CHAPTER 25

Political Theory in Aeschylean Drama: Ancient Themes and their Contemporary Reception

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Introduction

The past thirty years have witnessed a surge of interest in the political thought of the Greek tragedians. Influenced by theorists such as Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, and Sheldon Wolin, scholars across disciplinary and methodological boundaries have turned to Greek tragedy with a view to reflecting on contemporary democratic politics. As the playwright whose themes are most consonant with the city’s democratic ideology, Aeschylus has undoubtedly benefitted from this turn.1

Looking to Aeschylus and his contemporaries for clarity on political questions is not a new trend. References to Aeschylean drama and themes, most notably to Prometheus Bound, have populated philosophic and political discourse since the second half of the 18th century.2 For Marx, Prometheus was the “most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar”;3 and Hegel identified Aeschylus as a poet who wrote in the service of patriotism and national identity.4 Nietzsche suggests that Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound demonstrates the perfect balance between creative power and the will to delusion, a tension that he interpreted against the backdrop of the Greeks’ willingness to acknowledge that the world itself, on a cosmological level, is deeply unjust,5 while for Heidegger, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Prometheus

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1 See Goldhill 2000 and 2004 and Sommerstein 2010, esp. 303.
2 See Hall 2007, 179. See also Van Steen this volume.
3 Marx made this comment in an unpublished forward of his 1841 dissertation (See Marx and Engels Collected Works, I.31). He later depicted Prometheus as representative of humanity, “dwelling in light,” from which the worker is estranged (“Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.” In The Marx Engels Reader, 94).
4 Hegel, Lectures on Aesthetics, p. 275.
5 See Lecznar 2013 for a helpful discussion of Nietzsche’s evolving reception of Aeschylus’ Prometheus from the Birth of Tragedy to the Gay Science, where he comes to represent the naive Greeks as radically alien to the modern subject.
stood as the first example of philosophic defiance in the face of fate, a defiance that paradoxically helped him to cultivate a more adequate metaphysical orientation to fate.\(^6\) By the mid-twentieth century, Promethean themes of humanistic triumph had started to wane, but Aeschylus’ *Persians* had become a lightning rod for critical reflection on the West’s military legacy and its global repercussions. Amidst a growing number of politically informed theatrical revivals of the play,\(^7\) political thinkers across the ideological spectrum deployed Aeschylus to reflect on the West’s military entanglements, both to affirm its victory over eastern autocracy\(^8\) and to criticize its Orientalizing and imperial heritage.\(^9\)

For all this longstanding engagement with Aeschylean themes, there has nevertheless been a marked shift in recent engagements with the poet. Political theorists are now, more than ever, speaking with one another across the boundaries of traditionally self-contained disciplines, such as Political Science, English, Classics, Philosophy, and Rhetoric. This cross-pollination has made disciplinary specialists of all sorts more alert to the relations among ideology, symbolic form, religious and civic ritual, and social norms, particularly as a feature of the democratic experience. These new levels and types of engagement have also shifted the way political theorists approach Athens and Aeschylus specifically. Less reliant on mid-century reconstructions of the *polis* as interpreted by Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle, political theorists have expanded their canon and devoted more sustained attention to the political theory of Athens’ great playwrights.\(^10\) Moreover, heightened awareness of political exclusion and political remainders in democratic theory has led to a renewed interest in Athenian tragedy for its tellingly multivocal representation of otherwise excluded minorities.\(^11\)

After briefly contextualizing the contemporary “turn to tragedy,” this chapter will zero in on three related approaches to Greek tragedy influenced by these disciplinary shifts. The first approach, associated primarily with J. Peter Euben, treats the ancient *polis* as an exemplar for thinking more clearly about democratic politics then and now, in all of its productive tensions. This

\(^6\) “The Self-Assertion of the German University.” See also Francoise Dastur 1999, 137.

\(^7\) For a thorough discussion of twentieth century adaptions of the play see Hall 2007 and Foley 2012.

\(^8\) See, for example, Hanson 2001.


\(^10\) See Bassi and Euben 2010; Ober 2008, ix–xxi; Frank 2006. For a recent discussion of the way political theory as a discipline has shifted its engagement with Greek thought since the second half of the 20th century, see Kasimis 2015.