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**Reviewed Work: *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* by Richard Seaford**

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**Reviewed Work: *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* by Richard Seaford**

**Disciplines**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

SEAFORD, RICHARD. *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. xx + 455 pp. Cloth, \$75.00.

In his stellar commentary on Euripides' *Cyclops*, and in a string of impressive and suggestive articles, Richard Seaford has already established himself as our era's leading expert on a question that is both perennial and currently pressing: what does tragedy have to do with Dionysus? Whatever that question meant to the ancients who first raised it in the form of the proverbial complaint "*ouden pros ton Dionuson*," to us it expresses a felt need to contextualize tragedy, to overcome our habits of reading the surviving plays solely as self-contained literary texts. Our starting point for this inquiry must be the setting of tragedy's original performance in the Great Dionysia, and a fully satisfying answer must address the character of the Dionysia as simultaneously religious and political, a ritual in honor of a god that was also a self-conscious expression of the Athenian polis. In a study that is explicitly framed as a historicist counter to the prevailing literary (or as Seaford has it "formalist") approaches to tragedy, Seaford here excavates that junction of religion and politics, locating the origins—and thus the essence—of tragedy in a weaving together of several rituals, all of which promoted the emerging city-state.

The core of Seaford's argument, and the central contribution of his study, is in this resolutely ritualist theory of the origins of tragedy. Drawing on a deep and detailed knowledge of Greek religion, and building on his own previous demonstrations of the pervasiveness of ritual themes in the extant plays, Seaford argues that tragic drama was created through the making public of rites of initiation into the Dionysian mysteries; these rites were originally the secret practices of the all-female thiasos but were converted into tragedy through their public revelation and their enactment by male performers. The plots of tragedy dramatized the aetiological myths that grounded Dionysian cult, such as the myth of Pentheus, but also other rituals, especially hero-cult, that similarly fostered the creation of the polis.

For Seaford, the defining feature of the polis is the transcendence of the autonomous household in the creation of a larger and cohesive civic identity. Dionysus is, above all, the deity who presides over that process, and this accounts for his central role in tragedy. Dionysus is a foreigner without internal allegiances; he traverses the space between the city's margins and its center, thereby defining the city's shared territory; and he draws women out of the household into his thiasos, thereby countering the possessiveness and exclusivity of the individual household. But the creation of trans-familial social cohesion is also key to the non-Dionysian myths and rituals incorporated into tragedy. Hero-cult, for

example, transforms the divisive private funeral into a unifying experience of general lamentation that leads to benefits for the whole community. Many of tragedy's non-Dionysian myths, especially those of the Theban cycle, rehearse the destruction of the introverted royal family with positive results, usually through the foundation of a cult, for the community as a whole. This last point is among the most breathtaking in the book, and it helps to solve one of the main mysteries surrounding tragedy, which is why the polis would sponsor a form of art dedicated to representing terrifying, irremediable disasters.

What makes this theory so compelling is the way Seaford manages to avoid a reductive identification of tragedy with any one ritual while finding a consistent thread among the many rituals that converge to shape the genre. He argues persuasively for seeing the suffering heroes of tragedy as reflecting simultaneously the cult hero, whose universal lamentation binds a community together; the scapegoat, whose expulsion also reinforces community; the initiate, whose isolation and confusion precede his reintegration into society; and the grasping monarch, whose downfall frees up the circulation of women and goods. He is able to find unforced connections between what have often seemed like irreconcilable clues to tragedy's origins; in particular, his linking of Dionysian worship, hero-cult, and polis formation under the tyrants brings Herodotus' famous account of how Cleisthenes of Sicyon transferred "tragic choruses" from Adrastus to Dionysus beautifully into focus. This learned and subtle argument admirably fulfills Seaford's aim of making ritual much more central to our understanding of tragedy than it has been so far. It certainly ought to eliminate what remaining prejudices are due to the routinely invoked "excesses of the Cambridge school" (better described, after this analysis, as their oversimplifications).

