

Mirrors for the Athenians?

The Presentation of Citizens' Reactions to Disasters and Dilemma's in Greek Tragedy

Annette Harder

In recent research on Greek tragedy we find a strong focus on the role these plays played in the context of Vth century Athens in which they were performed. It has become more and more clear that these plays were there not just for entertainment or the enhancement of religious festivals, but in many cases were also tuned to make the audience reflect on matters of relevance for contemporary society and for the *polis*. Thus e.g. Christopher Pelling (2000,196-7) remarks:

In tragedy citizens could think in a more reflective mode about some of the city's ideals. We can phrase that, if we like, as questioning and even subverting the city's ideology. Or better, we can see this questioning as itself ideologically authorised: one of the marks of the good citizen is to feel the problems which the *polis* raised, or at least to feel them in the right setting; and the tragic theatre was the right setting.

Sometimes the connection between tragedy and the contemporary world seems to be very close and obvious, as in the case of Aeschylus' *Persae*, about the recent defeat of the Persian king Xerxes and his army, or Euripides' *Trojan Women*, about the imperialistic behaviour of the Greeks towards their Trojan victims after the Trojan War. In other cases the connections are less direct, but an invitation to the audience to reflect on topical issues can still be detected. In the words of the well-known Greek scholar Eric Dodds, the plays are often tuned to "enlarge the audience's sensibility" on the issues they are dealing with. One aspect of this is that they may present the audience with models of behaviour which can be effective and successful or altogether wrong or destructive, but in any case deserve careful contemplation.

One such model can be found in the behaviour of citizens in times of crisis. In eight Greek tragedies of V BC we find choruses of (elderly) male citizens. These choruses are of different status and nature. They may be old men who stayed behind while a war was fought and are now facing the return of the king, either triumphant as in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* or defeated as in his *Persae*. Or they may be elderly citizens of Thebes, confronted with the problematic behaviour of their – often tyrannical – kings, as in Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Euripides' *Heracles*, or of Athens or other towns, involved in the moral dilemma's of their – often more democratic – kings, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus* or Euripides' *Heracidae* and *Alcestis*. Exploration of the utterances of these bodies of citizens fits in well with recent research such as that of Edit Hall into the 'polyphony' of Greek tragedy, which

gives a voice to not only the heroic characters of the old mythological tradition, but also to e.g. slaves, women and simple citizens. According to Hall (1997,118) the polyphony of tragedy implies that although

“taken as a whole, tragedy legitimises the value-system necessary to the glorification of Athens ...it is also important ... to remember that the polyphonic tragic form, which gives voice to characters from all such groups, challenges the very notions which it simultaneously legitimises”.

Therefore one may ask how these bodies of citizens are reacting to the events in the plays and, in relation to the theme of this conference, focus on the question how they are presented in terms of ‘citizens’ resilience’. Do they accept a subordinate role and adapt to the circumstances, hoping to survive unharmed? Do they protest? Do they present an alternative and try to change the course of events for the better? What are the effects of their attitude? Are they able to survive if they do nothing or are they successful if they protest or take action? What lessons could an Athenian audience learn from the citizens’ behaviour and attitude?

For the purpose of this conference I have looked for answers to some of these questions in two plays, in which a city is or has been threatened by enemies from outside. In one of these plays, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the king is of a tyrannical disposition and his intentions, though at first perhaps not altogether bad, turn out to be altogether wrong in the course of the play; in the other, Euripides’ *Heraclidae*, the king is a character who clearly tries to do his best for the common good, but for various reasons does not quite succeed. In both cases there is a role to play for the citizens of the town, who obviously have a strong interest in things going well, but without the power to achieve this if the king does not cooperate. I will explore what means they are using to influence the course of events and what kind of picture and/or example they offer the Athenians in the theatre. At first sight the plays might offer a picture of “all being wrong in Thebes” and “all being right in Athens” and one could imagine that an Athenian audience would be much pleased with itself after watching them. But a closer look suggests that there was more at stake and that interpretation should be less straightforward.

