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Teaching Greek Tragedy

Over the past decade, there have been numerous calls to diversify the political theory canon. As Parrish (2007) writes, there should be a place for non-canonical political theory texts within introductory political theory courses. However, including the non-canonical is but one strategy for diversifying such courses and intellectual explorations. In this essay, I advocate teaching Greek tragedy as an additional strategy to enhance engagement with diverse voices, viewpoints, and content, as well as an avenue to develop a more gender-inclusive syllabus. In advocating the use of Greek tragedy in introductory political theory courses, as well as upper-division courses, I also engage with an additional aim: political theory should help students encounter and engage with broad questions about the nature of political life, and as such, as a subfield, it should foster creativity. Teaching Greek tragedy offers an opportunity to address both aims concurrently, fostering a particular approach to diversity in ways that promote originality and imagination as central to the work of political theory and political thinking.

In this essay, I explore one way that Greek tragedies can enhance the political theory curriculum, which help develop the critical thinking skills in college students: diversity of perspective. Diversity of perspective operates on multiple levels, within the plays and within the broader scholarship on these plays. While the tragedies often have a dominant voice, or protagonist, they also include additional viewpoints from other characters, which provides an opening to interrogate these voices. This can allow for further exploration of the questions that undergird political life because multiple viewpoints are introduced over the course of the plays. Beyond the multiple voices within the text of these plays, scholarship about these plays can also

help enhance diversity on introductory syllabuses. Scholars from diverse backgrounds write about these plays, and in particular, scholarship on Greek tragedy allows for the inclusion of more female voices on syllabi, which is a particular challenge when considering ancient political thought. This essay explores two plays of Euripides, *Medea* and *Trojan Women*, to address the way both the content of and the scholarship on Greek plays can work towards the goal of inclusion and diversity. In addition, this essay ends with a recommendation for an assignment structure that promotes student creativity. Taken together, this essay both demonstrates the various ways in which tragedy helps promote the goal of diversity by bringing in alternative voices and viewpoints, as well as fosters creativity, by encouraging students to develop their own voice, using tragedy as a starting point.

Tragedy as Diversity

There is substantial criticism directed at canonical political thought for being "too white" and "too male." This criticism has provoked reflection about the inclusiveness of syllabuses for introductory political theory courses. Professors have developed a number of tactics to enhance the diversity of voices on such syllabuses. For example, professors have endeavored to expand the field of study beyond the Western tradition, bringing in authors from places beyond Europe. This can include authors from Islamic political philosophy, such as Alfarabi, Ibn Rushdi, or Ibn Khaldun; authors from Chinese political philosophy, such as Laozi or Zhaungzi; authors who explore post-colonialism in Latin America, such as Jose Martii or Leopold Sedar; or authors who write on politics in India, such as Gayatri Spivak or Uma Narayan. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list, but a sample of authors that, by virtue of their region of origin, help to expand beyond canonical political thought, which is so often rooted in the Western tradition. While this is

an increasingly popular and important exercise, there are additional ways to enhance diversity in our political theory courses. The approach I advocate here, teaching Greek tragedy, is meant to supplement, not replace, the aforementioned method.

There are multiple ways to conceive of diversity and inclusion. While geographic point of origin and historical context provide important proxies to measure diversity, I advocate for a more expansive view here. The texts that we interrogate as political theory form the core of political theory. As theorists, we learn different ways to approach the various kinds of texts we encounter in our field of study, as we strive to analyze, understand, and critique the ideas found within these works. As Peter Euben writes, texts are the objects we gather around as political theorists; they are the beginning of our politics (1990). While certain texts seem non-negotiable, such as Plato's *Republic*, or Machiavelli's *The Prince*, we should ask ourselves how these texts achieved this status. At the core, these texts are canonical because we teach them as such; we teach them as such because they are canonical—there is something of an infinite loop of justification. But beyond this, we likely teach these texts because they help us interrogate, and teach our students how to interrogate, questions about the nature of political life. They help us consider questions about living together, the exercise of power, and even the gendered notions of power and citizenship. These two texts in particular present different views on the nature of political life, and yet, both are often present on introductory syllabuses. Political theory asks a number of questions and unearths many different answers about the nature of political life; building on this idea, diversity can emerge from this multitude of questions and answers, by further expanding the source material for this conversation. It is in this space that tragedy becomes a way to diversify the introductory political theory syllabus. Though it comes from the Western tradition, the multiplicity of viewpoints makes it a rich resource for diversity.

