

BOOK REVIEW

Pollution and Crisis in Greek Tragedy. By FABIAN MEINEL. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 278. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-04446-3.

Fabian Meinel's book is essentially a literary study of Greek tragedy organized around the theme of pollution, which is identified as either a central topic or a vehicle for exploring the central topic of many tragedies. The potential of such an approach is obvious, given the plenitude of violence and transgression (and thus pollution) in Greek tragedy.

Meinel sensibly resists adopting a single, rigid definition of "pollution," which he wants to use to explore a variety of ideas in a variety of tragedies. It is unfortunate, however, that he gives no definition at all beyond a promise to consider the "qualities, functions, and associations" of pollution in each tragedy. As one proceeds through the book, it becomes clear that Meinel favors a traditional strategy of close reading based on key words, often *μίασμα* and its cognates; it is less clear whether terms like *ἀνόσιος* and *κηλίς* denote pollution for his purposes, and some discussion of terminology would have been welcome. Moreover, "pollution" is interpreted very broadly, including not only ritual defilement but also such things as unconventional attitudes and inherited misfortune. While I am sympathetic to Meinel's desire not to lock such diverse tragedies into one interpretative mold, I wonder whether some flexible definition of pollution could have been devised to prepare the reader more effectively for these moves.

After the introduction are four chapters and a short conclusion. In this space, Meinel presents readings of eight tragedies by the three major playwrights. The overarching purpose seems to be to demonstrate the versatility of "pollution" as an interpretative tool: discussions focus on how this idea intersects with and accentuates problems of epistemology (Eur. *Hipp.*, Soph. *OT*), civic stability (Soph. *Ant.*), justice (Aesch. *Oresteia*, Eur. *IT*), and collective self-identity (Aesch. *Supp.*, Soph. *OC*, Eur. *Ion*).

For the first chapter, Meinel has selected two plays in which characters wrestle with questions of causality. Phaedra's passion for her stepson is shown to be somehow a matter of pollution; Meinel's reading puts considerable weight, per-

haps too much, on the “miasma of Phaedra’s mind” (*Hipp.* 317). Whatever the nature of her pollution, it spreads to Hippolytus, who is wrongly called polluted but shows his alienation from society, which is often marked by pollution, in his misogynistic rant. (Of course, Hippolytus’ “polluted” attitude toward women is inextricably bound up with his extreme sexual purity...) While in *Hippolytus* pollution assaults people from outside, in *OT μίαισμα*, which is initially used of the plague and its cause, comes to be applied ironically to Oedipus himself: his pollution is inherent, and ultimately even this designation is insufficient to describe his condition.

The next chapter prefaces a reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone* with discussion of civic stability, symbolized especially by walls and laws; pollution is simultaneously transgressive of boundaries (and thus a threat to stability) and constrained by law. Though the emphasis on written and unwritten laws may lead the reader to expect a focus on Antigone in the literary analysis, Meinel is more interested in Creon, who evinces an obsession with stability and categorization to the point of trying to control the pollution caused by Polyneices’ rotting body; the tragedy of the play revolves around his failure to control the uncontrollable.

Chapter 3 is to my mind the most disappointing simply because so much space is devoted to developing rather conventional conclusions. The first section establishes that Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* is centrally concerned with two types of justice (vigilante and legal); that pollution automatically attends each murder; that ritual purification is insufficient to remove this pollution; and that, until the institution of legal justice, pollution can only be removed by further murder. Meinel then explores how these ideas are manipulated in Euripides’ *IT*, concluding that that play’s self-consciousness exposes both Orestes’ pollution and Iphigenia’s attempt at purification as mere poetic constructs, which in turn allows the play to be properly “tragic.”

The final chapter is surely the most successful, perhaps because the topic is no longer pollution but (im)purity, which is a more flexible term and therefore easier to relate to non-ritual themes. Discussion centers on the concepts of ethnic purity and civic identity when a community is approached by an outsider. Aeschylus’ Danaids base their identity on “female inviolability,” which they move away from when they enter the Argive community—which then has to redefine its own sense of ethnic purity. Sophocles’ Oedipus arrives at Colonus in a ritually liminal state, pure enough to make an offering to the Semnai Theai but still somehow marred by his past crimes. This liminality is reflected in his physical position between Athens and the sacred grove and his incorporation into the

Athenian community as a not-quite citizen (ξέμπολις). Finally, Euripides' *Ion* is characterized by purity through his association with Apollo, the Pythia, and the sanctuary; though he must also surrender his extreme purity that separates him from society, his true identity turns out to be ethnically purer than his earlier identity as a foreign slave.

Overall Meinel has a number of interesting points to make in his discussions of individual passages, but I am not entirely convinced of what pollution really has to contribute to a reading of Greek tragedy. Many interpretations presented here are fairly standard: few will be surprised to learn that the Creon of Sophocles' *Antigone* is excessively controlling or that *IT* is self-conscious about its own inventiveness. But Meinel deserves credit for thoroughly examining what is unquestionably a critical theme in tragedy.

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