

Drama and Theatre in ancient Greece. A database and a spectators' school.

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Abstract¹

Drama always consisted of an invaluable “database” for the culture and education of the ancient Greek spectators, who used to watch it as a performance that derived from the already existing literary types and forms (epic and lyric poetry) on which it was based and which included up to a certain degree; namely, in Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides’ tragedies and Aristophanes’ comedies, almost all the ideas, the messages, the moral values and the knowledge that constitute the so called “*Ancient Greek Thought and Philosophy*”, coexist and consist of the values of the ancient Greek culture as a whole. However, these do not represent the accumulation of some valuable material, but the creative conjunction and composition of qualitative and quantitative data in an astonishing analogy and harmony that expresses the basic principles and virtues of the ancient Greek Thought such as Moderation, Harmony, Symmetry, Equilibrium and the correspondence between form and content. This explains why the ancient Greek drama has been characterized by scholars as the “Theatre of Ideas” (Arrowsmith, 1963: 32) and the dramatic poets as “Educators” (Arnott, 1970: 35), since they used the stage in order to criticize their world, to promote the ideas rather than the heroes’ characters in their plays, thus providing an integrated culture and education for their spectators.

1. The particularity of the Ancient Drama

1.1 Myth and Speech

Nowadays, the ancient Greek Drama, a product of a unique composition of various and at times contradictory parameters, (mythic and/or objective venue and time, philosophical rationalism and mythical conscience, religious background and festive traditions, a ritual and social entertainment, both an educational good and an expression of political conscience), remains a live spectacle and represents (-through its timelessness-) the concept of “classic” (Settis, 2006: 28-41, 114-126), perhaps better than any other form of art and culture.

According to the scholars that were directly or indirectly involved in the issue, it is about a multi-dimensional product with aesthetic, philosophical, existential and social status, created at a certain venue and time, under special circumstances: social (the Athenian democracy), historical (the victorious end of the Persian Wars), economic (Athenian hegemony), cultural (the Golden Age of

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Athens), philosophical (Sophism, Socrates, pre-Socratic philosophers), religious (Mythical theology), literary (Epic- Lyric Poetry), cultural (music games, the Dithyramb) and aesthetic (Classicism). It is a complex creation that represents exhaustively the Ancient Greek intelligentsia and the cultural values of the ancient Greek world as presented in Philosophy, Art, Politics and Mythology, the social behavior and religion (democracy, rationality, human rights, moderation, law, ethics, respect of personal freedom) and includes all the previous as well the contemporary forms of the artful written word (epic-lyric poetry).

From the moment they appeared, both Tragedy and Comedy were related with the public life of the City, the interests and the concerns of the Athenian society, thus contributing to the creation of a new coordinated cultural identity for the Athenian citizens, after the Persian Wars. This led to the blending of traditional mythic patterns of the archaic thought with the new rationalism of the Sophists, as well as the co-existence of a folk cultural tradition represented by the Chorus with the artistic creation, which homogenized the old concepts with the modern argumentation of the Deme and the Sophists.

The question is: how was this unique cultural creation and expression created and where did it come from?

By attempting an archeology of the knowledge we have on the specific issue, we may re-examine the primitive myth as the base and the foundation of Drama and Theatre in ancient Greece. According to the Athenian and the ancient Greek citizen's conscience, the myth was a reality that depicted the world in a different way, generally accepted by all: it was a semantic and value system that had gradually been displaced by the development of the "Speech" and its substitution by it. The further, however, cultural sub-base of the ancient Greek world, the concept and the causal interpretation of all the issues, continued to take place to a large extent, not only in a strictly rational but also simultaneously in a mythicized way, so that the conscience of the matters should co-exist with an equivalent context. The myth continued to explain the facts, to give answers to real questions, to interpret whatever was historically defined with unhistorical terms and eventually to present the truth of the facts in an indirect and sometimes symbolic, connotative way. Hence, the "historical truth" was transformed into "mythological narration", which was in turn recast into "theatrical truth" that the Athenians and all the other spectators then received in the Dionysian or any other Amphitheatre.

