In most cases it is very difficult to decide what relation existed between a Greek tragedy and the political events of the time, and there are widely divergent views as to how this problem should be tackled. In this article I do not attempt to give a comprehensive survey of the different kinds of political interpretations of Greek tragedy. I shall first examine the possibilities and limitations of the political approach in general, and then discuss some interpretations which are representative of different approaches. I use the term 'politics' in a restricted sense as denoting matters connected with the internal government of the state, e.g. the struggle between political groups, and with its relation to other states, i.e. its foreign policy. Social questions like the position of women and slaves are not included, although they may be regarded as part of politics and play an important part in Greek tragedy; their inclusion would complicate the subject even more and make it difficult to draw clear distinctions.

With regard to its political involvement Greek tragedy presents us with a curious paradox. On the one hand dramatic performances in Athens were the responsibility of the state. Tragedies were performed at a festival instituted and organised by the state, which also contributed to the costs of production. Moreover, the theatre was not merely subsidised by the state, as in many modern countries; in Athens we find a real popular theatre, for the citizens participated in the performances and took a lively interest in them. V. Ehrenberg says: 'It was at the same time an event in which citizens—both as members of the chorus and as actors—performed a play normally written by a fellow-citizen before an audience of citizens (and a few foreigners) and judged by some of the citizens'.

In the middle of the 5th century BC the theatre of Dionysus in Athens could seat approximately 17,000 spectators; this did not mean that every citizen attended the performances, but there are surely few periods in history in which the theatre could count on such popular support.

On the other hand it was only in exceptional cases that the tragic dramatists depicted the events of their time. Of the thirty-two extant Greek tragedies there is only one, the Persae, which dramatises a recent event, and according to our sources there were only a few other plays with a similar subject. The majority of Greek tragedies were based on myths, and thus treated events which took place in a distant mythical time. The political events of the fifth century are not represented directly in these tragedies.

It may be assumed that most artists are influenced in one way or another by the conditions of their time and that their works show traces of this influence.

*This article is a revised version of a paper read at the conference of the Classical Association of South Africa in January 1981.
This applies especially to drama, which portrays life in such a graphic way. Therefore Greek tragedy may also be expected to show signs of the influence of contemporary events. Most critics agree on this point. J.C. Kamerbeek expresses it in this way: 'Het is absurd te veronderstellen, dat de ontwikkeling van democratie en imperium en de conflicten hiermee gepaard (en men bedenke dat iedere Attische burger daarbij direct betrokken was, dat de ontwikkeling zich grotendeels in de volksvergadering afspeelde) langs de ontwikkeling van de tragedie heengleden (de tragedie die bestemd was en opgevoerd werd voor het Athense volk). Dat is alleen daarom al zo onwaarschijnlijk, omdat de bloei der tragedie samenvalt met Athene's politieke grote tijd. De vraag naar de relatie tussen tragedie en historie, tussen poëzie en werkelijkheid, is dus in dit geval een zeer natuurlijke, maar verliest daarom niets van haar gecompliceerdheid'.

Critics show a preference for the term 'reflect' to describe this influence. A.J. Podlecki says: 'The first step, then, is to recognize that dramas written in a particular historical context may also reflect that context'. E. Delebecque regards a vague term such as 'reflet du temps présent' as better than the term 'allusion'.

If Greek tragedy does reflect contemporary conditions, in what way does this appear? For the sake of convenience I wish to distinguish between three ways, of which the second and third may frequently overlap: The first way is simple and clear—the direct portrayal of contemporary events, as in the Persae of Aeschylus. In the second place there may be allusions to contemporary events. Behind the mythical story references may be seen to certain events, situations and even personalities of the fifth century. There is a great difference of opinion about the identification of such allusions. Some allusions are generally accepted as such, e.g. Athene's speech on the institution of the Council of the Areopagus and the references to a treaty with Argos in the Eumenides. However, the number of such accepted allusions is very small, and there are innumerable cases on which critics disagree vehemently. Some critics are inclined to deny the very existence of allusions, while others discover them at every turn. There is also a third possibility, that tragedy may reflect the thought rather than the events of the time. In that case a tragedy is not connected with a particular event or situation, but with a whole period. Issues are treated in the plot which were topical at the time and frequently discussed by the citizens. The aim of such a tragedy is that of 'restating mythical situations in terms of fifth-century conflicts'. For this reason we frequently find anachronisms in Greek tragedy where mythical heroes behave like fifth-century Athenians.

