

## Paul Cartledge: The Politics of Tragedy Ancient & Modern

Denver 30 October 2000

I must begin - and I hope I may speak on behalf of all of us Tantalists, especially the 'barbarians' among us - with an enormous thank you: above all to Don Seawell for making this whole thing possible, the quite remarkable production of *Tantalus* which is the immediate occasion for our symposium in these congenial surroundings, and for providing us with the material means to come here and to spend our time here with you so pleasantly as well as profitably. But thanks also to our indefatigable symposium organizer, Professor John Gibert of the University of Colorado at Boulder. His is not, I trust, the sort of boulder that poor Sisyphus found himself perennially rolling up an unforgiving hillside of Tartarus - a companion in sorrows to the perennially frustrated and likewise unhappily situated Tantalus.

There are, ladies and gentlemen, two reasons for studying and wanting to go on studying the ancient Greeks. The first is that they are so *like* us. The second is the exact opposite, that they are so *unlike* us. The Greeks themselves would have appreciated that polar opposition. Let me explain. On the one hand, as our own English language reveals, the ancient Greeks invented all sorts of culturally crucial practices and institutions that we still take to be culturally crucial for us today - for example, politics, esp. democratic politics, and theatre. On the *other* hand, their politics, their democracy, their theatre were in various, fundamentally important ways different from our own.

Let me begin to try to convey that sense of difference, even alienness, by reminding you of a short story by Jorge Luis Borges called 'Averroës' Search'. In this fictionalised version 'Averroës' - in reality Abu-al-Walid Muhammad Ibn-Ahmad Ibn-Rushd - is presented to us working in Muslim Cordoba on his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*. He is hampered, admittedly, by the fact that he knows neither Greek nor Syriac and so he is working at third hand, from a translation of a translation. Worse than that, right at the start he has run up against an obstacle - and finds himself in a state of aporia, not knowing the way forward. What has caused this obstruction? Two little words - 'tragedy' and 'comedy', for which - as Borges (or rather his English translator!) phrases it - 'no one in all of Islam could hazard a guess as to their meaning'. A little later - Borges does not say exactly how - the meaning of those two words is at last revealed uniquely to Averroës, and in his commentary this is what he writes: 'Aristotle gives the name "tragedy" to panegyrics and the name "comedy" to satires and anathemas'. Oh dear.

It doesn't matter to me whether Borges is in fact making all this up - the point is that certain words do not 'travel' from one language to another, because there are insuperable cultural obstacles in the way. Now, that's easy enough to see in the case of the transmission of classical Greek via Syriac to Arabic, from the world of pagan, pre-Christian Greece to the world of Islamic Spain. What's not always quite so easy to see is that tragedy, tragic drama, in ancient Greece or

Athens does not, cannot mean the same as tragedy in contemporary London - or Denver.

There are several reasons why that should, must, be so. My brief today - and I shall try to be brief - is to explain just one of them: politics or the political. That is to say, ancient Greek tragic theatre was *political* theatre in a number of senses, and ancient Athenian politics, even ancient Athenian democratic politics, were a very different kettle of fish from modern British or American democratic politics. For a start Athenian tragedy was anchored in, and had no *raison d'être* outside, a religious festival staged by the city, the polis, of Athens. That city was importantly secular, or secularised, but the Athenians never allowed themselves to forget for long that it was a city of gods as well as, or rather before it was, a city of Men. One way they reminded themselves of that was precisely by staging tragedies every year in religious space and time. Then, the drama festival was a major responsibility of the regular city authorities and was conducted within the normal framework of Athenian political decision-making and accountability. Next, many thousands of Athenian citizens were involved actively in the performance, whether as actors, 'extras', chorusmen, impresarios, or - not least - audience (a point I'll come back to right at the end of my presentation). That they were so involved was because it was firmly and explicitly believed that they should be, or even *had to be*, so involved - and the city as such made great efforts to *enable* them to be. It would be an exaggeration to say that participating in a tragic drama was being political in exactly the same way, or with exactly the same effects, as participating in a meeting of the Athenian Assembly. But it would be even more inaccurate and misleading to separate off the two kinds of activity as being - as we might want to put it - 'cultural', in the one case, and 'political', in the other. For the ancient Athenians, the political had a far more comprehensive reach than it does for us - and a far more deeply intimate significance too. What one was, how one saw oneself, how one defined oneself in fifth-century Athens was an extensively and intensely political matter. Then, finally, there's that little word 'democracy'. Today, it covers a multitude of sins (a word I use advisedly) - but in fifth-century Greece, where it was invented, it still retained its full-blooded original, etymological signification - in practice as well as theory and symbolism - of 'People-Power', and more particularly the political power of the majority or mass of the common or ordinary citizen people. Ancient Greek democracy has well been called self-government by mass meeting - it was direct and open self-government, not any form of our modern, representative systems of democracy. And the Athenian people really did decide the issues, after listening to competitive argument and debate. And the decisions they took might all too often be literally ones of life and death - their own.

