

The Ethical Discourse of Tragedy and (Pseudo-)Historiography

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Abstract The concept of ethical criticism has always had its roots in ancient Greek tragedy and its Aristotelian interpretation. The tragic plot reveals the ethical choices of the characters and provokes an ethical response on behalf of a listener. The idea that literature is a medium where readers can safely fulfill experiments of thought with human behavior and the consequences of various ethical choices can be reduced from the analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which is an analysis of Greek tragedy. The ethical cosmos of a tragedy, however, is obviously different from that of historiography. The paper analyses the pseudo-historiographical rewriting of the Trojan war by the so-called Dictys Cretensis (which became the source of knowledge about the Trojan war for the European tradition for centuries, until the Renaissance). That text elaborates many events for which the main sources are tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and mostly Euripides. Characters in a tragedy make very difficult decisions and take them seriously. In the *Ephemeris*, they do not seem to realize moral dilemmas or that they have to choose, but act spontaneously in accordance with their direct interests or desires. Their motives become increasingly mean as the war develops a demoralizing effect on them.

Key words ancient Greek tragedy; pseudo-historiography; Aristotle, Euripides; Sophocles; Dictys Cretensis; ethical choice.

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The concept of ethical criticism has its roots in ancient Greek tragedy and its Aristotelian interpretation. This is rather logical, given that Aristotle can be regarded as the founder of the philosophical subdiscipline of ethics. Although Plato did discuss ethical problems too, it was Aristotle who coined the name and wrote the first completely discursive books on the topic: the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Eudemian Ethics*, and the *Magna Moralia*. At the same time, he is also the founder of western literary criticism with his *Poetics*, which discussed tragedy almost exclusively, and approached it essentially from the viewpoint of ethics. Tragedy for him is the imitation of human action, which is always already an ethical issue, processed by ethical choices of the dramatic agents, interpreted and evaluated by the audience on ethical grounds. This original link between the philosophical and literary fields of research made ancient Greek tragedy an experimental site of ethics and ethical criticism.

In her search for the ethical-philosophical that appears in literature, on the basis of the presupposition that literature offers plenty of experimental answers to the Aristotelian key question of ethics, namely “How shall we live?” Martha Nussbaum focused exclusively on narrative, and mostly on novels (Nussbaum 1987). Many have criticized this approach, partly because it uses a very narrow notion of literature, leaving large areas undiscussed, partly because the focus on plot simply misses the literariness of literature, which was for a long time and maybe still is the object of literary criticism since its foundation as modern academic discipline by the Russian formalists. What I would like to do in this paper is plot-centered ethical criticism, which, however, does justice to the literariness in so far it investigates the consequences of transposition from one literary genre to another in the creation of a rather different ethical cosmos.

The transposition I discuss happened in a strange literary work usually referred to as *Dictys Cretensis*, although it is not a title, but the name of the fictitious author. The name of the real author or forger is unknown. The well-developed narrative frame makes it the most successful and probably most interesting ancient literary forgery (Speyer, Eisenhut 15). It is a prose narrative, a memoir of a (fictitious) eyewitness of the Trojan war. Dictys of Crete is said to have been a Greek soldier in that war. The Greek text was written in the 1st century CE, but we only have two

papyrus fragments from it (Grendell, Hunt & Goodspeed, Nr. 268; Barns, Parson, Rea & Turner, Nr. 1539). However, a Latin translation was made in the 4th century CE, which has survived. On the basis of the Greek fragments we know that the Latin was written in a much more elevated style, which can be seen in many places to be imitating Sallust, the most popular Roman historian in the 4th century CE. The Sallust quotations usually appear as moralizing or psychological additions to the Greek original (Noack 451-3). However, according to the translator's introductory note, the second half of the narrative (on the return of the Greeks) was severely abridged. We can describe the genre of this text as novelistic pseudo-historiography. The Greek-Latin title is *Ephemeris belli Troiani*, which can be translated as the journal of the Trojan war. *Ephemeris* is also the name of an ancient genre, called *commentarius* in Latin, a collection of notes that a prominent historical figure can publish as raw material for future historiographers without much rhetorical elaboration (Bomer 210-11). The work thus has historical or historiographic interest and attitude.