It is clear that in many cases it is extremely difficult to prove conclusively that in a given passage there is an allusion to or reflection of the conditions of the time. Two additional factors make it even more difficult. In the first place our knowledge of fifth-century history is frequently incomplete and we are dependent on fragments of information which have been handed to us in a very haphazard way. In these circumstances it is dangerous to assume a connection between our incomplete information and a particular play. The second difficulty
is the great uncertainty about the dating of many plays. The dates of only a few tragedies are certain; others can be assigned to a certain period with a measure of certainty, and quite a few cannot be dated with any certainty at all. In view of this uncertainty it is very risky to connect a particular tragedy with a particular event.

I shall now discuss a few typical approaches to the problem of proving that there is a definite connection between a tragedy and the conditions of the time. The different methods frequently overlap and one scholar may employ more than one approach, but I have drawn certain distinctions for the sake of greater clarity.

The first approach is that of the historian. The scholars I mention here employ different methods which will be discussed later, but they have one characteristic in common: They regard tragedy as a historical document from which they can extract information concerning the events or the ideas of the fifth century. Ehrenberg says very candidly: "... the chief interest taken in tragedy in this context is in its quality of reflecting the spirit and issues of the time. It thus alas! has become a "historical source"." It is indisputable that tragedy is an expression of the spirit of the time, but it is quite a different matter to deduce reliable facts about a period from a particular tragedy. Moreover, this approach frequently leads to a one-sided view of tragedy. Since the critic is mainly interested in obtaining facts he will concentrate on certain scenes which look promising in this respect and neglect to consider the play as a whole. Consequently he will not really do justice to the whole tragedy and the danger of a distorted interpretation will be greater.

As an example of this approach I take A.J. Podlecki's book *The political background of Aeschylean tragedy*. It is an excellent book and a model of cautious and well-balanced scholarship. Nevertheless the dangers of the historical approach are very evident in certain chapters. Podlecki does not explain his method at length but gives a few indications in his preface: 'The issues and personalities with which the dramatist is involved in his public life can impinge on his art in various ways. Themes of political importance—matters, say, of legal and civil justice—may be translated into dramatic terms. Again, the dramatist may, by his choice of subject and his handling of it, show that he is vitally concerned with, indeed even taking sides in, a current controversy. Or, more rarely, he may place specific persons and historical events in a dramatic setting'. He regards it as important to ask the right questions: 'What is the background of this play? What were the issues being discussed when the playwright moulded his idea and cast it into final shape? Are these issues reflected—in a general or some specific way—in his work?' (p. viii). These questions must be asked in a relaxed way; the plays must be 'coaxed' into yielding up their historical secrets.

Podlecki is looking for answers to his 'historical questions' and this leads to some curious interpretations. In his discussion of the *Persae* he pays special attention to the stress laid on the name of Salamis in the description of the naval battle and connects this with the fact that Themistocles' political position in 472
was very dangerous. He arrives at the conclusion that Aeschylus was here defending Themistocles against his political enemies by emphasising his past services to Athens, and that this was an important inducement to write a tragedy on the battle of Salamis at this particular time: 'It is in this context that the prominence Aeschylus gives to Salamis finds its real importance: he is helping Themistocles in a contest of mythological propaganda and artistic motif' (p. 14). With all due respect to Podlecki's thirst for information it may be asked whether this is really the most significant part of the message of the Perse. In the same way, in his discussion of the Supplices, he emphasises the part which the democratic assembly of Argos plays in the decision to give refuge to the Danaids. He even objects to the view that king Pelagus is the centre of the tragic action; the fact that the final decision is taken by the people detracts from his tragic dilemma. (This objection has been convincingly refuted by P. Burian.7) This emphasis on the popular assembly must mean something, and according to Podlecki it once more refers to Themistocles and the fact that Argos gave refuge to him after he had been banished from Athens. It is even possible that Aeschylus is here expressing his support for a treaty with Argos, a matter which was presumably already being discussed at the time. It is noticeable that Podlecki draws a distinction between the artistic and political intentions of the dramatist: 'The conclusion can hardly be avoided that, whatever Aeschylus may have been doing artistically, he was also, on another plane, holding up for his audience's admiration a democratic Argos, the Argos of his own day' (p. 50). It may be asked whether it is justifiable to draw such a distinction. In all justice to Podlecki I must add that his discussions of the tragedies are not always so one-sided. In the chapter on the Oresteia he first gives an illuminating exposition of the role of dîke in the trilogy, without allowing the historical background to intrude, and only then discusses its relation to contemporary politics.