To conclude: one way of reminding ourselves graphically of all these essential and central differences between the politics of ancient and modern theatre would be to compare - or rather contrast - the annual Edinburgh Festival - or indeed this current Denver festival - with the Festival of Dionysos of Eleutherai at Athens in the fifth century BC. Enough said (I trust).

The upshot of this brief introductory, scene-setting contribution is this: even when a contemporary director (such as Rush Rehm) restages an ancient Greek and by definition political tragedy, the politics involved in the two stagings of supposedly the same drama must necessarily mean quite different things. A *fortiori* that's so also when a modern or contemporary Western playwright (British, European, American or whatever) such as John Barton writes a new play or set of new plays somehow based on or inspired by ancient Greek tragedy. And a *fortiorissimi* it's so when such a modern or contemporary playwright writes a tragedy that can be usefully called political - if indeed writing new political tragedy is possible today.

To illustrate my argument, let me give a couple of examples of each of those 3 categories, viz:

1. Restaged ancient Greek tragedy
2. Modern/contemporary Greek-based tragedies.
3. Modern/contemporary political tragedy.

#### 1. Restagings of Ancient Greek Tragedy:

(i) My first example is Peter Hall's and Tony Harrison's *Oresteia* (1981/2). It's hardly possible to begin to scratch the surface of the full potential political meaning or meanings of Aeschylus's original trilogy in its original context of 458 BC(E). The timing of it - so soon after a major political transformation, almost another democratic revolution, at Athens - meant that it could not but be taken by its original mainly Athenian audience as having something centrally important to say about the reforms of 461. It also had something to say about Athenian *foreign* policy - it's often missed by moderns that Agamemnon and Orestes are quite deliberately but untraditionally presented as kings of Argos not - as in Homer - Mycenae. And it also had something to say, something important but rather less so, about the politics of gender. Peter Hall's & Tony Harrison's version, in so far as it could be said to be political at all in a direct way, concentrated primarily and almost exclusively on the latter, the politics of gender. The precise *democratic* significance in the original ancient Athenian context of the supersession of family vengeance by city justice was, and in a sense had to be, fudged in 1981/2 by representing it in timeless, almost cosmic, and broadly civilisational terms.

(ii) My second illustration of a modern staging is Rush Rehm's version of Euripides's *Suppliant Women* which I had the privilege and pleasure to see in Washington DC in 1993. The original was an example of a recognisable plot-type that enacted transparently 'patriotic' myths concerned with the early mythical history of Athens: this particular example fits into same sub-type as, say, Euripides's *Descendants of Heracles* the Athenians are shown as an 'open' community with a big heart, readily welcoming in and giving sanctuary to desperate suppliant strangers, both men and women. In so far as it is mythically Athens-centred in this way, the main plot of the play can't speak directly to us politically at all. On the other hand, at first sight the defence of democracy by 'Theseus' against the claim by the Theban herald that democracy can lead to

rule by an ignorant mob *might* seem to speak clearly to us too - except that ancient democracy was direct, not representative, and therefore far more plausibly vilified as potential ochlocracy, and in the 420s the real contemporary city of Thebes not only was an oligarchy against which the Athenian democracy could be said to be waging an ideological 'cold' war but also was an active military ally of Sparta in the very hot Peloponnesian War.

## 2. Let's turn next to Greek-based Modern versions

### (i) Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*

In 1944 under the occupation of Paris by Nazi Germany a play - not the first nor the last - was put on that called attention by its very title to its affinity with and descent from the extant Sophoclean original: I'm referring to Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*. But, partly of course precisely because of the circumstances of its original composition and production, this lacked not only the religious but also the political elements of Sophocles's play - however controversial in interpretation those original political elements of course still are. Above all, Anouilh's *Antigone* failed then and still fails to convince a wide audience that it is more than an allusion to Greek tragedy. On the other hand, the play's ambivalence, the fact that both pro- and anti-Nazis saw something in it for them, was not necessarily entirely alien to the original experience of ancient Greek tragedy.

