

Poetic ἔκπληξις: On the Nature of Tragic Fear

In chapter 6 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle makes the catharsis of emotions like pity and fear the art's defining characteristic. Later, however, he restates the end of tragedy with different vocabulary (25.1460b23-26): ἀδύνατα πεποιήται, ἡμάρτηται· ἀλλ' ὀρθῶς ἔχει, εἰ τυγχάνει τοῦ τέλους τοῦ αὐτῆς (τὸ γὰρ τέλος εἴρηται), εἰ οὕτως ἐκπληκτικώτερον ἢ αὐτὸ ἢ ἄλλο ποιεῖ μέρος. (If impossibilities are included, they are mistakes. But it is possible to include them properly, if they achieve the goal of tragedy (which goal has been stated), that is, if they make some part or other [of the tragedy] more emotionally shattering.) As Elizabeth Belfiore has argued (Belfiore 1992), Aristotle equates catharsis with tragic ἔκπληξις. This restatement aligns Aristotle's theory with the discussions of tragedy that we find in other ancient literary criticism (Belfiore 1992). In fact, authors as diverse as Aristophanes, Plato, Polybius, and [Longinus] place ἔκπληξις, or emotional paralysis, at the heart of tragedy. More interestingly, ἔκπληξις is associated with the worship of Dionysus. Taken together, this evidence suggests that ἔκπληξις was a primary characteristic of tragedy from its inception to at least the first century C.E.

Descriptions of tragedy's emotional effect are frequent and consistent. Several authors describe Aeschylus's attempts to induce ἔκπληξις. In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Euripides boasts that unlike his rival, he did not shatter his audiences with fear. Often, the statement is taken to reveal a fundamental difference in the nature of the two tragedians' work. While Aeschylus strove for emotional impact, Euripides wrote plays for intellectual contemplation (e.g. Lada-Richards 1999). In the larger context of that comedy, however, it is unsafe to take anything the eventual loser of the contest says at face value. When Euripides' calls Dionysus' choice of Aeschylus shameful, Dionysus responds, "What is shameful, if it doesn't seem so to the audience?" (1475). In other words, Athenian audiences demanded ἔκπληξις in their tragedies. Furthermore, like

Aristophanes' Dionysus, later commentators on Aeschylus extol his ability to stupefy. The scholiast to his *Agamemnon*, for instance, praises Cassandra's prophetic description of her own and Agamemnon's deaths as particularly amazing because it produces both ἔκπληξις and sufficient pity (*Schol. Aesch. Ag. hyp.*). For the audience member, ἔκπληξις is a necessary feature of tragedy.

We also find tragic ἔκπληξις in Plato's *Ion* (535b1-c8). Socrates asks Ion if, when he inflicts ἔκπληξις upon his listeners, he finds himself enthused as well. Ion responds that he is possessed, and he experiences the emotions he describes. Plato equates epic with tragedy and derides the emotional power of both genres, but once again, ἔκπληξις is at the heart of the tragic project.

Polybius also looks askance at tragic ἔκπληξις, but only when it is used to heighten the impact of historical narrative. In his attack on Phylarchus (2.56), he explains that it is the aim of tragedy to drive the spectator from his or her senses, but such technique is unsuitable for historiography.

[Longinus] is the most explicit of all of the ancient commentators: the end of tragedy is ἔκπληξις (15.2). These authors, taken in combination with Aristotle, provide witness to a theory of tragedy that remains consistent over several centuries: the goal of tragedy is to induce a kind of mental paralysis brought on by an extreme emotional disturbance.

That conception of the tragedy is particularly interesting when we consider the association of ἔκπληξις with Dionysus and his worship. Outside of tragedy, we find ἔκπληξις, frequently, in war. For instance, when the news of a successful Peloponnesian raid on Salamis reached Athens, it created a greater panic (ἔκπληξις) than any other in the war (Thuc. 2.94.1). The chorus of the *Bacchae* (301-5) reminds Pentheus that Dionysus has something of Ares in

him. When panic spreads through the ranks, that is Dionysus. Emotional ἔκπληξις belongs to Dionysus.

And in fact, ἔκπληξις is an important element in cult worship. A decree honoring the daduch of 20/19, Themistocles, praises his ability to endow the mysteries with more ἔκπληξις than his predecessors (Clinton 1974). Centuries earlier, Plato associates ἔκπληξις with Eleusinian mysticism in the *Phaedrus*, and ἔκπληξις is “one of the essential emotional ordeals that an initiand into Bacchic/Eleusinian mysteries is required to undergo.” (Lada-Richards 1999). Given the central role ἔκπληξις plays in tragedy, its association with the cult worship of Dionysus is no surprise.

A tendency to overvalue the definition of tragedy Aristotle gives in chapter 6 of the *Poetics* has obscured the importance of ἔκπληξις in Greek tragedy. Mental stupefaction is an essential element of the tragic art and crucial to the worship of tragedy’s patron god.

Bibliography

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