In the second place I discuss the approach of those scholars who attempt to find allusions to definite historical events in tragedies with mythical subjects. The most important representatives of this school are Gregoire, Goossens and Delebecque. I shall refer mainly to the latter two, who have published books on the relation between Euripides' tragedies and his time. These scholars call their approach 'la méthode historique' or 'interprétation historique'; their methods resemble those of the historians in many respects but there is nevertheless a difference of nuance. The historian is interested in tragedy as a historical source; these scholars interpret a tragedy on the strength of its relations to historical events.

This school sees each tragedy as an accurate reflection of the various events and political conflicts of the period in which it was written. The successes and defeats of the Peloponnesian War and the consequent elation or despondency of the Athenians must have left traces in Euripides' tragedies. Tragedy is therefore a kind of running commentary on the events of the day. R. Goossens describes Euripides' œuvre as 'une chronique attentive . . . de la vie et de l'opinion athéniennes'.8 G. Zuntz, who rejects this approach, declares that these scholars
regard Euripides as the editor or leader-writer of a modern newspaper, as it were, who reacts nervously to the latest development.\(^9\) Delebecque indeed declares: ‘Chacune des tragédies d’Euripide semble avoir . . . le caractère d’une œuvre de circonstance’.\(^10\)

With such a starting point it is to be expected that these scholars are obsessed with allusions. They have to find allusions, since they cannot by any other means prove a close connection with contemporary events. Delebecque gives a lengthy explanation of his approach which is amazingly systematic. A historian like Thucydides supplies three details when he describes a battle—a fact, a proper name and a date. A dramatist can usually only mention a fact or a proper name, and the spectator must add the rest. He writes, for example: ‘For a new war a new leader is necessary’ or: ‘The folly of one has led to the misery of all’. The scholar must now discover who this new leader or this fool is. The dramatist may also mention place-names such as Sipylus, Tanaüs or Carystus, and from these names the facts must be deduced. If a critic follows such a method it is not surprising that he finds innumerable allusions. Delebecque discusses the different kinds of allusions at great length and I shall mention only a few examples.

One of the problems is to what extent details concerning mythical cities, peoples and persons can be applied to the places and persons of the fifth century. Delebecque has no doubts in this respect. When Sparta, Argos, Corinth or Thebes are mentioned, one must immediately also think of the relations of these cities with Athens in Euripides’ time. His interpretation of the Heraclidæ is a good example. Since this tragedy describes how the children of Heracles seek protection in Athens against the persecution of Eurystheus, king of Argos, there are naturally many expressions of hostility towards Argos to be found in the play. According to Delebecque, however, it is clear that the Athenians in 430 BC (his dating of the play) were indignant at the fact that Argos, ostensibly neutral, was guilty of double-dealing. He even deduces from the play that there were two parties in Argos—one pro-Spartan and the other pro-Athenian. In other cases, however, Delebecque leaves the possibility open that Argos may not mean Argos but by means of an ‘allegorical transposition’ denote another city. It is especially in the case of mythical heroes that the latter method is very popular. Attempts to prove that behind a Theseus, Oedipus or Creon there lurks a well-known personality of the fifth century are numerous and have led to the worst excesses of this kind of interpretation.

