The Festival of Dionysus: A Civic Event

In Poetics, Aristotle defines the function of tragedy as the “catharsis” of emotions, their “purgation” or “purification” (Janko 5). Jacob Bernays, known for his medical interpretation of Aristotle’s Poetics, defines the relationship between tragedy and catharsis differently. He says it is “accidently [a] by-product of tragedy, rather than something essential to its nature.” Nevertheless, Bernays says “the best audience for a tragedy, in terms of its emotional effect, would surely be an audience of people who are emotionally disturbed and unbalanced” (5). Athenian political leaders placed great emphasis on controlling citizens in this state of mind in order to prevent civil conflict. Catharsis, or the purging of the emotions, both pity and fear, was a way for the Athenian democracy to prevent chaos. The performance of tragedies at the festival of Dionysus provided the citizens with this cathartic outlet. The tragedies also exposed audiences to issues that identified the consequences of acting out in rage, making the festival, undoubtedly a civic event.

The festival of Dionysus was a way to control the conflicts that existed between the citizens of Athens. If they could purge their rage, they would then become the ideal docile citizen that the political leaders could more easily control. In Athens, there was an acute sense of pride, a self-proclaimed superiority, because the citizens comprised the ruling class of the polis. However, in any democracy where such freedoms are granted, conflicts will arise. As the citizens have the opportunities to voice their opinions, which rarely are a consensus, internal conflicts are inevitable. In fact, Plato states in Republic: Book VIII, that the Greek city-state “is a form of government which teems with evils” (Constitution Society). He goes on to imply that it is both a democracy and a tyranny. According to William V. Harris in Restraining Rage: The
Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity, Plato claims that “democracy leads to a de facto anarchy in which even the slaves and the animals are infected with the spirit of freedom. After that, so he maintains, comes tyranny” (158). Harris is clearly showing the paradox that exists in the presence of freedom.

During the Golden Age, which coincided with the origin and evolution of the festival of Dionysus, Pericles governed the citizens of Athens. He was revered for his creation of the polis, meaning city-state, and often called a citizen himself (Else 154). In fact, the term that refers to this era of flourishing democracy, “The Golden Age,” is also often called “The Age of Pericles” (154). However, it can be argued that Pericles exerted his power in order to establish restraint in a democracy of freedom and voice. An example of this would be in the “Pericles Funeral Oration” where he stated:

> We are a free people not only in our management of public affairs but in our personal tolerance of one another's everyday conduct. In my judgment there is no other place where the Individual can develop independence and self-reliance so easily, so gracefully, and in so many directions. That this is not a matter of boastful talk for this occasion, but of plain truth, is proved by the fact of our power, which we acquired because we possessed those qualities. Learn from these dead that the key to happiness is freedom.

In implying that the peace in Athens is a result of the citizen’s “personal tolerance of one another’s everyday conduct,” Pericles cleverly gives insight into the potential difficulties of a democracy (154). And although, the “Age of Pericles” exists after a series of tyrannies such as
Peisistratus, who took over the acropolis of Athens in 561 B.C., there is still a necessity in keeping an even keel in their city-state (Lavelle 9). Their hubris, or excessive pride, was important as an example of the greatest polis of all the Greek city-states and it was in their interest to maintain that status (Scaroborough 247). Pericles was also revered as a great supporter of the theatre arts, making the festival of Dionysus a civic duty for all citizens including even the poor and criminals. There is no doubt that Pericles was revered by his citizens and that his funeral oration promoted patriotism, but freedom is synonymous with protest and passion, all often leading to anger and frustration; this is inevitable.

Pericles was a strong supporter of the theatre and led the polis to organize the festival of Dionysus. The democratic process included recruiting chorus members by the choregoi, based on their knowledge, as well as choosing the judges, a random process by drawing names out of a vase (Rhodes 109). However, Pericle’s agenda in supporting the attendance of the masses to this festival was actually a way for him to control their rage and prevent chaos in Athens. Catharsis, the purging of emotions both pity and fear, is considered to be an important element of the festival of Dionysus. The assembly of the festival required each Athenian dramatist to submit a trilogy of tragedies in addition to a satyr; these plays were watched on the second through the sixth day of the festival (Scarborough 246). The tragedies were especially important because they offered the experience of catharsis to the audience members. According to Myra L. Uhlfald in The Classical Journal, Aristotle identifies the elements of the plot of tragedies as an opportunity to “arouse pity and fear” defining tragedy “as the imitation of this kind of action (Lane 309). Aristotle, according to Uhlfald, is ultimately saying that the audience member is essentially the tragic hero. If the audience member could identify with the tragic hero, purge his rage, and learn a lesson about maintaining self composure, why wouldn’t
Pericles encourage the attendance of such an experience? He was revered for supporting the arts, allowing all to attend, establishing a sense of citizenship and community, all while maintaining control in his city-state, giving all of the citizens the right to take pride in being the most successful polis.

It is important to focus specifically on the dramatist works in defining how the audience members could relate to the tragic hero. If the citizens could relate to these heroes, they could learn the consequences of acting on one’s emotions. There is a fine line between thumos, spirit, or passion and stasis, or anger. “If there was too much thumos, terrible civil conflict was a likely consequence” (Harris 158). It is largely assumed that the tragic dramatists had their own political agendas in writing their plays and submitting them to the festival in the hopes of sending their message to the masses. What they may not have realized is that almost every hero was a victim of too much thumos, and inadvertently, this taught the public a lesson about the dangers of releasing one’s anger.

A prime example of this would be Antigone by Sophocles, one of the fathers of tragedies at the festival. King Creon’s anger with the dead Polyneices, who he sees as a traitor who attacked his city, as well as his anger with Antigone for defying his decree of burying Polyneices, is rigid. Haemon, his son, asks him to give up his thumos stating that “though a man be wise, it is no shame for him to bend in season” (Sophocles 97). Unfortunately, Creon refuses, and although he relents, it is too late. Antigone, Haemon, and Creon’s wife Eurydice are all dead. In this example, Creon’s anger leads to death and misery. Sophocles’ play not only allowed the citizens to experience catharsis, but also served as an example for their own civic duty in behavior and heightened their appreciation and duty to uphold tolerance in their actions. In fact, the citizens may associate the rigid Creon with the series of tyrants that reigned prior to
“The Age of Pericles” during the Peloponnesian Wars. As a result, they remember their fortune of freedom, adhere to the expectance of acting with tolerance, and, as a result, contribute to a maintained democracy. Ultimately the festival of Dionysus reminds them of their civic duties and therefore should be considered primarily as a civic event.

As democracy flourished in Athens in the 5th century B.C., the citizens held great honor and pride for how they were seen by other Greek city-states. Pericles, who governed their acropolis, was especially noteworthy for his leadership and loved by his people for saving them from a series of tyrants. A democracy gives the citizens a voice, and the Athenians, like any other body of citizens, used that voice. However, their voices, opinions, ideas, and passions all differed, and Pericles was wise to recognize the potential conflict that could exist. His support and leadership of the festival of Dionysus was essential in controlling the emotions of the masses. It was a way for him to reach everyone, to expose them to tragedies, to cause them to release their thumos through catharsis. Whether the catharsis experienced at the festival were like Aristotle says, one in the same with tragedy, or a “by-product” of tragedy as Bernays states, they were a prime opportunity for political leaders, like Pericles, to provide a voice for all citizens without providing the opportunity for revolution, therefore making the festival’s most important purpose a civic event.

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