In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, performed in 442 BC, the threat from outside is in the past. At the beginning of the play the chorus of old men of Thebes is happy and confident because the war between their former king Eteocles and his brother Polyneices, who came to attack the town with an army of helpers from Argos, is over and the enemies are dead. Even so it is clear that the war is not over for everybody. The new king Creon has ordered that the body of Polyneices may not be buried, because he was a traitor who made war on his own town. However, Polyneices’ sister Antigone cannot accept this and she buries her

brother secretly. When Creon discovers this he has her buried alive, against the appeal of his son Haemon, who is engaged to Antigone. Only when the gods give clear signs of their displeasure and Haemon's life seems to be endangered too Creon goes to free Antigone, only to find her as well as Haemon dead by their own hand.

In this play we get a picture of the behaviour of citizens under tyrannical rule. Unlike Athens, which also in the mythical world of tragedy, stands for freedom and democracy, Thebes is the town where, in tragedy, tyrants may flourish and strange and grim events may take place. This can be seen in the character of Creon. He shows all the characteristics of the typical Greek tyrant. Although he gives evidence of a certain sense of responsibility at the beginning of the play and it has been argued that he means well for his polis, this is overruled by his tyrannical and godless attitude: he refuses burial to Polyneices against divine law, he suspects conspirations against himself, he demands unconditional obedience from Antigone, Haemon and the citizens and particularly in the discussion with Haemon he shows himself indifferent, arrogant and unwilling to listen. At the end the gods give clear signs that they are not amused and Creon is punished by losing his only son (and later also his wife).

Unlike the citizens in the *Heraclidae* the citizens in the *Antigone* do not really oppose the king. They accept his orders and superiority quite explicitly in e.g. lines 211-14:

Such is thy pleasure, Creon, son of Menoeceus, touching this city's foe, and its friend;
and thou hast power, I ween, to take what order thou wilt, both for the dead, and for all us
who live (Jebb)

They also share Creon's view that Antigone is bold and stubborn and altogether wrong and at no point in the play, not even when she is going to die and speaks to the chorus for the last time, they give her any kind of support. Their final judgment in lines 872-75 seems typical:

Reverent action claims a certain praise for reverence; but an offence against power
cannot be brooked by him who hath power in his keeping. Thy self-willed temper hath
wrought thy ruin (Jebb)

So, as was argued by Cynthia Gardiner in her book on the chorus in Sophocles of 1987 the chorus seems largely passive and focused on surviving unscathed. There are, however, a few passages which hint at at least the possibility of a different attitude:

- At one point Antigone suspects that the members of the chorus would oppose Creon and agree with her view on the burial of her brother if their lips were not 'sealed by fear' (505); the chorus

does not react to this suggestion and it remains an open question what the audience would have made of this. Did they feel that their silence made them into cowards who deserved their tyrannical ruler and simply got what they asked for?

- When Haemon speaks with his father he argues that the people of Thebes sympathize with Antigone although they are afraid to say so and he quotes them at some length (690-700):

For the dread of thy frown forbids the citizen to speak such words as would offend thine ear; but I can hear these murmurs in the dark, these moanings of the city for this maiden: 'No woman', they say, 'ever merited her doom less, - none ever was to die so shamefully for deeds so glorious as hers; who, when her own brother had fallen in bloody strife, would not leave him unburied, to be devoured by carrion dogs, or by any bird: - deserves not *she* the meed of golden honour?' Such is the darkling rumour that spreads in secret (Jebb)

This could be merely a rhetorical device, but in the light of what went before, one again gets the impression of a population which may mean well, but is too frightened to speak its mind.