On what grounds can one decide that a given passage contains an allusion to a contemporary event? It is often argued that, if a passage does not fit the context, it must refer to something outside the play, especially a contemporary event. But this criterion very easily lends itself to subjective interpretations. If a critic has once decided that a passage contains an allusion, he quickly finds arguments to prove that it does not fit the dramatic situation. He is unwilling to recognise any function which such a passage may possibly have in the play. Delebecque mentions several types of remarks which do not fit the context—sudden changes
of tone, digressions, anachronisms, discrepancies, unnecessary details etc. It is clear that in this way it will be fairly easy to demonstrate that a passage must refer to an event outside the play.

In his book *Ironic drama* Philip Vellacott follows an approach which in many respects resembles that of Delebecque *cum suis*. He attempts, as he says, 'to relate situations, speeches, actions, and moral attitudes found in the plays more directly to the life of the Athenians who formed the first audience than is usually thought to be critically valid' (p. 16). In this way he continually tries to find a connection between a play and contemporary events. Of the *Phoenissae* he says: 'The play is addressed directly to the citizens of Athens on the one topic which in 409 confronted them afresh every day... The theme is war—the War of the Seven against Thebes; but from the outset Thebes is clearly and deliberately identified with Athens in the mind of the spectators' (p. 67). Vellacott's special contribution lies in his use of the term irony. He says: 'When a statement or a speech seems incredible in the direct sense, we shall consider the possibility that it is ironic and then apply and test this as a hypothesis elsewhere' (p. 16). Undoubtedly irony plays an important part in Greek tragedy and also in Euripides, but it is dangerous to decide that a passage is ironic because of the supposed circumstances at the time of production, as Vellacott does. His view of the character of Theseus in the *Supplices* of Euripides is a good example. Theseus in this play is usually regarded as the type of the ideal ruler. When the mothers of the Argive heroes who fell before Thebes implore his help to regain the bodies of their sons, he at first refuses and advances weighty reasons for his decision. Vellacott, however, regards his speech as a caricature... 'perhaps of leading middle-class citizens, regularly elected to office, eloquent on the subject of young men, muddle-headed as politicians' (p. 27). When the herald from Argos arrives, Theseus defends democracy against his attacks, but Vellacott is not impressed: 'Another political sermon, on an unimpeachable text. But, whatever truth such an assertion may have had fifty years earlier, it surely carried less conviction in 421, in a community harassed and regimented by the exigencies of war, dislocated by the increase of population, and bemused by demagogues' (p. 28). It is noticeably that he finds the passage ironic mainly because of the situation in 421 BC. In this way any arbitrary interpretation can be defended.

The uncertainty about the dating of many plays frequently casts doubts on the interpretation of these critics. When a tragedy is coupled so closely with a particular event or situation, a difference of a few years may lead to a completely different interpretation. The *Heraclidæ* again furnishes a good example. Delebecque accepts 430 BC as the date of production and draws far-reaching conclusions about the relations between Athens and Argos at that time, as I have already mentioned. Pericles' naval expedition round the Peloponnese is seen as a threat to Argos. Certain remarks of the Athenian king Demophon about his preparations for battle are even regarded as advice to Pericles as to how he should wage the war against the Spartan invaders. These conclusions depend entirely on his dating of the play. Vellacott, however, assumes that the play was
performed in 427 or 426 BC. Because of this he connects the Heraclidae with the siege of Plataea which was then in its last stages. The story of how Athens in mythical times gave refuge to the children of Heracles must have reminded the Athenians of their neglect of duty towards the Plataeans. Macaria, who voluntarily sacrifices herself to save her family, is a symbol of Plataea: ‘For those whose eyes were open to the imagery of the scene, her blazing, defiant courage symbolized the spirit of the garrison of Plataea, still tying down a Spartan force which might otherwise be harassing Athens’ (p. 191). The difference between this interpretation and that of Delebecque is amazing.