Despite his strongly ritualist position on the origins of tragedy, Seaford does not write off the Homeric epics, which have played a central role in anti-ritualist theories, such as John Herington's *Poetry into Drama*. Rather he works out a complicated comparison between tragedy and Homer, in which differences in the treatment of ritual play a major role. In part, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* serve as foils for tragedy, sources for and expressions of the pre-polis culture that antedated both the city-state and the genre of tragedy. In Homer the state is absent and social relations are governed instead by relations of reciprocity between autonomous households, which may be hostile and expressed as reciprocal vengeance or amicable and expressed as reciprocal gift-giving. Homeric society lacks the social institutions that ultimately supplanted reciprocal exchange, a formal judicial process and trading in commodities aided by coinage, and similarly lacks the polis-fostering rituals of hero-cult and Dionysian worship. Unlike tragedy, the epics avoid representing the disasters that necessitate those institutions, such as killings of kin and gift-exchanges with sinister outcomes. The principal rituals of the Homeric world are those that reinforce interfamilial reciprocity, such as supplication, guest-friendship, and marriage.

And yet the Homeric epics do also register the need for mechanisms that, like the rituals underlying tragedy, promote the transcendence of the family in the creation of a larger community. The plots of both epics expose the insufficiencies of reciprocal exchange through moments of crisis and impasse that impair both social relations and ritual process: Achilles' refusal of gifts in exchange for Hector's body, which blocks death ritual on Hector's behalf; the perversion and suspension of the wedding brought about by Penelope and her suitors on Ithaca. And the resolutions found for those crises involve the kind of collective, trans-familial activities that Seaford has identified as proper to the polis: the public funeral and communal lamentation for Hector, the forging of a settlement between Odysseus and the suitors' relatives on Ithaca.

Seaford responds to this contradiction by adopting a classic analyst position, complete with several detectable layers of composition and a key role for the Pisistratids in shaping the Homeric texts that we have. In particular, he embraces the analyst strategy of assigning contradictory elements to different authors and periods. For him, the Homeric social world centered on reciprocity between households belongs to the epics' pre-polis past while the more communally-oriented endings belong, like tragedy, to the Pisistratean cultural program, in this case to Pisistratus' reorganization of the Panathenaea, which included the regularization of Homeric recitation. It was at that point that the *Iliad* was reworked to conclude with the ransoming of Hector and the *Odyssey* was given what has been seen since Alexandrian times as its "continuation." Passages that seem to anticipate these endings were planted at the same time, and certain sections that share the themes of tragedy were also added, most notably the passages involving Hector and Andromache in which a conflict emerges between city and family and in which Andromache is compared to a maenad.

This interpretation of Homer has the virtue that, like Seaford's reading of tragedy, it connects the texts we have to one of the contexts in which we know they were performed. And while the "Pisistratean recension" has been out of fashion recently, the more prevalent orthodoxy that the poems received their current form in the eighth century does depend on the dubious proposition that they would have been effectively frozen through a several century period of primarily oral transmission in repeated rhapsodic performance. We will never be able to pin the Homeric epics decisively to a single historical moment and there is clearly an argument to be made that, in their selection, arrangement, and emphasis of traditional material, our poems highlight issues of concern to sixth-century Athens.

Harder to entertain, however, is Seaford's segmentation of the text into earlier and later passages. One need not be in the grip of a mystic unitarianism based on belief in the individual genius (rightly dismissed by Seaford on p. 144) to see that problematic relations between powerful families and larger communities pervade both epics. Even without any trace of the polis, the Trojan legend's account of a large-scale joint military venture involving many heads of house-

holds who are also local chiefs raises issues about super-familial communities. The entire plot of the *Iliad* is shaped by the issue of whether the competing interests of autonomous chiefs can be subsumed in a unified, successful fighting force. The *Odyssey* is haunted from its opening lines by the issue of Odysseus' relations with the larger community of Ithacans who make possible his status as hero and chief and who fall by the wayside (in both of their manifestations, as his companions and as Penelope's suitors) as he returns to his base of power in the household. It may be impossible to decide whether the prominence of these issues anticipates the concerns of the polis or projects them retrospectively, but those issues are surely integral to the poems in their entirety, not restricted to certain portions that can be isolated and identified as later than others.

