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“The Tragic Day”

At a critical moment of Aristophanes’ comedy *Thesmophoriazusae* (*The Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria*), Euripides, who is a character in the play, expresses acute dread lest the assembly of women condemn him to death. He cries out in terror, ὦ Ζεῦ, τί δρᾶσαι διανοεῖ με **τῆμερον**; (“O Zeus, what do you mean to do to me **today?**” 71).¹ And only a few lines later, he returns to the subject of this day to proclaim, **τῆδε θῆμέρα** κριθήσεται | εἴτ’ ἔστ’ ἔτι ζῶν εἴτ’ ἀπόλωλ’ Εὐριπίδης (“**This very day** it will be adjudged: does Euripides live on, or is he a goner?” 76–77). Then immediately afterwards he goes on once again to explain his situation: αἱ γὰρ γυναικες ἐπιβεβουλεύκασί μοι | κἀν Θεσμοφόροι μὲλλουσι περὶ μου **τῆμερον** | ἐκκλησιάζειν ἐπ’ ὀλέθρῳ (“The women, you see, have devised a plot against me, and **today** in the sanctuary of the Two Thesmophoroi they’re going to hold an assembly on the question of my destruction.” 82–84). And a hundred lines later he returns yet again to the same topic: μέλλουσί μ’ αἱ γυναικες ἀπολεῖν **τῆμερον** | τοῖς Θεσμοφορίοις, ὅτι κακῶς αὐτὰς λέγω (“The women at the Thesmophoria are preparing to destroy me **this very day**, because I slander them.” 181–182).

Obviously, Euripides is extremely worried about what might happen to him, and not about what might happen to him some day in the imaginable future, but in particular about what seems likely to be about to happen to him on the very same day during the course of which we happen to encounter him expressing this worry. His repeated references to that specific day are made all the more emphatic by being placed conspicuously in every instance, either at the beginning of the sentence or at the end of the line. These references are manifestly not random or insignificant: they are indicating what is for Euripides a crucial part of the perilous situation in which he finds himself. He is in mortal danger: and what is more, today is the very day on which that danger is coming to a head. Not only is this danger associated with this day: the two seem to be inextricably and essentially linked with one another.

This comic episode featuring the tragic poet Euripides belongs to what are called the “paratragic” scenes of ancient Greek comedies – that is, scenes that parody the conventions and language of the ancient Greek tragedies that were staged in the same years, and sometimes in the very same theaters and festivals and usu-

1 Greek texts and English translations of this play are taken from Henderson (2014).

ally before the very same audiences, as the comedies were.² These scenes, which occur with some frequency in the plays of Old Comedy, provide one convenient way to find out how ordinary audiences in ancient Athens understood the tragedies that they regularly watched in their theaters, for the comic poets were hoping to raise a laugh by caricaturing aspects of tragedies that their own audiences would find immediately recognizable as characteristic of tragedy.³ Such aspects were not funny in the tragedies themselves – indeed, they could contribute powerfully to the tragic effects that convulsed and enthralled spectators. But once they were taken out of the context of the tragedies in which they had been so effective and were inserted instead into the alien and ludicrous framework of comedies, they could suddenly reveal themselves to be bizarre and hence potentially risible phenomena. That is, the laughter of the comic poet, and that of the comic audience, could serve metatheatrically to thematize the literary, unrealistic character of the tragic conventions and thereby to unmask them as being fundamentally “funny,” in both senses of the English word: as being peculiar or odd, and thereby as inciting laughter.

If Aristophanes’ Euripides had only referred once to this fateful day, his words might have been overlooked or discounted. But as it is, his references are repeated and conspicuous. So this gag surely suggests that Aristophanes and his viewers were able to recognize references to that day as being especially typical of tragedy – that is, that it was especially characteristic of tragedies to focus the spectators’ attention upon that single and particular day on which the tragic crisis either seemed to be about to happen or else was indeed in the very course of happening. This day we can call “the tragic day.” It is the one day that is selected by tragedy out of all the thousands of days that make up this month and this year and all the years of time, as the only day on which the tragic catastrophe can happen, must happen, and therefore inevitably will happen. Euripides was a celebrated and controversial tragic poet; in Aristophanes’ comedy he suddenly discovers that he is a tragic character in his very own tragedy, not one that he has composed but one in which he is himself the mortally endangered protagonist. He suddenly realizes that the tragic day is not only a literary trope, but also, for him, in this comic fantasy, a life-threatening experience.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses a different but closely related aspect of the tragic day. Comparing tragedy with epic, he writes,

2 The basic treatment remains Rau (1967).

3 For another example of the use of comic paratragedy to identify an element ancient Greek audiences would have recognized as being typical of tragedy, cf. Most (2013).