- Eventually, when the gods have given clear signs of their displeasure at Creon's punishment of Antigone, the chorus becomes critical and urges him to change his mind and free her. When after Haemon and his wife have died Creon appears as a broken man the chorus condemns him and regards his fate as 'the work of no stranger's madness, - if we may say it -, but of his own misdeeds' (Jebb)

Here, one could argue, we see a lack of resilience of the citizens. They are frightened to such an extent that they accept a violation of the divine laws, which order a respectful burial of the dead in all circumstances, and do not oppose Creon as long as he feels certain about what he is doing. Only when the gods have made it clear that Creon is, in fact, the loser in this whole business and that his punishment is imminent, they change their attitude and become critical of him. The Athenians might have felt comfortable about this, as it were citizens of Thebes who were thus described. Even so, the play could serve as a warning and a reminder of the dangers of the loss of democracy and freedom.

Euripides' *Heraclidae* as we have it is not quite complete, but the plot must have been more or less as follows. The children of Heracles, led and protected by their father's old friend and nephew Iolaus and their grandmother Alcmene seek refuge in Marathon near Athens when Eurystheus, the enemy king of Argos, tries to capture and kill them. The Athenian king Demophon, a son of Theseus, is willing to help

and risk war with Argos, but when he has consulted oracles and heard that a “girl of noble family” must be sacrificed to guarantee a good outcome of the war he starts to back out and states that neither he nor any of the Athenians will sacrifice a child. Then Macaria, the daughter of Heracles offers herself to be sacrificed. After that we hear no more about the sacrifice, but a servant of Heracles’ son Hyllus announces that Hyllus is coming with an army to help the Athenians. A fight with the Argives, in which Iolaos undergoes a miraculous rejuvenation, is then won and Eurystheus taken prisoner. Alcmena wants to kill him, against the chorus’ advice and at the – lacunose – end Eurystheus predicts that he will become a benevolent protector of Athens where he will be buried.

This play has often been regarded as one of Euripides’ ‘patriotic’ plays, because it is centred around a myth which glorified the helpfulness and hospitality of Athens towards those who were in need of help and had thus become an important part of the Athenian cultural memory. It could appear in funeral speeches for the fallen soldiers, as in e.g. Plato’s *Menexenus*. However, when looked at more closely Euripides’ plays often suggest interpretations which are not so straightforward and in this respect the *Heraclidae* is no exception.

In this play the chorus consists of older men of Marathon, who seem to represent the spirit of an idealized Athens (and must have reminded the audience of the famous battle of Marathon fought against the Persians earlier in the century). They are particularly outspoken on the central themes of the play: the idea that the people of Athens should offer asylum to refugees even if it means war with Argos and the notion that although it is quite alright to kill an enemy in battle it is not right to kill him afterwards, when he has been taken prisoner, out of revenge. The scene with the herald from Argos contains several lines which illustrate their basic attitude (101-113):

Stranger, respect is due to suppliants of the gods. No violent hand must drag them away from altar or statue. Justice is holy and will not allow this. ... They are suppliants and strangers who look to our city for help. To reject them is to defy the gods. ... This land is free. You should have shown enough respect to address her king, before you so presumptuously defied the gods, and laid hand on these strangers here (Vellacott)

and this is emphasized again further on in the play, in e.g. 329-32:

To help the helpless in the cause of right has been our long tradition, and is always our desire. Often before this land has for the sake of friends faced peril; now I see this new struggle looming near (Vellacott)

Their sense of being free citizens also shows when they oppose Demophon, when he threatens to strike the herald from Argos and when led by oracles and the protests of his people he seems inclined to give up his plan of protecting the Heraclids, and when they try to stop Alcmena at the end of the play, when she wants to kill the now powerless Eurystheus. On both accounts the chorus is moderately successful. Although it does not prevent the sacrifice of Macaria, Demophon does go into battle against the Argives, and although it cannot prevent the death of Eurystheus, the king announces that finally he will become a benevolent power protecting Athens from his grave.