We should keep in mind how Aristotle highlighted the difference between historiography and poetry: “the former relates things that have happened, the latter things that may happen,” “i.e. that are possible in accordance with probability or necessity” (Aristotle 1451b4-5 and 1451a39-b1). In antiquity nobody doubted the historicity of the Trojan war and its prominent characters, but since the 5th century (or even earlier) intelligent people have been puzzled by the fact that all the accounts were written by poets (Merkle, *Die Ephemeris...* 36) and contain many obviously impossible, marvelous elements. The Dictys account offered a seemingly reliable narrative (with the claim of being written by an eyewitness, the type of source regarded as having the highest authority in antiquity), containing exclusively the kind of events that could appear in historiography too. The previously accessible sources (epic poems and tragedies) may have told what may have happen, but Dictys finally claimed to tell what had really happened around Troy.

The Dictys account is in reality first and foremost a rewriting of belletristic texts, the Homeric and cyclic epics (cf. Merkle *Die Ephemeris...*, passim). Homer's two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* tell only a fraction of the stories of the Trojan war. The former covers the events of some days from the ninth year of the war, the latter the return of Ulysses with retrospective accounts of the sack of Troy (with the wooden horse), the adventures of Ulysses after the war, the return of Menelaus, and the death of Agamemnon. There were about a dozen other epic poems on the Trojan war and other mythical topics (the epic cycle), which have

been lost, but were available in antiquity. They were regarded as having much less poetic value than Homer. And for many events the best-known and most highly evaluated source of information was tragedy, about a dozen pieces by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The Dictys account transposes those events from the life world (and ethical world) of poetry to that of historiography, but since it is in fact pseudo-historiography, it shows the latter world in an extreme, slightly belletristic, even more characteristic form.

The most detailed narrative which takes its plot from a tragedy is that of Iphigenia in Aulis. In Euripides' tragedy both Menelaus and Agamemnon had to make very difficult ethical choices before the tragedy, and both change their minds in the first scene to choose differently in the same dilemma. In fact, Agamemnon changed his very first decision already before the tragedy. The Greek army is ready to sail to Troy, but there is no wind. They are told (by the gods through prophets) that for the departure and the successful campaign in Asia, Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. The elected commander has to choose between loyalties to the male community and to his own family, between the values of the society and his more limited life circle. Since both loyalties are valid and of utmost importance, both possible choices are equally legitimate and equally wrong. Dismissing the army and canceling the war means the denial of his duties and values as a king and a hero, while if he kills his own child, he betrays his role as a father and the head of a family. The gods do not offer an easy choice, which makes it a real ethical dilemma. First Menelaus and Agamemnon agreed to sacrifice Iphigenia, sending a letter to Agamemnon's wife asking her to send the girl to Aulis. Then Agamemnon changed his mind, trying to send another message to his wife withdrawing the first request. In the first scene of the drama, Menelaus and Agamemnon have an argument about that second decision. Menelaus still wants to sacrifice his niece. For him the decision is, however, quite different. He is the beneficiary of the campaign, which has the purpose to get his wife back. Due to the argument, however, he changes his mind and accepts that he should not let his niece, a blood related member of his family, be killed in order to regain an unfaithful wife and punish an adulterer. He is willing to call off the war. During their fight, however, Agamemnon also changes his mind and accepts (again) the viewpoint of male society. From that point on he wants to make the sacrifice.

Achilles, the greatest hero of the Greeks, a demigod, learns that Iphigenia has been tricked into coming to the camp under the pretense that she is supposed to marry him. He is so upset about his name being used for such a mean and undignified purpose that he decides to prevent the sacrifice by all available means.

However, he comes to realize that all the Greeks, including his own soldiers, are determined to perform it. His final decision is to fight against the Greeks till death, even if it is futile, but he will not endorse their action. He renounces the loyalty towards his community when he finds their ethical decision unacceptable. But at this point, on the verge of a catastrophe, Iphigenia realizes that she also has a choice. Instead of being a passive victim and waiting for men to decide her fate she decides to willingly sacrifice herself for the good of the Greek male society.

We can see that characters in a tragedy make very difficult decisions and take them seriously. They invest immense energy in pondering the values they want to represent in the world and suffer profoundly because of those value conflicts. They are willing to die if it is the price they have to pay for the values they have chosen.