ἡ μὲν οὖν ἐποποιία τῇ τραγωδίᾳ μέχρι μὲν τοῦ μετὰ μέτρου λόγῳ μίμησις εἶναι σπουδαίων ἠκολούθησεν· τῷ δὲ τὸ μέτρον ἀπλοῦν ἔχειν καὶ ἀπαγγελίαν εἶναι, ταύτῃ διαφέρουσιν· ἔτι δὲ τῷ μήκει· ἡ μὲν ὅτι μάλιστα πειράται ὑπὸ **μίαν περίοδον ἡλίου** εἶναι ἢ μικρόν ἐξαλλάττειν, ἡ δὲ ἐποποιία ἀόριστος τῷ χρόνῳ καὶ τούτῳ διαφέρει, καίτοι τὸ πρῶτον ὁμοίως ἐν ταῖς τραγω-
δίαις τοῦτο ἐποίουν καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἔπεσιν.

Epic matches tragedy to the extent of being mimesis of elevated matters in metrical language; but they differ in that epic has an unchanging metre and is in narrative mode. They also differ in length: tragedy tends so far as possible to stay within **a single revolution of the sun**, or close to it, while epic is unlimited in time span and is distinctive in this respect (though to begin with the poets followed this same practice in tragedy as in epic). (*Poetics* 5 1449b12–16)⁴

Aristotle’s point is somewhat different from Euripides’ in the *Thesmophoriazusae*. Euripides’ concern with the tragic day is focused on the menace that *this one present day*, in contrast to any other day, offers to his very survival. His worry is that this will be his last day, that the whole future length of his life will be one day or even less. Aristotle, instead, is thinking about the length of a day, and is arguing that tragedy, unlike epic, tries to limit its action to the duration of *a single day*, whatever day that might happen to be. For Euripides, the day, by reason of its presentness, confronts him with a terrifying threat in its immediacy and urgency. For Aristotle, what matters is that the duration of a single day is long enough to encompass a whole action – evidently, he is presupposing here the concept of a single, unified action as comprising a beginning, a middle, and an end, which he elaborates a few pages later (*Poetics* 7 1450b23–34). And yet these two understandings of the tragic day are clearly connected with one another. What makes the tragic day tragic for Euripides is his dread that the misfortune it contains, and indeed his life in its entirety, will conclude as a whole once and for all before the end of that same day. Thus both his conception and Aristotle’s revolve centrally around the postulated finality of a completed tragic event: the difference is that Euripides emphasizes its urgent proximity, Aristotle its limited duration.

Aristotle’s claim that tragedy “tends so far as possible” to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, “or close to it,” was most likely not intended as a prescriptive rule to which he was requiring future poets of tragedy to adhere as far as possible – though precisely this was how this sentence tended to be understood by the French and Italian Neoclassical theoreticians of tragedy, who partly based upon it their demand that tragedians obey the three unities of time, place, and action.⁵ Instead, it seems to be descriptive and to be indicating a general tendency

4 The Greek text and English translations of this treatise are taken from Halliwell, Fyfe, Innes (1995).

5 E.g., Robortello (1968, 50).

which was not always respected but which underwent a historical development towards greater restrictiveness in this regard.

In fact, this description, so understood, is confirmed by most of the surviving Greek tragedies: by far the greater number of these contain an action that takes place from beginning to end within the compass of a single day.⁶ Indeed, some tragedies indicate explicitly that the start of the play's action coincides with daybreak: thus the prologue of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* takes place in the last hours of the night before daybreak, as the watchman's first speech, invoking the stars of the nightly heavens, makes clear (1–19); but we can be certain that the day has begun by line 508, when the messenger greets the risen sun.

