

## The Olive in Greek Tragedy through War and Peace

The olive in Greek tragedy has economic, religious, historical and aesthetic significance as well as strictly literary and culinary importance. For instance, in Aeschylus' *Persians* a luxuriant olive is prominent among Atossa's offerings to the ghost of her late husband Darius (616-18). All parts of the libation are Greek, not Persian (Garvie 2009). They are reminiscent of plantings admired by Odysseus in the peaceful gardens of Alcinoos (*Odyssey* vii.116) and Laertes (xxiv.246), as well as the thicket of olive and thorn (φυλία, perhaps a wild olive) where he fell asleep on Phaeacia (v. 476-493). The chorus later underscores the commonality of Greeks and Persians by commenting that the Persians under Darius peaceably ruled "olive-planted" (ἐλαιόφυτος) Samos (884); the fruit links the prosperity of both societies before Xerxes' disaster. A similar context underlies Xerxes' remorse at burning the Athenian Acropolis (Herodotus 8.54-5). When the king orders the Athenian exiles to make their customary sacrifices, they find a fresh shoot sprouting from the sacred olive.

Aeschylus' *Persians* is the only intact "historical" tragedy. The other references to the olive in extant Greek tragedy come from works eschewing direct political references, primarily during the Peloponnesian War. Given these constraints, how closely does the evidence from later fifth-century Athenian tragedy correspond to historical analysis? According to many modern scholars, the annual Spartan incursions during the Archidamian War tended to cause short-term damage. As Herodotus implies, olive trees are less susceptible to destruction than most crops, and, during the Archidamian war, harvesting came after the Spartans had withdrawn (Foxhall 2007). However, the war also entailed great shorter-term hardships. In addition to anxiety, loss of life, and reduced productivity (Bresson 2016), these include the destruction of olive presses, and disruptions to supply chains and exports disproportionately affecting Athenian olive oil (Foxhall

1993, Rawlings 2007). The suffering intensifies after the fortification of Decelea in 413 (cf. Foxhall 1993).

Although references to the olive are broadly consistent with this historical understanding, those in later fifth-century tragedy are diffuse and varied, consistent with this period. They contrast with the specificity of Aristophanes, who depicts Dicaeopolis counting olive trees as a benefit of peace at *Acharnians* 997 (Olson 1991), much as Trygaeus pictures “well-anointed” (ὕπαλειψαμένοις) knees playing with a personified female Spectator (*Peace* 897). Examples in tragedy include Creusa, in Euripides’ *Ion*, giving her son a crown of the same olive on the Acropolis as seen in Herodotus (Mueller 2010) to signify permanence: “it has not lost its color, born from an immortal olive tree” (1435-6).

The olive does not, however, appear in Xuthus’s banquet in the *Ion*, which emphasizes tapestries and protocol, not food. The olive is also absent in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*; Philoctetes’ “two-mouthed” (δίστομος) cave (16) and harbor are a hardscrabble version of the setting in *Odyssey* XIII.96-127, but lack Odysseus’s welcoming olive tree (XIII.102, 122), a harbinger of the torment Odysseus inflicts on Philoctetes (Davidson 2002) and indirectly to the horrors of the Peloponnesian War (cf. Roisman 2005).

In *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles returns to the seat of the Eumenides, whose earlier transformation in Aeschylus is framed by the crazed Orestes brandishing an olive branch as he leaves Delphi (43), in contrast with the hearths of “thrones glistening with olive oil” (λιπαροθρόνοισιν ... ἐπ’ ἐσχάραις) which the Eumenides will enjoy (*Eumenides* 806). The sacred grove which contains the olive welcomes Antigone and her father (17) in a scene that leads Oedipus from his own past into a future where his spirit will protect Athens, despite its sufferings. The olive is also central to Oedipus’s final ritual to the Eumenides (484). As in

Herodotus and the *Ion*, Athena's unconquered olive tree remains (701), but now it has survived both the Persians and the Peloponnesians (Saïd 2012; cf. Hornblower 2011 on Thucydides and iii.26.3 and vi.99.3).

### Bibliography

Bresson, Alain, *The Making of the Ancient Greek Economy*. Steven Rendall, trans.

Princeton/Oxford 2016

Davidson, John. "Arrival at the Cave: the *Odyssey* and Greek Drama." *WS* 115 (2002) 45-57

Foxhall, Lin. "Farming and Fighting in Ancient Greece." *War and Society in the Greek World*.

John Rich and Graham Shipley, eds. London/New York 1993

-----, *Olive Cultivation in Ancient Greece: Seeking the Ancient Economy*. Oxford 2007

Garvie, A.F. *Aeschylus: Persae, with Introduction and Commentary*. Oxford 2009

Hornblower, Simon. *A Commentary on Thucydides*. 3 vols. Oxford 2011

Mueller, Melissa. "Athens in a Basket: Naming, Objects, and Identity in Euripides' *Ion*."

*Arethusa* 43 (2010) 365-402

Olson, S. Douglas. "Dicaeopolis' Motivations in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*." *JHS* 111 (1991)

200-203

Rawlings, Louis. *The Ancient Greeks at War*. Manchester 2007

Roisman, Hannah M. *Sophocles: Philoctetes*. London 2005.

Saïd, Suzanne. "Athens and Athenian Space in *Oedipus at Colonus*." in *Crisis on Stage: Tragedy*

*and Comedy in Late Fifth-Century Athens*. Andreas Markantonatos and Bernhard

Zimmermann, eds. Berlin/Boston 2012