Though there are three major Greek tragedians, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, this essay focuses on the work of Euripides. I look at the content of and scholarship around two of Euripides' works to argue for this method of inclusion: *Medea* and *Trojan Women*. I choose Euripides in part because his work is less likely to appear on introductory syllabuses, and because scholars identify the complexity of his work. This complexity provides the basis not only of my argument for inclusion, but also creativity, to which I will turn in the latter part of the essay. These three plays offer a sense of the breadth of issues in Euripides' texts, that help bolster claims of inclusion and diversity when understood in its broader conception introduced above. In particular, *Medea* raises questions about gender and inclusion; and *Trojan Women* emphasizes the perspective of the outsider. The content of these plays helps work towards goals of greater inclusion and diversity, which, when combined with assignments designed to help students tap into their creativity, demonstrates the potential to achieve multiple outcomes concurrently.

Euripides' *Medea*

Discussions of inclusion often begin with an assessment of identity markers. Gender and race are two prominent heuristics used to evaluate the level of inclusion, both on course syllabuses (see for example: Parrish 2007; Holland 2006), as well as more generally. While my understanding of diversity expands beyond such markers, these categories can help indicate areas that would aid in the project to enhance diversity on introductory syllabi. In Euripides' *Medea*, the titular character is a woman who murders her children in order to take revenge on her estranged husband. Medea, in addition to her status as woman and mother, is also a foreigner in Corinth, where the play is set. Throughout the course of the play, the audience observes Medea move from grief-stricken at her predicament, to the pursuit of vengeance against Jason, her once-husband and father

of her children. To add insult to injury, Jason is to wed the princess of Corinth, Glauce. Medea murders Glauce and her father, King Creon, before taking a sword to her own sons in Euripides' production. At first glance, it might seem curious to advocate for the inclusion of such subject matter in an introductory course—cheating husbands, murderous mothers? However, it is precisely the excessive nature of the characters and content in this play that makes it helpful on the metric of inclusivity.

Feminist theorists have long celebrated Medea as a feminist heroine who eschews the societal expectations of her gender. Specifically, her character explicitly rejects motherhood on multiple occasions in the play, which is often read through the murder she commits. Medea's rejection of her societally-mandated role offers an opportunity to consider the socially constructed nature of these expectations, and the way they are linked to Medea's gender. Childcare is presented in the play as the purview of the mother; Medea's rejection of this when she proclaims, "I have come out of the house," is coupled with a rejection of her relegation to the private sphere of the home. Feminist theorists appreciate this rejection because it brings Medea into the public realm, into the realm of politics (see for example: Collits 2000; Hall 1999; March 2001; Markovits 2018). Medea's rejection of her station in life is itself a political act. This can be read against the excesses that accompany the rejection. That is, Medea's murder of her children can be read as part of this rejection. It raises questions about whether such excess is necessary in order to throw off the yoke of oppression that accompanies the relegation of women to the private sphere, or whether or how rejection of societal standards can work to reshape them? In addition, Medea's status as woman and mother raises questions about the nature of empowerment-what form can or should it take, what are the consequences of empowerment, and what, if any, limits should there be to seeking empowerment? As Medea leaves her home to address the women of Corinth, and pursues a course

of revenge against Jason, the personal and the political intertwine, which offers another place to ask productive questions for political life: are there limits/boundaries to political life? If so, where do they lie? *Medea* can provide students a chance to engage the link between excess and femininity as an explicitly political question. This gendered excess, and its relationship to the polity, emerges in other philosophical works, including Rousseau's *Emile*, Machiavelli's *The Prince,* and Plato's *Republic.* Though this question is central to *Medea*, its significance is broadly relevant to the history of political thought.

