



The Mourning Voice: An Essay on Greek Tragedy. Nicole Loraux. Translated from the French by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings. Cornell University Press. 2002. ISBN 0-8014-3830-6. Pp. xv+127.

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In this essay based on her 1993 Townsend lectures delivered at Cornell University, Nicole Loraux (L.) puts forward the provocative thesis that tragedy is an *anti-political* genre. She defines *anti-political* as “any behavior that diverts, rejects, or threatens, consciously or not, the obligations and prohibitions constituting the ideology of the city-state” (p.26). While not wishing to deny that tragedy maintains close ties with civic life, L. chooses instead to take as her starting point the question of what tragedy *sounded* like. In this respect, she focuses on the sounds of mourning, which have to a great extent been banished from public display except in the theater. L.’s essay begins with a highly politicized interpretation of Greek tragedy—Sartre’s adaptation of Euripides’ *Trojan Women*—and ends, on a much more lyrical note, with L.’s homage to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. The trajectory between these two points covers such diverse topics as Athenian topography, different meanings of the adverb *aei*, the foreign origins of the *aulos*, and the relationship between Apollo and Dionysus. The chapters retain signs of their original genesis as lectures and stand on their own as self-contained texts; yet taken together they offer a subtle and wide-ranging analysis of mourning, from its most basic aural components to its influence on the form and reception of Greek tragedy. One of the many virtues of L.’s work is that it cannot be easily summarized. In what follows,

nevertheless, I shall offer a brief outline of the chapters and some reflections on the place of this study within the current critical landscape.

In the first chapter, L. reads Sartre's *Trojan Women* alongside Euripides' play and focuses on the changes that have been made to the original production. Sartre's 1965 production systematically replaces all the choral stasima with dialogue and erases the repetitive mourning that is distinctive of Euripides' play. The effect, according to L., is a radical shift in the "tone" and metrical structure of tragedy. The changes that he has made are symptomatic Sartre's chiefly political concerns in adapting the play: he writes at a moment of crisis and as a means of intervention in war-time politics, a protest against the Vietnam war. Sartre, like many contemporary readers of tragedy, chooses to ignore the features of tragedy—its musicality and choral songs—that are for L. definitive of the genre. As such, his play serves as a useful foil for Greek tragedy, which as her work aims to show, "is not *only* politics" (p. 16).

In Chapter 2, L. focuses on the theater of Dionysus' physical separation from political spaces within the city. While there has been a tendency to view the theater audience as a direct reflection of the citizen body, L. cautions against this analogy which erases important differences: the theater audience comprised non-Athenians and possibly women and slaves as well. Moreover, the tragic chorus most often plays the role of non-citizens. Unlike many other *poleis*, which did keep their theaters in the agora, both the theater and the assembly leave the Athenian agora for their own spaces at the end of 6th-beginning of 5th c. BCE. It is important to recognize what this spatial divide signifies in terms of tragedy's role in the eyes of the city.

The theater of Dionysus offers a space to receive what has been excluded from other civic discourses. In Chapter 3, L. shifts her focus from the broad panorama of Athenian topography to the details of language; specifically, she examines the staging of a conflict between the political and the tragic through the adverb *aei*. When used in a political context (e.g. in book three of Aristotle's *Politics*), *aei* (loosely translated as "without interruption") qualifies the unchanging nature of a people or a city, despite the succession of generations. Not surprisingly, the word can be used to gloss over difficult transitions: "...recourse to *aei* clearly proves most effective—performative somehow, an incantation, in any case—when some temporal break has occurred in the life of a city-state; the term is used to suggest that, in and by means of the succession of archons, beyond the vicissitudes that have shaken its unity...what is being perpetuated is the city-state itself, one and always the same"

(p.29). In tragedy, the timelessness of *aei* refers not to the events or institutions of mortals, but rather to the time of the gods and of cult. Whereas mortals must live according to *tuchê*, divine affairs are governed by the regularity and immutability of *aei*, to which tragic heroes (particularly Sophocles' heroes) can only aspire. Different meanings of *aei* come together in the character of Sophocles' Electra, who in her ceaseless mourning gives voice to the repetition and permanence of grief. On L.'s reading, the aural resonances between *aei/ aiei* and the inarticulate cries of mourning (*ai ai*) are not to be dismissed lightly. In this way, the grief banished from private houses by civic legislation restricting mourning comes back unrestrained, in the tragic voice of *aei/ ai ai*. This is a case where sound is hardly irrelevant. Whereas in the language of prose "meaning takes precedence over sound," in tragic language sound *is* meaning. "For looking into *ai ai*," L. summarizes, "introduces us to a world in which there is no meaning other than sound itself" (p.39).

The contrast between the funeral oration and tragedy is explored in greater depth in Chapter 4. In the context of the funeral oration, the death of others (non-Greeks) serves as a eulogy for the bravery of Athenians. All *andres* are Athenian citizens; and mourning is subsumed almost completely by feelings of joy and delight in ones own victory. Tragedy, by contrast, stages suffering in such a way that allows identification, or recognition, of oneself in the lamentation of others. It expands the definition of *andres* from the civic self, to the broader category of "mortal" and in this way "reappropriates a vision of the human proper to lyric poetry" (p.51).

But to what extent is tragedy the legitimate heir to the tradition of lyric poetry? In Chapters 5 and 6, L. looks at the contrast between Dionysus and Apollo as expressed through their musical instruments. Songs of mourning are not accompanied by the lyre, but rather by the *aulos*, an instrument represented as having foreign (Phrygian) origins, at least within the lyric tradition. The *thrênos* is a lyre-less song. In a mixing of genres and sounds that is typical of tragedy, the strains of the lyre and the *aulos* become confused; hymns and paeans are contaminated with sounds of mourning. The cry *Ie*, typically linked to the *paeon*, also expresses pain; and *iakkhê* and *euoi* invoke both Dionysus and Apollo. As Nietzsche realized more than a century ago, tragedy is born out of the conflict between Apollo and Dionysus, and consequently belongs to neither god exclusively. The final two chapters explore this dual heritage

and its evidence in the ambiguous sounds and ritual cries in which tragedy abounds.

It is not new to see tragedy as the genre that appropriates other genres and negotiates seemingly irreconcilable tensions. Indeed, such a summary risks reducing L.'s insights to a reaffirmation of Jean-Pierre Vernant's classic exposition of "tension and ambiguity" in tragedy. What is unique to L.'s analysis is her willingness to discard what has become the usual starting point for readings of tragedy, that is, its complex relationship to the official civic bodies of Athens, and to go after the much more elusive meanings of sound. And in doing so, she aims for more than simple categorization of binary opposites. L. is drawn, rather, to the places where opposites overlap and definitions—between self and other, citizen and foreigner, pain and joy, reality and mimesis—dissolve. To be a spectator at the theater of Dionysus is, above all, to transcend these categories.