

## AIAS IN ATHENS

At a conference celebrating Oliver Taplin's career, it is particularly fitting to offer a paper on Sophokles, for the study of Athenian tragedy has been permanently transformed by Oliver's work. He made scholars look at the way audiences experienced the drama, and thus directed us to the myriad of contexts in which tragic poetry was – and continues to be – performed. Following the Prof.'s lead, though proceeding in a slightly different direction, I want to discuss Sophokles' *Aias* in its original context, and to explore how that setting might influence an interpretation of the tragedy.

In order to do so, I begin with the ideas presented by Simon Goldhill in 'The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology'. Goldhill reminds us, above all, of the festival and civic context of Athenian drama: before the first tragedy, libations were poured by the ten generals of that year; the city's benefactors (citizens or not) were publicly rewarded; the tribute from Athens' 'allies' in the Delian League was displayed before the audience; and the orphans of those citizens who had died fighting for their country (and whose raising had been subsidised by the city) were paraded and presented with their first suit of armour. These were all highly visible symbols of the power and prestige of the Athenian community, and they were on show not only for the city's citizens but also the many metics, allies and foreigners who came to view the magnificent spectacle on offer.

These features are set out in detail in the first half of Goldhill's article. In the second half, Goldhill then tries to relate those surroundings to an interpretation of the tragedies themselves. He points out several ways in which the *Aias* engages with the pre-play ceremonies, for example in the construction of Eurysakes as an heroic analogue for the contemporary war-orphans (*Aias* 545–95) [1]. He argues that the analogy has a subversive or questioning function, exploring the "tension between the texts of tragedy and the ideology of the city."<sup>1</sup> This disjunction, he suggests, had something to do with the transgressive nature of Attic drama, which in itself was related to the nature of the festival's honorand, Dionysus.

This is a useful point of departure for the current discussion, because Goldhill is right to point out differences between these two worlds – i.e., of the play and its audience – nor is he alone in having done so. Jon Mikalson, for instance, has argued that the terrible tragic gods sit ill with the fifth-century notion, held at least by Athenians, that Athens enjoyed divine support.<sup>2</sup> Like Goldhill, Mikalson believes that the disjunction is significant, but in this case of an insularity between the worlds: the gods on stage are literary creations, which have little if nothing to do with the ways in which the contemporary audience conceived them acting in their own lives. His conclusion has not been generally accepted, but he is undoubtedly correct that there are significant differences between the two worlds' representations of the divine. The realisation of what we might call this separative capacity within Athenian tragedy is not simply a modern one, either. Herodotos (6.21.2) [2] tells us that the early poet Phrynichos (active c. 511–476 BC) was fined after he dramatised the fall of Miletus (c. 494 BC) during the Ionian revolt, because he reminded the Athenians too much of 'their own troubles'. The story is a pointed and early reminder of something basic to Attic tragedy – almost exclusively its poets took distant, heroic subjects for their plays.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Goldhill (1987) 69.

<sup>2</sup> Mikalson (1991).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, Aeschylus' *Persians* (472 BC) is the obvious exception (for others, cf. Sourvinou-Inwood (2003) 16–19). In that sense, there is an obvious relationship with the careful and thoroughgoing links we find

Distance as well as difference, then, both factors together allowing an Athenian audience a certain measure of insularity from the events unfolding on stage. How might this twin dynamic be applied to the *Aias*? Let us begin with the central issue of the war-orphans. In the play, Eurisakes is orphaned because of the ultimately selfish act of Aias, who kills himself with little final thought for the fortunes of his φίλοι, because his personal integrity and τιμή have been impugned and denied (98, 426–7, 440, 837–8) [3]. Aias kills himself because his personal honour cannot be rescued from the situation into which it has been cast. Indeed, when he first declares his intention to die (430–80), he does not mention either Tekmessa or Eurisakes, though he does concede their interests – somewhat briefly but to no effect – in the famous ‘deception speech’ (646–92, at 652–3). Sophokles makes clear, in the messenger’s speech (758–77) [4], that his fate is the result not only of Aias’ personality but also divine hostility, incurred by hybriistic behaviour towards Athene – behaviour against which even his stern father Telamon had counselled him when he set out for Troy (764–9 [4]).