Another point which must be mentioned here is the contrast which some of these scholars see between Euripides and the other two dramatists with respect to their political involvement. It is not surprising that the critics who are on the look-out for allusions concentrate on Euripides. More of his tragedies are extant than of the other playwrights and most of them were written during the Peloponnesian War, which makes it easier to connect them with definite events. Therefore Delebecque, Goossens and Vellacott confine their researches to Euripides’ tragedies. But is there really a fundamental difference between Euripides and the others? Goossens thinks that there is a great difference between Aeschylus’ and Euripides’ use of anachronisms. Aeschylus at all times maintains the conventions of tragedy and his plays have an epic tone; the statements of Euripides’ characters, on the other hand, are modern and could easily come from political speeches of the fifth century. There may be a difference of tone between Aeschylus and Euripides, but Aeschylus was just as involved in contemporary politics as Euripides, as the indisputable allusions in his tragedies clearly show. Sophocles’ case is somewhat different. It is very difficult to find allusions in his tragedies and it is noteworthy that considerably fewer attempts have been made to prove direct connections between his tragedies and contemporary events. This does not mean, however, that contemporary politics did not influence him at all, as Vellacott maintains: ‘The extant plays of Sophocles . . . contain little identifiable reference to the strains and anxieties which occupied the lives of author and audience outside the theatre. A play of Sophocles called its audience away from the practical discussions, the hates and desires, of yesterday and tomorrow, inviting them to weep and tremble in a world of heroically clarified issues’ (p. 151).

It is clear that Vellacott is specially looking for ‘identifiable’ references in tragedy, and because he cannot find such references in Sophocles, he regards him as being above politics. But must an interest in contemporary affairs always be expressed by means of allusions? Is it not more advisable to concentrate on the reflection of the spirit of the time in tragedy? It must be mentioned that this approach is sometimes found in the works of Delebecque, Goossens and Vellacott, although the search for allusions predominates. Delebecque mentions as a third type those allusions which have to be inferred from the whole play, which displays certain ‘tendances profondes’. Strictly speaking, they should not be called allusions at all. The best representative of this approach is V.
Ehrenberg in his book *Sophocles and Pericles*. He does not deny the possibility of allusions, but considers the search for them to be unrewarding. He regards tragedy as being mainly a reflection of the spirit of the time: 'The indisputable fact remains that Attic tragedy was written under the impact of, and therefore is our chief witness for, the spiritual life of fifth-century Athens' (p. 2). Therefore it indicates the issues which occupied the mind of the Athenians at that time: 'On the whole, we can say that the actuality of Attic tragedy is not that of a political pamphlet or the debate in the assembly, but it does reflect the more general issues of the day, that discussion which at all times is going on between the members of a community naturally divided in their views on some of the fundamental, or even some less fundamental, questions of life and thought' (p. 11). This applies especially to the Greek dramatist who wrote for the people and not for a selected few. The performance of a play was 'an event of public life in which the trends of the people’s mind were reflected, discussed and displayed, often in their ultimate consequences' (p. 7).

Ehrenberg is especially interested in Sophocles and Pericles as two representatives of the thought of the time. He discusses what we know of Pericles' view of politics and of the part Sophocles played in public life. After analysing Sophocles' portrayal of rulers, especially Creon in the *Antigone* and Oedipus in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, he draws certain conclusions about his political point of view and his attitude towards Pericles. He admits that Sophocles never openly opposed Pericles, but nevertheless sees a fundamental contrast between them. Sophocles believes in divine powers who control everything, even the state; Pericles is the rationalist who believes in man as the measure of all things. Sophocles warns against 'the possible or even necessary results of a policy relying on the intellectual genius and the overriding power of one man, capable of putting his reasoning intellect over and against the most sacred traditions' (p. 140). This interpretation can be and has been criticised, especially the attempt to find similarities between Creon and Pericles. F. Schachermeyr, among others, has shown that it is very unlikely that Pericles would have agreed to Sophocles' election as general if he had regarded him as an opponent.19 Nevertheless, Ehrenberg's approach to the problem is interesting and is a much more promising way of examining the relation between tragedy and contemporary politics.

