

**Fabian MEINEL**, *Pollution and Crisis in Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, XIV + 278 pp., ISBN 978-1-107-04446-3, £99.00.

Fabian MEINEL'S (henceforth: M.) monograph aims to provide a detailed study of ritual pollution in Greek tragedy, which, as the author argues, constitutes an important subtext in the representation of tragic "crises", that is, in the most general sense, "difficult situations" (p. 9). After a brief introduction outlining the principles of his approach – "a focus on description" instead of defining the essence of tragic pollution (p. 13) – M. proceeds to put them into action in his reading of ten plays: *Hippolytus* and *Oedipus Rex* (ch. 1), *Antigone* (ch. 2), the *Oresteia* and *Iphigenia in Tauris* (ch. 3), *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Ion* and Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* (ch. 4).

In the *Hippolytus* pollution provides an "alternative model of causation", one transcending the divine frame set by the opening and concluding epiphanies (p. 45). Everything begins on Crete, with Phaedra's mother Pasiphae and her "disposition towards errant erotic desire" (p. 27); inherited by Phaedra in her passion for Hippolytus, it surfaces as the μίασμα of the φρήν (*Hipp.* 316). We are thus invited to see in this celebrated turn of phrase not an adroit metaphor, but a very concrete phenomenon, grounded in the concept of hereditary pollution on the one hand, and in Hippocratic gynaecology on the other: a quasi-medical affliction caused by excess of blood, which – due to sexual abstinence – does not find release in menstruation and therefore besets the φρήν (pp. 41–43). The stage is thus ready for yet another strand of pollution which ensues as a consequence of Phaedra's suicide. Taking place in a "period of particular vulnerability" (p. 30), which is Theseus' sacred embassy to a sanctuary, this event produces a polluting ritual transgression and thus sets in motion the entire chain of disastrous events, perhaps "as the ultimate cause of *Hippolytus*' tragic action", or "at least as a potential contributing factor" (p. 32).

The medical reading of Phaedra's "pollution of the mind" blunts the poetic force of its juxtaposition with the tangible impurity caused by murder: it is not the hands which are defiled by blood, but the midriff (M. is keen to stress the somatic aspect of the φρήν), polluted by undischarged menses. Its grounding in the religious discourse of classical Greece seems equally questionable, since, unlike many other cultures, the ancient Greeks attached no particular μίασμα to menstruation<sup>1</sup>. The idea of Theseus' sacred embassy is also problematic. Only in passing is he described as θεωρός (*Hipp.* 792, 807), which may indeed suggest that he has been away on a visit to an oracle, and thus provide the reason for his absence. However, to assume that this rather insignificant and almost deliberately vague motif necessarily evokes a very particular and complex religious ceremony, the sacred θεωρία sent annually from Athens to Delos – a period of particular vulnerability, during which even legal executions (including that of Socrates) were suspended – may seem slightly too adventurous. To deduce from so tenuous an association an entire framework of ritual vulnerability, disrupted by Phaedra's death, is bound to lack plausibility.

With the *Oedipus Rex* M. explores the limits of ritual pollution and its discourses. He begins with the familiar and plausible argument that μίασμα (along with its cognates) initially serves as the keyword in diagnosing the condition of Thebes and of Oedipus himself: both the hero and the city "collapse into one, so that Oedipus appears not only as afflicted by *miasma*, or the source of *miasma*, but in his essence and very being as *miasma*" (p. 64). After the fateful recognition,

---

<sup>1</sup> R. PARKER, *Miasma. Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, Oxford 1983, pp. 100–102.

however, the discourse of ritual pollution eventually fails to do full justice to the extent of Oedipus' personal misery, "to comprehensively grasp the suffering of the man on stage" (p. 67).