By contrast, the fathers of Athenian war orphans generally haven’t died in an exclusive search for personalised or individual honour – or in anger at its frustration – or because they have continually abused a deity. Instead, they perished on expeditions approved by the assembly (of which they themselves were members), led by elected citizens answerable for their behaviour, and conducted for reasons overseen by that assembly. In addition, every father knew that his dependents *would* be looked after by the state – a far cry indeed from Aias’ rather unconvincing belief that Teukros alone will be able to look after his φίλοι (560–4) [5] – and they were well aware that, if the general’s actions on the campaign were deemed incompetent, he would be brought to account.

Indeed, the Athenian attitude to its generals was a trying one. As the fifth century progressed, the office was increasingly linked with political success and prominence, so we should not be surprised if Athenians were often pretty hard on their generals. After all, they were elected to the post and, like other office holders, had to undergo εὐθύνη after it, as well as a process of oversight which could result in deposition and trial at any point during the year. Consider the following examples: the generals who were put to death illegally in 406 after failing to recover the dead from the Battle of Arginousai; the punishment of Miltiades for failing to reduce Paros (480/79 BC); Kimon’s exile after the insult suffered by the Athenians at Mt. Ithome (462 BC); or Demosthenes, who delayed returning to Athens until he’d won a compensatory victory to atone for a series of setbacks in Aetolia (427–6 BC). But office holders were also up for scrutiny on the comic stage, as with Aristophanes’ sustained lampooning of Lamakhos in the *Akharnians* (428 BC) and the *Peace* (421 BC). This is not to argue that the Athenians were inevitably disrespectful of generals, or more so than other Greeks. But it is to suggest a far from uncritical context, in which one can hardly imagine a figure like Aias, who sees his dilemma completely in personal terms, and has little or no

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between Greek and non-Greek potentates in Herodotus. In both cases, the essential similarity of human beings from different cultures is overborne by the difference in their customs (νόμοι), and the (in the end) negative *exempla* of these characters serve to illustrate the improvement in Greek culture wrought by their (general) absence. But, as we shall see in the case of tragic characters, there are also admirable qualities to be found, as well as ways in which their failings are possible and potential in the world of the audience. Therein lies the normative power of the *exemplum*: it assumes the rightness of the dichotomy (and to that extent reassures the audience that their values are essentially correct), but it also warns of the need constantly to guard the values structuring the dichotomy.

## AIAS IN ATHENS

thought for his responsibilities to his contingent of Salaminians. In this important respect, he is very much unlike a contemporary Athenian general.

Yet the poet seems to suggest that we should be importing contemporary categories: Sophokles makes both Aias and the *choros* refer to Athens and Salamis a great deal (596-8, 859-61, 1216-22) [6], and many have seen their relationship as typically Athenian: the transformation of the troops from Homeric warriors – fighters who happen to row – to tragic sailors – who happen to fight – certainly seems to ‘zoom’ into the world of the audience (to borrow the terminology of Sourvinou-Inwood). Moreover, the *genos* of the Salaminioi had an important role in the administration of Aias’ contemporary cult in Athens, so it is not unreasonable to see in this relationship a pointed reminder of the audience’s present. Once again, however, consider the central difference: the absolute reverence in which Aias is held by the *choros*, their complete and total dependence on him (154–71) [7], and their utter subordination to his personal desires, is quite different from that pertaining in an Athenian context, where a general is a fellow citizen and his responsibilities are legally enforceable. The *choros*’ attitude to Aias is as absolutist, and as unAthenian, as Aias himself. Once more, initial similarities give way, on reflection, to a profound awareness of fundamental differences.

In any of these cases, can we say that the audience would make the subversive link that Goldhill – amongst many others, it must be said – wants them to make? Or would they, rather, have a deepened impression of the alterity of the play world, and the ways in which it was deficient when compared with their own? If we look for subversion in Attic drama we’ll probably find it. But that may not have been the point.