A good example of a similar approach is to be found in M.H. Jameson's article 'Politics in the Philoctetes'.15 He first discusses the political situation in Athens in the period before 409 BC. The view that Philoctetes represents Alcibiades, the wronged hero who must be recalled to save Athens, he finds unacceptable because the differences between their personalities are too great. His approach is rather to consider Odysseus and Philocrates as typical persons of the time: Odysseus is the unscrupulous politician who can adapt himself to any situation; Philoctetes, on the other hand, represents the honest citizen who is disillusioned by the failure of the attempt to reform the democracy—both by the deceit of the oligarchs and by the arrogance of the radical democrats. His
reaction is to withdraw from politics and to distrust every scheme for reform. Neoptolemus may be regarded as the representative of the young men of good character in whom the only hope for the future lay. With these conclusions Jameson should have been content, but unfortunately he reverts to more conventional methods in trying to identify Neoptolemus with the younger Pericles. Apart from this, his article is a commendable attempt to interpret tragedy as a general expression of different attitudes towards contemporary issues.

With some hesitation I include under this heading S. Melchinger's treatment of Greek tragedy in the first volume of his book *Geschichte des politischen Theaters*. Since he devotes only sixty pages to Greek tragedy, he cannot discuss it very thoroughly and he is inclined to make rather irresponsible statements without giving convincing proofs, e.g. that Aeschylus was forced to leave Athens because he had criticised the reorganisation of the Council of the Areopagus in the *Eumenides*. In the case of Aeschylus he tries to prove a very close relation between tragedy and contemporary events. In Sophocles' tragedies, however, he finds a different approach to politics, an attempt to analyse more fundamental problems: 'Das politische Thema des Theaters sind nun die Grenzen der Politik, deren Übergriffe in Bereiche, die vor ihr geschützt bleiben müssen, der hybride Missbrauch von Macht durch Gewalt' (p. 62). The burial prohibition in the *Antigone* is an example of such a transgression against humanity; this tragedy warns against the abuse of power. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus* the limitations of political planning are emphasised; politics must make provision for unforeseen circumstances. The *Philoctetes* is a protest against the view that the end justifies the means. Melchinger's remarks on Euripides are, strangely enough, not very significant, except for the expected interpretation of the *Trojan Women* as a protest against war. His view of the *Orestes* is more original: 'Es ist ein Stück über die Fragwürdigkeit der Polis überhaupt' (p. 81). The political developments since Pericles had, according to Euripides, destroyed all hope that human society would be able to achieve liberty and justice in one state.

This approach of Ehrenberg and others is an improvement because it leads to a more relaxed search for a connection between a play and its time. But it can still result in very subjective and arbitrary interpretations. Ehrenberg himself criticises an interpretation of the *Ajax* by Norman Brown in which Ajax is seen as a representative of the old aristocracy who has to yield to the new democratic attitude as exemplified in Odysseus. The method followed by G. Zuntz in his book *The political plays of Euripides* does not eliminate all subjective interpretations, but may serve as a corrective. Zuntz's general approach is very well summarised in a paper 'Contemporary politics in the plays of Euripides'. He sharply criticises those scholars who are always looking for allusions. The performance of a play may arouse certain associations in a spectator, but these are irrelevant: 'True: every and any word spoken by any person on the stage could make anyone in the audience think of anything. This infinite and indefinite possibility of associations is irrelevant' (op. cit. 58). He then asserts that there are
no allusions in tragedy, but he understands this term to mean an utterance which does not fit its context and can only refer to facts or persons outside the drama. Zuntz does not deny that there is a connection between tragedy and history: ‘Every experience and every idea that stirred his age, every hope that winged, every despair that bent it; they have all been absorbed, by a genius of unlimited perception and penetration, into the objective world of art. The whole of existence; not excluding politics. And thus, heightened and deepened, interpreted and interrelated, the transitory has become κτημα εις αει; the timebound, timeless’ (op. cit. 59). But he emphasises the autonomy of the work of art. The political elements have been absorbed into tragedy and tragedy remains in her own sphere from which she cannot be dragged. Thus the details of politics cannot, as it were, be re-extracted from tragedy.

