

## Violence in Greek Tragedy

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Violence is probably one of the most prominent characteristics which we generally associate with Greek tragedy. The most dreadful crimes are committed in Greek tragedies, the characters suffer acute mental and physical pain, violent deaths abound. However, drama was a highly esteemed form of art, produced in the established frame of theatrical competitions, which formed a part of the political and religious life of the city state of Athens.

The relationship of the two notions mentioned in the theme of our conference, politics and cruelty, is in this connection necessarily somewhat different from what it is, I presume, in most of the other papers discussed here. The plots of Greek tragedies were generally taken from mythology, not from contemporary events, and thus Greek drama does not describe the Greek polis in the same way as for instance the Greek historians do in their works. We cannot read directly from the drama what kind of violence might be encountered in the city of this time, how the people felt about it, how it was coped with. On the other hand, the drama naturally reflects these aspects of the contemporary life of the polis – only they appear in tragedy in a magnified and often in a twisted form. As regards the word “cruelty”, it is perhaps not the best word to express the relevant notion in drama.<sup>1</sup> When we speak of cruelty, we generally mean that somebody is ready to cause suffering to others, even delights in it.<sup>2</sup> We do meet such

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the paper presented by Andrew Lintott in this conference, p. 9 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed., 1989), s. v. ‘cruelty’: “The quality of being cruel; disposition to inflict suffering; delight in or indifference to the pain or misery of others; mercilessness, hardheartedness; esp. as exhibited in action.” The meaning of such words is naturally inseparably linked with the relevant culture and society. In Greek, the notion of *hubris* comes near to this definition of cruelty – cf. Aristotle’s definition of *hubris* in *Rhet.* 1378b23 ff. – but there is the difference that at least in classical Athens the perpetrator’s wish to humiliate the victim seems to be essential (see N. R. E. Fisher, ‘*Hybris* and Dishonour I’, *Greece and Rome* 23, 1976, 177–93). This

cruelty in Greek tragedy, too, but more often this aspect is not emphasized at all, and violence is presented as a practical and necessary means of harming or eliminating one's enemies, and may even be sanctioned by religion. It is for this reason that I have chosen to use the word violence rather than cruelty in the title of my paper. Why is violence so prominent in Greek drama? One could ask more broadly, why is violence so prominent in Greek literature and art in general? Greek literature begins with the *Iliad*, the great epic of violence and aggression, where, however, the traditional formulaic verses describing in technical detail the monotonous killings of warriors are tempered by the deep humanity attested both in many details of the story as well as in the overall composition. Greek art loves to present wild beasts tearing their prey, gods fighting with Titans and Giants, Centaurs attacking Lapith men. The sombre and violent myths of Greek heroes are favourite themes of both classical dramatists and classical painters. Why is it so, and how do the Greek artists and authors present violence in their works – these are questions which I think should be investigated and discussed more fully.<sup>3</sup>

As regards violence in Greek tragedy,<sup>4</sup> the discussion has been mainly

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aspect is missing in *bia*, which denotes bodily strength and often acts of force against somebody's will. About the meaning of the different Greek words denoting force, see E. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Paris 1969, vol. ii 72 ff.

<sup>3</sup> The most influential discussions of violence in Greek culture have dealt with violence within ritual: Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen*, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 32, Berlin and New York 1972, and René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, transl. by P. Gregory, Baltimore and London 1977 (original: 'La Violence et le sacré' published in Paris 1972). Violence as a force in the development of the Greek city is discussed by Andrew Lintott, *Violence, Civil Strife and Evolution in the Classical City 750–330 BC*, London and Canberra 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Recent treatments of the subject include H. Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides*, Ithaca, NY and London 1985, Barbara E. Goff, *The Noose of Words: Readings of Desire, Violence and Language in Euripides' Hippolytos*, Cambridge 1990 (especially pp. 55–77), Charles Segal, 'Sacrifice and Violence in the Myth of Meleager and Heracles: Homer, Bacchylides, Sophocles', *Helios* 17 (1990) 7–24. Themes in Drama vol. 13 (1991) on the subject of 'Violence in Drama', published shortly after our conference, contains three papers on Greek tragedy: the introductory essay 'The Uses of Violence in Drama' by Thomas Gould (1–13), and the articles 'Violence in Greek Tragedy' by Simon Goldhill (15–33) and 'Violence and Dramatic Structure in Euripides'

