

Cultic Aetiology in Euripides

Euripides is fond of having his characters, especially near the ends of plays, mention forms of religious worship connected in some way with events on stage. Most scholars have assumed that these “cultic aitiologies” correspond fairly closely to what the original audience believed and did outside the theater. A decade ago, however, Scott Scullion made a learned and powerful case that in Greek tragedy, “*aitia* or the cults they refer to could as a matter of convention be wholly fictitious” (Scullion 1999-2000; see also Dunn 1996). Since Scullion wrote, the traditional view has been reasserted by, for example, Parker 2005; and Seaford 2009 now offers a point-by-point critique of Scullion’s arguments. In this paper, I take up a few strands of this complex debate and, on the matter of tragic vs. cultic “truth”, suggest an interpretation not considered by either Scullion or Seaford.

I first try to clarify what is in dispute. Although the expression “*aitia* or the cults they refer to” is clear, and Scullion consistently distinguishes cult from myth, Seaford misrepresents him on this point. Scullion perhaps invites this misunderstanding by ordering his examples not according to criteria such as their presumed basis in ritual performance, local tradition, or *ad hoc* invention by a tragic poet, but rather in a progression from easy to hard cases (as he sees them). The idea that Euripides invents cult practices, and not just myths explaining them or objects supposedly on view in sanctuaries, has without doubt met the most resistance. Scullion makes this claim about four passages: two where he considers it very easy to accept his conclusions, and two he acknowledges as very hard. Yet as it happens, recent scholarship has tended to side with him on the hard cases. The anomalous cult of Eurystheus announced in *Heraclidae* is a related case; here, opinion tilts against Scullion, but the evidence is far from clear, and the issues are instructive. I also consider whether important cases have been overlooked. Scullion leaves fragmentary plays out of consideration, and Seaford particularly laments the absence of a discussion of *Erechtheus*. I show that the relation of the cults ordained by Athena in the Sorbonne papyrus (Eur. *Erech.* fr. 370) to cultic reality as known from other sources does no harm to Scullion’s position, and arguably supports it, insofar as it allows us to see Euripides operating in exactly the way most scholars now believe Aeschylus operates in *Eumenides*.

Finally, I turn to the model of communication between poet and audience on the subject of cult. Seaford argues that tragedy’s information about cult is reliably true because the audience expected it to be, and the poet had good reasons to fulfill this expectation and no reason not to.

Scullion maintains that “in the radically imaginative world of tragedy the authenticity of *aitia* and even of cults is based on their coherence with a play’s postulates and themes rather than on their correspondence to so-called ‘real life’.” Scullion wishes to banish the preconception that “imaginative literary work is necessarily subordinate to religious, political or other authoritative ideologies.” Seaford’s objection to the rhetoric here perhaps points a way forward. I suggest that by overemphasizing the autonomy of literature, Scullion misses a chance to draw attention to its reality as an aspect of religion. Taking a hint from one of the two “fall-back positions” he offers readers unwilling to follow his argument all the way, I consider the implications of the idea that when hearing of a cult practice different from what they believed and did outside the theater (or, it may be added, entirely new to them), “spectators would be expected to conceive of this as the (or an) original form of the worship” in question. Those who, like Seaford, insist on establishing the facts of the matter often assume that audience members distinguish what they hear and what they know and test the one against the other. It might more often be true to say that what they hear *becomes* what they know, that tragedy is in a meaningful sense constitutive of religious and political reality for most spectators. I test this idea on *Erechtheus*, a limit case since it involves cults at the very heart of Athens.

Works cited

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