Seaford's analysis of Homer is much more successful in eliciting ways in which ritual patterns have helped to shape the epics' plots than in specifying their historical context, and the same can be said for his approach to tragedy as well. Seaford's self-identification as a "historical" reader of tragedy is in some ways misleading ("anthropological" might be more accurate). His mission of highlighting tragedy's ritual dimension leads him to assimilate the extant plays to the origins of which they bear traces. As a consequence, he underplays the position of these plays in a historical development that had been going on for many decades before our first surviving examples were composed. As the "*ouden pros ton Dionuson*" proverb indicates, this development involved in part a growing detachment of tragedy from its ritual roots (as Seaford has acknowledged elsewhere in his analysis of satyr drama as arising to restore a Dionysian element that had fallen out of tragedy). Tragedy's history begins with the conversion of actual rituals into representations of rituals; to do justice to tragedy as we know it, one has to take into account some of the traditional literary issues that Seaford dismisses as "narrowly formalist" or "merely aesthetic." Rituals are intrinsically and designedly unchanging, but tragedy was also shaped by individual playwrights who fulfilled its competitive dimension by putting their individual stamps on the works they produced, nuancing their retellings of traditional myths through variations in character, motivation, tone, and style. Over time, tragedy became an arena for competing visions of the polis, as Aristophanes' *Frogs*, among other sources, eloquently attests.

This issue is sharpened by Seaford's inevitably heavy dependence on Euripides' *Bacchae* as a principal source for, and illustration of, his theories. *Bacchae* does indeed seize on and foreground tragedy's genetic affinity to Dionysian ritual, and Seaford has brilliantly disclosed the full extent of that aspect of the play, but *Bacchae* is also one of the latest tragedies we have and expresses its author's idiosyncratic, questioning, and historically conditioned response to both ritual and the polis. In part through techniques stressed in traditional literary criticism, such as the use of irony and the creation for his characters of distinct and sympathetic personalities, Euripides puts his audience in a position in which it is impossible to respond to his play as one would to a set of socially construc-

tive rituals. A similar limitation affects Seaford's insightful reading of the deception speech in Sophocles' *Ajax* as reflecting the experience of being initiated into the Dionysian mysteries. This interpretation unquestionably enriches our understanding of what has always been a mysterious passage, but we still need to know how to integrate this representation of initiation into our reception of Ajax as a character with a certain personality and history and of *Ajax* as a coherent drama recounting a familiar myth from the perspective of late fifth-century concerns.

The historical context that really interests Seaford is clearly that of tragedy's origins in the developing city-state, not of its eventual production in the developed city-state, but that earlier context is, of course, even harder to recapture. Our evidence for the emergence of the polis is sketchy and scattered, and to make his case Seaford often illuminates tragedy through historical developments, such as Solon's reforms, that were not all that close in time to its emergence. One of the most exciting moments in the book involves uncovering shared elements in accounts of the Cylonian conspiracy and the plot of *Oresteia* but, given the nearly two centuries that separate those events from the production of the trilogy, these can only be broad common threads running through a large chunk of Athenian history.

These limitations of the evidence mean that the history Seaford appeals to is necessarily vague and generalized: there are few specific actors, whether individuals or groups, and no particularized interests besides those of the polis as a whole. For readers who associate a historical approach with the "new historicism" of contemporary literary study, Seaford's analysis will seem curiously apolitical. Despite an evident sympathy for Marxism, there is little here of the new historicists' interrogation of the political control of art. Seaford's city-state tends to be monolithic and the creation of cohesion and order within it an unquestioned benefit. There is no suggestion that, for example, the Pisistratids' interests might be very differently served by the cohesion of Athens than those of ordinary citizens. In this feminist age, it seems surprising that the sexual politics of the genre receive so little attention, especially given Seaford's claim that tragedy originated in the appropriation of female rites by male actors. As often happens with works of literary scholarship, Seaford's study itself resembles the texts that it discovers. Like the plays he has so revealingly investigated, Seaford conveys a vision of the polis that does not entirely suppress the violence, division, and hierarchy on which its creation of community depends, but that finally constructs that community in its ideal form: unified and unchanging over time.

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