In the tragedies that were composed by the real tragic poet Euripides (as distinguished from the fictional tragic poet Euripides who is a character in several of Aristophanes' comedies), it occasionally happens that, after the catastrophe, someone points out how lamentable the day that all have just experienced has been: so for example the Nurse in the *Andromache* exclaims, "My dear ladies, how disaster follows upon disaster **this day** (ἐν τῆδ' ἡμέρᾳ 803)!" 802–803).⁷ But even more characteristic of Euripides' tragedies are prologues in which the speaker foreshadows the events to come by announcing that the day on which the action is going to take place will be decisive – surely Euripides favors this device because in this way the audience are put into a state of anxious anticipation and suspense. The conspicuous placement of these announcements at the very beginning of the plays in question must have struck spectators as being typical of Euripides: in this regard, Aristophanes' caricature is quite accurate. Thus at the beginning of the *Alcestis* Apollo says about the heroine, "She is now on the point of death, held up by the arms of her family within the house, for it is **on this day** (τῆδε [...] ἐν ἡμέρᾳ 20) that she is fated to die" (19–21), and he adds a few lines later, when he sees Death approaching for her, "He has arrived punctually, watching for **today** (τόδ' ἡμαρ 27) when she must die." (24–27) So too, in the opening of the *Hippolytus*, Aphrodite, enraged with Hippolytus, declares, "Yet for his sins against me I shall **this day** (ἐν τῆδ' ἡμέρᾳ 22) punish Hippolytus. I have long since come far with my plans, and I need little further effort." (21–23) In the prologue of *Hecuba*, Polydorus says of Polyxena, "For fate is leading my sister to her death **on this day** (τῷδ' [...] ἐν ἡματι 44)." (43–44) And Electra announces at the beginning of the *Orestes* the fate that on that very day impends for Orestes and herself:

Argos has decreed that no one is to receive us under his roof or at his fireside or even speak to us since we are matricides. And **this is the appointed day** (κυρία δ' ἡδ' ἡμέρα 48) on which

⁶ Schwindt (1994).

⁷ Greek texts and English translations of Euripides are taken from Kovacs (1994–2002).

the city will vote whether we two must die by stoning [or someone must whet a sword and thrust it upon our necks]. (46–51)

It is noteworthy that in most of these examples the day in question has not been chosen at random but has been assigned by fate – and by the same token, the event that is scheduled to transpire on that day cannot be postponed or annulled by any merely human agency but is instead just as fixed and inalterable as the destiny that has imposed it. Moreover, the event that will happen on this day is generally not just any everyday occurrence, but the most important occurrence of all: an impending death, and not that of just anyone, but rather the death of one of the principal characters of the play. The tragic day is tragic not only because it is typical of tragedy, but also because it is involved in a circumstance that is peculiarly characteristic of tragedies: death.

Euripides’ *Medea* makes a particularly novel and interesting use of this topic of the tragic day. Medea has been banished from Corinth by King Creon, who fears what she might do to him and to those he loves if she remains in the city. But she manages to persuade him to give her a respite of a single day so that she can put her affairs into order:

Allow me to remain **this one day** (μίαν [...] τήνδ’ [...] ἡμέραν 340) and to complete my plans for exile and how I may provide for my children, since their father does not care to do so. (340–343)

She appeals to his most humane sentiments, his pity and his sense of guilt for his involvement in Jason’s mistreatment of her. Creon accedes to this request – after all, he might wonder, quite reasonably, what harm could she possibly do him in a single day? But his sympathy with her is not unlimited: he warns her, “if **tomorrow’s sun** (ἡ ’πιούσα λαμπάς [...] θεοῦ 352) sees you and your children within the borders of this land, you will be put to death.” (352–354)

And yet as it will turn out, by granting her this concession at the same time he is signing the warrant of his and his daughter’s death. As soon as he leaves the stage, Medea gloats:

But he has reached such a pitch of folly that, while it lay in his power to check my plans by banishing me, he has permitted me to stay **for this day** (τήνδ’ [...] ἡμέραν 373), a day on which I shall make corpses of three of my enemies, the father, his daughter, and my husband. (371–375)

Creon was a victim of the illusion that this present day was a day just like any other one, a day which he could grant as an apparently harmless respite to Medea without changing his own situation in the least. This might have been

the case had Creon been living in the ordinary world; what he has failed to realize is that in fact he is a character in a tragedy, and that his perfectly understandable but in fact catastrophic decision to give Medea a grace period for a single day will transform that day from an ordinary one into a tragic day. His free but blind decision to ease Medea's situation slightly for a single day was sufficient to plunge him and his whole household into irremediable disaster.

