

POLITICAL TRAGEDY: SOPHOCLES AND ATHENIAN HISTORY*

Sarah Ferrario

1. *Introduction*

Sophoclean tragedy was conceived, composed, and performed in democratic Athens, and it has often been suggested that it was also essentially *set* there.¹ Heroic mythology provided a façade of ‘safe’ remove for the audience, lest the emotional balance shift, as it apparently did in the case of the poet Phrynichus and his tragedy on the *Capture of Miletus*, too far in the direction of Aristotelian fear.² But the heroic world also furnished a rich source of paradigms and models with which tragedy could interact in order to examine contemporary Athenian concerns.³ The real distance between the audience and the discourse, therefore, was significantly narrowed by the habits of public *paideia*, which conditioned citizens to understand and embrace their roles in the *polis* through active participation, both as listeners and as speakers, in the life of the city.⁴

The Greek tragedies that survive to us, probably selected by virtue of their excellence or pedagogical value in antiquity and the Byzantine era, come exclusively from Athens, and span at most a period of just over 70 years, from a known production date of 472 BC for Aeschylus’ *Persians* to 401 BC

* I would like to express my gratitude to Andreas Markantonatos for his thorough and supportive work as editor; to William McCarthy, Leonora Neville, and Melissa Mueller for reading this project in draft and providing suggestions that improved it both in style and in substance; and to Kate Bush, who served as research assistant.

¹ On the cognitive association of tragic ideology with Athens, e.g. Ober/Strauss (1990) esp. 248; see also the references in notes 11 and 141, below.

² Rosenbloom (1993) esp. 195; on pity and fear, see Arist. *Poet.* 1453a5–6; on the fine exacted from Phrynichus for reminding the Athenians of *oikeia kaka* (perhaps to be translated as ‘troubles that belonged to them’), see Hdt. 6.21.2. The Athenians had failed to assist Miletus sufficiently during the Ionian revolt to prevent its seizure by the Persians in 494 BC.

³ Easterling (1997a) esp. 25–28. Cf. also Knox (1957) 62.

⁴ On democratic *paideia* as an embedded social and political process at Athens, see e.g. Ober (2005a) and esp. (2005b); Ober/Strauss (1990), the latter more centrally focused upon drama and both with additional references; on active audience participation, see e.g. Goldhill (2009a) 27 and the bibliography collected at n2.

for Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*.⁵ This period coincides closely with the rise and fall of the 'Athenian Empire', a tributary maritime alliance that was founded in 478 BC upon the success in the Battle of Salamis (480 BC) and was dismantled by the Spartans along with Athens' Long Walls at the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC. The period of the Empire witnessed the rapid development of a radical democratic government and a famously rich blossoming of the arts.⁶ The size and the resources of imperial Athens distinguished it from other Greek *poleis* as a capital of culture and a military power, and the Athenians advertised this both to themselves and to others: much artistic production of this period, including some of the dramas, reveals a self-conscious civic pride.⁷ But Athens was by no means the only democracy in the Greek world,⁸ and its occasional demand that the factious among its allies adopt democracy as well likely helped to propagate this system still more broadly.⁹ The Athenians also shared a common language, religion, and intellectual life with most of the rest of Greece: although the various *poleis* considered themselves politically independent, their social and cultural experiences were often similar.¹⁰

There is therefore an important debate in the current scholarship as to whether Athenian democracy forms the necessary political background to tragedy, or whether the genre may more generally reflect the concerns and experiences of '*polis*-dwelling Greeks'.¹¹ In one sense, the response depends upon our definition of the term 'political':¹² if 'political' refers to 'recent specific historical and governmental events', the analytical balance is more likely to tip in the direction of Athenocentrism; if 'political' is taken to mean

⁵ Sophocles died in 406/5 BC: the *Oedipus at Colonus* was staged posthumously (see note 70, below).

⁶ The term 'radical' is often used to describe the Athenian democracy following the reforms of Ephialtes in 462/1 BC: Roberts (1998²) 50 (an introductory treatment); see also Hornblower (2002³) 22–24; Meier (1993) 24–32.

⁷ See e.g. the papers collected in Boedeker/Raaflaub (1998); see also Castriota (1992).

⁸ On democracies outside of Athens that arose in the sixth and early fifth centuries BC, see Robinson (1997).

⁹ E.g. Meiggs (1972) 208–212.

¹⁰ See e.g. the survey by Beer (2004) 1–17.

¹¹ The continuum of views regarding the politicization of the Greek theatre is well outlined by Rhodes (2003) 104–106 *et passim*, who provides the phrase quoted here, arguing (at 104) that 'in the interpretation of particular plays themes have often been said to be democratic which are better seen as concerns of *polis*-dwelling Greeks in general'. Particularly important among Rhodes' references for the appreciation of the debate are Goldhill (2000) and (1990); Griffin (1999a) and (1998); add also now the methodological discussion of Wilson (2009b).

¹² See Carter (2007) and (2004).