Very little of these ethical dilemmas has been kept in the Dictys account. One of the basic differences is that it is not the wind and the campaign that are at stake, but the lives of the Greek soldiers who are being killed by an epidemic. An inspired seer informs the leaders that Iphigenia's sacrifice is the only possible cure. In this dilemma Agamemnon has to choose not between values but between killing one person and letting thousands die. However, for him this is not a dilemma here: from the first minute he consequently refuses to sacrifice his daughter. Therefore the Greeks depose him as general-in-chief and create a four men corps to run the army. Ulysses secretly goes to Mycenae with a false letter about the wedding of Achilles and Iphigenia and brings the girl to the camp. Menelaus, without any moral hesitation, starts performing the sacrifice, when a voice from the woods prevents it. In the meantime Achilles has received a letter and gifts from Iphigenia's mother revealing the trick his name had been used for. He runs to the place of the sacrifice to stop it, but since it has already been called off, no conflict develops. What we can see from this summary is that the characters do not realize the moral dilemmas or that they have to choose. They respond to any situation instantly and without any kind of deliberation. The choices they make, however, can be interpreted as good, more or less. What is completely missing, however, is any interaction between Achilles and Iphigenia, and consequently any self-sacrificing deliberation on their behalf. Achilles tries to intervene here violently, but since he has not checked the Greeks' mode in advance, this does not mean willing death for him. He does not confront the whole army, but only a fraction of it in a sudden flare of anger, which is his basic characteristic. And there is no word about Iphigenia making any decision on her own. Those decisions that are visible here are represented as morally good. Agamemnon's stubborn refusal to sacrifice his daughter makes him appear a better father than anywhere else in the mythological tradition, while

Menelaus and Ulysses are lauded by the narrator for saving the army. But all this is in the first book and at the beginning of the war. The whole narrative explains the decline of the Greeks as a result of the demoralizing effect of the war itself (cf. Merkle *Artless...*, and in more detail *Die Ephemeris...*).

We can see this in the story about Ajax' death, best known from a tragedy by Sophocles. Before the stage action started, Achilles' weaponry has been awarded to Ulysses, which upsets Ajax so much that he decides to kill the Greek leaders. Pallas Athena prevents this by tricking him into believing that some sheep and cattle are Menelaus, Agamemnon and Ulysses. At the beginning of the tragedy Ajax realizes what he has done in his madness, and that he has become ridiculous in the eyes of the Greek community, so he decides to commit suicide. His concubine, Tecmessa, tries to dissuade him in vain. In the last phase of the tragedy, Agamemnon and Menelaus deny any funeral rites to Ajax, but Ulysses convinces them to allow the burial of the corpse, since one should respect a noble enemy in his death.

Before comparing this plot to the transformations of the Dictys narrative, let us reconsider what Aristotle wrote about the decisions. In the *Poetics* the notion appears in his analysis of character. Character is a word of Greek origin, and the usual translation of the one Aristotle uses here, namely *ethos*, from which the word ethics comes. The Greek word character was to become a notion of philosophy one generation later, with the work *Characters* by Aristotle's disciple Theophrastus. The Aristotelian *ethos* has a rather different meaning from its modern English translation, since it is not the whole personality, but as it is defined, "according to which we say that the people in action are of a certain sort" (1450a6-7). A little bit later a more detailed definition is offered: "Character is which reveals decision, of whatever sort; this is why those speeches in which the speaker decides or avoids nothing at all do not have character" (1450b9-11). In the main analysis, however, Aristotle declares that characters in a tragedy should not be of "whatever sort." From one of the preliminary definitions of tragedy we know that "comedy prefers to represent people who are worse than those who exist, tragedy people who are better" (1448a17-19). And it must be an ethical quality he is speaking about, since "everyone differs in character because of vice and virtue" (1448a3-4). Therefore we expect people represented in tragedy be good, better than those who exist. And this is exactly what Aristotle requires: "the characters should be good. The tragedy will have character if, as we said, the speech or the action makes obvious a decision of whatever sort; it will have a good character, if it makes a good decision" (1454a16-19). It goes without saying that a decision influences the evolution of the plot, therefore morally good decisions also can result in a tragic catastrophe. Since

characters in the tragedy should be good, they should choose virtue and never vice. In the case of Iphigenia we have already seen that sometimes one has to choose between too virtuous options, both of which may have terrible consequences.

