

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Greek, Latin, and Classical Studies Faculty
Research and Scholarship

Greek, Latin, and Classical Studies

2016

Euripides and the Politics of Form

Joel A. Schlosser

Bryn Mawr College, jschlosser@brynmawr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/classics_pubs



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Citation

Schlosser, J. 2016. Euripides and the Politics of Form (Review). *Polis* 33.1: 213-217.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/classics_pubs/114

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Victoria Wohl, *Euripides and the Politics of Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 200 pp. ISBN: 978-0691166506. \$39.95. Paper.

Reviewed by Joel Alden Schlosser, Bryn Mawr College (jschlosser@brynmawr.edu)

What is the political work done outside formal institutions and political practices? Victoria Wohl's *Euripides and the Politics of Form* turns its attention to politics beyond these conventional areas, detailing how Euripides' tragedies "shape political sensibilities, create political attachments, [and] structure political feelings." First delivered as the Martin Classical Lectures at Oberlin College, Wohl joins impressive company, including Martha Nussbaum (*The Therapy of Desire*), Josiah Ober (*Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*), and Anne Carson (*The Economy of the Unlost*). Wohl's dense but rewarding work is an achievement worthy of such distinction: it not only opens new ways of reading the politics of tragedy but calls attention to sites and modes of politics often ignored by political scientists as well as historians of ancient Athens. *Euripides and the Politics of Form* inaugurates a novel and important approach to Greek tragedy that deserves attention from anyone concerned with the politics of literature from the classical period through the present.

Wohl prefaces her argument with the qualification that *Euripides and the Politics of Form* concerns itself less with Euripides than with "the politics of form." By "form" Wohl intends to capture both the plot structure, or *muthos*, of Euripidean tragedy as well as the formal resources of speech and dialogue, monody and choral song, characterization, poetic language, and visual spectacle. Rather than analyzing the thought of the plays, then, Wohl examines the aesthetic form itself as a type of political content. In general, "form" describes "something we sense in the course of watching or reading a play," an "affective structure" that each play contains and creates in relationship with its viewers and readers.

"Form" thus encapsulates a great deal; at times it seems difficult to say precisely what form excludes. But Wohl sets her argument up as a critique of historicist work on Greek tragedy, in particular interpretations intent on identifying democratic ideology in the plays. While situating tragedies within their historical moment to show how they "reflect and reflect on" (in Peter Euben's phrase) contemporary political life and thought in democratic Athens, such approaches have neglected literary form by focusing on the text as solely a product of the ideology around it. "New Historicism," in Wohl's words, "proposed that social context could render the literary text fully lucid, but instead the text has become translucent" (4). Wohl instead treats these texts as *literary* texts while still attending their historical context, returning to a formal approach without losing the insights of historicism to develop an immanent critique that identifies "the ideological work being done in and *by* tragedy's aesthetic form" (4).

Rather than surveying the whole of Euripides' corpus or organizing her treatment in terms of themes treated within the plays, Wohl explores different facets of the politics of form with reference to many (although not all) of the plays. On my reading, five important facets of the politics of form emerge: affect; structures of feeling; tensions

between form and content; psychagogia; and the structuring (or narrativizing) of reality itself. For Wohl, Euripides “thinks in form about form” (7); these five facets demonstrate *how* such thinking happens and open up future avenues of research concerning their effects.

First and most generally, “affect” mediates the relation between aesthetic and political forms; it names *how* the form of tragedy *affects* forms of politics. While “affect” in many ways describes all of the ways that the politics of form operates, it also has a narrower sense when considered in terms of tragic pity. The essence of Greek tragedy, Wohl writes, consists in the staging of beautiful suffering. *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba* raise questions about the meaning of such suffering. The extremes on display in these plays arouse fear and pity while also implicating spectators in the suffering they depict. While Elaine Scarry argues that beauty draws us toward the good,¹ Wohl reads these plays as calling into question the pity tragedy supposedly produces. We pity the women of Troy but this brings no justice. *Hecuba* seems to promise justice in its symmetry between Polymestor’s killing of Hecuba’s son, Polydorus, and Hecuba’s vengeful murder of Polymestor’s children in turn but this is a false equivalence. *Hecuba* instead shows us our own sadistic investments in injustice: Political expedience trumps justice, as shown by Agamemnon’s lack of action on behalf of Hecuba; at the same time, Agamemnon’s pity demonstrates his implication. As Wohl puts it, the play’s “ragged ending disrupts the beautiful balance of *dikē*” (60). Aesthetic contemplation is not enough and the affective responses of fear and pity elicited by the plays only put the burden of responsibility and action on us.

A second facet of the politics of form, the tension between form and content, heightens the affective power of the plays. For Wohl, *Suppliants* exhibits such a tension to powerful effect. Here the play’s “noisy political content is complicated by the play’s form.” Read as a political allegory, *Suppliants* appears to reinforce democratic ideology. Yet the “patriotic clichés” that fill the play are uttered by a king. We never see the Athenian people on stage and Theseus “is both symbol and spokesman of the democratic polis.” This metonymy bespeaks a deeper paradox: “Tragedy’s representational strategies make it unable to represent the anti-representational logic of Athenian democracy” (94). In other words, *Suppliants* suggests a basic incoherence concerning who actually governs in Athens, an incoherence modeled in its own troubled allegory of Athens. While historicist readings emphasize the *Suppliants* as a political tragedy embodying the constitutive beliefs of democratic Athens, Wohl thus shows how the form of the play calls attention to the limits of its own representation, revealing a gap between the play’s ability to depict the *dēmos* and the *dēmos* itself, what Wohl calls a “fundamental mimetic antinomy between the political and the tragic” (98).

