

BOOK REVIEW

Performing Oaths in Classical Greek Drama. By JUDITH FLETCHER. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 277. Hardcover, £60.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-76273-1.

“Speech acts” are familiar in many areas of classical studies, but there has been no systematic work in the arena where they loom largest, Greek drama. Judith Fletcher’s book fills a big part of that gap. The focus is not performance in the usual sense but oaths as “performatives.” As J. L. Austin defined them in his lectures of 1955, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, 1962), these are sayings that enact the very actions they proclaim, as when one says “I do” (or the like) at a marriage, or “I give and bequeath” in leaving a legacy. Oaths and curses are perhaps the most potent of these performatives. An oath-taker swears to do thus and such or suffer the consequences, and the very pronouncement makes that pattern of action a reality. Of course much depends on circumstances: does the speaker follow an accepted procedure, correctly and completely? Is he (or she) properly qualified, and is the speech act made with the clear commitment to carry it out, not as a joke or ploy? Violating any of these conditions renders the performative “infelicitous,” not necessarily void but dubious. This framework is essential to Fletcher’s approach. For much of ancient drama seems to revolve around oaths that are infelicitous in that Austinian sense: the (per)formative declarations of young men coming of age, the oaths sworn or invoked by designing women, the ploys of cheats and conniving servants.

For background and comparative material Fletcher draws upon the Nottingham Oath Project and the volume of conference papers, *Horkos*, that she co-edited with Alan Sommerstein (Exeter, 2007). She begins with an introduction to the archaic paradigm, focusing on the oaths that frame the *Iliad*. For Achilles is fully qualified and committed to his vows, and the main action of the epic follows that program. From the *Oresteia* to *Lysistrata*, the oaths of drama also drive the plot, but the circumstances prove rather less felicitous.

Oath-taking is a gesture of gender and authority. A man swears upon his standing in the group and the favor of god, and he wagers his very *genos*. The “cut pieces” of the sacrificial victim may have included the testicles, and the oath-taker

who stands in this bloody mess is reminded of what is at risk (46–7). The tale of Glaucus, who asked the oracle if he might falsely swear to be rid of a debt, brings home the implication (Hdt. 6.86): the Pythia warned that the offspring of such an oath is nameless and limbless but snatches up the whole house. Glaucus abandoned his scam but the very idea doomed his progeny.

Tragedy often turns upon infelicities that create suspense but end well enough. Thus in the *Oresteia* (Ch. 1), the young man, scarcely his own master, has sworn to Apollo to avenge his father, but he has a moment of hesitation (*Choe.* 899). The doubtful commitment frames the plot that defines the character. That success of the oath, as the ephebe becomes *anēr*, also defines Hyllus in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and Neoptolemos in *Philoctetes* (Ch. 2).

Euripides mastered a different kind of plot, weaving doubtful oaths into disaster (Ch. 6). In *Medea*, after all, the complication builds upon the oath that Jason has already forsworn, and the peripety comes with the oath that Medea demands of Aegeus, when she recognizes in him the plight of a man without sons. *Hippolytus* similarly turns upon an oath solicited by a conniving woman (the nurse), all the more infelicitous as it is sworn by a celibate *nothos* who promptly reconsiders. Fletcher's analysis of the plot (190–4) is intriguing and suggests how the peripety was staged: if Phaedra is indeed at hand to hear Hippolytus compromise his vow of silence before the chorus, it makes the unraveling all the more inevitable and ironic. This self-righteous youth would never violate his oath, but, like Glaucus, he damns himself by the mere suggestion.

Comedy similarly builds upon performatives, and the parallel plot device opens the stage to intertextual gags. Here Fletcher's findings are especially insightful. Thus in *Thesmophoriazusae* (Ch. 7), the point of the parody is not that Euripides disrespects the gods but that he builds his plots around outrageous infelicities. The action of *Clouds* also revolves around oaths perversely rendered (Ch. 5). But Aristophanes' masterpiece oath-play is *Lysistrata* (Ch. 8); for the women's pledge in the prologue guides the plot to the end, where the men negotiate over naked Reconciliation and then must plight their troth to recover the "hostages."

Along the way there are a few disappointments. Performatives in tragedy make us ponder the puzzle of agency (111): do "speech acts cause action or reflect a more potent force?" Oedipus and Creon wrestle with that overdetermined reality, and we expect Fletcher (in Ch. 3) to explore their recognition, as they face the curses they called down in ignorance; but she barely hints at that arc from oath to *anagnōrisis*. In comedy, of course, we can dispense with determinism but

we don't want to miss the stage directions: so in the tease scene in *Lysistrata*, Myrrhine should be swearing to Kinesias (917–18) that “she cannot just <let him> lie on the ground”—woman on top (correcting p. 237). But, however we construe the infelicities, this book is an important contribution to the way we understand ancient Athens, as a culture defined by devices of discourse.

EDWIN CARAWAN

Missouri State University, ECarawan@MissouriState.edu