In Sophocles too the tragic day recurs often, though perhaps somewhat less mechanically and predictably than it does in Euripides. In *Oedipus the King*, Teiresias' altercation with Oedipus climaxes in the seer's predicting enigmatically, "**This day** (ἡδ' ἡμέρα) shall be your parent and your destroyer." (438)⁸ And after the catastrophe has been revealed to all, the Second Messenger comments on what has happened in words that echo and explain Teiresias' prediction:

These horrors burst forth not from one person, but brought commingled grief to man and woman. Their earlier happiness was truly happiness; but now in **this day** (τῆδε θῆμέρα 1283) lamentation, ruin, death, shame, all ills that can be named, none of them is absent. (1280–1285)

In *The Trachinian Women*, once Hyllus has seen Heracles begin to suffer the mortal torments that Deianeira's poisoned gift inflicts upon him, the son bitterly accuses his mother, "Know that on **this day** (τῆδ' ἐν ἡμέρα 740) you have killed your husband – yes, my father!" (739–740)

In most of the Sophoclean examples, the tragic day is not announced from the very beginning, as it is in Euripides; instead, the terminology tends to be applied retrospectively to events only once their full catastrophic dimensions have become unmistakably clear. Teiresias is the sole character who is privy to the kind of superhuman knowledge that would permit him, like many Euripidean characters, to forecast the coming tragedy as being inevitable; Sophocles' characters tend instead to be imprisoned within an insuperably limited degree of merely human knowledge and hence they are capable of recognizing their true predicament only later, much too late.

The *Ajax* provides a partial exception that in the end confirms this rule. It turns out late in this play that Athena is furious at Ajax and will ensure his death, but that this can happen exclusively on this one day. Ultimately this knowledge derives from the seer Calchas; but it is transmitted only by an anonymous human messenger, who warns that Ajax must be kept indoors for that one day if he is to survive it:

⁸ Greek texts and English translations of Sophocles are taken from Lloyd-Jones (1994).

So much as this I know, since I was there. Calchas moved away on his own from the group assembled around the commanders, apart from the sons of Atreus, placed his hand in Teucer's in friendly fashion, and spoke, charging him by every means to keep Ajax in the hut during **this present day** (κατ' ἡμᾶρ τοῦμωφανῆς τὸ νῦν τόδε 753) and not to let him out, if he wished ever to see him alive. For the anger of divine Athena shall pursue him **for this day only** (τήνδ' [...] ἡμέραν μόνην 756), so Calchas said. (748–757)

Why Athena's anger has such a short effective duration, and why she would not be capable of destroying Ajax even if he remained within his hut, are questions that the play does not pause to answer, or even to pose. Instead, the messenger repeats over and over again the urgency of the danger posed by this one day: “By such words as these he brought on himself the unappeasable anger of the goddess, through his more than mortal pride. But if he is still alive **this day** (τῆςδ' [...] ἡμέρα 778), perhaps with a god's help we may preserve him.” (776–779); Tecmessa: “Ah me, from what man did he learn this?” Messenger: “From the prophet who is son of Thestor, a word that on **this day** (καθ' ἡμέραν | τὴν νῦν 801–802) brings death or life for him.” (800–802) But of course this news comes much too late to be of any use: for by the time we hear these words, Ajax has already left the hut and gone out to the place where in the very next episode he will kill himself. Here alone in these examples from Sophocles can humans attain some degree of a superhuman level of knowledge – but they can do so only indirectly and futilely, for by the time the divine message reaches them it is far too late for them to be able to apply it in such a way as to prevent the tragic outcome.