I hasten to add that the dynamic I’ve suggested is not intended just to make the audience feel smug. Indeed, they sympathise more keenly with the circumstances of the play world, for it lacks the institutional mechanisms and compensations rendering the type of crisis on stage palatable – or more palatable – when faced by the audience. The death of a father is still a terrible loss for an Athenian *oikos*, no doubt, but the war-orphan institution looks after the afflicted *oikos* in a way that the Greek army, Aias or Teukros could not possibly have done. Thus, difference gives a particular clarity to the difficulties facing the characters when they make their decisions – generally without the compensations and comforts (such as they were) with which the Athenian audience was familiar: the *choros* are simply Aias’ retainers stuck in the midst of a now hostile army; Eurysakes can count on nothing but the questionable power of Teukros; Aias himself has no purpose or existence beyond the establishment and maintenance of his personal honour. The deracination of all these characters, at least when viewed through the customs and beliefs of an Athenian audience, adds powerfully to that audience’s understanding of their situation.

Can these conclusions be extended into the rest of the play? In a very real sense, Aias brings his doom upon himself, on one level, by his insufferable attitude and behaviour towards Athene. Yet this extremity of character is manifest in all his interactions and most of his actions, exchanges with Tekmessa and Eurysakes, in his condemnation of Odysseus, his killing and torture of the animals whom he mistakenly believes are his human enemies, and so on. Aias is frequently drawn in extreme (and negative) terms, yet it would be entirely one-sided not to see that the play also depicts a man who is in many ways admirable. He is

powerful, strong, brave to a fault, and capable of great achievements. Indeed, when Teukros defends his half-brother before Agamemnon, the poet goes out of his way to show the events and qualities which make Aias great and worthy of admiration (1266–89) [8]. So he is a complex character, and one whose fall seems to encompass much more than simple divine punishment for a moment of *hybris*. The tension between his qualities, indeed the fact that his negative qualities are an inherent part of his powerful figure, mark him out as an excellent paradigm of a man – human greatness coupled with human weakness.

Yet Sophocles and the other Athenian tragic poets were interested in their characters not just as expressions of the universal, as human beings of a sort to be found any age, but specifically as representatives of an earlier heroic age, a time when men were closer to the gods than they are now. Making sense of these differences was fundamental for both the poets and their audiences, as a way of seeing where they had come from, and how they had progressed. One common way of doing this, but by no means the only one, was through the establishment of a cult.<sup>4</sup> The prefiguration of Aias's hero-cult at the end of his play, though not entirely like that currently observed in Athens, allows the audience to connect their civic present (for he was the eponym of one of their ten tribes) with the heroic past, and to do so in a way which actually affirms a positive picture of the contemporary – figures like Aias, great and powerful as they were, are no longer possible or even desirable in the fifth century setting. Their power is, nonetheless, acknowledged and harnessed for the benefit of the community, in this case through the actualisation of the hero within the city's civic structure, and his protective power as an object of cult.

Applying the principles of difference and distance to the *Aias*, then, gives an interpretation of the tragedy which recognises the tensions enacted on stage, and sees the irreconcilable nature of those tensions – and the drama which they produce – as essential to the way in which the poet and his audiences understood heroic myth. This is how tragedy enacts the famous Aeschylean principle of 'learning by suffering' (πάθει μάθος *Ag.* 177), a principle which can hardly apply to the characters themselves, who usually fail to see or understand the process of their downfall. In sum, then, I argue for an interpretative method for the *Aias*, and by

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<sup>4</sup> This type of ending is, *contra* Griffin (1998) 53, extremely common in the surviving tragedies: Sophocles more than suggests such cults at the end of the *Aias*, *Philoctetes* and *Trachinian Women* (and, of course, the *OC*), and Euripides puts one at the end of the *Medea*, *Children of Heracles*, *Hippolytus*, *Heracles*, *Electra*, *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, *Hecuba*, *Helen*, *Andromache*, *Orestes* (Neoptolemus' cult in Delphi is foreshadowed) *Phoenician Women*, and the *Bacchae* (and the lost *Erechtheus*). Other types of institution are also employed, such as the Areopagus court at the end of the *Oresteia* mentioned earlier, the festival of the Prometheia at the end of the Prometheus trilogy (whether it is or not by Aeschylus), the aetiology of marriage at the end of the Danaid trilogy, the Argive oath and the dedication of the sanctuaries at the end of Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, the Athenian aetiology of the Ionians in Euripides' *Ion*, the foundation of Arcadian Oresteion in Euripides' *Electra* and *Orestes*. These endings represent a variety of ways out of the tragic dilemma – as, e.g., the Areopagus represents the only possible solution to the personalised vendetta which destroys the principal characters in the *Oresteia* (and contested in Euripides' *Orestes*) – but they may also simply mark off that world from the present, providing a link between the two. Yet an 'institutionalised' ending is not found in every tragedy, and many plays – Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* and *Persians*, Sophocles' *OT*, *Antigone* and *Electra*, Euripides' *Alcestis*, *Trojan Women*, *Iphigeneia in Aulis* – are content to dramatise the crucial (and usually disastrous) conflict between the tensions which have driven the drama; cf. Seaford (2000) 37–9. Of course, the plays should not be reduced to cultic or institutionalised *aetia* narratives, but no interpretation can simply ignore them.

