THE ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRATIC IDEAL
AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR TODAY’S WORLD

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Ancient Greek Drama/Theatre reinforces the idea that we have the power to shape and reshape our own lives and social conditions. For the performers as well as the spectators, to be human was to be potentially a hero of tragedy. But their unique interaction established the reviving tension between the “I” and the “we.” It discovered how the mystery of losing heritage lies in our Self and why complexity and decision-making as a dialectical unit are the timeless quality that defines its characters. The essay focuses on the processes regarding personal responsibility as a collective strength.

With the advent of the twenty-first century, many observers see evidence that the world is entering a new era of political and economic liberalism, considering whether democracy offers a unified system of beliefs that can be successfully applied to any setting. The ideals of democracy—freedom, equality, popular sovereignty—are so appealing that many different kinds of regimes pay lip service to them. Yet, the real issue is the machinery of government, as Jacques Barzun reminded us in 1989 (the year of Europe’s democratic awakening against totalitarian suppression), “because it is how the wheels turn, and not the theory, that makes a government free or not free” (12). That machinery cannot be imported, Barzun argues, but rather must reflect each nation’s history and its people’s “habits of the heart.” Tocqueville, Rousseau, Burke, and Montesquieu come to mind with a proven human truth: political equality can be decreed, but freedom cannot. Freedom asks for the slow training of individuals by history. This element of time carries with it a predicament and a paradox. The predicament is “how can the peoples that want to spread freedom to the world propose their institutions as models to those institutions that depend on habits long ingrained?” and as for the paradox: “how can a people learn
the ways of free government until it is free? And how can it stay free if it cannot run the type of machinery associated with self-government?” (Barzun 12). These modern questions are familiar to us since antiquity, whose practices and writings on government inspired thinkers to design plans or issue warnings appropriate to their own time.

I

“Habits of the heart” is the theme of the Greek chorus, when it presents the life voyages of the protagonists to an audience who steered themselves on collision courses with society. The ancient Athenians had begun to question how nature worked, how society should work, and what man’s role was in the scheme of things. Tragedy was the poet’s answer to some of these questions: How should one behave? How can one accept the injustices of life? What is the price of hubris? The playwright’s key role is indicated by the term applied to him, didaskalos (teacher), for he was considered to be the instructor of both the performers (during the process of play production) and the audience (through the finished product).

The chorus, which serves several functions, plays a most complex role in the performative meaning. First, it is a character in the play; it gives advice, expresses opinions, asks questions, and, sometimes, takes an active part in the action. Second, it often establishes the ethical or social framework of events and sets up a standard against which the action may be judged. Third, it frequently serves as an ideal spectator, reacting to the events and characters as the dramatist might hope the audience would. Fourth, the chorus helps to set the overall mood of the play and of the individual scenes and to heighten dramatic effects. Fifth, it adds movement, spectacle, song, and dance, and thus contributes much to the theatrical effectiveness. Sixth, the choral passages serve as an important rhythmical function, creating intervals or retardations during which the audience may reflect upon what has happened and what is to come.

By performing the mythological past, the polis trained its citizen in the recognizability of history. When I discussed with Karolos Koun what impact the drama may have had on the theory and practice of direct democracy in ancient Greece, his answer was straightforward: “Its art of observation teaches that the ancient maxim is true: the world insists in being governed” (1975).

Aeschylus’ Oresteia tells the legend of Agamemnon, the Greek war hero who was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, and the pursuit of justice by Agamemnon’s children, Orestes and Electra. Thematically, the trilogy is about the tragedy of human arrogance or hubris—the hubris “required” to murder a person for personal gain, as in the case of Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, as well as the hubris to, in turn, hunt down and kill them, as in the case of Orestes and Electra. When, in the end, Orestes and Electra are brought to trial by the Furies, vengeful emissaries of the gods, Aeschylus makes a point that has been echoed by historians and dramatists, psycholo-
gists and criminal court reporters for centuries since: that the root of evil and suffering is, usually, human arrogance. On a dramatic level, the plays convey the suffering of a family torn apart by patricide and matricide. Koun’s idea (that is, rules of government) that the performances were a kind of “exercises in historicity” implies “machinery of government,” but no rules can be applied universally.

As contemporary readers of Greek tragedy, we may feel that we face different truths than did the Greek audiences twenty-five hundred years ago. How, then, do we create meaning from these plays? How do we reconcile the tensions which exist between the fictional images of life the Greeks presented and the ongoing reality of our own lives? One way to begin is to identify particular areas in which the view of life implied in Greek tragedy differs from our own. The discovery that it is possible to look at life through entirely new eyes is in itself a kind of meaning which drama has to offer.