The myth, as it appears in the Ancient Greek Tragedy, includes History (in its wider sense) and – at times- derives from it (e.g. The Trojan War). However, it approaches, analyzes and interprets it in a different way, therefore creating its own "truth", which neither always nor necessarily coincide with the spatio-temporal existing one. It creates a unique reality that is disconnected from objectivity, establishes its independence, becomes autonomous and is transformed into a new form of "the Real", which constitutes the literary and more precisely the "theatrical truth" (e.g., the image we have for Agamemnon or Atossa). It presents characters and events (Hector, Hecuba, Philoctetes, Clytemnestra), which are already known in the initial -at least- moment of their scenic representation, to the conscience of both the potential spectator (i.e. the idea of whom the poet had in his mind while writing the tragedy/comedy), as well the real (i.e. the actual) spectator of the ancient Greek Amphitheatre, since they constitute a common cultural tradition with which this spectator is overly familiar with. The value of Drama does not lie in the "history" via which it is expressed, but in its narrative structure and function.

In our attempt to acquire an understanding on Tragedy as a type of cultural creation of such a range, we ought to go back to the initial moment of its conception, genesis and shaping as a stage entity in the 5th century BC Athens. By doing so, we realize that the historical truth, (i.e. the objective facts about which some may have heard about through mythological narratives or their literary versions and took place sometime in the distant past and in the mists of history), was

finally transformed into a legend and consecutively shaped into a myth as time went by (e.g., the Trojan War, or the expedition of the Argonauts). These historical facts turned to form the thematic frame, from which the tragic poets later drew inspiration for the plot of their plays, therefore transforming the mythological narratives into dramatic depictions, dramatically formed on stage by actors and addressed to spectators. Thereby, the appropriate conditions were created for the Drama to be developed. The only thing that had to be done, was to add the Dialogue, which did not exist in the original category of the primitive pageant. Thus, the homeopathic relation between those who acted and those who participated was transformed into an illusionary relation between actors and spectators, consequently resulting to the transfiguration of the original “Ecstasis” into “Catharsis” (Schechner, 1985: 117-150).

1.2 Speech and Drama

If we would like to attempt a general outline of the parameters of the Ancient Greek Tragedy, we might mention the following: the Trojan War offered the tragic poets the basis for the creation of a great variety of tragedies, which belonged to the same “circle” (Hecuba, Helen, The Trojan Women, Philoctetes, Agamemnon) and talked to Mankind about the absurdity and the pointlessness of the War, the deadlock of violence, the horror of the violent death and in conclusion, the uselessness of sacrifice and heroism. Also, it offered the opportunity to delve into the relation between Man and Nature, the transcendent element and the cosmic authority, the “other” man and ultimately his inner self and promoted the morality and the kindness of the heroines, such as Antigone in Sophocles’ “Antigone”, Iphigenia in Euripides’ “Iphigenia in Aulis” or Neoptolemus in Sophocles’ “Philoctetes”.

Nevertheless, the myth was nothing but a false narration in the conscience of the ancient Athenian citizen; it was a reality that represented the world in a different way, commonly accepted by all, a conceptual and value system that had gradually started to be outplaced by the development of the “Speech” and its replacement by it.

Naturally, the tragic poets’ turn to the mythical narrative and its exploitation for the drama included other causes. The philosophy and the worldview that constituted the conceptual background of tragedy, the value-world and the behavior of the ancient Greeks’ actions found its direct repercussion in the conceptual background of the Tragedy. The disturbance of the cosmic balance caused by the hero’s “hubristic” (abusive) behavior, which consecutively brought the Gods’ “Atis” and the unavoidable “Nemesis” that punished the “abuser” and re-established normality, the pre-defined course of the hero, who even if he was a slave to his own “Fate” he refused (or was unable) to escape from it and accepted the consequences of his actions that (usually) others committed in the past in his absence (like Oedipus in Sophocles’ “Oedipus Rex” or Electra in Euripides’ title play), but to the damage of the suffering innocence he represented, could not be expressed with certain and tangible historic events and incidents. The myth, with its polysemy, its ability to create a new significance and multiple interpretations, its ambiguity and the evasiveness of an exclusively unique interpretation, came to express every ability, everything potential or alternative, thus satisfying the spectators’ multiple needs by various means, according to their receptive abilities and the horizon of their expectations. Even if the interpretations given at times varied and were contradictory with regard to the motives, the content, the meaning, even the results of the actions of the archetypal figures of the ancient Greek Drama (such as Oedipus, Hecuba, Prometheus, Antigone, Orestes, Medea and so on, with respective re-adaptation and re-significance of the values and the messages represented and formed on stage, such as Justice, Democracy, freedom, the Human Fate, Rational Thinking, Human Rights and the like), their reception was always realized in the same way, as defined by Aristotle: a subject, an adventure of the suffering character with beginning-middle-end, full of passions, emotions and mental crises accessible and comprehensible to the audience who attended the scenic spectacle via the actors and their role, with a direct, experiential and vivid participation in it, which took place in a specific

venue and time and was realized through the function of the dramatic convention and illusion. In other words, the conscious acceptance both by the actors and the spectators that what was taking place in front of them and among them was received as real, although they knew that it was untrue and illusionary.