focused on two aspects. One is the contradiction between what happens in the story of the drama and what happens on the stage: violent death is the subject of very many tragedies, but violent death is very rarely presented in front of the spectators. The murders happen, as a rule, off stage; the cries may be heard echoing from the palace, and afterwards, a messenger tells what has happened, and generally the bodies are brought onto the stage.

It has long been debated why this is so. Aristotle does not pay attention to this in his *Poetics* – in fact, he seems to take it for granted that murders could happen on stage, too; I don't see how his statement that deaths seen on stage (*hoi en tô phanerô thanatoi*) introduce a pathetic element in the drama could otherwise be understood (1452b12). Horace in a well-known passage of his *Ars Poetica* (179–188) warns that murders and miraculous metamorphoses should not be presented on stage; his objection seems to be that they cannot be credibly presented. Modern discussion has suggested many explanations why it is dramaturgically impossible or impractical to present violent deaths on stage<sup>5</sup> – because one actor would thus become incapacitated and yet be needed soon after for other roles; because the action of the drama is in most cases locally fixed in one place, say in front of a royal palace, by the presence of the chorus, and many deaths and acts of violence happen somewhere else such as in distant towns or on the seashore. Also, it is more natural to hang oneself in an inner room of a palace, rather than by the palace door in front of spectators. One argument, already presented in the ancient scholasts' remarks, has been that such spectacles would be too repulsive for the sensibilities of the Athenian spectators – but when one thinks of the scenes in fact presented by the tragedians to the spectators, such as Agaue brandishing her son's head at the end of a pole in Euripides' *Bacchae*, it seems that the public's sensibilities were not over delicate. Indeed, according to Aristotle, tragedy

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Hecuba' by Charles Segal (35–46). I cannot discuss here the many interesting points raised in these papers, but will instead confine myself to some references in my notes.

<sup>5</sup> Useful discussions of the views so far presented are found in P. H. Harsh, 'Deeds of Violence in Greek Tragedy', *Stanford Studies in Language and Literature* 1941: Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of Stanford University, ed. by H. Craig, 59–73, and J. M. Bremer, 'Why Messenger-speeches?', *Miscellanea tragica in honorem J. C. Kamerbeek*, ed. by J. M. Bremer, S. L. Radt and C. J. Ruijgh, Amsterdam 1976, 29–48.

produces true pleasure precisely because it creates in the spectator the emotions of pity and fear (Poet. 1449b25).

It has also been suggested that the presentation of death was a religious taboo in the festival of Dionysus, either because the actors as participants in a sacred festival could not murder each other<sup>6</sup>, or because death could not be presented before the god Dionysus, who in a way was thought to be a spectator in his festival.<sup>7</sup> In a modified form, this explanation has recently attracted serious consideration. Walter Burkert, J.-P. Guepin, and others have emphasized the significance of the primitive taboo against killing: as it is necessary for man to kill for his survival, the violent act of killing is concealed and justified in elaborate religious rituals and myths connected with them.<sup>8</sup> In the Dionysiac festivals, the killings are much emphasized, but at the same time softened down by presenting them as unwittingly done or done with the consent of the victim, or by not showing them on stage, but only reporting them.<sup>9</sup>

This emphasis on a taboo is related to the other aspect which has been very prominent lately in the discussion of the violence in tragedy, namely its connection with the ritual of sacrifice. In this discussion, the theories of René Girard have often been used. He examines the connection of violence and the sacred,<sup>10</sup> and argues that the violence inherent in human nature produces an ever-repeating chain of violent reprisals, until it finally produces a crushing catastrophe, which by its unanswerable quality puts an end to the reciprocal chain of violence. This final blow is felt to be something divine, and thus takes the responsibility of violent acts from man. By the transference of violence to the divine sphere, men conceal their own participation in the chain of violence. This concealment and

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<sup>6</sup> For this view, see R. C. Flickinger, *The Greek Theater and Its Drama*, 4th ed., Chicago 1936, 130–32.

