

The *Ekkyklema* as Tyrannical Device

When Clytemnestra reveals the corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra to the Chorus and claims credit for their murders in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is probably using the *ekkyklema*, a low platform on wheels used to display "interior" scenes in Greek tragedy. There is no firm evidence for the *ekkyklema*'s use in fifth-century tragedy, although Aristophanes' fifth-century parodies of tragedy suggest it (Farmer 2017; Webster 1970). Regardless of when this stage machine was introduced, there are moments in numerous fifth-century tragedies where a character points to a display of the dead or the suffering, for which the *ekkyklema* would have been suitable, as evidence to others onstage of his or her power. "That man is Agamemnon, / my husband; he is dead; the work of this right hand / that struck in strength of righteousness. And that is that," says Clytemnestra to the horrified Chorus (trans. Lattimore). In this paper, I will suggest that the *ekkyklema* is the stage machine of tyrannical display in fifth-century tragedy. That is, I will argue that these moments of bloody revelation – whether the wheeled platform was used in the original performance or the display of a tableau of violence was accomplished in another way – use the tyrant's logic of deliberate, public cruelty to inspire terror and obedience in onlookers. This is not controversial in the case of a character like Clytemnestra, but the repetition of this sort of scene-framing across tragedy can shed a different light on characters often seen as more sympathetic, such as Orestes or Hecuba. The specter of tyranny lurks everywhere, and characters that give in to their tyrannical impulses need to be corrected in some way.

There are three sorts of scenes in which the *ekkyklema* may have been used to display the dead or suffering. Scenes in which the *ekkyklema* could have been used to display multiple dead

bodies appear in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*, in Sophocles' *Electra*, and in Euripides' *Electra*, *Hecuba*, and *Hercules Furens*. In all these scenes, the motive for the murders is revenge, presented by the speakers as justice. In all these scenes, the display of the corpses is deliberate, presented by the speakers as an instructive spectacle for onlookers; deictic pronouns abound. There are other scenes in fifth-century tragedy where the *ekkyklema* could have been used to display single characters being tormented by physical or mental anguish: in the *Prometheus Bound*, in Sophocles' *Ajax*, and again in Euripides' *Hercules Furens*. These scenes, in which at least somewhat sympathetic protagonists suffer at the hands of angry gods, make the tyrannical impulses behind the deliberate display of suffering clearer. Finally, Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *Hippolytus* contain scenes in which a character who has committed suicide is displayed to another character, perhaps on the *ekkyklema*. In both of these scenes, it is the wife of the ruler who has committed suicide. In the *Antigone*, the suicide of Creon's wife arrests his progression into tyrannical behavior, while in the *Hippolytus*, the suicide of Theseus' wife initiates it. These moments when the *ekkyklema* may have been used, these moments of deliberate display of the effects of violence on bodies, are all revelations of cruelty to *philoï* in front of onlookers (such as the Chorus). They are all displays of what the Greeks saw as tyrannical behavior (Farenga 1981).

As Allen (2000) has shown, punishment in tragedy must be public. In this paper, I will argue that the *ekkyklema* (or some predecessor of this stage device) is used to display the tyrant's power to kill or inflict suffering. But any power that must be displayed so theatrically – any power that depends on the presence of spectators – rests on shaky grounds (Meltzer 1988). This is why Odysseus averts his eyes from Athena's infliction of Ajax's suffering in Sophocles' *Ajax*; why seeing his wife's corpse causes Creon to re-evaluate his harsh punishments in Sophocles'

Antigone; why Orestes must flee the city and seek purification after triumphantly displaying the bodies of his mother and her lover in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* (contra Griffith 1995). The power to punish is also the power to compel others to watch punishment. When the tyrant commands his subjects to watch a spectacle of punishment, however, he risks revealing that his rule is built on a show of force. The *ekkyklema* focuses the spectators' gaze on the tableau of empty violence.

Bibliography

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