It is therefore understood, under this perspective and conditions, why the ancient Greek tragedy consists of a unique cultural product, not only because of the issues it dealt with, neither because of the type and the scale of the conflicts it presented, nor (eventually) the juxtaposition of the natural in the metaphysical world with the personified or impersonal formation of the contradictions it illustrated. The concept of “*tragic*” is not a quantitative, but a qualitative size, which (by being such) overcomes the time limits and the commitments of space, thus acquiring the dimensions of universality that, *mutatis mutandis*, appears under different circumstances and within a different frame of reference even in this present day and age.

The basic aim is the educational effect on the audience that attends it and the final development of “*catharsis*” with the interpretation of the term that Aristotle gave in his “*Poetics*” (VI, 1-4, 1449b). These, of course, imply that the “*ethos*”, i.e. the configuration of an honest personality for the spectators, and therefore the culture and the education provided, represents all the goods that the State offered generously to the citizens. Hence, the development of “*ethos*” as the main purpose of the tragedy is located in multiple levels and functions cumulatively, thus intensifying the importance and the feasibility of its existence.

The comprehension of this evolutionary procedure, as well as the highlighting and the promotion of “*ethos*” as the teleological aim of the Tragedy, cannot be accomplished, unless we take into very serious consideration the philosophical and evaluative system that the ancient Greeks advocated as a whole. According to this, there is a cosmological, universal harmony, an inextricable element of which is the Human Being. This Human Being, however, (-because of his/her behavior-) deranges the predetermined cosmic balance (*hubris*) and brings about the anger and the violent intervention of the impersonal transcendental forces, which control the grand scheme of things (*nemesis*), therefore leading to the eventual devastation of the abuser and the restoration of the previous order.

An indicative case of such “*hubris*” and its fatal results, is Xerxes’ presumptuous decision to subjugate Nature, by placing a “*wooden platform on the neck of (Helles)pont*”, or also, the former one of Darius to flog the sea, because of the wreckage of Mardonius’ fleet during the first crusade against the Greeks. This distortion of “*ethos*” and the total disregard for the laws and the elements of Nature, led to the well-known conclusion and gave a brilliant sample of the tragic form we deal with.

Man, therefore, has to “*live according to nature*”, in total harmony and balance, within a state of moderation and virtue, which represent the basic values and model behavior of the classical ideal. The quotes “*Know thyself*” and “*Learn what you are and be such*” constitute the necessary requirements, the firm commitments via which man will comprehend his nature as a living/social being and walk in this world accordingly. This is exactly what Antigone expresses in Sophocles’ homonymous tragedy, when she confesses that “*It is not my nature to join in hate, but in love*”, thus showing the content of “*ethos*”, which constituted the fundamental objective of the ancient Greek thought.

The coexistence and balance between “*Nature*” and “*ethos*”, the “*natural*” and the “*human*”, bring about moderation, harmony and beauty, which are the structural elements of the concept of “*classic*” and the parameters of “*virtue*”, as the ultimate goal of the ancient Greeks (“*good and virtuous*”), i.e. being harmonious in body and mind.

1.3 The cultural-educational mission of Theatre

By taking into account all the above, we may consider that Drama consisted of an invaluable “*database*”, for the culture and the education of the spectators that attended it as a performance, in an architecturally, urban-designed space, the so-called Amphitheatre. The dramatic poetry, which is the creation of the Greek classic spirit, emerges at a later stage from the already existing literary types (epic and lyric poetry), which (up to a certain degree) includes and on which it is based. We may only indicatively mention that it draws the subject, the main aspects, the plot and the narrative elements that constitute the basic characteristic of the dramatic myths (on which tragedy is based), from Homer and his two epic poems - the Iliad and the Odyssey. By exploiting the characters and their actions it breaks free from the epic, heroic, narrative element and emphasizes on the moral, metaphysical and psycho-spiritual characteristics of their participation in the plot, from which the value world of the ancient Greek drama derives and is based on. From the lyric poetry, it draws the aesthetic and qualitative category that frames the text and transforms the narrative into the dramatic and poetic element, adding lyric and emotional elements, via which the best possible reception of the play and the communication with the reader or the spectator of the performance is accomplished.

