
The oath in Greek culture has been little studied in the history of classical scholarship; only a few monographs on the topic have been written (primarily Hirzel, R. 1902. *Der Eid* (Leipzig), and Plescia, J. 1970. *The Oath and Perjury in Ancient Greece* (Tallahassee)), but both are limited in scope. Lately, Judith Fletcher, the author of the work under review here, and Alan H. Sommerstein have undertaken to fill that gap, not only with Fletcher’s new monograph but also with an international conference at the University of Nottingham in 2004, the proceedings of which were subsequently published (full disclosure: I spoke at the conference and my paper was published in the proceedings). In this volume, Fletcher expands her paper in that volume (on oaths in the *Oresteia*, Chapter 1 in this volume) and offers the first book-length study of the oath as a narrative device in Greek literature: “Mirroring the protocols of archaic Greek society, the oath in literature defines social boundaries, solidifies friendships and interstate relationships, even though those same texts recognize the potential for oaths to be twisted and exploited.” (34)

Fletcher begins with a chapter-length introduction in which she not only lays out her argument, but also provides a useful overview of the steps taken while swearing an oath and then a brief survey of the use of oaths in Greek literature through Herodotus. In her literary survey, she stresses the nature of oaths as catalysts for a plot, but also suggests that the use of oaths in Athenian tragedy was intimately bound up with the democratic nature of Athens’s society and government. And it is this insight that makes this work so effective and intriguing; since oaths on the stage reflected oaths in daily and political life for their Athenian audiences, they were not simply a literary device, but were simultaneously a social phenomenon. The book thus holds interest for more classicists than only those who study Greek tragedy; those interested in history and ancient political theory may also find it useful.

The first chapter proper discusses oaths in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* trilogy, in particular applying the use of oaths to the trilogy’s well-known themes of gender distinctions. Male and female swear and use oaths differently; women’s oaths tend to be less potent and more likely to fail. Hence Clytemnestra’s oath of vengeance is less ‘proper’ than Orestes’ oath, even though both oaths commit the speaker to a morally questionable course of action. At the end of the trilogy, Orestes, saved by the power of his own earlier oath to avenge his father, concludes with another oath binding together Athens and his own Argos in alliance, bringing closure to a plot driven by the earlier failed, broken, or amoral oaths of the House of Atreus.
While Chapter 1 was concerned with tragic oaths in the public sphere, Chapter 2 deals with personal oaths sworn by young men on the brink of maturity, in this case Hyllus in the *Trachiniae* and Neoptolemus in the *Philoctetes*. Fletcher links these to the ephebic oath of Athens (and other Greek city-states), and suggests that “these young men serve[d] as paradigms not only for Athenian youth, but also for mature citizens of a polis in which language joins secular authority with divine force” (99). Certainly tragedy has a didactic and self-referential aspect; it is no great stretch here to agree that figures like Hyllus, Neoptolemus, and Orestes were models for citizens in their treatment of oaths, which were an integral part of the civic sphere of Athens.

Fletcher focuses on the *polis* in Chapter 3 via the Oedipus cycle. Although set largely at Thebes, the Oedipus cycle provides an already much-noted contrast between Thebes and Athens, the setting of the *Oedipus at Colonus*. In Thebes, language is suborned—see, for instance, Creon’s oaths and speeches in the *Antigone*—or misunderstood and rejected, as in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. But in the *OC*, Theseus swears oaths to Oedipus that are observed and fulfilled, and in so doing Theseus acts as “a model for the Athenian citizen” (122).

Chapter 4 turns to the remaining tragedian, Euripides, who tended to use oaths differently than his predecessors, as Fletcher notes: while Sophocles used oaths as an expression of liminality, Euripides uses them more as a plot device and as a moral weathervane for his characters. Fletcher looks at Euripides’ *Phoenissae, Orestes, and Cyclops* to prove her point, as well as the fragmentary *Oenomaus*. She does not address the fact that *Cyclops* is a satyr-play, not a tragedy proper, but does make an argument that its treatment of perjury fits in well with the Euripidean view of perjury in his other plays: perjury leads to the curse that is implicit in every oath, and that perjury can lead to both the destruction of the individual character and his community.

Aristophanes’ *Clouds* is the subject of Chapter 5. Here Fletcher closely analyzes the theme of oaths in the play, specifically Strepsiades’ broken oaths to repay his debts and Pheidippides’ refusal to attend the Phrontisterion, despite his promise to his father that he would do anything to help him. Fletcher ties in the theme of oaths with traditional interpretations of the play and its intergenerational conflict, but she also makes a case for a conflict between mortal and divine law in the play as well. Oaths represent this conflict as expressions of mortal law that are intended to be enforced by the gods. In the end, the broken oaths in the play are punished by the gods—Strepsiades still owes his creditors, the Phrontisterion is set afire—and this fact offers an anchor for a society set adrift by the sort of conflicts between generations that we see in the *Clouds*.

Fletcher’s study of Euripides continues in Chapter 6, this time with the focus on women’s oaths and the oaths men swear to women. Earlier, in discussing the