We live in an age in which the idea of truth is linked to the process of scientific investigation. Truth is available for us, not now, but at some time in the future, when all the experiments have been performed and all the data are in. The implication of Greek tragedy, however, is that a form of truth is immediately available to those who are willing to face it and strong enough to survive. Since most mortals prefer their daily illusions, this willingness and strength must come from the tragic protagonist. Ancient Greek characters undertake extreme, audacious objectives and pursue them relentlessly to the point of catastrophe. Their actions help the community to face its fear of the implacable power of Necessity and inspire pity for the suffering which they must undergo in the process. If we empathize with the protagonist, we can vicariously test our own powers of truth-facing and survival.

The tragic conflict is revealed as a clash between mortal striving and a mysterious force in the universe which opposes such striving. Sometimes, it is said that Greek tragedy is about man against the gods, and it is true that a god may, sometimes, be the agent of negative forces. A large part of our understanding of the genre depends on the Poetics of Aristotle. The age of the great tragic writers was already long past when Aristotle first came to Athens. Aristotle himself pointed out that tragedy had already reached its highest development in the works of Sophocles and Euripides. Therefore, when he set out to examine the genre of tragedy—to construct a philosophical model for perfect tragedy, he was working with plays that had already passed into history. Essentially, the model that Aristotle constructed was based on carefully selected examples and primarily on Oedipus the King. This is not only an important fact in order to understand the aesthetic of Aristotle, but his political thinking too.

To discover why and how democracy is an ideal specifically rooted in an-
cient Athens’ theatre, a brief examination is necessary of the most important aspects of Aristotle’s model. For Aristotle, the poet-dramatist is not a historian but a creative artist—which means that he imitates not what actually happens in life, but what is probable and meaningful. He arranges events, not necessarily in the order of their occurrence, but in an order that is likely, believable, and, above all, inevitable. The poet who follows this pattern imitates ideal truth, the universal which grows out of the specific. (For Aristotle, this makes drama of greater import than history, which deals only with objective facts.)

In terms of specific form, the tragic plot must contain “reversal,” results opposite to those intended; “discovery,” which means the change from love to hate, or from ignorance to knowledge, within the play itself, with consequent arousal of pity and fear (there is some justification for defining “discovery” as transference of knowledge from the protagonist to the audience); and “suffering,” from murder, torture, or injury of the hero who passes from happiness to misery. The hero will not be perfectly virtuous and just, since, if he were, the tragic happening would be unfair; and he will not be evil or base, since the tragic event would then be only poetic justice. Instead, he will be a basically good person of distinguished standing (so that his fall will be greater), and his downfall will come about because of a flaw in his character. This flaw may be an excess of some virtue.

The Aristotelian position outlined above is certainly not a final or completely accurate depiction of Greek tragedy; of the plays that we have, it fits completely only *Oedipus the King*. It does provide a model however—a pattern against which we can measure the existing plays, and a reasonably clear statement of exactly what the ancient Athenians got from their tragedies. First of all, Sophocles’ plays are about the folly of arrogance and the wisdom of accepting fate. Sophocles believed in the Greek gods, but his plays are suffused with existential insights that have been voiced many times since. For instance, compare this observation by Antigone in Sophocles homonymus play:

> What joy is there in day repeating day,  
> some short, some long, with death the only end.  
> I think them fools who warm their hearts with  
> the glow of empty hopes.

with Macbeth’s famous speech:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
> creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
> to the last syllable of recorded time;  
> and all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
> the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
> Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player,
The drama competitions at the City Dionysia demonstrate the need for dialogue to meet changing conditions in the society. The performances aim to achieve understanding from a variety of perspectives, standards, and criteria that people apply in their defense and criticism of judgment. It is the theatre where the ancient Greeks cultivated the idea that political institutions must respect differences and allow many different visions of what is good to be expressed within the bounds of civility and public order. But any attempt to understand and interpret a play text mainly on the grounds of meaning on the verbal level ignores a basic structural principle which assumes that the meaning of the parts is imbued and, finally, determined by the structure of the whole. It should be born in mind that the same words may indicate very different acts/actions when reflecting different intentions and purposes. Unfortunately, access to the original “performance text,” which should be conceived as the whole, is restricted by the “literary text,” which lacks the nonverbal elements necessary to determine the performative function of the words.