However, we were at an era that Speech had displaced the Myth in the conscience of the ancient Greeks. The thought, the logic, the interpretation of the things, which was based on the relations between the cause and the effect, constituted a new common reality. Starting from the thought of the Ionian School (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus), of Southern Italy (Pythagoras, Parmenides, Zeno of Elea) and especially Socrates, Plato and the Sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias), the ancient Greek philosophical thought turned to subjects of moral, metaphysical, conceptual, anthropological and political content. Long before, however, we discover that Orphism and theology, which was the equivalent of Pythagoras in Southern Italy and Sicily, the general intelligentsia of the so called Seven Sages of Greece (Chilon, Solon Pittacos, Cleovoulos), was reflected on representative quotes that had -even fragmentarily- (“potentially” considered as the data of antiquity) been devised, formed and expressed irrespectively or even contradictorily. The integration of all these, the encoding and the activation of their function was accomplished through drama as a unique and special type of artful literary creation; namely, in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides’ tragedies almost all the ideas, messages, values and the knowledge that constituted the “ancient Greek Thought and Philosophy coexisted, thus shaping the frame of the values of the ancient Greek Culture.

However, the aggregation of this rich informative material does not represent the compilation of knowledge in the form of an “*encyclopedic dictionary*”, as the one attempted by the Encyclopaedists in the French Revolution. Drama is not just the accumulation of some valuable material of the kind “*stones and bricks, woodwork and tiles, tumbled together in a heap*”; on the contrary, it is a creative conjunction and composition of qualitative and quantitative data in an amazing analogy and harmony that expresses the basic principles of the ancient Greek Thought, such as moderation, harmony, symmetry, balance and the correspondence between form and content. All these coexist evenly balanced in the qualitative and the quantitative parts of the tragedy and constitute the idea of classic. As such, they have the character of timelessness and universality in their acceptance and recognition by their contemporary, as well as their subsequent listeners, spectators and readers, hence expressing the particularity of the type that is nowadays known as “ancient Greek drama and theatre”. Culture was the predominant interest of all the expressions of the ancient Greek society. The “*contests*” of any nature (athletic, musical, rhetoric), aimed at the education of not only all those who participated, but also of all those who attended them. Within those frames, they included the “*Dramatic*” contests of tragedy, comedy and the satyr play. Education was not only accomplished by the serious, but also by the satyr play, since it was not only accomplished by the serious but also the hilarious situations. The emotional purgation (or Catharsis) occurred both by crying and laughing. (D’ Angour, 2013: 297). That is why the ancient Greek drama has been called by scholars the “*Theatre of Ideas*” (Arrowsmith,

1963: 32) and the dramatic poets as “Educators”, since they used the stage in order to criticize their world and promote the ideas rather than the heroes’ characters in their plays, thus providing integrated culture and education for their spectators (Arnott, 1970: 35). The recipient and the final judge of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and the other dramatic poets of the ancient times, was not only the Reader-Athenian citizen in the Ancient Agora of Athens, in the Academy or the Lyceum, but mostly the Spectator-Athenian citizen or the Metic in the theatres of Aixoni or Vravra and especially in the Amphitheatre of Dionysus at the foothills of the Acropolis (Moretti, 2000: 100-120). There, through the theatrical illustration which constituted the scenic spectacle of the tragedy and the comedy, the old aristocratic social values that found their foundation in the earlier myths and religion, were interacting with the sophistic reasoning and in the end they compromised on moderation, which was the most important and general criterion for the Athenian citizens/spectators of the performances. By participating in the scenic spectacle, they acquired the opportunity to escape from their everyday reality and re-examine their relations on an interpersonal, political and social level (Meier, 1993: 19-25). The scenic speech of tragedy and comedy had enough appeal to their interests and the real world; the dramatic author of the ancient times would take into consideration their perceptive abilities, their mentality and their expectations (Meier, 1993: 19-25, Goldhill, 2012: 81-101).