In the discussion of the *Heraclidae* and the *Supplices* of Euripides in his book Zuntz therefore tries to respect the autonomy of the work of art. He first analyses the two plays as timeless works of art without trying to relate them to contemporary politics. Of the *Supplices* he says: ‘This is, admittedly, a political play determined throughout by contemporary experiences and ideas and conveying a definite message. But this message is general not particular, and objective not personal; it is inherent in the detached reality of the drama as a whole’ (p. 5). According to Zuntz the central theme of this play is the problem of how to live with others, citizens of a polis with each other and one polis with another. When the suppliants ask Theseus for help, he is faced with this problem in an extreme form. Must he stake the very existence of his city in order to defend certain values? In the *Heraclidae* on the other hand, the central theme is that of χαρις—the readiness to do someone else a favour and his readiness to accept and return the favour. This preserves life in a world of chaos and lawlessness. Not until he has analysed the plays in this way does Zuntz proceed to examine their relation with the contemporary situation. Consequently his interpretation of a tragedy is not influenced by a preconceived notion of its contemporary relevance.

A similar approach is followed by J. de Romilly in an article ‘Les Phéniciennes d’Euripide ou l’actualité dans la tragédie grecque’. She emphasises that the relation between this tragedy and contemporary politics is of a general order. The central theme of the tragedy is that of civil strife, the quarrel between two brothers which is endangering the city. She examines the way in which this quarrel is portrayed: Polynices is treated more sympathetically than Eteocles, but the disastrous consequences of his actions are clearly demonstrated. The greatest praise is given to Menoeceus who sacrifices himself for his country. She concludes her analysis with these words: ‘Les Phéniciennes, drame de l’επις dénoncent donc un mal profond, qui tient à la jalousie des individus et trouve son seul remède dans le sacrifice à la patrie . . . La pièce ne joue pas sur les allusions de portée plus ou moins immédiate: elle s’inspire d’un sentiment général et d’une idée largement humaine, susceptible de s’appliquer à d’autres temps’ (p. 33). Nevertheless de Romilly insists that this general idea originated
in a particular historical situation and that even the way in which it is phrased owes much to contemporary thought. She quotes passages from contemporary writers and from other tragedies of Euripides in which similar problems are discussed, especially the question as to whether tyranny or the safety of the city is to be preferred by a leader. In this way she demonstrates the political relevance of this tragedy without connecting it too closely with particular persons or events.

So far I have concentrated on the problem of deciding whether there is a connection between a particular tragedy and contemporary politics. But even when such a connection has been proved, the problem of interpretation still remains. What is the dramatist's purpose in alluding to contemporary events? Is he criticising or praising a certain policy? The Persae furnishes a good example. In this case there is no doubt about the contemporary reference, since the play describes a recent event. But what is the purpose of the play? Some regard it as a patriotic play. Lattimore says: 'We cannot fail to see here the glorification of a victory which is, as far as Aeschylus can make it so, Athenian'. Others, however, have emphasised the religious purpose of the play, e.g. Kitto: 'The reasonable view, the one taken by the majority of critics, is that the play is essentially religious and moral; that Aeschylus used the events of the war, and reshaped them, to enforce the religious theme that the gods punish human presumption'. Melchinger also thinks that it is a political play, but regards it as a protest against the imperialistic policy of Athens after the Persian Wars: '. . . jeder Denkende konnte sich ausrechnen, was geschehen würde, wenn Athen Hellas weiter als Object seines Machtrausches behandeln und der grosse Rivale, Sparta, zum Gegenschlag ausholen würde.' Such a protest seems a bit unlikely at such an early date as 472 BC, but this example shows to what different interpretations a play can lend itself.

