

## Reading Greek Drama Democratically

The relationship of the fifth-century Athenian theater to the Athenian democratic regime has been endlessly debated, but without achieving a satisfactory consensus. I am returning to this question from a different and, I hope, more productive perspective. My assumptions are, in brief, that a full answer to the question involves looking at the theater as an institution and including both tragedy and comedy (treated separately in other analyses); that the commitment to free expression that is at the heart of Athens' democratic ideology is foundational also for Athenian drama; and that the best way to understand the political engagement of the theater is not as commentary, in favor of or in opposition to democracy, but as active *participation* in it, emphatically including the questioning of democratic values and critique of democratic practices found again and again in surviving dramatic texts, both tragic and comic.

*Parrhêsia* (free and frank speech, literally 'saying everything') is a watchword of democratic ideology and indeed the defining attribute of the (male) citizens of Athens. In the fifth century, *isêgoria* (literally, 'speech equality') can be used to denote the democratic regime: the authority of every citizen to speak his mind for the good of the community, is regarded as fundamental to democratic governance. The significance of this as ideology goes beyond the no doubt important question of how many and what classes of citizens exercised this right.

It is not, however, the theater's overt endorsement of this or other specifically democratic ideas, but rather its *engagement* with a democratic culture of open debate that brands it as a participant in the democracy, first and foremost through dialogue, the back and forth among characters who speak for themselves. The characters say what they have to say, unfiltered by an all-knowing narrator; the audience is left to decide what is all means. The democratic character

of tragedy is perhaps most obvious in its presentation of agonistic persuasive speech, something as fundamental to Athenian theatre as it is to Athenian political life.

In order to provide evidence for the power of this approach in the brief compass of a conference paper, I will limit my remarks to a single tragedy and comedy, both of which for different reasons seem to resist “democratic” readings. Even in such cases, I will suggest, the framework of polis ideology subsists, and uncovering it can be revelatory. Sophocles’ *Ajax* (undated, but plausibly attributed to the 440s) deals with a proud and unbending Homeric hero who has been shamed in the eyes of his peers, whose life and death (he falls on his sword in the middle of the play) seem to be at the further possible remove from the ethos of the democratic polis. The perspective of others in the play, however, most notably the Chorus of his Ajax’s loyal troops, his brother Teucer, and his arch-enemy Odysseus, suggest a contrasting value system based in the ideology of the polis with which to rethink, in the wake of his death, the meaning of both hero and community.

Aristophanes’ *Knights* (424), on the other hand, engages directly with contemporary Athens, but its satirical take on the debasement of political deliberation is so vicious as to make the comedy appear until nearly the end entirely opposed to democratic values. Two slaves vie for the favor of the sluggish and pampered Demos with ever more unscrupulous flattery and shameless bribery: Paphlagon, a thinly disguised parody of the popular leader Cleon, and the even more loathsome Sausage Seller, who defeats his rival. In the final scene, Demos is magically rejuvenated by the Sausage Seller and ready to take charge once more. This finale is pure fantasy, but it stages the triumph of retributive justice by humiliating the Cleon figure using his own methods, and allows Athens to transcend the debasement of its discourse by providing the people with the servant they need. Aristophanes here satirizes the worst excesses of the

aspiring demagogue and the foolishness of those who embrace him, but then goes on to imagine a happy reversal in the magical apotheosis of the power of words. An ordinary Athenian—as ordinary as they come—transforms himself and his world by the power of persuasive speech, comedy’s wry but telling tribute to democratic ideology.

#### Bibliography

Burian, P. “Polyphonic Ajax,” in K. Ormand, ed. *A Companion to Sophocles*. 2012: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 69-83.

Carter, D. M., ed. *Why Athens? A Reappraisal of Tragic Politics*. 2011: Oxford University Press.

McGlew, J. F. *Citizens on Stage: Comedy and Political Culture in the Athenian Democracy*. 2002: University of Michigan Press.