Ancient Greek drama called and calls for the working out of decision-making processes, discussion, or dialogic situations that will allow actors and audience to establish acceptable procedures for tackling controversial moral or value issues. With the Bacchae, it was Euripides’ intention to perform an act of harsh criticism of contemporaneously held beliefs, with the clear purpose of creating a conflict between the cruel nature of Dionysus and a sense of true divinity, against the background of expectations for a new and more rationa conceptualization of life. Agave’s anagnorisis of her horrendous deed and her profound sorrow do not constitute a recognition of the god’s “conjunction of opposites,” but rather convey a sense of contradiction to Dionysus’ alleged divinity.

3.

“So it was that humankind lost the ancient concept, dating back at least to the Greeks in the Western tradition, that society has a purpose that is something more than establishing the ground rules for individual striving,” Harrington reflects, comparing today’s democracies’ struggle for democratization with the Athenian vision of a participatory, non-bureaucratic democracy (34). Others, like Michael Novak, reject the premodern concept of the common good for a modern free society. For Aristotle, the common good was what all things aim at; it had primacy over persons. But embracing the dignity of free persons does not mean that the concept of the common good
must be jettisoned. It means, rather, that this concept must be revised. And here liberalism, in the classical sense, has proved essential. Liberalism has provided the kind of institutions most suitable to the “person-qua-person,” as Novak puts it; in doing so, it has achieved a “practical reconciliation of the common good with the free person” (57).

But let us remember for a moment what the political ideals and aims of the Athenian democracy are. In The Politics, Aristotle points out that one basic principle of the democratic constitution is liberty. To Aristotle, liberty means two things: (1) “ruling and being ruled in turn,” and (2) “living as one chooses” (37). As such, liberty and equality are “inextricably linked.” In fact, the first element of liberty, “ruling and being ruled in turn,” is based on a fundamental conception of equality, which Aristotle labels as “numerical equality” (opposed to “equality based on merit”) (37). “Numerical equality” means an equal share of the practice of ruling for all regardless of individual ability, merit, or wealth. “Thus understood, equality is the practical basis of liberty. It is also the moral basis of liberty” (Held 50).

However, Aristotle was aware, that a strict adherence to the doctrine of political equality could endanger individual’s liberty to “live as one chooses.” The Athenian democrats believed that there must be limits to individual choices so that one’s exercise of free will would not interfere unjustly with other people’s freedom. As long as each citizen has the opportunity of “ruling and being ruled in turn,” the risk associated with equality can be minimized and both elements of liberty can be realized. On Aristotle’s account, then, Ancient Greek “democracy entails liberty and liberty entails strict political equality—a matter which caused him to express grave reservations about democracy” (Held 50).

Society, far from being a “perfect community,” as Aristotle said, must stand the tension between natural law and history. In a famous passage of his Rhetoric, Aristotle put it in this way:

Justice and injustice have been defined in reference to laws and persons in two ways. Now there are two kinds of laws, particular and general. By particular laws I mean those established by each people in reference to themselves, which again are divided into written and unwritten; by general laws I mean those based upon nature. In fact, there is a general idea of just and unjust in accordance with nature, as all men in a manner divine, even if there is neither communication nor agreement between them. This is what Sophocles’ Antigone evidently means when she declares that it is just, though forbidden, to bury Polynieces, as being naturally just: “For neither to-day nor yesterday, but from eternity, these statutes live and no man knoweth whence they came. (1373b)

Let us briefly recall the context of these words. Aristotle is analyzing the different parts of rhetoric: deliberative, forensic, epideictic (that is, oratory that deals with praise or blame). The opposition between written particular
law, on the one hand, and unwritten general law, on the other, takes place within the section on forensic rhetoric. Aristotle does not bother to demonstrate the existence of unwritten law: he takes it is natural and, therefore, self-evident. The Greek scholars among us know that the translation is not quite correct; it is sexist by eliminating the neuter terms Aristotle is using (“nobody” and “all” instead of “men” and “man”). This is not a minor detail, because, with Antigone, a feminine character speaks the voice of generality; on the contrary, the written law, in the name of which Creon forbids the burial of Polynices, is, in Aristotle’s words, a “particular law.” Natural law, as those neuter terms emphasize, embraces both men and women. But Aristotle seems to suggest that what is “based upon nature” is unrelated to specific times and places.