### (ii) John Barton's *Greeks*

Thirty-six years later, in unimaginably different circumstances, John Barton staged in London his *Greeks* cycle - an earlier tryout of the *Tantalus* cycle but fishing out different sources from the same ancient Greek mythical pool. One unduly severe academic critic accused Barton of intellectual cowardice, of 'a very English unwillingness to face up to tragedy'. But that was surely unfair - from Barton's Shakespearian *Wars of the Roses* in the 60s to the Homeric and tragic-Athenian War of Troy in 1980 was a short, sharp step, and even that severe academic critic conceded that *The Greeks* did give the audience some idea of the original character of Greek tragedy. To one member of one of the audiences, me, it did a lot more than that - and the anti-war 'message', if that's not to be too reductionist, came across very strongly and clearly to my thirty-something self. John Barton expressly distanced himself from any precise political interpretation, indeed from any political interpretation at all, by claiming that his plays were more 'fables' or 'fairy stories'. I beg to differ. Some ancient Greek tragedies were precisely that too, and yet none the less Modern/contemporary Political Tragedy?

Here I find myself up against an obstacle bigger even perhaps than Averroes's linguistic one - truly a Sisyphean boulder: i.e., is there any such thing as modern/contemporary political tragedy, or at any rate political tragedy in the same sort of sense or senses as we use the term automatically of ancient Greek tragedy and, with barely a moment's hesitation, of Shakespearian tragedy?

No one, of course, is in any doubt that there has been lots of political *theatre* in the past two to three generations - including of course plays that fall into one or other of my first two categories as well as my third (and here I'm indebted to Helene Foley for help on the American side): to take just some more recent examples, there have been David Hare's and Howard Brenton's *Pravda* Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* and various productions by John McGrath's 7:84 Company, or, on the American side, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* or the work of the Living Theater and El Teatro Campesino companies, and of the SF Mime Troupe and the Bread & Puppet Theater.

But political *tragedy*?

Well, if we're to believe George Steiner of course, there's no modern tragedy of any sort, and can be none, in any useful sense of that word. Because in his view the organic conditions, the shared community of myth and other communal belief, simply no longer exist in our anarchic, atomised, individualistic, post-communitarian western societies. (We have even been assured, by one rather wild and woolly British politician - who shall be named: Margaret Thatcher - that 'there is no such thing as society'; but I let that absurdity pass without further comment.) For myself I think that view of Steiner's is an exaggeration. I believe that in principle it would be possible to write today a tragedy, a *form of* tragedy, evoking pity and fear and so forth, but it would more likely be an individual, psychological tragedy about an ordinary person or persons, not precisely a political, communal tragedy of either the ancient Greek or the Shakespearian type. In fact, I'm tempted to suggest that John Barton's *Tantalus* cycle might qualify as a candidate for a peculiarly modern sort of tragedy, in the following sense.

Helene Foley has written, sagely, of ancient Greek tragedy that it 'permits a political response to irresolvable, extreme situations without being crudely topical'. The ancient Greek myths of the House of Tantalus are not our myths, so there's no danger whatsoever of being crudely topical in rewriting or recuperating or reconstructing them in dramatic form, as Barton has so poetically and I think movingly done. Moreover, I am sure I was not alone in being given furiously to think by these plays - on matters of war versus peace, on religious faith versus humanist or at least human faith, on the role of men versus that of women, and so on. In short, these plays of *Tantalus* these tantalising plays, seem to me exactly to respond to what Peter Hall has been saying, or preaching really, for many years, most recently in his *Exposed by the Mask* (the book of his Trevelyan lectures, given earlier this year in my own university):

'It would surely be a paradise to live in a democracy mature enough to pay its artists to criticise it ... I believe that we need live theatre more than ever. We need it above all to challenge dogma and to ask difficult questions in an increasingly simplistic society'.

Live theatre - and especially such a critical, anti-dogmatic live theatre - is surely 'at risk' today, as Michael Kustow has eloquently and again rightly warned us. As I wrote this paper, the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus (or not?), the *Andromache* of Euripides, a version of his *Alcestis* by Ted Hughes, and a new play based on Sophocles's lost *Tereus* were all being staged in London. But, as a letter published in one of our national newspapers observed recently, we have 'a status quo which has allowed the word theatre to develop deeply negative and old fashioned connotations in the eyes of young people'. One way of keeping theatre live, and alive, is by taking the risk of going back to the ancient Greeks, back to our shared ancient Greek dramatic and theatrical roots, back to a tragic theatre which, among other things, centrally and deliberately set at risk some of the Greeks' most basic customary beliefs and practices - and then had the courage to require the audience, a mass audience of ordinary citizens, to be literally 'critical', to make an informed judgment of value on what they'd experienced.

Pericles is said famously to have called his Athens 'an education for all Greece'. In the theatrical sense that I've outlined, I would argue, it could - and should - become an education for all America and Britain too, in the third millennium of our common era as it was in the very different and sometimes quite alien Greek world of two and half millennia ago.