<sup>7</sup> See K. Kiefer, *Körperlicher Schmerz und Tod auf der attischen Bühne*, Heidelberg 1909, 105 f., K. Matthiessen, *Elektra*, *Taurische Iphigenie und Helena: Untersuchungen zur Chronologie und zur dramatischen Form im Spätwerk des Euripides*, Hypomnemata 4, Göttingen 1964, 144, L. di Gregorio, *Le scene d'annuncio nella tragedia greca*, Milano 1967, 26 n. 5. See also Harsh 62 ff., Bremer 40 ff.

<sup>8</sup> W. Burkert, 'Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual', *GRBS* 7 (1966) 87–121, idem, *Homo Necans* (see note 3), J.-P. Guepin, *The Tragic Paradox: Myth and Ritual in Greek Tragedy*, Amsterdam 1968.

<sup>9</sup> A summary of these views is presented by Bremer 41 f.

<sup>10</sup> See note 3.

fiction is seen by Girard to be essential in the relation of human society to violence, and often this concealment takes the form of ritual. A surrogate victim is expelled from the community or killed, and thus violence is kept outside the community.<sup>11</sup>

The role of sacrificial ritual in tragedy has been emphasized e.g. by Helene Foley and Pietro Pucci.<sup>12</sup> There are many tragedies in which the whole action of the play centres upon a human sacrifice, as in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* or *Bacchae*, and many others where sacrifice, usually of a willing young girl or boy as the victim, is an important stage in the plot. It usually has a beneficial effect on the community in question, and this has been seen as a reason for the prominence of violence in tragedy. By presenting sacrificial rituals which have a positive, healing effect in the course of the events of the plot, tragedy emphasizes its own importance as a ritual of the community and its own beneficial effect in that community.<sup>13</sup>

I think that there is much worth serious attention in these approaches, but also that by concentrating on the idea of taboo and sacrificial violence many other aspects of violence in Greek drama have remained obscured. When discussing why violent deaths were not shown on stage, other questions, e.g. what kind of violence was shown on stage and how was violence done off-stage reported, have been almost forgotten. The emphasis on sacrificial violence has obscured the fact that the tragedians also speak at length about other kinds of violence – the violence of war, of political pressure and private vengeance and so on. I shall now briefly discuss some of these aspects.

Although violent deaths are seldom presented on stage, there are many other ways in which spectators are confronted by violence – through their eyes, through their ears, and especially through their imagination. There are many difficulties preventing us from knowing how the Greek plays were performed by the actors on the stage – how they moved, what kind of gestures they used, how natural or stylized was their way of acting etc.

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<sup>11</sup> See Girard ch. 2 and 4.

<sup>12</sup> H. Foley, *Ritual Irony* (see note 4), P. Pucci, 'Euripides: The Monument and the Sacrifice', *Arethusa* 10 (1977) 165–195.

<sup>13</sup> Goff (see note 4) in her treatment of the end of Euripides' *Hippolytus* criticizes Foley's and Pucci's view that tragic violence has the same redeeming effect as violence within ritual (122 ff.).

From careful reading of the texts, however, something may be gathered.<sup>14</sup> As regards violent actions, there seem to have been certain conventions which were used in many plays and which would thus be familiar types of scene to spectators; a consequence of this is also that the author can play with the expectations of the spectators by creating variations and surprises, which acquire their force from the very existence of such conventions.