The chief argument in support of this otherwise stimulating reading is the uneven distribution of μῖασμα-words throughout the play: all five instances – referring explicitly or obliquely to Oedipus himself – occur before the recognition, and none after. As such, this observation would have much to commend to it; however, as M. himself observes (p. 67), the play's exodos is riddled with other terms denoting ritual impurity and referring to the eponymous hero: ἄγος, κηλῖς, ἄναγνος – to name just these three. In order to prove his point, M. would have to show that there is indeed a significant semantic gap between the latter notions and μῖασμα – which he does not, merely dismissing them as "imprecise" or "vague" (p. 67).

The relationship between pollution and law informs M.'s view of Sophocles' *Antigone*. In short: laws create stability within civic space and within its fundamental distinctions (p. 77), pollution, on the other hand, upsets them. One such distinction is that between friend and foe, which the μῖασμα of mutual fratricide, that of Eteocles and Polynices (*Ant.* 172), obviously confuses. Creon through his decree seeks to reestablish this fundamental opposition (p. 92), and to subsequently sequester pollution both topographically – by casting the unburied corpse outside the civic space (p. 96) – and discursively, by controlling it through language (pp. 97 f.). Tragedy ensues when these efforts are frustrated, as pollution resists Creon's attempts and encroaches upon civic space in various forms: scraps of Polynices' body carried to the altars by carrion birds, confusion of categories, such as that of male vs. female (pp. 98 f.), and finally piles of corpses (Antigone, Haemon, Eurydice) which multiply and make their way into the very heart of the *polis*, Creon's palace (pp. 105 f.). As such, pollution remains a nameless phenomenon – as in Tiresias' report (*Ant.* 998–1032) – and thus defies the control which Creon attempts to exercise over it through language. In conclusion, the reader is invited to look at Polynices' decomposing body as a metaphor of the internal strife within Thebes, to which end M. has to overcome the troublesome absence of any plausible hints thereof in the text of the play itself.

I was quite disappointed not to find in this otherwise original reading more emphasis on the germs of instability within the "stabilising" drive of Creon's edicts; M. is right to argue that Polynices defies firm categorisation along the friend-foe dichotomy (perhaps φίλος would be a better term in the former's stead). Surprisingly enough, however, he ignores the most explicit statement of disruption within spatial categories – below and above, along with life and death ("burying" Antigone alive; refusing to bury the dead Polynices) – engendered by the decree (*Ant.* 1068–1071).

The dialectic of pollution and stability is taken through to the next chapter, which deals with the *Oresteia*. This time it is justice (δίκη) which is negotiated through the discourse of ritual impurity. M.'s view of these issues is surprisingly conservative. The first two parts of the trilogy dramatise δίκη in its vengeful, violent and talionic guise: bloodshed is met with bloodshed; the killing of a murderer cleanses one pollution, but produces another. This endless paradox of impure purification through homicidal vengeance is put to an end in the concluding part of the trilogy with the establishment of the Areopagus, and the institution of the legal trial which supersedes the logic of revenge and pollution. Ritual purity is no longer relevant to Orestes' release: what matters now are "terms of wider justice" determined in the newly-founded court of law (pp. 138 f.).

The evolutionary paradigm underlying such an approach has been already subject to decades of criticism<sup>2</sup>. I will limit myself to one point, namely that the question of pollution is in the end no longer relevant and gives way to a new order of justice. The crowning argument which leads Athena to cast her vote (and thus determine the issue of the trial) has little to do with the right and wrong of Orestes' deed or with his motivation and other "external factors" (as M. argues at pp. 125

<sup>2</sup> Going back as early as H. LLOYD-JONES, *Zeus in Aeschylus*, JHS LXXVI 1956, p. 64; cf. also S. GOLDHILL, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge 1986, pp. 37–41, for an overview of earlier debate.

and 132 f.). She is ultimately persuaded by Apollo's (in)famous physiological ruminations which establish not the justice of matricide, but the fact that Clytemnestra and her son were not related by blood (*Eum.* 657 f.). This point, in turn, is made in a direct response to the Erinyes' questioning of Orestes' ritual status: "having spilt on the ground his mother's blood of his own (μητρὸς αἵμ' ὀμαιμον) – will he then live in his father's house in Argos? At which public altars will he sacrifice? Which lustral water of a phratry will admit him?" (*Eum.* 653–656). The issue of ritual purity is thus very much at stake during the trial, to the point of actually determining its outcome and securing Orestes' release from the Erinyes.

