

## REVIEW

### THE POLITICS OF EMOTION IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

Eirene Visvardi, *Emotion in Action: Thucydides and the Tragic Chorus*. *Mnemosyne Supplements*, 377. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015. Pp. x + 290. Hardback, €115.00/\$149.00. ISBN 978-90-04-26929-3.

This work provides a thoughtful and useful contribution to the growing body of studies on the emotions in Greek literature. Visvardi focusses on works belonging to two distinct genres, Thucydides' *Histories* and the choral odes of tragedy. She argues that they both 'reflect and address in diverse ways what emerges as a vital preoccupation in fifth-century Athenian culture: how to engage (with) collective emotion in order to direct its motivational power into action that is conducive to social cohesion and collective prosperity in the *polis*' (1).

In the introduction (and then again in the concluding 'coda'), Visvardi sets out the assumptions that underpin her argument. Fifth-century Athenians 'explicitly give emotion a prominent place in their public discourses and decisions' (3). Tragedy and the *Histories* play a role in shaping these emotions and in showing how the right kinds of collective emotion can be productive in decision making within the democracy. Through an analysis of Aristotle's theory of emotions, Visvardi argues that emotions, and ultimately the enactment of emotions by a chorus on stage, may affect or be part of cognitive processes. In doing so, her argument reflects the views of much scholarship on the emotions and tragedy, such as the contribution by Lada-Richards.<sup>1</sup> Visvardi's contribution, however, is to show the ways in which tragic choruses, though largely neglected by Aristotle, raise the question of how emotion 'is to be incorporated in or addressed through institutions and practices of the *polis*' (31).

In her chapter on Thucydides, Visvardi seeks to counter the possible objection that heightened emotions are not conducive to rational thought or that the two can be separated. Here she provides an interesting and persuasive account of the importance of emotion for rational processes in the *Histories*. There is less a dichotomy in the *Histories* between reason and emotion and

<sup>1</sup> I. Lada-Richards, "'Empathic Understanding": Emotion and Cognition in Classical Dramatic Audience-Response', *PCPS* 39 (1993): 94–140.

more a difference between emotions that lead to good or bad decisions. Charismatic figures such as Pericles, she argues, are necessary to ‘calibrate collective emotion and render it conducive to good policy making’ (48).

In the next two chapters, Visvardi suggests that tragic choruses approach emotion in similar ways. She considers two sets of plays, first Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, *Suppliants*, and *Seven Against Thebes*, and secondly Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* and Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Visvardi sees the Aeschylean choruses as being ‘active choruses’ in that they ‘specifically (attempt to) instigate fear and perform an extensive discourse about the content and function of this emotion’ (94). As in Thucydides, the choruses in these plays show that emotions can have both a positive and a negative effect on the *polis*. The chorus of the *Eumenides* inspire fear as the Erinyes, but fear is also useful in keeping order within Athens. By contrast the chorus of the *Bacchae* is less active than those of Aeschylus and Sophocles and instead ‘theorizes’ Dionysiac fear (237). Together these choruses offer ‘paradigms of affective participation to be taken outside the theatre, into the courts and the political assembly’ (248).

Visvardi provides a detailed close reading of her chosen texts and some valuable insights into issues of emotion. The book is perhaps not an easy read, however, and in places Visvardi may be said to provide more questions than answers. Not all of the terms used in the work are fully defined—it remains unclear, for example, how the chorus of the *Bacchae* can really be said to be ‘theorizing’ Dionysiac *deinon* (a rather prosaic and cerebral activity, one would have thought, for a band of enthused maenads). Similarly, on Aeschylus’ *Suppliants* we are told that fear initiates debate and thus becomes ‘gradually tamer and more sensible’ (120). Given the previous discussion on the relationship between reason and the emotions, it would be useful to know whether ‘sensible’ here and elsewhere can be taken as a synonym for ‘rational’. Visvardi certainly does not regard emotion as something divorced from reason, but the precise relationship between the two is left open.

Moreover, she is possibly a little incautious in insisting on a civic function for tragedy within the Athenian democracy. She notes that this is a controversial issue on p. 4, but then largely declines to argue the point. Lengthy reviews of ongoing scholarly debates are, admittedly, not always helpful, but on the other hand the notion of a politicized Athenian theatre is a key assumption for the argument—and one, I fear, that is not entirely safe.<sup>2</sup> Her argument perhaps fits the Aeschylean plays rather better than those of Euripides and Sophocles, in which the *polis* and political decision-making feature less prominently.

Perhaps equally bold is her claim that ‘emotion as enacted and theorized by tragic choruses must have been of particular interest to the Athenian audience’ (46). Yet can we really generalize on what the audience ‘must’ have

<sup>2</sup> Objections by, for example, P. J. Rhodes, ‘Nothing to do with Democracy: Athenian Drama and the *Polis*’, *JHS* 123 (2003): 104–19, are noted but largely brushed aside.

thought? Gorgias certainly believed that poetry aroused emotions (B 11.8–10 D–K), yet he does not credit audience members with any great desire to understand these feelings, and rather states that they are determined to be deceived and enjoy the tragic poet’s ‘deception’ (B 23). Plato (who receives surprisingly little attention in Visvardi’s study) may be one example of an Athenian who harboured doubts about the social and political utility of tragic emotions (e.g. *Resp.* 605c–606b). Should we also take into account the views of those audience members at the City Dionysia who were not Athenian citizens? Her approach is in general decidedly ‘Athenocentric’ and perhaps some attention could have been paid to the possibility of performance contexts outside Attica or of the non-Athenian elements in attendance at the theatre of Dionysus.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Visvardi has, in the final analysis, produced a thought-provoking study that will be of use to anyone interested in the emotions in Thucydides and Greek tragedy. This book should certainly stimulate yet further debate and research in this important area of inquiry.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, D. K. Roselli, *Theatre of the People* (Austin, 2011) 118–45; E. Csapo, *Actors and Icons of the Ancient Theatre* (Chichester, 2010) 84–107.