

## Whips, goads, fetters, yokes: torture in Greek tragedy

In Herodotus' narrative of the Persian Wars, the Persian Great King Xerxes expresses his rage at the disobedience of the Hellespont by having it lashed (Hdt. 7.35). He also orders his men to throw a pair of fetters into the Hellespont for good measure. In Aeschylus' *Persians* (*Pers.* 739-52), the ghost of Darius, Xerxes' father, points to Xerxes' rash act of "fettering" the Hellespont as the moment of his undoing. The Great King is often depicted in Greek sources as treating everyone and everything as his slaves, regardless of their status. This is the paradigmatic act of the tyrant: to attempt to assert dominance over someone (or something) wholly inappropriate by treating them (or it) like a recalcitrant slave. Allen (2000: 86) notes that whips, goads, fetters, and yokes all serve as symbols of punishment in Greek tragedy. Furthermore, she notes that the difference between torture and punishment was seen by the ancient Greeks as a question of legitimacy: does the one wielding the whip, goad, fetter, or yoke have the right to punish? This question forms the heart of her discussion of the *Prometheus Bound* (2000: 25-35), in which Prometheus' being fettered to a mountain is presented by the "new king" Zeus and his henchmen as a legitimate punishment, while Prometheus and his sympathizers see it as a spectacle of tyrannical torture. Yet Allen does not fully draw out the connections between tyranny and public torture in her study. This paper will argue that whips, goads, fetters, and yokes are symbols not merely of punishment in Greek tragedy, but of tyrannical punishment: public punishment that is intended to shore up the tyrant's power by terrorizing the spectators.

We can see the connection between these modes of punishment and the tyrannical abuse of power in a number of tragedies beyond *Prometheus Bound*. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Aegisthus threatens to bind the Chorus with fetters if they do not obey him (*Ag.* 1639-40). In

Sophocles' *Ajax*, Ajax believes he has been punishing his commanders Agamemnon and Menelaus with a whip while they are fettered in his tent (1-133). In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon grouches that the Chorus has not yet submitted to his yoke (*Ant.* 289-92). Literally or metaphorically, the use of these terms identifies the speaker as someone attempting to treat free people like slaves, as a tyrant does.

These tools of coercion also shed light on more marginal or debatable figures in Greek tragedy. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Oedipus describes to Jocasta how he quarreled over the right of way at a crossroads with an old man who is eventually revealed to have been Laius, his own father; when Oedipus would not give way, Laius struck him on the head with his "double goad" (Soph. *OT* 809). This act, which Oedipus perceived as a kind of tyrannical arrogance, prompted Oedipus to kill Laius and all his retainers. He then takes his father's place. Like father, like son.

More troublingly, perhaps, these tools of coercion link the gods to tyrannical public torture in several tragedies. We have already touched on *Prometheus Bound*, which depicts Zeus as an insecure "new god" who fetters Prometheus to a mountainside in an effort to control the threat to his regime that Prometheus represents. As Allen discusses, Prometheus is then displayed to a series of internal spectators (the Chorus of Oceanids, Oceanus, and Io). Similarly, Athena displays the maddened Ajax to Odysseus at the beginning of Sophocles' *Ajax* as a spectacle of her power to punish, even though Ajax is the one wielding the bloody whip. As Seale (1982: 144-80) and others have noted, this tableau effectively puts Odysseus in the position of the theatrical audience. Dionysus displays the maddened Pentheus to the Bacchantes at the end of Euripides' *Bacchae* as a spectacle of his power to punish, even though Pentheus is the one who attempted to fether Dionysus. Aphrodite displays the mangled Hippolytus to

Theseus at the end of Euripides' *Hippolytus* as a spectacle of her power to punish, even though she struck Phaedra with her “goad” of passion (Eur. *Hipp.* 39), even though Hippolytus is the one who yoked and whipped his horses (Eur. *Hipp.* 1195) to try to escape Phaedra’s passion. In all of these plays, mortals use or suffer the effects of these instruments of coercion, as they attempt to force those around them to do their will, but it is ultimately the gods who present them to the internal spectators and to the audience as examples of their right to punish – no matter how cruel the methods or how slight the offense.

#### Works Cited

- Allen, Danielle. 2000. *The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens*. Princeton.
- Seale, David. 1982. *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*. Chicago.