What we see here through the chorus is a body of citizens upholding the traditional moral values of Athens against the weakness of a Demophon, who means well, but is not up to his task, and against the bitter spirit of revenge of an Alcmena. Even so, the chorus does not oppose the human sacrifice demanded by the gods and seems to accept Macaria's offer to die for the sake of her family and of Athens with the same mixture of admiration and relief as Iolaus and Demophon. As in the *Antigone* here too we get a glimpse of the other citizens of Athens and they do not seem to share the idealistic attitude of the chorus, as in 415-19 Demophon tells Iolaus about their reaction to the plan to help the Heraclids:

At this moment there are angry gatherings to be seen, where some say I was right to promise sanctuary to foreign suppliants, others hold this was an act of folly. I only have to carry out this promise – and civil war is on us (Vellacott)

As in other plays Euripides seems to present a contrast between the attitude of older, selfish and more pragmatic characters and the pure and unselfish altruism of a young person willing to sacrifice itself for the community. This could make the audience think again about the attitude of not only Demophon and Iolaus, but also of the chorus and the Athenians in general. One could imagine the more perceptive members of the audience wondering what kind of community would so easily allow a young person to die for it or start civil war over this issue and what this would mean for the moral standards and stability of that community in the long run.

Thus the focus on Athens and the way in which the chorus is presented in this play, which was performed ca. 428 BC, may well reflect issues of the early years of the Peloponnesian War, a war which had a great impact on the life of the Athenians, as we can also see in the comedies of Aristophanes, and, as we can read in Thucydides' account of the war, very quickly had a demoralizing effect on all Greek cities, including Athens. The fragility of communities under stressful circumstances is well illustrated in his descriptions of e.g. the effects of the plague in Athens or of the political struggles and civil war in Corcyra, which lead to murder and chaos. In the *Heraclidae* it becomes clear that not only in notoriously

un-democratic towns like mythical Thebes dangers are lurking within the community and the laws and standards of proper behaviour may be ignored by the citizens, but that in Athens there are similar dangers. Martin Hose in his recent study of the works of Euripides of 2008 still defends the patriotic interpretation of the play and describes the events as “einige Hindernisse, die den besonderen Edelmüt der Stadt profilieren helfen” (p.73), but this seems to simple and in my view does not do full justice to the text.

Thus, when we compare the *Antigone* and the *Heraclidae*, we get the impression that in the second play the focus on the behaviour of citizens in difficult situations has become more emphatic and the message more urgent. From criticism of citizens in a far away town and a mild reminder of how one should not act if one were a citizen of such a town, we have moved to a disturbing picture of what may go wrong in one's own town if the proper standards of behaviour are tampered with. In both cases the victims of the older people's attitude are the young people, Antigone, Haemon and Macaria, who still have ideals and are willing to fight and die for their conviction. The sad and cynical conclusion, about which both Sophocles and Euripides seem to invite their audiences to think, is that in the world of Greek tragedy the effects of the constructive and 'resilient' behaviour of the young people are frustrated by the lack of 'resilience' of the older generation: because of their fear of tyrants or their indifference and self-interest, which makes them accept 'easy' solutions, the older citizens in fact become a 'guilty' generation and the potential for 'resilience' of the younger generation is destroyed before it even has had time to flourish.

Finally, recalling the quotation of Christopher Pelling with which we started, one can see how for perceptive citizens of Athens in the real world as opposed to the mythological world of the plays, pondering these issues and reflecting on the questions what they really meant for the well-being of the *polis*, might be a source of awareness about the attitudes of citizens leading to 'resilience'.

oudere mannen:

A. *Pers.*, *Ag.*: mannen die oud zijn en achtergebleven terwijl elders oorlog werd uitgevochten, nu geconfronteerd met de nasleep daarvan

S. *OT*, *OC*, *Ant.*: mannen die een rol spelen tijdens crisis in eigen gemeenschap

E. *HF*, *Alc.*, *Hcl.*: mannen die een rol spelen tijdens crisis in eigen gemeenschap

vrouwen uit de stad:

A.Sept., Ch.

S.Tr., El.

E.Med., El., Or.