The most usual types of convention in connection with violence were arrest by force and threatening with violence.<sup>15</sup> The arrest occurs in connection with the entrance or exit of an actor: someone is escorted onto the stage into the presence of an authority by mute attendants, or required at the end of the scene to be taken off. The convention is the basis for the power of some exceptions, as at the end of Euripides' *Hippolytus* (1084 ff.),<sup>16</sup> where Hippolytus stops the attendants ordered by his father to seize him from using force and moves away, submitting to his father's will. The threats of violence in tragedy mostly remain threats: the actors may raise their swords or sticks or fists and talk with brutal words of killing, but usually something happens or is said to prevent the realization of the violence threatened.<sup>17</sup> The most famous of such threatening scenes is the confrontation of the Egyptian herald and the Danaids in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Maidens*: the threats of the Herald are so vivid and violent, the dread of the maidens so acute, that many of the modern commentators of the play have actually visualized here brutal fisticuffs between the Danaids and a group of Egyptian soldiers. Probably, however, the incident was realized on stage as a scene of growing threat and tension, and the violence already anticipated by the public in their imagination with the help of the

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<sup>14</sup> The problems of performance are discussed e.g. in O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, Oxford 1977, 28–39, idem, *Greek Tragedy in Action*, Cambridge 1978, 58 ff., J. Gould, 'Tragedy in Performance', *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature I: Greek Literature*, ed. by P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox, Cambridge 1985, 263 ff., S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge 1986, 276 ff., M. Kaimio, *Physical Contact in Greek Tragedy: A Study of Stage Conventions*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae B* 244, Helsinki 1988, 6 ff.

<sup>15</sup> See Kaimio 62 ff.

<sup>16</sup> See Kaimio 64.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. A. Spitzbarth, *Untersuchungen zur Spieltechnik der griechischen Tragödie*, Zurich 1946, 34 f.

vivid expressions heard from the stage was stopped just at the moment of crisis by the Danaids' cry for help and the arrival of King Pelagus.<sup>18</sup>

It was probably quite rare to see on stage two characters actually resorting to physical violence. Consequently, it might well have had a great effect on the public. Similarly, Sophocles uses the conventions of arrest and apparent release from violence with great skill in his *Philoctetes*. When Philoctetes has realized that he has been tricked and Odysseus intends to take him to Troy, he tries to throw himself down from the cliff to escape this fate. Odysseus orders his men to take hold of him, and he utters a long monologue of despair and hate in their violent grip (1003 ff.). But after this speech, Odysseus suddenly orders his men to release him, saying that he does not need Philoctetes in order to capture Troy, but only his bow (1054 f.). This seeming release from violence is in fact an ultimate act of cruelty, because Philoctetes is thus abandoned to die on his solitary island without the help of his sole means of survival, the bow. A parallel to this scene comes somewhat later, when Neoptolemus has brought Philoctetes his bow back and promised to take him home. Philoctetes catches sight of Odysseus and is about to shoot him with his bow, but Neoptolemus prevents this act of violence by another act of violence, taking hold of Philoctetes' arm and preventing him from shooting, until Odysseus is safely away, and thus preparing the way for the final, peaceful solution of the play (1300 ff.). Here we have an example of a beneficial act of violence shown on stage – a rarity in itself in Greek drama.<sup>19</sup>

The most dreadful scene of violence actually shown on the Greek stage is the beginning of the *Prometheus Vincitus*, where Hephaestus, on the order of the tyrant Zeus, and with the help of the brutal Kratos (Force) and the mute attendant Bia (Violence), chains Prometheus to the rock with bands around his arms, body and legs and strikes an adamantine wedge through his chest. Whether this was performed with a huge doll, as has been suggested, or with a real actor and less real proceedings,<sup>20</sup> is irrelevant here: the text with its details, the horrified pity of Hephaestus

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<sup>18</sup> See the discussion by Taplin 1977 (see note 14), 216 ff., H. Friis Johansen and E. W. Whittle, *Aeschylus: The Suppliants*, Copenhagen 1980, commentary on ll. 885–7, 905–10, 908, Kaimio 68 f.

<sup>19</sup> See Kaimio 71 f.