Yet, some passages of the second book of his Rhetoric suggest a different view. Aristotle examines in detail the different emotions used by the orator in order to convince his audience. Pity, for instance: “... the nearness of the terrible makes men pity. Men also pity those who resemble them in age, character, habits, position, or family; for all such relations make a man more likely to think that their misfortune may befall him as well” (1386a). We come across the same argument in the section about envy: people envy those who are near to them in time, place, age, and reputation, whence it was said “[k]inship knows how to envy also,” and those with whom they are in rivalry, who are those just spoken of; for no man tries to rival those who lived ten thousand years ago, or are about to be born, or are already dead; nor those who live near the Pillars of Hercules; nor those who, in his own opinion or in that of others, are either far inferior or superior to him (139ff).

In Aristotle’s view, the emotions analyzed in the second book of Rhetoric are “undoubtedly” based upon nature. But he submitted them, as we would say today, to specific historical and geographical limitations. The outreaching metaphors—“ten thousand years” and “Pillars of Hercules”—suggest a time, either past or future, so remote as to prevent us from identifying, either in a negative or in a positive way, with the emotions of other human beings. And here is the connection to the “ancient concept” Michael Harrington (34) and others see lost in today’s realization of democracy, which emphasizes liberal individualism.

Men and women, Aristotle said in The Politics, are “drawn together by a common interest, in proportion as each attains a share in the good life”—but people are also moved by a desire “to live a social live even when they stand in no need of mutual support”; thus, the aim of the polis (of the city, of the government) “is not mere life, it is rather, a good quality of life” (37). It is not enough that “the law becomes a mere covenant—or ‘a guarantor of men’s rights against one another’; it should be a rule of life that will make the member of the polis good and just” (37). No wonder that, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, social critiques try to translate these thoughts
into their revolutionary visions. It is the ancient republican ideal of the citizen in which private and public harmoniously reinforce one another.

For Michael Novak, liberalism in this sense has been embodied in the American experiment, which “made central to the conception of the common good the protection of individual rights” (57). The American founders did not try to impose a “moral-cultural system” from the top down, but left the construction of such a system to institutions wholly distinct from government (the press, churches, universities, and the like). They also legitimated a new type of economic system, promoted and regulated by the political system but “free to a degree unprecedented in history from the domination of the state” (57).

It is here where a revised understanding of the common good is happening. The most potent instrument of achieving it is not the state but the society at large, and not the solitary individual, but “the communitarian individual.” The ongoing question is how self-interest and faction can be made to serve the public good. But the old phrase “common good rightly understood” means achieving it for a particular community, at a particular moment, not the common good for all times and places.

Aristotle’s description challenges today’s liberalism to define itself not in terms of the individual but as a social system. The ancient Athenian model of democracy is a reminder of the need for republican virtues in a people who aspire to be free.

4.

The Athenian democrats also showed a remarkable appreciation on the value of justice, rule of law, and due process. Self-imposed restraint was understood as essential for social communication. “If the law is properly created within the framework of the common life, it legitimately commands obedience” (Held 50). In contrast to later liberal positions, Athenian democracy was marked by a general commitment to the principle of civic virtue: dedication to the republican city-state and the subordination of private life to public affairs and the common good. There was no liberal distinction between state and society, between specialized officials and citizens, or between “the people” and government:

In this community the citizen had rights and obligations, but these rights were not attributes of private individuals and these obligations were not enforced by a state dedicated to the maintenance of a framework to protect the private ends of individuals. Rather ... they were “public” rights and duties. (50)

Unlike the modern liberal separation between public sphere and private life, Athenians thought that the most desirable life was the life in a polis, where each citizen as a political being found ultimate fulfillment through political participation and public debate. The principle of government was the
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principle of a form of lifelong direct participation. The governors were to be
governed. The process of direct and active self-government was the ultimate
affirmation of Athenian citizenship.

