy directed against Creon have a civic as well as a personal aspect, ensuring that Oedipus does not wholly lose the audience's sympathy. Yet with the exception of Jocasta's remark that the whole πόλις has heard the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon (850), the noun is not found again in the play, despite several occurrences up to this point; the focus shifts to Oedipus' history and identity, and the danger to the city is forgotten. In *Electra* Sophocles allows the city sometimes to break through the otherwise continuous attention on the house of Atreus, reminding the audience of the broader significance of the action without distracting them from the main theme. In *Oedipus the King*, by contrast, the city is central for the first two-fifths of the drama, and then suddenly receives no more attention. In each play, the civic context is put to use in distinctive ways to further particular dramatic ends.

These wider civic perspectives taken by Sophocles' protagonists at moments of crisis further question the model, discussed above (Chapter 10), of heroes focused solely on their own honour. Moreover, they invite the question of the relationship of these plays with the community in which they were first performed. 'Tragedy and politics' is a favourite topic of scholarship, as scholars argue how classical tragedies interact with contemporary political culture. An older tradition attempted to see specific historical events and personalities adumbrated in the plays, while a newer one investigates the world view, the values implied by the dramas and to what extent they corroborate, or challenge, the values of the audience, particularly the values of democracy.[13]

[13] Goldhill 1987; Winkler and Zeitlin 1990; Griffith 1995; Easterling 1997; Griffin 1998; Seaford 2000; Rhodes 2003; Carter 2011b; Osborne 2012.

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'Sophoclean theatre is an excellent place to think about the audience of democracy', as Simon Goldhill remarks.[14] What was that audience? More diverse than we might think at first, as can be viewed along a number of axes. First, both women and men were there. No positive evidence suggests that women were banned or discouraged from going to the classical theatre, and much evidence suggests that they were present, including statements to that effect in Plato and a passage in Aristophanes which makes sense only under that hypothesis.[15] Second, the audience consisted of Greeks of all kinds, not just Athenians. In Aristophanes' *Acharnians* of 425 the main character, Dicaeopolis, tells the audience that he can speak frankly to the audience because the play is being performed at the Lenaea, before the sailing season began – 'we are on our own', he tells them.[16] The implication is that at the Dionysia, which took place later in the year when it was easier to take to sea, foreigners were present. Plenty lived in Attica anyway, as metics; plenty will have been in Athens on other business at any one time (at least outside the winter); some will have made the trip with a visit to the festival in mind.

Neither women nor foreigners will have been present at the theatre in as great a number as Athenian men were; yet minorities deserve historical investigation too. Sources also give far more information about fifth-century Athenian men than they do about Athenian women or non-Athenian Greeks of that period, but no-one would argue that the position of women in fifth-century Athens is a topic that we can neglect. By the same score, an account of the audience of fifth-century tragedy must take into account its variegated composition, thus widening our picture of who was actually sitting there and watching as Sophocles produced his plays. Goldhill and Hall have asked 'If we want to understand tragedy in history, how should we bring together a recognition of tragedy's address to the citizens with a recognition of the ambiguity within tragic language?'[17] One way of answering that question involves the realization that those Athenian citizens included both men and women; and that citizens of other *poleis* would have been present too. That very phrase 'tragedy's address to the citizens' thus itself has a creative ambiguity, even before we tackle ambiguity in Sophocles' own language.

[14] Goldhill 2009a: 29. For the tragic audience see Roselli 2011; Finglass 2017i: 311–17.
[15] See Aristophanes, *Peace* 962–7 with Carter 2011a: 50–1.
[16] Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 504–7.
[17] Goldhill and Hall 2009b: 19.

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This all has significant implications for any reading of the plays which equates the audience with the assembly of adult citizen Athenian males and proceeds to analyse the functions of tragedy on that basis.

Problematization of the idea of 'the audience' can go further. So, third, audience members will have had a wide range of political views. A recent discussion by William Allan and Adrian Kelly emphasizes the polysemy of political voices within classical Athens, and the ability of tragedy to connect with diverse groups.[18] Just as people today sometimes hold different opinions about the best way to arrange and govern a society, so too people in ancient Athens were not always unanimous in their attitudes to contemporary politics. As a consequence, 'no Attic tragedy could afford to be exclusively pro- or anti-democratic, or indeed pro- or anti-aristocratic, for the simple reason that its audience was not so exclusively either'.[19] This is important because, in discussing the figures portrayed in tragedies, 'We have to seek to know how the original audience understood those characters and their sufferings. The constant predicate of that process was the fifth-century community, its values, its views, and its institutions.'[20]

Fourth and finally, there were audiences beyond that of the first performance. Tragic poets were naturally writing with a view to future performances and future audiences (pp. 37–8 above), and so were unlikely to employ material that would not travel. Marrying the growing interest in early reperformance of tragedy with the investigation of its political significance is one more way in which further work on this topic could proceed reinvigorated.

[18] Allan and Kelly 2013.
[19] Allan and Kelly 2013: 92.
[20] Kelly 2015: 86.

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