

Vernant – Myth and Tragedy

1. The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece

More important to find the antecedents of tragedy, not the origins. The tragic mask allows the actor to become part of the heroic age. Only now, the hero has become the problem. Tragedy taps into current legal terminology, but exploits its ambiguities to create conflict (nomos/physis?). It also creates conflict between the heroic past and the modern city. Tragedy develops when human action becomes the object of reflection and debate, but not autonomous or self-sufficient.

2. Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy

Tragedy does not reflect reality so much as call it into question. There is still a clash of values between the polis and the recent past. The chorus expresses the feelings of the spectators, while the actor is estranged from the city. This dichotomy extends to the language as well. Eteocles in *Septem* switches from being the modern city commander in the beginning to the mythical hero. A hero's actions come from his own ethos, but are also the expression of a religious power or daimon. Dichotomy too with kratos – there is the legitimate rule contrasted with brute force. Even the divine universe is in a state of conflict. In *Antigone*, the conflict is between a private religion and a public one, which is confused with the supreme head of state. Tragedy can be read on many different levels. Creon and Antigone use nomos in completely different ways. There is also a contrast between the ancient harmartia, or ate, and the action done unjustly, but under no compulsion.

3. Imitations of Will

The Greeks do not have a concept of free will comparable to ours. hekon is used of both men and animals. Even consideration (boulesis) is the function of desire. hekon and akon are used in murder terminology, showing what is intentional and what is done under duress. For Aristotle, someone does something of his own volition only when he is compelled by no one else. Lesky saw divine causation in Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphi., but also a great desire on Agamemnon's part. ethos versus daimon again. In the OT Oedipus suffers passively, but inflicts the blinding on himself. Tragic guilt is thus the clash between the ancient conception of defilement or ate and the 5th century conception of constraint.

11. The Tragic Subject: Historicity and Transhistoricity

Marx posed the paradox – why does Greek tragedy, so connected with a particular time and society, still resonate so much with us today? What can be said about the tragic man? One, that tragedy is the conflict between the older heroic type and the new city, as above. Two, tragedy allowed the invention of fiction in mimesis. The epic poet didn't imitate, he merely represented. Tragedy puts on imitations of legendary figures. History recounted what took place, but tragedy could acquire a general significance. It prompts the spectator to view all the contradictory aspects of human nature and to question it.