How is this tragic focus on the tragic day to be explained? The question has been much discussed in the history of the study of Greek tragedy, and various possible answers have been proposed, among them the following:

- *Focalization of attention and intensification of dramatic suspense.* As Aristotle suggests, one of the ways in which tragedy is superior to epic is its greater restriction of the temporal duration of its action:

ἔτι τῷ ἐν ἐλάττονι μήκει τὸ τέλος τῆς μιμήσεως εἶναι (τὸ γὰρ ἀθροώτερον ἥδιον ἢ πολλῶ κεκραμένον τῷ χρόνῳ, λέγω δ' οἷον εἴ τις τὸν Οἰδίπουν θεῖη τὸν Σοφοκλέους ἐν ἔπεσιν ὄσοις ἢ Ἰλιάς).

Also, tragedy excels by achieving the goal of its mimesis in a shorter scope; greater concentration is more pleasurable than dilution over a long period: suppose someone were to arrange Sophocles' *Oedipus* in as many hexameters as the *Iliad*. (*Poetics* 26 1462b1–3)

By concentrating all the action into the brief compass of a single day, the tragic poet heightens the urgency of his plot and increases the suspense felt by the characters, chorus, and presumably audience. We might describe this as a *psychological* or *psychagogical* explanation.

- *Ephemerality as the fundamental condition of human existence.* It is a commonplace of early Greek thought that humans, unlike gods, do not enjoy a stable condition but that their whole life can be changed entirely by the events of a single day; this radical inconstancy is referred to by Pindar and other poets as human ephemerality.⁹ This is what Athena is indicating at the beginning of Sophocles' *Ajax* when she draws the lesson from Ajax's downfall and says to Odysseus,

Look, then, at such things, and never yourself utter an arrogant word against the gods, nor assume conceit because you outweigh another in strength or in profusion of great wealth. Know that **a single day** (ἡμέρα 131) brings down or raises up again all mortal things, and the gods love those who think sensibly and detest offenders! (127–133)

So too, the Nurse in the same poet's *Trachinian Women* interprets the downfall of Deianeira in the same moral terms: "That is how things stand here; so that if anyone reckons on **two days or more** (δύο | ἢ κατὰ πλείους ἡμέρας 943–944), he is acting foolishly, for there is no **tomorrow** (αὔριον 945) till one has got through **today** (τὴν παροῦσαν ἡμέραν 946) in happiness." (943–947) By limiting his dramatic action to a single day, the tragic poet reminds his human spectators of the fact that they cannot count on their current condition as lasting any longer than that. This explanation, by contrast with the first one, is *anthropological* and *ontological*.

- *The continuous presence of the chorus.* Lessing proposed a concrete *dramaturgical* or *technical* explanation for this concentration of tragedy on a single action in a single time and place:

Die Einheit der Handlung war das erste dramatische Gesetz der Alten; die Einheit der Zeit und die Einheit des Ortes waren gleichsam nur Folgen aus jener, die sie schwerlich strenger beobachtet haben würden, als es jene notwendig erfordert hätte, wenn nicht die Verbindung des Chors dazu gekommen wäre. Da nämlich ihre Handlungen eine Menge Volks zum Zeugen haben mussten und diese Menge immer die nämliche blieb, welche sich weder weiter von ihren Wohnungen entfernen, noch länger aus denselben wegbleiben konnte, als man gewöhnlichermassen der blossen Neugierde wegen zu tun pflegt: so konnten sie fast nicht anders, als den Ort auf einen und ebendenselben individuellen Platz, und die Zeit auf **einen und ebendenselben Tag** einschränken.

Unity of action was the first dramatic law among the ancients; the unity of time and unity of place were both only consequences of that first law, which they would not have observed as more than absolutely necessary had the incorporation of the chorus not been added. But because their actions required a crowd of people as witnesses, and because this crowd always remained the same and could neither distance themselves from their homes nor remain outside longer than one normally would out of mere curiosity, the ancients could hardly do oth-

⁹ The classic discussion remains Fränkel (1946).

erwise than to limit the location to a single individual spot and the time to **one single day**. (G. E. Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 46. Stück)

Given that the chorus in a Greek tragedy arrives on the scene near the very beginning of the play and remains present there until the very end, what are they to do if during the action the sun sets? Where do they sleep? Do they just lie down on the ground? Or do they go home? Obviously, this dilemma could pose considerable embarrassment for the staging of a play, and one way to avoid it is to keep the action within the limits of a single day. And yet there are tragedies in which the action takes place in two different locales – most notably Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* and Sophocles’ *Ajax* – and in these cases the chorus leaves the scene from the first locale and reenters it in the second one; so perhaps this dramaturgical difficulty would not have been insuperable if the tragedians insisted upon having a play whose action extended beyond a single day.