The expression of an opinion for the image of a spectator in the Amphitheatre of Dionysus and especially in any other ancient Greek theatre of the 5th and the 4th century BC, is considerably problematic and the advocacy of one and only one viewpoint may be precarious and devastating, since the results of the studies and the approaches to the ancient Greek drama are published at a blistering pace. According to systematic modern approaches, the audience in the Amphitheatre of Dionysus was not homogeneous. Au contraire, it varied considerably. It was not a “*quiet gathering of serious and intelligent citizens*” but probably a disobedient group of people that made noise to such a degree that they could be compared to the spectators of an outdoor popular spectacle in the period of the carnival or “*even more with the spectators of a football match rather than the lovers of the opera and the theatre of our times*” (Sommerstein, 2006:897). Many spectators had (probably during the past) participated in a performance, as members of the Chorus, which was identified with the mentality, the psychology and the expectations of the Athenian people as a whole (Mastromarco, 2011: 263-316). One is for sure, though: it was about an audience that had many characteristics of the members of a wider electorate, with similar mentality, psychology and expectations, comparable to the one they had when they participated as citizens in the Assembly and voted in their social gatherings. One must also not forget that “*once a year according to the Athenian calendar, the Assembly indeed took place in the theatre instead of the standard venue, in the Pnyx*” (Van Steen, 2011: 784).

In that sense, the spectator of the ancient Greek drama differentiated and was defined on the basis of the various features that existed and functioned simultaneously. Namely, it was not only the Athenian citizen, the foreigner or the metic (much more the slave and the woman), but equally the farmer from the Acharnes, or Socrates and the Sophists’ students. It might also be the anonymous person of plebian origins, or the distinguished public or state official or the educator of Wisdom, the adolescent young spectator or the elderly, the conservative person of aristocratic origins, or the deeply democratic citizen. All these, coexisted as spectators that attended the same performance, in the same space, but maybe in distinguished seats the ones from the others (let us not forget the existence of privileged and not privileged seats in the theatre of Dionysus), thus forming the real, historically defined audience.

A similar, however, image for this audience co-existed intra-dramatically recorded by the dramatic poet himself, presenting heroes and circumstances, actions and ideas, conflicts and choices that at times responded to the one or the other side of the real audience (Arnott, 1970: 35-42), thus satisfying the interests and the expectations of the young or the old, the aristocrats or the democrats, the uneducated or the educated (Lada-Richards, 2008: 466-486).

In conclusion, we may say that the audience to which the ancient Greek tragedy and comedy was addressed, was mostly an audience of citizens, since the plays were presented in “*events for the celebration of the Athenian citizens’ identity*”. The mediators, the members of the Chorus, the actors and the sponsors of the performance belonged to the same social group. Therefore, the tragedy “*defines the identity of the male citizen, while it simultaneously produces and reproduces the ideology of the community of the citizens*” (Hall, 2012: 140-141). It was about an audience with equal receptions, with similar cultural experiences, with relevant interests and goals, as these were formed within the frame of the “*city-state*”. The mythic narrative as the canvas of the tragedy, the possession of the spectators by the already previous theatrical, religious and social culture, only represented the pretext that allowed the creative conscience of the dramatic poets to be activated and offer the spectators the possibility to realize the transcendence of “*here/now*” of their presence, towards the “*elsewhere/elsewhen*” of its mythical version. With the procedure of illusion that took place during the performance, every spectator-citizen in the ancient Greek Amphitheatre found his personal reasons, which-initiating from the respective textual and scenic facts/elements-offered him the “*Catharsis*” as the ultimate purpose with its multiple philosophical, existential, psychoanalytical and sociological dimension. The same spectator might relatively easily comprehend, decode and mark the scenically on-going messages. It was to him that Aristophanes addressed through the “*offences*” of his plays, aiming at his consideration and awareness, through the parody of familiar circumstances and the satire of historical figures (Arnott, 1970: 37-39). Aeschylus had the same in mind in “*The Persians*”, when trying to boost his morale and reward his attitude during the recent Greco-Persian Wars, while it was to his own political experiences that he addressed through the “*Eumenidae*”, when the Pnyx became the dramatic venue for the recognition of the institutions and the constitutional Athenian democracy, on a secondary, imaginary, as it was exactly in the literal, real level (Hesk, 2011: 107, Winkler-Zeitlin, 1990). In this way, drama and theatre as a solid unity of form and content, became a pedagogically complete school for the audience that attended the performances regularly and participated actively in them. The scenic construction of images and the world of values, came in complete identification, hence responding in the best possible way to the idea of “*classic*”, as the correspondence of form and content, symmetry and balance, via which the timelessness and the universality of the ancient Greek drama was eventually ensured (Settis, *ibid.*: 17-28).

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