Next comes the Euripidean "sequel" to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*: the *Iphigenia in Tauris*. This play, frequently deplored or dismissed as un-tragic (despite Aristotle's admiration), is taken very seriously by M. His main emphasis is on its ambiguity and open-endedness: in his quest for release from the matricidal toils Orestes is repeatedly frustrated (Delphi, Areopagus), and thus the very last of remedies – which gives the play its plot – is bound to appear equally elusive. Not only is it advocated by the same gods whose authority has already been called into question on previous occasions. More importantly, it is negotiated through a very ambiguous pattern of pollution and purification, woven into an entire plot of false ritual, in the light of which the status of Orestes, both before and after, is bound to appear equally equivocal: the illusory (and metatheatrical) nature of the ritual itself is taken by M. (quite plausibly) for the illusory nature of Orestes' release in general. Will the false purification cleanse him from real pollution? Is his pollution indeed real and tangible, or rather goes beyond "the concreteness of ritual categorization", prefiguring thus its internalisation in the later *Orestes*? (p. 160) Will the exotic adventure lead to release, or is the future as bleak and pessimistic as the hero's existence up to this point? This is no inane, documentary inquiry into the events beyond the tragedy's closure, but a rewarding and thought-provoking exploration of issues inevitably raised by the play's twisting plot and the ambiguity of its discourses.

As a minor point, I find M.'s reading of *IT* 704 f. (ἀγνισθεῖς φόνωι) as "purified by killing" (pp. 149 f.) very attractive. I would be tempted to refer this turn of phrase to *Eum.* 603: ἐλευθέρω φόνωι (SCHUTZ's emendation of φόνου, accepted by PAGE, WEST and SOMMERSTEIN), which refers to Clytemnestra's ritual status, "liberated [from pollution?] by [her own] death".

The final chapter brings together three plays which, according to M., combine the discourses of pollution and citizenship: Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Euripides' *Ion*. In the *Supp.* pollution is the expression of identity crisis: the civic is tantamount to pure, whereas the "Other" – to the polluted. The "otherness" is explored in the collective persona of the Danaids: what sets them apart from the civic realm is their composite ethnic identity (barbarian and Greek) on the one hand, and – somewhat paradoxically – their abnormal insistence on sexual purity (ἀγνεία). The polluting potential of their otherness finds its expression in their threat to commit suicide within the pure (ἀγνός) space of the sanctuary. This crisis is consequently resolved by redefining the "standards of Argive purity" (p. 203), so as to allow the incorporation of the Danaids' problematic ethnic identity into the citizen body, and by negotiating their movement – both literal and conceptual – from the purity of the sanctuary to the civic space of the *polis*, and from the purity of their virginal status to a "wifely", that is a "civic" one (p. 198). Seeing, however, that purity defines also civic space, the argument risks running into conundrum, and M. is thus forced to differentiate the "sacred" space of the sanctuary from the "quasi-sacred" space of the *polis* (p. 202).

A deeper engagement with the dynamics of the civic and the sacred, along with the relevant ideas and notions, such as ὄσιος on the one hand and ἀγνός (along with ἱερός) on the other, would certainly provide M. with a much better interpretive template. Instead, however, M. seeks to explain the intersections between civic and ritual purity through an adventurous reading of a single passage in the text of the play, where the foundational hero, Apis, is said to have "cleansed" (ἐκκαθαίρει) the land of Argos from "man-destroying [not man-eating – JK] monsters" (κνώδαλα βροτοφθόρα) which have arisen from old pollutions (*Supp.* 264 f.). According to M., this ritual purification acquires "socio-political" overtones, and effectively brings about civic purity, because

the said monsters constitute the “totally other, the opposite of the civic self” (p. 193). I believe this would require a more detailed justification, as there is nothing in the text itself which sets these vaguely described creatures in a conceptual opposition with the symbolic order of society (as is undoubtedly the case of, say, Polyphemus). Without firmly establishing (instead of merely asserting) their “total otherness”, the entire argument which rests on this premise is bound to appear shaky.