There is no reason to think that any one of these proposed explanations, or any other one, is the single necessary and sufficient answer that can resolve this conundrum. Instead, it seems likelier that each such proposal illuminates a different aspect of a particularly complicated phenomenon. Perhaps, in this spirit, one might add a further suggestion to the pile:

- *The festival days, the ones on which the Greater Dionysian festival was celebrated.* The Greek tragedies were staged at the Greater Dionysian festival, presumably as an offering to the god Dionysus. Every year, the festival took place from the 10th to the 16th days of the Attic month of Elaphebolion: five days all in all were set aside for the celebrations, including performances of tragedies on three days, of comedies on one, and of dithyrambs on one; it is known that the performances began at dawn on each of these days but it is not certain which days exactly were the ones dedicated to which of these performances.¹⁰ This meant that all year long, the audiences knew that starting at sunrise on a certain day tragedies would be performed, and that hence on that one day the fates of the characters whose vicissitudes were the subject of these tragedies would be decided, so that it would be determined whether they would survive or be destroyed. In this sense, the tragic day would be the day on which a tragedy was performed. This would be a *religious* or *institutional* explanation.

What dates these performances would have corresponded to in our own calendar is difficult to determine, given that the Attic calendar was lunisolar and that the dates shifted from year to year. But what is certain is that the lunar month Elaphe-

¹⁰ Mikalson (1975, 125–130, 137, 201); Pickard-Cambridge (1968, 57–83).

bolion straddled the vernal equinox, i.e., that it corresponded roughly to March–April in our solar calendar, and that Elaphebolion 10–16 were the days right in the middle of that month. Thucydides for example writes that the treaty that established the Peace of Nicias was made “as the winter was ending, in the spring, immediately after the city Dionysia.” (5.20.1) Hence there is a good chance that at least in some years the Attic tragedies were performed exactly on or at least very close to the vernal equinox around 20 March.

Perhaps then we can suggest a further possible explanatory hypothesis, a *symbolic* one:

- For might we not regard the tragic day as a demonization of the festival day on which the tragedies were produced? To be sure, it is one of the laws of Greek tragedy that, unlike comedies, tragedies never make explicit reference to the actual conditions of stage production but only do so implicitly and only if such references can be understood within the fictional world of the play. So the tragic day is the day that the tragic characters experience as being tragic; but it is also the festival day that is experienced by the theater audience as being tragic, albeit in a different sense. The audience’s knowledge that the tragedy was to be performed on a certain day is introjected into the minds of the characters within the tragedy themselves, where, given the terrible events that await them, it takes on a deadly, demonic urgency. For the audience, the tragic day is a matter of the calendar; for the characters, it is a question of life or death.

And perhaps there is even more. For the vernal equinox is one of the two days of the year on which day and night are balanced equally on the razor’s edge. Starting the very next day, every day will become longer, and every night shorter. But the equinox itself is the day of crisis. Will the tragic characters survive it or not? Will they live on to see the days becoming ever longer, or will they be overwhelmed by night? They do not yet know; and the audience is there to find out what will happen.¹¹

What a remarkable way the Athenians invented to celebrate the beginning of spring: to remind themselves of the precariousness of the human condition and of the likelihood of disaster and grief. How Greek!

¹¹ And perhaps we might finally suggest a *poetological* hypothesis. For what is at stake in the tragic day is not only the tragic character’s own life or death, but also the success or failure of the tragedy which the tragic poet has composed and which is set into a competition with two other poets’ productions. Only one of them can be proclaimed the victor; only one can have his name inscribed as victorious on the victory lists; only one can achieve the only kind of immortality that a human poet can hope for.

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