<sup>20</sup> On this problem of the performance, see O. Taplin 1977, 243 ff., M. Griffith, *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound*, Cambridge 1983, 31 n.95.

and the brutal briskness of Kratos show that the scene was meant to present inhuman torture. And there is an equivalent to this torture still waiting for Prometheus, as described by Hermes at the end of the play: the promise of Zeus' eagle devouring his liver. How the glaring cruelty of the sovereign god was explained or compensated for in the other parts of the trilogy remains problematic, as too is the author and date of this play, which according to the growing conviction of the scholars is unlikely to be by Aeschylus.<sup>21</sup>

In opposition to the scenes of violence acted on stage, the crowning violence of tragedy is usually held to be those hidden murders behind the stage, reported later by a messenger. But how much of the violence is actually hidden from the spectators? Take for instance Euripides' *Medea*, where we have two pairs of murders of the classical behind-the-stage type: first Medea sends a poisoned robe to the Princess Creusa, which causes both her and her father's death, reported duly by the messenger, and then Medea kills her children, the bodies of whom are afterwards seen with her in her dragon chariot. The act of dying is not seen, but the act of killing is constantly kept in the foreground of the spectator's mind by anticipation, by imagination, by verbal report, by the sense of hearing and finally by the sense of sight, when the bodies are shown. First the Nurse fears that Medea will harm somebody – she rather hopes it will be the enemy (93 ff.) but fears it will be the children (118). Then Creon fears that Medea will harm him, his daughter and his son-in-law (282 ff.), and Medea actually plans to do precisely this, settling for a scheme to poison Creon and his family (374 ff.). The expectations of the audience thus raised are still strengthened when Medea tells of her former success in killing the dragon and murdering Pelias (480 ff.). Later she tells exactly how she is going to cause the death of the princess and kill her children (783 ff.). The chorus anticipates in two choral odes what will happen (846 ff., 976 ff.), Medea does the same in her famous monologue which gives her final decision (1021 ff.). Then comes the messenger's report of the death of Creusa and her father (1121 ff.), with grisly details of their suffering (1167 ff.). After that, Medea announces her intention of immediately murdering

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<sup>21</sup> For the authenticity see C. J. Herington, *The Author of the Prometheus Bound*, Austin, Texas 1970, S. Saïd, *Sophiste et tyran ou le problème du Prométhée enchaîné*, Études et commentaires 95, Paris 1985, and for an opposing view M. Griffith, *The Authenticity of Prometheus Bound*, Cambridge 1977.



the children (1236 ff.), and after a short anticipatory ode by the chorus (1251 ff.), the cries of the children are heard (1271 ff.). After all this preparation, there is no need for long explanations; Jason comes, fearing for the children's lives (1301 ff.), hears that he is too late (1306 ff.) and is immediately confronted by the triumphant Medea, who refuses to give him even the bodies of his children to bury (1317 ff.).

What act of showing the stabbing the children in front of the audience could equal this elaborately built-up sequence of violence, where the audience is led phase by phase through all the horrors of the four murders, compelled to experience them through the eyes and minds of all the different parties concerned? Such a construction and such a drama is not only the lucky result of the prescribed avoidance of a taboo – i.e. the taboo against the presentation of murders in the theatre – but a deliberate presentation of violence, by which the spectators are caught up in the Aristotelian pleasure of horror and pity – and even more than that, in the contemplation of violence.

In addition to the ways of presenting violence which I have discussed so far – violence acted on stage, violence reported, violence intended, anticipated, reacted upon – there is a very suggestive means used by the dramatists, namely the imagery of violence. This is a powerful tool to engage the emotions of the spectators, as for instance Euripides knows, when in the beginning of *Hecuba* he repeatedly flashes into the mind pictures of Polyxena seen as a young animal violently separated from her mother – she is compared to the calf of a deer (90 f.), to a young foal (142 f.) and to a calf (205 ff.), and in each case the mother is linked to this animal imagery by human references – human hands, bosom, etc.<sup>22</sup> This kind of characterization of violence by imagery is especially typical of Aeschylus, the form these images take often creating associations which otherwise are left unsaid. Thus, the violence of the *Oresteia* is from the beginning of the trilogy often clothed in images which repeat themselves and develop through the plays.<sup>23</sup> There is the omen of the two eagles devouring the pregnant hare in the parodos of the *Agamemnon* (114 ff.), the image of the tame lion cub turning into a murderous beast (717 ff.), Iphigenia sacrificed like a goat (231 ff.), the glaring light of crime (388 f.) and the