Another well-known example of the same problem of interpretation is to be found in the reference to the Council of Areopagus in Aeschylus' Eumenides. The historical background is clear. In 462/1 the democrats under the leadership of Ephialtes and Pericles took away all the powers of the Council except the right to judge cases of homicide. In the Eumenides Aeschylus shows how the goddess Athene institutes the Court of the Areopagus to judge Orestes on the charge of matricide. Before the jurors cast their votes Athene declares in a speech that the court will continue to play an important role in the state:

'. . . In this place shall the awe of the citizens and their inborn dread restrain injustice, both by day and night alike . . . Neither anarchy nor tyranny shall the citizens defend and respect, if they follow my counsel . . . And so you shall have a bulwark of the land and a protector of the city such as none of human kind possesses, neither among the Scythiaas nor in the domains of Pelops. Proof against thoughts of profits is this council, august, quick to anger, wakeful on behalf of sleepers is the guard-post of the land that I establish.'
Scholars give different answers to the question whether Aeschylus here expresses himself in favour of or against the reform of the Areopagus. The stress laid on the dignity and importance of the Council gives the impression that he disapproves of the curtailment of its powers. On the other hand the powers which are here given to the Areopagus are precisely those which it retained after the democratic reforms, and therefore some critics think that the dramatist is expressing support for such reforms. In spite of numerous studies no agreement has been reached. Podlecki discusses the various points of view very thoroughly but is unable to arrive at a definite conclusion: 'It is almost a matter of taste to which of the sets of preferences we give greater weight'.

He is especially impressed by K.J. Dover's argument that Aeschylus undoubtedly supports the treaty with Argos, which was just as important a part of the democratic policy as the reform of the Areopagus. He regards it as unlikely that Aeschylus would support one part of the program and criticise the other: 'At the very least, we may wonder why, if Aeschylus did not support the internal changes of the Reformers, he did not say so unambiguously and why he gave such repeated and dramatically unnecessary prominence to a major part of their program, the Argive alliance'.

Podlecki's wish that Aeschylus should express himself 'unambiguously' on political issues raises the fundamental question as to what the task of the dramatist should be when he deliberately refers to contemporary politics. Should he indicate clearly what policy he supports and make propaganda for it? In the past some dramatists have done this, but their works have rarely stood the test of time. At this point it may be useful to refer to the theories of Bertolt Brecht, one of the great exponents of committed theatre in the twentieth century. According to him the theatre should encourage a critical attitude. The spectator should not identify himself with the characters and accept their own view of themselves, but should regard them critically and draw his own conclusions. The spectator must think for himself and not even the playwright ought to tell him what to think.

This concept of a critical theatre is very useful when discussing the political involvement of Greek tragedy. The primary task of the dramatist is not to make propaganda for a political policy. He should analyse the principal factors in a situation impartially. If there is a conflict of opinions, he should try to describe both sides as fairly as possible. He will have his own opinions, of course, but he should not force them on the spectator. The 'message' should be found in the structure of the play as a whole, not in isolated speeches or passages. If this is the case, different spectators may have arrived at different conclusions.

It is now possible to regard Aeschylus' reference to the Areopagus from a new point of view. Dover and Podlecki are inclined to see Aeschylus as a 'party' man who has to support his party in everything. It is quite possible, however, that he supported the Argive alliance but disapproved of the reform of the Areopagus. Lloyd-Jones says: 'But it does not follow that a poet who makes a polite mention of an ally must necessarily share the attitude in internal matters of those who
have promoted the alliance'. This does not mean that he was trying to persuade the Athenians to restore the powers of the Areopagus. He expresses certain views on the best way of ordering the state and the necessity of keeping a balance between tyranny and anarchy; he emphasises the importance of the Council of the Areopagus in maintaining such a balance, perhaps with a feeling of regret for the curtailment of its powers, as Lloyd-Jones suggests. The main emphasis, however, falls on general principles and the warning against civil strife. It is even possible that the democrats would have agreed with these statements, as Dover asserts. Aeschylus rises above the limited view of a politician when he gives advice to his people, and this may also be said of Greek tragedy in general.

NOTES

6. op. cit. 11.
10. op. cit. 10.
12. op. cit. 46.
17. See note 9.
18. RPh 39 (1965) 28–47.
19. Compare Vellacott's assertion that this tragedy alludes to the war between Athens and Sparta.
20. Quoted by Podlecki, op. cit. 9.
22. op. cit. 47.
24. op. cit. 94.
25. ibid. 95.
26. op. cit. 77.
27. 'The political aspect of Aeschylus' Eumenides', JHS 77 (1957) 233.
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