extension for Athenian tragedy in general, which is founded on the very simple notion that heroic *pathos* = audience *mathos*.

This conception is immediately open to the charge that it reduces tragedy to a straightforward representation of a dominant ideology, whose only artifice is a series of negative *exempla*. On the one hand, that is precisely how Isocrates took it: for him, it was greatly to Athens' credit that the crimes of the tragic heroes had taken place somewhere other than Athens (*Panathenaic speech* 121–2) [9], while an influential modern study has argued that Thebes, so often the setting for tragic stories, is deliberately constructed as an 'anti-Athens', where destructive conflicts are played out in a safely 'other' world.<sup>5</sup> This is probably too schematic. There *has* to be some recognisable link between the community on stage and that represented by its audience, for otherwise there can be no sympathy, or indeed any of the emotional reactions to which both Plato and Aristotle are witness.

Moreover, the representation and projection of a dominant ideology – if we were even able to define it – is very rarely clear-cut, and democratic Athens famously lacked a straightforward enunciation of its values. The Athenians had to infer and engage in a 'sense of self' from many different sources and in many different ways.<sup>6</sup> So a simple 'indoctrinating' programme – of the sort imagined by opponents as well as proponents of the 'social function' school – is definitely not the point of Athenian tragedy. Instead, by presenting contemporary customs refracted through an heroic mirror, the playwright is encouraging his audience to reflect on the reasons why they hold the values they do: why, as in the *Aias*, it is a good thing to have a custom protecting the war-orphans (look what happens when it is absent); why personal honour is not unlinked with the honour and success of the community as a whole (look what happens when it is so divorced); why persuasion is generally preferable to violence divorced of reason; why no one man should be able to make a personal – and so, frequently paranoid – decision about burial rights and customs (look what happens to Creon and those around him in the *Antigone* when he does), and so on.

Yet, one wonders whether the playwrights ever sat down to 'instruct' their audiences in such a monovalent and unimaginative way. Instead, perhaps we should look at it this way. Would it be surprising if an author raised in Athens, and composing for the favour of an Athenian audience (in a competition, let us remember), were to structure heroic myth so as to appeal to, indeed even make sense to, that audience? Such a group of people would hold a series of social assumptions derived from their own practices and customs which might not necessarily cohere with those of other groups, say, in Sparta or Thebes. Consider, as a simple example, the differences between the tragic and Pindaric treatments of the Oedipus story; in both traditions he is a great and powerful figure, but there is a difference of emphasis between them – tragic poets focus on his disasters and suffering, and their ramifications for his family and community; Pindar stresses his wisdom in *Py.* 4 and, in *Ol.* 2, the reassuring fact that his line has been passed on, through the descendants of Polyneikes' son Thersandros, to the autocratic recipient (i.e., the Sicilian tyrant Theron) [10] & [11]. For an Athenian audience, the powerful hero is a source of danger to himself and those around him; for a Sicilian audience in the case of *Olympian* 2, living under an autocrat who (as Bruno Currie has recently shown) had very real pretensions to hero cult, the same figure possesses qualities to

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<sup>5</sup> Zeitlin (1986) = (1990).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the collection of essays in Boedeker & Raaflaub (1998).

## AIAS IN ATHENS

be admired and emulated – or at least endured. To be sure, Pindar doesn't try to hide the terrible elements of Oedipus' story, but he focuses on those aspects which would find the most welcome reception within his target audience.