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<sup>22</sup> See Kaimio 80 n. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure*, Cambridge, Mass. 1971.

blood of murder which rains over Clytemnestra like dewdrops (1390 ff.) – all images which speak of the perverting force of violence and injustice, and which are normalized and healed in the end of the trilogy in the final song of the goddess Athene and the appeased Furies.<sup>24</sup>

I have spoken of the ways and means of presenting violence in tragedy; I shall now discuss some forms of violence presented in drama which, I think, cannot be easily connected with the notion of violence as a sacrificial ritual; there must in fact be other reasons for their prominence in drama. Firstly, the violence and cruelty of war are often foregrounded by the dramatists, both as a calamity bringing destruction to a whole community and as the cause of private loss and grief. Aeschylus and Euripides in particular paint great frescoes of war, which certainly reflect their own bitter experiences. Aeschylus' *Persae* is full of vivid details of death and mutilation in the messenger's reports of the defeat of the Persians (249 ff., 302–514), in the chorus' reactions (548 ff.), in Darius' prophecies (800 ff.), in the final lament of Xerxes (especially 950 ff.). This cannot be simply thought of as tales of the triumph of the Greeks: the grief and the horror are too real for that. In the *Seven Against Thebes*, Aeschylus lets the women of the chorus imagine the horrors of a sacked city (78 ff., 287 ff.), and in the *Agamemnon*, the smouldering ruins of Troy form the background of the victory, which has been very dearly bought by the Greeks (see especially 427 ff., 525 ff., 818 ff.). The defeat and sack of Troy are dealt with in two dramas of Euripides, the *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*. In the former, the despairing fates of the captured women are highlighted, but it is made clear from the beginning that the victors will derive no happiness from their triumph, either (65 ff.). In the latter drama, the demoralizing effects of the overwhelming tragedies of war are presented.<sup>25</sup> War in itself may be justified in tragedy, as it is, for example, in the defence of the Greeks against the Persians or the Thebans against the attackers in Aeschylus, but in many details the needless cruelty and impiety of the war is emphasized. With such deeds as for instance the killing of the baby

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<sup>24</sup> See e.g. S. Goldhill, *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: the Oresteia*, Cambridge 1984, 271 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Segal 1991 (see note 4) points out that Hecuba's predicted metamorphosis in the end "is the logical culmination of the motif of inner death that runs throughout the play" (p. 39).

Astyanax or the overturning of the gods' altars, man remains responsible, whatever the greater issues are.

Secondly, outside the sphere of war there is also much violence or threats of violence which is considered as cruelty and injustice by the victims, but sheer policy of sensible precaution by the perpetrator. Thus, the first part of Euripides' *Heracles* is dominated by the threat of Lycus, who has killed King Creon and usurped his throne and now wants to consolidate his power by killing Creon's daughter, her sons and, for a good measure, her old father-in-law. "This is not an outrage, but caution," he argues. "I don't want to leave them alive so that they could once take vengeance upon me for what I have done" (165 ff.). The same kind of policy leads Hermione in Euripides' *Andromache* to threaten to kill Andromache and her son, whom she feels to be a threat to her marriage to Neoptolemus. In both dramas, one is struck by the very simple and straightforward language used about this kind of violence. "You shall die" (*Andr.* 245), "I shall kill you" (440) are the kind of words Andromache is addressed with; nothing emotional, nothing mysterious, simply the sheer brutal politics of power. We can see here reflections of the disillusionment of the politics brought about by the Peloponnesian War, so powerfully described by Thucydides.

