

Tyranny, Tyrannicide and *Stasis* in Athenian Politics and Tragedy

Tyranny was a powerful idea in fifth-century Athenian politics. Firstly, it was central to the traditions about the tyrannicide, a founding act of the Athenian democracy that was widely celebrated, both in official and in unofficial contexts. Secondly, it was a term of political invective, which derived its potency from the fear that the democracy might be overthrown in favour of a tyranny. Thirdly, it had an analytical use: it was used, especially in a Sophistic context, to consider questions such as whether power is a good thing to possess or not - but it is also used in Thucydides and Aristophanes to explore the morality of the Athenians' rule over their allies.

When these three uses of tyranny are carefully distinguished in this way, it becomes possible to see that the tragic playwrights, especially Euripides, drew on political ideas about tyranny subtly and selectively, and in different ways in different plays. In particular, the different dramatisations of the Orestes myth accord very different prominences to the issue of tyrannicide: whereas it is a significant feature of Aeschylus' treatment, Euripides leaves it out altogether, and in *Orestes* in particular Aegisthus is not even thought of as a tyrant. Euripides' plays also use tyranny to explore the issue of *stasis*, which (as we know from Thucydides) plagued Greece in the last decades of the fifth century.

It is therefore possible to consider the exploration of the idea of tyranny in tragedy as an important and complex part of how tyranny was thought about in Athenian political life.

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