

## The Politics of Tragedy

Public officials, journalists and ordinary citizens frequently use words such as "tragedy" and "tragic" when trying to make sense of unforeseen events of mass suffering or fatality. So, for example, a Google search cross-referencing "tragedy" and "September 11" conducted a year and a half after the attacks received 853,000 hits [Martin Harris, "Letter," *London Review of Books* 25 (9) (May 8, 2003)]. Philosophers and literati, including Goethe, Hegel, and Nietzsche, have long reflected on examples of Greek tragedy and developed notions of the tragic to reflect on the nature and significance of the human affairs. Oftentimes, these intellectual or academic "experts" in tragedy have looked with disdain on what they see as the imprecise and clichéd use of the vocabulary of tragedy in ordinary usage. So, for example, in a forum of theatre and performance scholars organized in New York City to reflect on the meaning of the discourse of tragedy provoked by the 9/11 attacks, one participant (Alice Raynor) argued that "the term (tragedy) had been devalued into a generic word for calamity," while another (Harry J. Elam) warned against "succumbing to popular notions of the tragic."

This paper offers a way to understand the deep connections between the two seemingly disparate and unconnected discourses of tragedy conducted by public officials, journalists, and ordinary citizens, on the one hand, and academics and intellectuals, on the other. Those connections are to be found in the interdependent relationship between tragedy and democracy, which first manifested itself in the democratic polis of ancient Athens. This paper considers the scholarly findings of classicists, philosophers and political theorists that *tragōidiā* had an important political role during ancient Athens' establishment of democratic self-rule as a vehicle both for educating the political judgment of polis citizens and for promoting their sense of civic solidarity. (German classicist Christian Meier's statement in *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*

that, “Attic democracy was as dependent on tragedy as upon its councils and assemblies,” is emblematic of the findings of this scholarship.) This paper then shows how similar political uses are implied in the ordinary uses of the vocabulary of tragedy by public officials, journalists, and ordinary citizens in democratic polities undergoing crisis or communities undergoing a transition to democracy.