The Athenian drama competition was an essential part of ancient Athens’
machinery of government. Its ideals—equality among citizens, liberty, and
respect for the law and justice—have had great influence in the Western
political thought, although there have been new central ideas added during
the course of history—for instance, that human beings are “individuals”
with “rights.” This, notably, cannot be directly traced to Athens. Today’s un-
derstanding means that the individual has a capacity for freedom, for real-
izing himself/herself in the course of his/her actions, and that “he [sic] has
inherent rights over and against the demands of any community to which
he [sic] may belong” (Berger 1973). Berger says that, in the modern world,
democracy may well be the most practical way to safeguard differing trad-
itions and values because of the “breathing space” it allows individuals and
institutions other than the state. Western democracy has been founded on a
specific understanding of the individual as a bearer of inalienable rights. To-
day’s concept of the individual as an autonomous being (Berger 1973, 1999)
historicizes the Ancient experience, including the critique of the great minds
of Ancient Greece—Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, Thucydides, which saw doz-
en of democratic cities perish from inefficiency, stupidity, and corruption.
We remember that Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote The Social Contract (1762)
because he discovered (for his time) that the Athenian democracy was too
good for men as they are. But the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the
United States Constitution, the German Grundgesetz, or the European Sys-
tem of Laws, just to name a few examples, where character, habits, religion,
economic base, and education of each people are being taken into account
before setting up any constitutional machinery, constitute the convergence
of two cultural streams: the first, originating in biblical religion, with Protes-
tantism playing a decisive role in its application to political democracy; the
second, rooted in the Hellenic view of man, transmitted to modernity via the
Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and applied to the invention of demo-
cratic institutions by the French Revolution and its successors.

We—who work as actors, directors, or scholars with Ancient drama—won-
der, sometimes, about the divergent viewpoints in the recent debate as to
whether democracy is an ideal specifically rooted in the Western experience
or whether its values are more universally valid. While it is not difficult to
connect the rise of democratic institutions with specifically western historical
experiences, there are also points of contact to be made with institutions in
non-western societies. I know no example where the performance of an
ancient Greek drama did not re-affirm the need for more “breathing space”
on the part of he audience. Ancient Greek drama teaches us to restrain the
actions of the rulers. It is full of subversive energy against the suppressors
of the individuals’ rights of liberty, freedom, and justice. Benno Besson’s
Peace in the sixties, in East Berlin, de-masked the state’s justification of the erection of the wall. Dimitris Rondiris’ Electra, with Aspasia Papathanassiou in the lead, in the same place, as guest performance, brought a timelessness on the stage, which was in sharp contrast with the official aesthetic ideology. And my own Suppliant Women, at the beginning of the eighties, demonstrated for a young audience what the so-called “socialist democracy,” including the freedom of speech, is missing. The victory of western democratic values over the totalitarian dictatorships in 1989 in Europe demonstrated to the whole world why and how democracy is, under modern conditions, the only practical alternative to tyranny.

5.

What is needed, Max Horkheimer said in a 1942 essay, is “the Greek polis without slaves.” The crux of many of the critiques within western democracy is that the participatory democracy of the polis was erected on the basis of the lack of freedom of slaves and of women and of contempt for even the free manual laborer. “The best state,” Aristotle had said on that last count, “will not make the manual worker a citizen.” The vague hint that Aristotle had defined such a possibility in his discussion of the “states of Daedalus,” which would come into existence sometime in the future with automation, is not “fact” enough, to explain why, as Orlando Patterson puts it, “[s]lavery, freedom, and empire, like father, bride, and groom, marched to the altar of Athena together” (118). Sociological activists and ideological strategists comment as one: “The psyche of democratic Greece, then, was permeated by antidemocratic assumptions” (Harrington 34). But why look back to such a tarnished ideal? Because the ancient Athenians, at their best, built a political system in which there was no bureaucracy, no state looming over the citizen, but a culture of participatory and social commitment—resting, it is true, on that so-called immoral foundation. The forms of Athenian politics, in short, have a value that can be detached from their historical base, particularly, if we agree, that “the parts of the machine are not detachable” (Barzun 12).

In order for the ancient Athenian democracy to work properly, there were several important conditions. Robert Dahl summarizes six elements. First, “citizens must be sufficiently harmonious in their interests so that they can share, and act upon, a strong sense of a general good that is not in marked contradiction to their personal aims and interests.” Second, citizens must also be homogeneous with respect to those characteristics (such as the amount of wealth and leisure time) for which wide differences might create instability and sharp conflicts regarding public good. Third, “the citizen body must be quite small, ideally even smaller than the forty to fifty thousand of ... Athens.” Fourth, citizens must be able to assemble and directly debate issues of legislation and render judicial judgment. The Athenians found it difficult to conceive of representative government, much less to accept it as
a legitimate alternative to direct democracy. Fifth, self-government not only entailed meetings in the Assembly, it also meant citizen participation in the administration of the city-state. Most Athenians served as a public official at least once during their life time. Sixth, city-state should remain “fully autonomous”: leagues, confederacies, and alliances should not be allowed to preempt the sovereignty of the Assembly of the city-state (Dahl 18-19).