Borrowing a description of a third facet from Raymond Williams’ *Marxism and Literature*, Wohl takes a slightly different approach to the politics of form with the concept of a “structure of feeling.” Williams defines structures of feeling as “social

¹ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, 1999).

experiences in solution . . . [experiences] at the very edge of semantic availability.”² Wohl shows how plays like *Suppliants* and *Orestes* constitute a political practice, putting into play “the barely articulated thoughts, feelings, experiences and beliefs that will precipitate out in real political action” (138). In other words, “structures of feeling” introduce affective spaces – holding environments, to borrow from D.W. Winnicott – that allow for ambivalent emotional responses to the political situation. *Orestes* articulates this structure of feeling by positioning the audience between the failure of a quest for redemption and the revenge drama that begins in the play’s second half. Pylades’ appearance and promise of salvation saves Orestes and Electra (as well as the play). And yet the revenge plot also “repeats the fratricidal violence of the doomed house,” in effect forcing the audience to choose between seeing this as desperate vengeance or evidence of a corrupt city. Either way, the play “offers no hope of reconciliation.” On Wohl’s reading, *Orestes* “leads to an emotional and cognitive impasse that reproduces the tensions of Athens in 411” (127).

Fourth, the politics of form also evokes the idea *psychagogia*, the leading of the soul in a particular direction. Plays do not simply contain ideology but they *do* ideology, shaping the soul in particular ways. According to Wohl, “Ideology is less a determinate content than a ‘structure of feeling,’ . . . [and] tragedy’s ideological force lies not in its mimetic representation (positive or negative) of the former but in its psychagogic manipulation of the latter” (38). The extravagant pathos of *Alcestis*, for example, is hard to resist: while distant from the political concerns of democratic Athens, the play brings together the democratic equality of death and the benefits of royalty; this juxtaposition puts the audience in an emotionally uncomfortable position, forcing spectators to confront the limits of Athens’ commitments to equality as a first political principle. The *Ion* provides a similar example, highlighting the contradiction between Athens’ myth of autochthony and the chance (or *tuchê*) that actually leads some residents of Athens to be citizens and others not. “The play thus pits the ideological certainty of the end against the contingency of the dramatic means” (22).

Seen from its *psychagogic* aspect, Euripidean tragedy achieves its political force by leading the soul to adopt certain subjective relations to the reality it depicts. Yet this depicting always already involves a degree of construction. According to Wohl, Euripidean tragedy does not just provide the proverbial “mirror in the roadway” but crafts reality through its formal structures. Tragedy reproduces the affective experience of events, making the emergent scenarios feel real. Wohl contrasts this argument with William Arrowsmith’s classic “A Greek Theater of Ideas,” where Arrowsmith argued for Euripides’ reporting of the “widening gulf between reality and tradition” (111).³ Wohl asserts, however, that plays like *Helen*, *Trojan Women*, and *Orestes* demonstrate the difficulty of distinguishing literary text from context, how history emerges from the narrativizing of the plays themselves, and how tragedy “stages a dress rehearsal for the tragic future soon to come.” *Helen* revolves around questions of illusion and reality:

² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1978), 133 – 4.

³ The citation comes from Wohl. Cf. William Arrowsmith, “A Greek Theater of Ideas,” *Arion*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Autumn, 1963), 32 – 56.

“which is the real Helen and which the eidolon?” asks Wohl (113). The play does not simply stage the traumatic historical context following the Athenians’ defeat in Sicily in 412; it also raises the question of the ways in which such stories are told, with the fictional world of Egypt contrasted to the “real world” of Troy. As Wohl puts it: “Tragedy, far from passively reflecting contemporary reality, in fact anticipates and precipitates it by producing the affective and cognitive framework in which the future can unfold” (112).

This rather breathless naming of example upon example in support of the “politics of form” follows the structure of Wohl’s arguments in the book. While the theoretical insights reaped merit the effort, the plays themselves often seem much less important. As Wohl admits, “Euripides” in her study plays a secondary role to “the politics of form.” This subordination of Euripides prompts the question: Is there anything distinctively *Euripidean* about Wohl’s insights? Does a “politics of form” emerge just as easily from Dickens (one of Raymond Williams’ examples) or Balzac (one of Jameson’s examples)? If so, then what do we as political theorists gain from turning to the politics of form in democratic Athens?

Wohl’s study invites such lines of inquiry but it does not take them up. One wonders about the particular *democratic* formations of this politics of form. As Wohl mentions, the performance of Greek tragedies formed part of a political institution in ancient Athens and each performance was preceded by dramatic displays of the democratic *polis*. The politics of form may not have had a particularly democratic inflection but this context created an atmosphere conducive for democratic politics. Reading Greek tragedy in historical context without reducing the genre to mere mirrors of ideology, J. Peter Euben’s *The Tragedy of Political Theory* proposed to consider Greek tragedy as providing “a preface for understanding classical political theory” and suggested that “the tragedians and these theorists provide in turn a ground for contemporary theorizing.”⁴ Taken in light of Euben’s work, then, *Euripides and the Politics of Form* leads us to consider the democratic (or democratizing) consequences of history, philosophy, and other literary forms. Moreover, it prompts reflection on the *affective regimes* that structured these forms. To what degree did the embodied experience of Greek tragedy make a difference? Or the fact that one could see one’s fellow citizens? We can only hope Wohl tackles such questions next.

⁴ J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton, 1990), 4.