What can we say about the decisions in Sophocles' Ajax? The story started with the decision to award Achilles' armor to Ulysses, but since that happened before the tragedy and the motives are not clarified, there is no character in this decision. Then Ajax decides to massacre all the Greek leaders. This may seem a bit harsh. But the "most obvious quality of tragic conflict is its extremity: it does not ordinarily admit of compromise or mediation" (Burian 181). The archaic heroes do everything for *timê*, to be respected by society; if they sacrifice their life, they do it not so much for the survival, success or well-being of the society, but for the respect they achieve through that. Therefore if Ajax had simply accepted humiliation, which means deprivation of respect on behalf of the society, it would not be a virtuous decision. To take his revenge may be virtuous, but destroying the society whose respect he wants to gain is problematic both logically and morally, and the latter dilemma was very probably understood in all its dimensions by the contemporary audience of the democratic Athens.

His second decision, to commit suicide because he cannot face ridicule and humiliation once again without any chance of vengeance, is characteristic of the old Greek values (the so-called shame culture), and shows some tragic grandeur. The leaders' final decision to provide an appropriate funeral for Ajax, who had been the second greatest Greek warrior during the war, is obviously a morally good decision, and what is surprising that Menelaus and Agamemnon can be convinced only with some difficulty. The idea comes from Ulysses, who admits that Ajax was his enemy, nevertheless he is able to show real generosity.

In the Dictys account it is not Achilles' armor but a very holy statue of Athena that is awarded to Ulysses instead of Ajax, which is a minor difference. However, Ulysses has good reasons to claim the statue, since it was him who furtively brought it from Troy before the capture. But it is not the reason why he is rewarded. After the sack of Troy, Ajax wanted Helena to be executed, because she had caused so much pain to the Greeks, but Menelaus was still in love with his wife. Ulysses played a key role in giving her back to Menelaus safely. The narrator and a part of the army interprets this decision as putting personal desire before the community's interests. Some soldiers, however, try to flatter Ulysses by scolding Ajax, who declares he will take bloody vengeance on those who insult him. From his perspective we cannot see any moral problem: he does not want to kill everybody, and does not want to take revenge on the whole army because of a decision he

cannot accept. He only declares that he will protect his dignity. Then something unexpected happens: “At daybreak we found Ajax, out in the open, dead; upon closer investigation we discovered that he had been killed with a sword” (5.15, Dictys, *A Journal...*, 115). Nothing is said about divine intervention, madness, shame or suicide. The latter cannot be completely excluded. It will never be clear how Ajax died, but public opinion is summarized as follows: Both leaders and privates were extremely upset, which soon resulted in revolt, because everybody was frustrated about Ajax having been assassinated furtively by Agamemnon’s circle. Political assassination, petty crimes with low intentions: that is characteristic of the Greek leaders after the war, without any residue of tragic grandeur.

The characters of tragedy have time to speak about their decisions. In Dictys’ political-historiographical cosmos they act immediately, without hesitation, and the readers are given only the narrator’s speculations about the motives, which tend to be presented as mean. Even if the choice is factually the same as in a tragedy, the decision is morally wrong here because of the lack of deliberation, because the “heroes” do not realize that they have to choose between values, but act spontaneously in accordance with their direct interests or desires.

We may deduce even from Aristotle’s insights that different literary genres imply different ethical worlds, if we combine his idea that tragedy represents people better than us, while comedy those worse than us, with his definition of character as the manifestation of good or bad ethical choices. In tragedy good people make good choices, while in the comedy bad people make bad choice, which are tautological descriptions, since people are good or bad exactly because of their good or bad choices. In the transposition of the story of the Trojan war from the tragic to the historiographic discourse we see remarkable changes in the ethical value of the same decisions of the very same people. To choose the same for a different reason is not the same decision to be sure. The different genre, however, hardly seems to represent different kinds of choices, but rather different decision making processes, different attitudes towards the challenges of ethical choice.

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