Thirdly, there are cases of violence which are unavoidable, since they are in some way caused by the gods. These belong to the most powerful sequences of events presented in Greek drama, and they could be thought to be good examples of the concealment of violence in the disguise of religion, as Girard argues in his theory. However, they are not in fact presented in this way in Greek drama. Take, for examples, Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia and Orestes' murder of his mother in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and the violence done in a fit of insanity by Ajax and Heracles in the plays of those names by Sophocles and Euripides.

Both Agamemnon's and Orestes' crimes are ordered by the gods and thus they cannot avoid the necessity of committing them. However, they must bear the guilt and face the consequences of their deed. Agamemnon's deed has caused great horror and consternation among his society, which is expressed in the choral songs (218 ff.), and has roused the wrath of his wife (1397 f., 1417 ff.). He is also presented as ruthless and needlessly cruel in other respects, in his behaviour in Troy (525 ff., 818 ff.), as well as in his homecoming (witness his acceptance of the red carpet and his bringing of Cassandra with him). Orestes has better moral cause to kill: it is at

least in search of justice when he avenges himself on his mother. However, his crime is so horrible that he is very nearly destroyed. At the end of the trilogy, harmony is attained when Orestes is acquitted by the voice of Athene and the Furies are placated by her, but although this harmony stops the chain of violence, it does not wipe away the memory of it.<sup>26</sup>

In Sophocles' *Ajax*, the hero is rendered insane by Athene and falls upon cattle, thinking he is killing and torturing his enemies. Thus, he should not be considered responsible for his violence, nor should it weigh so shamefully upon him when he awakens from his fit as to cause him to commit suicide. At the same time, however, he is responsible, because his fury is genuine, as is his delight in his cruelty towards his enemies. We see the same dilemma still more powerfully presented in the figure of Euripides' Heracles. He, too, is rendered insane by the gods, and commits the most dreadful crime of murdering his wife and children, whom he has just rescued from Lycus' violence. But there is a strain of real, human violence in the hero, which the poet forcefully emphasizes. His whole preceding career has consisted of violent battles with all kinds of monsters – albeit carried out to rescue humankind – (151 ff., 348 ff.), and when he hears of Lycus' threats against his family, he is roused to a fury of violence, promising to fill the rivers of Thebes with corpses and blood (565 ff.).

Thus we see that men cannot avoid the guilt of violence, even if they must commit it because of a divine intervention or an old family curse. This view presented by the tragedians does not fit in with the theory of the concealment of violence in the guise of religious fiction. Tragedy does not conceal violence, it exposes it; it tries to reconcile the violent strains in man with the need of order in the society, but it never completely succeeds – tragedy knows about this irreconcilable conflict and shows it.<sup>27</sup> It draws

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<sup>26</sup> Nor does this harmony promise an unconditionally happy future for the city, as Goldhill in his recent article (see note 4) points out (p. 26).

<sup>27</sup> This is to some extent admitted by Girard: "From the very fact that it belies the overt mythological messages, tragic drama opens a vast abyss before the poet; but he always draws back at the last moment ..." (135), "This crisis invites us, for the very first time, to violate the taboo that neither Heraclitus nor Euripides could quite manage to violate, and to expose to the light of reason the role played by violence in human society" (318). Of the recent accounts of tragic violence, Goff and Goldhill, in their different ways, both go further in admitting that religious concealment is not the effect of Greek tragedy. Goff emphasizes that "the ending [of the *Hippolytus*] holds the positive and negative ideas of the play in a tension that is not a balance, but that

from violence some of its most powerful effects by engaging the spectators' emotions, Aristotle's pity and fear, but it does still more: it forces the audience – both the Athenians and us today – into intellectual effort, so that we think about violence, question its validity, discard false pretexts for it, and assume responsibility for it.