In a rather brief “excursus to Colonus” M. explores the ritual and civic status of Oedipus in Sophocles’ second eponymous play. He argues plausibly for its indeterminacy in both cases, and hence for hero’s liminality, who is “safely enclosed within the civilized space of the polis”, and yet at the same time “beyond its familiar human limits”<sup>3</sup>: in the shrine of the dread goddesses, where mortals dare not tread. I am less persuaded by M.’s insistence on linking Oedipus’ liminal status with the fact that “throughout the greater part of the play, the hero is seated on the boundary between two distinct spaces, the sacred space of the shrine and the profane ground outside it” (pp. 211 f.). The shrine itself is a part of the *polis*’ landscape, and yet at the same time excluded from it<sup>4</sup>: making it into Oedipus’ final resting place underscores his liminal status much more profoundly than his temporary dwelling on its boundaries.

Like the Danaids the eponymous hero of the *Ion* exchanges ritual for civic – or rather ethnic – purity (p. 228). He is shown by M. to be a liminal figure at the outset, and is subsequently incorporated into the civic space of Athens. As in the case of the Danaids, his liminality is inherently bound with ritual purity, and underscored by topography (the sacred space of the Delphic sanctuary), by sexual chastity, and by his problematic identity (being a foundling). I am less persuaded by M.’s insistence on the imperfections of Ion’s purity, which he seeks in the fact that the young man remains “outside in the area before the temple” (pp. 228, 234), and not within. This in turn is to suggest “dissonances” in the image of “Athenian purity” (p. 235) – because the two apparently constitute a mathematical proportion. While I am more than happy with the conclusion that the *Ion* explores, problematises and perhaps clarifies (p. 241) the question of Athenian citizenship, autochthony and civic purity, I am much less excited about the manner in which this conclusion was reached.

A minor point: Ion’s praise of μέτρια (*Ion* 632) can hardly be taken to imply remaining in the “middle”, “on the boundary”, that is in the betwixt-and-between status of liminality, and thus opposed to the civic ideal of “taking part in political affairs” (p. 235); μέτρια means due measure and as such taps into an entire nexus of civic ideals centred around the notion *sophrosyne*; furthermore, its praise in Ion’s diatribe is not contrasted with political life, but with its perverse abomination, that is tyranny (*Ion* 621–633).

In the “Envoi” it is briefly argued that “tragedy resembles pollution because like pollution it negotiates a variety of (socio-political and other) problems” (p. 246), which, according to M., “throws the doors wide open towards a giant topic [...]: Aristotle and his idea of tragic catharsis”. This naïve cliffhanger strikes a discordant note with the remainder of the study, based on meticulous – though frequently too adventurous – engagement with the relevant texts. M.’s book has a great deal to recommend it, and one can only wish that his many thought-provoking observations were not seasoned so abundantly with idiosyncratic assertions, which hinge on inane word-play (καθαρμόζουσα – καθαρμός: pp. 31 f.; φόνος πέπηγεν – ἄρειος πάγος: pp. 130 f.) and wildly arbitrary associations.

Jan Kucharski  
University of Silesia in Katowice

<sup>3</sup> Ch. SEGAL, *Tragedy and Civilization. An Interpretation of Sophocles*, Norman<sup>2</sup>1993, p. 369.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. F. DE POLIGNAC, *Cults, Territory and the Origins of the Greek State [La naissance de la cité grecque]*, transl. by J. LLOYD, Chicago 1995, pp. 33–41.