

### Eirene Visvardi

*Emotion in Action: Thucydides and the Tragic Chorus*. Leiden: Brill, 2015. x + 290 pp. \$149.00. ISBN 978-90-04-26929-3 (hbk).

A book about how to manage the emotions within a democracy seems a strangely timely enterprise at this moment in late 2016, when as far as many commentators can see, voters in the UK and USA took the opportunity to express multiple emotions of anger, hurt, and distrust, in ways that seem likely to harm the voters themselves far more than they are the objects and instigators of those emotions. In *Emotions in Action: Thucydides and the Tragic Chorus* (Mnemosyne Supplement 377) Eirene Visvardi examines how different Athenian genres explore the ways in which collective emotion may be harnessed to the goals of 'social cohesion and collective prosperity in the polis' (p. 1). Her study is thorough and thoughtful, if a little selective in terms of what choruses she actually analyses; currently it may also seem oddly optimistic.

The introductory first chapter gives definitions of key terms and lays out the research context. Fifth-century Athens is said to be a 'culture of passions' (p. 3) by which is meant that the polis gives place to emotions in its public discourses, and does not consider that they should be eradicated from debate; instead, the goal is to define the correct emotions that will lead to beneficial decisions and actions. A very important theme in the book is that emotion and reason are not opposed, but work together, particularly in the public realm, where anger, for instance, can properly serve justice. As with many other contemporary scholars, Visvardi considers that dramatic and political culture work together in the Athenian public realm, so that the emotion dramatized by tragic choruses helps to construct democratic practice and understanding.

Five plays are chosen whose choruses are particularly insistent on the emotions of pity and fear, and this selection leads first to a discussion of Aristotle. *The Rhetoric* is at least as prominent as the *Poetics* here, and this is because the importance of emotion in the orator's training is a sign of what is 'considered and deeply experienced as valued' (p. 11), particularly since emotions 'arise primarily in and through social interactions' (p. 12). Emotion is thus also closely connected to virtue, underpinning it with motivational force.

The chorus itself is also examined in this chapter, with a view to exploring its double identity as performer in the festival and dramatic character. There is also useful and penetrating discussion of its combination of marginality and authority, its self-reference, and its signal ability to survive the events that destroy the other characters. The collective nature of the chorus also points towards a pleasure that arises from sharing emotions, even if these are painful

(p. 27), and the point is emphasised via a reading of the Delian maidens in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, which are said to create ‘common responsiveness through pleasurable empathy’ (p. 29). These different types of pleasure, experienced in the theatre, help to build community by expanding the shared emotional sensibilities.

In the second chapter choral emotions are ‘contextualised’ by means of Thucydides. Thucydides is read for the light his text sheds on how Athenians do and do not manage to translate ‘participatory pleasure’ (p. 47), the pleasure of working as a part of group, into responsible political action. Emotions are not opposed to reason, and Visvardi suggests that Thucydidean emotions may be understood via a spectrum of degrees and types of rational considerations (p. 46). Even so, it is difficult for the Athenians to operate the productive versions of pity, fear, anger, desire, and hope, rather than yielding to the destructive side of collective emotions. Their task is complicated by the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of the emotions, by which Visvardi means that the emotions in Thucydides are often discussed in terms of a spectacle; for instance, the Sicilian Expedition foregrounds themes of *opsis* and *theoria*, while the fear generated by the oligarchic coup works partly because the city of Athens is not transparent to itself. By contrast, Pericles stands out as a leader of the collective because he analyses the people’s emotions for them, carefully guiding their anger and fear towards positive ends, while insisting on the continuity between individual and collective welfare which unregulated emotion might disregard. This chapter includes detailed analyses of the episodes where emotions run high, such as the stasis in Corcyra and the Mytilenian Debate.

Visvardi suggests that the tragic chorus is an institution within the democracy that is fundamentally concerned with collective emotions, especially pity and fear. She focusses especially on what she terms ‘active’ choruses, which turn out to be three specific Aeschylean choruses. Those of the *Eumenides* and *Supplikes*, while clearly participating vigorously in the play’s action, also deliberately instigate, and extensively discuss, the emotion of fear. The chorus of the *Seven*, on the other hand, does not intentionally provoke fear, but once they do, they also elaborate on it discursively. In the *Eumenides*, ‘the transition to a still passionate but authoritative judicial system also overlaps with a transition to a new type of fear’ (p. 99). The Furies accept the new institution ‘insofar as it espouses the same ideas of just conduct as they do’, which involves fear of individual punishment and communal fear of chaos (p. 109). This is why Athena repeats the words that the chorus use when she founds the Areopagus. But the ending of the play shows that emotion continues relevant to the process of judgement, when Athene makes her choice on the basis of attachment to the male cause (p. 117).