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is rather a persistent oscillation ... One of the beginnings posited by the ending is a beginning to critical practice" (128). Goldhill emphasizes "the extraordinary process of the developing city setting its own developing system of thought at risk in the public arena, placing its language and institutions open to the violence of what Euripides calls 'the strife of warring words'" (26).

# MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON GERHARD JARITZ

SONDERBAND II

# CRUELITAS

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## Preface

The present volume is a collection of the papers read at the conference which was held in May 1991 at the University of Turku on the theme *The Politics of Cruelty in the Ancient and Medieval World*. The general aim of the conference was to advance interdisciplinary and international collaboration in the fields of humanistic studies and particularly to bring together scholars who have common interests in the study of our past. The choice of the subject of cruelty naturally resulted from different study projects concerning the political and social history of late antiquity and the Middle Ages – the Roman imperial propaganda, the conflict between paganism and christianity, the history of the Vandals, the Byzantine empires, the Medieval miracle stories, to name some of them. Perhaps also contemporary events had an influence on the idea that cruelty could be the theme which conveniently would unite those various interests. And the idea emerged irrespective of considerations whether or not we should search for models in the Ancient World or join those who, as it seems to have been a fashion, insist on investigating what we have common with the Middle Ages.

One might argue – and for a good reason indeed – that cruelty is a subject for anthropologists and psychologists, not for philologists and historians. Where does the student of history find reliable criteria for defining the notion of cruelty in order to judge the men of the past and their actions, to charge with cruelty not only individuals but also nations and even ages (“the *crudelitas imperatorum*”, “the Dark Ages”, “the violence of the Vikings”, “the cruel Muslims”)? Is it not so that the only possibility is to adapt our modern sensibilities to the past and to use our own prejudices in making judgements about others? The prejudices – yes, but this is just what makes the theme interesting for the historian because our prejudices – our conception of cruelty, for instance – are part of the heritage of past centuries. The events of our own day – maybe more clearly than ever – have demonstrated that we live in a historical world. When we investigate the history of the concept of cruelty we, as it were, look ourselves at a mirror and learn to understand ourselves better. The concept of cruelty has two sides. It is a subjective concept used to define and describe those persons

and those acts that according to the user of the term are negative, harmful, humiliating, harsh, inhumane, primitive and unnatural; in everyday life it is associated with religious habits – with crude remnants of primitive religion, it is associated with passion, an uncontrolled mental state, or with violence and with the exercise of power without justice. On the other hand the term is used to classify people by their ethical and social habits, to accuse, to invalidate and injure others; therefore the accusation of cruelty refers to basic features of ancient and also Medieval thought, to the fear of anything foreign, to the aggressive curiosity to define and subsume others simply by their otherness.

Such were the considerations which gave inspiration for arranging the “cruelty”-seminar. The conference was accommodated by the Archipelago Institute of the University of Turku, in the island Seili (“Soul island”), in an environment of quiet beauty of the remote island and sad memories of the centuries when people attacked by a cruel fate, lepers or mentally ill, were banished there from the civilized community.

The conference was organized by the Department of Classics of the University of Turku in collaboration with the Departments of Cultural History and Italian language and culture of the same university. It is a pleasure to us to be able to thank here all those who helped to make the congress possible. We would like especially to express our gratitude to Luigi de Anna and Hannu Laaksonen for their assistance in preparing and carrying out the practical arrangements. The financial assistance given by the Finnish Academy and by the Turku University Foundation was also indispensable. Finally, we close by expressing our gratitude to Gerhard Jaritz, the editor of the *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* for the *Gesellschaft für Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters*, for his kind co-operation and for accepting this collection of papers to be published as a supplement to the series of the studies on the Medieval everyday life. One of the starting-points for organizing the “cruelty”-conference was the firm conviction that the Graeco-Roman Antiquity did not end with the beginning of the Middle Ages, but these two eras form a continuum in many respects, and the continuity was felt not only in the literary culture, in the Greek and Latin languages which were still used, but also in the political, social and religious structures of the Middle Ages. We think that this continuity is amply demonstrated by the studies of the present volume.

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