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This book deals with a crucial period in the evolution of Attic drama, viz. the last decade of the Peloponnesian war (415-404 BC), and focuses on the relation between dramatic production and the historical context, which was rich in external catastrophes as well as in mental crises. But, as the author himself points out in the introduction, this study happily avoids the excesses of the 'interprétation historique', according to which Greek tragedy was full of allusions to specific contemporary events or political figures and which culminated with R. Goossens. In his discussions of individual plays Hose even explicitly rejects several such historical identifications. Instead he considers his study more a kind of successor to that of Chr. Meier on the political dimension of the art of Aeschylus and the early Sophocles, although he admits at the same time that the necessity of tragedy as a means of expression for political developments, as postulated by Meier, is no longer valid in this later period.

Hose treats his subject chronologically, according to an implicit division in three periods. The first period (415-411: “Euphory and catastrophe”) encompasses the Sicilian expedition and its disastrous outcome and repercussions on internal political life in Athens. To this period belong the Trojan trilogy of Euripides (‘Alexandros’, ‘Palamedes’, ‘Trojan Women’) (415), Aristophanes’ ‘Birds’ (414), Euripides’ tetralogy of 412, which Hose reconstructs as ‘Andromeda’, ‘Helen’, ‘Iphigencia in Tauris’ and a prosatryc ‘Ion’, and finally the comedies ‘Dæmoi’ of Eupolis (412) and the ‘Lysistrate’ and ‘Thesmophoriazousai’ of Aristophanes (411). The second period (411-408: “Putsch and restoration”) begins with the short-lived oligarchical coup, which was followed by a restoration of democracy, new military successes and a tendency towards stabilization and ὀμοιος (several times wrongly printed as ὀμοιοῖς in this book) in internal affairs. This section deals with the ‘Philoctetes’ and the ‘Oedipus at Colonus’ of Sophocles—his ‘Electra’ is excluded because Hose dates the play before 415—as well as Euripides’ tetralogy of 408, which would have consisted of ‘Hypsipyle’, ‘Phoenician Women’, ‘Antiope’ and a prosatryc ‘Orestes’. In a third and final period (407-
404, “The way that led to defeat”), which includes the subsequent deaths of Euripides and Sophocles, the turbulent political and military events result in the battle at Aigospotamoi and the collapse of Athenian power. Here the author comments on the posthumously performed ‘Iphigenia at Aulis’ and ‘Bacchants’ and evidently on Aristophanes’ ‘Frogs’.

The treatment of each period is introduced by a survey of the historical developments, which serve as a background for the analyses of the individual plays. This procedure is certainly intellectually satisfying, but the whole of the chronological division is somewhat hazardous on two points. First we do not know whether ‘Oedipus at Colonus’ was written before ‘Iphigenia at Aulis’ and ‘Bacchants’—it may as well have been the other way round, since Sophocles died some months later than Euripides. Hose clearly wanted to underline the structural similarities between ‘Oedipus at Colonus’ and ‘Philoctetes’ and therefore grouped them in one chronological section. However, the distinction between these two plays on the one hand and ‘Iphigenia at Aulis’ and ‘Bacchants’ on the other reveals more about the essential difference between Sophoclean and Euripidean tragic art than about historical evolutions. The other hazardous element is the chronology of the two hypothetical tetralogies, which is based on C.W. Müller’s contestable theory that a tragedian could not possibly produce a tetralogy each year, but at best only every two years).

For the Trojan trilogy the author criticizes traditional connections with specific political or military events such as the Sicilian expedition and proposes instead to interpret these plays in the light of a climate of rapidly declining political morals: the plot of the ‘Alexandros’ would reflect the tendency to secret conspiracy and illegal action of the hetairai, the ‘Palamedes’ would be concerned with sneaky intrigue and the manipulation of legal proceedings, and finally the Helen-scene in the ‘Trojan Women’ would reveal the mental substructure to all that, viz. the replacement of traditional morals by ruthless human intellect. Regarding the ‘Alexandros’ the author indulges in an excursus on the reconstruction of this play, in which he makes some interesting observations. I note e.g. (p. 42 n. 39) his original interpretation of hypothesis, l. 31, where διὰ τῶν κινήσεων would not refer to the danger threatening Paris but to the herdsman’s risk of being tortured. Less attractive is his reading of fr. 44 Sn. (p. 41) which he wants to place in the great agon before Priam instead of in the scene of the attack on Paris with the sword: here he should have read my own comments on this fragment in response