The ancient Athenians’ “habits of the heart” are unique and indefinable; their organism of democracy is in fact indescribable, because it does not show others how to do it, but it models for observers a habit of self-help. What Jacques Barzun clarifies for the most modern democracy, the United States, should count for the western world’s oldest democracy, ancient Athens, too:

[F]irst, democracy has no theory to export, because it is not an ideology but a wayward historical development. Second, the historical development of democracy has taken many forms and used many devices to reach the elusive goal called human freedom. Third, the forms of democracy in existence are today in a state of flux. (12)

Those who wish to adopt classically liberal political systems for their countries will have to learn that that it is more difficult than it might appear. By confronting the present results of democracy with the ancient Athenian achievements, the importance of the individual person in the social process of democratization becomes obvious. It is one thing to structure a liberal government, but it is quite another, and much harder, task to develop the kind of citizenry fit for a democratic regime. The comparison is a reminder of the need for democratic virtues in a people who aspire to a free and liberal political order—these include such virtues as enterprise and responsibility for one’s self.

Our problem today is that freedom calls for a government that governs least; equality for a government that governs most. No wonder that the institutions of the free world are under strain and its citizens under stress. The theorem of democracy still holds, but all of its terms have changed in nature, especially the phrase “the people,” which has been changed beyond recognition by the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and the social revolution of the twentieth century. If free persons do have primacy, then, the common good can be only something that emerges from acts taken by free persons.

6.

Notwithstanding its critics, however, the ancient Athenian democracy remains a legacy from which our present and future generations can learn a great deal. Its theatre reinforced the existing social structure and celebrated Athenian democracy. But it was also a theatre of questions. The playwrights
recognized that life is full of contradictions and that the future can be neither predicted nor controlled. The dramas that have come down to us call the community to account for its actions and charge individuals with responsibilities for their choices.

Let me return to the example of Bacchae. An integral part of the text’s meaning is contributed by the target audience. The question for us is: how could the community of Athenian believers accept that Dionysus had caused a mother to dismember (sparagmos) her own son? Even if both Agave and Pentheus had committed the most tremendous sins—slander of the god and theomachy, that they did not deserve such cruelty is not only the opinion of a twenty-first century audience. This is not a matter of coexistence of creativity and destruction, but of sheer disproportion. Cadmus—who is punished despite being the only one to have protected Semele’s honor—concludes: “We have learned. But you punish us too harshly” (Bacc. l.1346). The Athenian audience—possibly on the brink of a religious revolution—could not have accepted a god who so wildly ran against the democratic and civic values of the city.

Euripides certainly inverted the structure of tragedy: instead of linking the god with value, he associated him with anti-value. How can a god plan such a terrible double vengeance on mother and son and yet claim divinity? Cadmus concludes: “Gods should be exempt from human passions” (Bacc. l.1348). The same structure is found in Hippolytus and The Trojan Women, in which Aphrodite, Artemis, and Athena reveal their unfitting human drives. Within the framework of an art which addresses large and heterogeneous audiences, which presupposes a—not necessarily sophisticated—response in unison, the theatre essentially reflects patterns of psychological response that, mainly, boil down to reaffirmation or refutation of held beliefs. “Relativism” was no choice. The ethic and moral principles of Athenian democracy provided certain procedural constraints and made demands on all participants.

Therefore, to the Greek audience the odes were a crucial part of the play. They set the norms of communication: norms of respect for persons, universal human and civic rights, and egalitarian reciprocity that govern such a theatrical situation. The chorus, representing the community’s Elders, who, in the fictional theatre world, are deeply concerned with the fate of the city, guaranteed equal opportunity to all participants—performers as well spectators—to take part in the societal discourse, to contribute to it, and to be free from coercion, be it ever so subtle or covert. Although the chorus also performed the priestly function of speaking for and to the gods in the real world of the audience, it reminded the characters and audience how to sustain those “normative practices and moral relationships within which reasoned but fair agreement as a way of life can flourish and continue” (Benhabib 38). Aristophanes expressed the Greek perception of the Chorus when he wrote in The Frogs’ Parabasis:

There is no function more noble than that
This tradition of spiritual teaching in Greek tragedy is centered in the choral odes. Its relevance for today’s theatre is that it “speaks the truth for the improvement of the city”: a challenge the twenty-first century theatre faces if it strives for a faithful description of reality.

Works Cited