This difference may also be detected in the back story to Sophokles' play, the conflict between Aias and Odysseus for the arms of Akhilleus. In *Nemean* 7 & 8, Pindar tells the story of Aias as one where a greater man has been defeated by a lesser man (alluding to the same tale in *Isthmian* 4 with a reference to the 'skill of lesser men' 34–6) [12] – [14]. In each case it is Odysseus' deceptive speech, or his skill at speaking, which unworthily damns Aias to defeat and death. Sophokles is aware of this vision, for both the *choros*, Aias and Teukros speak of Odysseus' victory in precisely these terms (187–91, 442–6, 1135; cf. Agamemnon at 1239–49) [15]. Yet in the play Odysseus' skill at speaking and persuasion – that most Athenian of virtues – is the *only thing* which achieves Aias' burial. In other words, what for Pindar is the dangerous facility which can overshadow true heroic greatness becomes, for Sophokles, the very thing required to achieve and confirm that greatness. Again, the effect of this contrast stresses the difference between the world of the play and the world of the audience, where the Athenians were proud – however rightly – of the openness of persuasion, of the power of *logos*, and the worship of their new goddess Peitho.<sup>7</sup>

So to understand, or at least consider, the audience for these texts is crucial, though we should not imagine it to be a monolith: Athens' political divisions reflected those of almost any Greek *polis*: aristocrats, democrats, the politically disinterested, would-be tyrants, and so on. In this respect, the 'ideology' of Athenian tragedy is not particularly Athenian, presenting instead the virtues of an exemplary *polis* culture.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps the most important reason why tragedy was able to travel beyond its original context, as Oliver Taplin and Bill Allan (among others) have argued.<sup>9</sup> In writing for such a variegated audience, therefore, the playwrights had to keep in mind this fragmentation, for there was no way to predict or level its sympathies, nor indeed to foretell the identity of the judges themselves. The challenge was, at least in part, to create a unity out of this potentially divided crowd, and the great heroes of the past were an ideal vehicle for such a creation.

In Sophokles' play, Aias can appeal to the city's aristocrats, who liked to connect themselves genealogically with the heroic past but could differentiate their own behaviour from that of the heroic character(s) (in their support, for instance, for the festival itself). But his story is also resonant for the most convinced of democrats, who finds an enduring sense of justice in the inevitability of his fall from power, as well as reassurance that his protective power (in several ways evidenced in the play) has been properly harnessed for the benefit of the community. This last element – his presence within the audience's world as a saving power and symbol of the unity of Athens – helps to bind the disparate groupings and units within the city, that is, the audience. Sophocles takes a character who could rub at and represent all

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<sup>7</sup> Athene's comments on Peitho in the *Eumenides* (885-6; 970-2).

<sup>8</sup> Cf., in particular, Rhodes (2003); also Hesk (2007) 78: ". . . while some tragedies seem to represent Athens as the place where problems can be solved, it is not always the case that Athens 'qua democracy' is necessarily implicated in a tragedy. A more general notion of Athens 'qua best polis in Greece' is sometimes the more plausible formulation."

<sup>9</sup> Cf., e.g., Taplin (1999); Allan (2001).

## AIAS IN ATHENS

the internal tensions of Athens (exactly as he does in Pindar's versions), and creates from him and his story a specifically Athenian unity.

### CONCLUSION

The tragic poet shaped heroic myth in order to appeal to the widest audience possible, to win their approval and respect, and because he shared the basic values which united and defined his community. The twin principles of 'distance and difference' governed the relationship between the world of the play and the world of the audience, and encouraged that audience to reflect on why and how their values failed to operate in the world of heroes, both to reinforce the operation of those norms, to appeal to them, and indeed to recreate that older world for a new and different one. Of course, I cannot rule out the possibility that these values could also be questioned, for the process of reflection cannot be controlled even by the poets initiating it. Perhaps someone in the audience might think that, in a figure like Aias, something great and powerful had been lost in the transition from the heroic to the contemporary world. But the play as a whole seems to suggest that something else, not without its faults but certainly without those driving the crisis on stage, has been gained in its place. Sophokles stresses the unsuitability of such a character for contemporary society, and at the same time his great power. The prefiguration of his hero cult with which the play ends stands as an articulating point in the tragic history not only of Aias but also of Athens itself, a moment of ending within the past, and a prediction of altered power and future purpose for this mighty hero.