Gender is only one potential pathway into questions about inclusivity and politics within this play. Medea is also an immigrant to Corinth, and one with a dangerous reputation. This makes her status doubly precarious. At the outset of the play, she is both an unmarried woman and a foreigner, with no protection or connection to Corinth, and only her reputation to shield her. Creon exiles Medea and her children, claiming that they pose too much of a danger to the stability of Corinth. This highlights an additional aspect of Medea's femininity, her volatility. The excessiveness of her actions are linked to Medea's outsider status, which is further reinforced as Creon exiles her from the polis. In the course of the play, Medea seeks refuge from her interlocutors, finding it in Athens with the arrival of King Aegeus. In staging these events, so intimately connected to the precarity assigned to Medea's immigrant status and lack of protection outside of marriage, the play provides an opportunity to interrogate the dynamics of migration, exile, and refuge. Further, Aegeus swears an oath of loyalty to Medea, but is unwilling to interfere in the events in Corinth—she must make her own way to Athens in order to receive the benefits of their agreement. Reading *Medea* through this perspective, that of the immigrant, amplifies the voice of this often unheard position, and places renewed emphasis on the struggles bound up in precarity. This play stages alternative voices and perspectives, and though audiences might be

horrified at her choices, the play raises many questions about the structural issues that are at work behind such dynamics. *Medea* introduces voices beyond those of powerful men that so often speak from the depths of the political theory canon, and raises countless questions about the nature of political life when viewed from this alternative, precarious perspective.

Euripides' *Trojan Women*

Trojan Women offers yet an addition perspective that can be helpful for students learning to ask questions about the nature of politics. This play is set after the fall of Troy at the hands of the Greeks in the Trojan War. The main characters in the play are the female members of the former royal family of Troy—with particular focus on the linked plights of Hecuba and Andromache. The play raises questions about what to do when one's entire world collapses, and what kind of agency exists for women in such a situation. Countless characters in the play lament the state of affairs, mourn the loss of their husbands and children, and the loss of their way of life, which died with the destruction of the city at the hands of the Greeks. Commentators sometimes characterize the entire play as an extended lament, while others identify numerous laments throughout the course of the play (Suter 2003). There is a deep sense of helplessness effected by the women in the play, as they are awaiting enslavement by the Greek victors. Though on its face it may not appear political by most conventional measures, it is through the staging of these alternative voices, the voices of the fallen enemy, that the play provides an alternative perspective than that most often put forward in political treatises. Of course, the age-old adage is that history is so often written by the victor; Euripides' *Trojan Women* elevates the voices of the conquered, and more than that, the wives of the conquered. By giving voice to the enemy, this play provides a chance for students to contemplate an alternative perspective than that of the victor. Instead of

contemplating the ways we create community, *Trojan Women* offers an opportunity to mull over its loss, which provides a new angle through which to confront the question of community—that of its destruction. In doing so, in elevating this alternative perspective, this offers conceptual diversity through the viewpoints present in Greek tragedy.

To be sure, this also builds on the forms of diversity represented in Euripides' *Medea,* once again focusing on women's perspectives. These women, though once privileged in status, are now marginalized twice over: first as enemy combatants, and once again as women. Once among the most privileged, they now lack autonomy over the most basic functions. This is perhaps most readily evident in the culminating events of the play, in which the Greek soldiers demand Andromache throw her infant son, Astyanax, from the walls of the fallen city (Due 2006). This brings together the position of mother within the society alongside the sheer powerlessness that emerges in the laments over destruction. Further, staging the laments of these enemy wives can serve as a reminder of shared humanity—indeed there are strands of ethical thought that locate a shared humanity in such laments. This also aids in considering the way different members of the community might experience loss. Women's roles in the community are distinct from their male counterparts. The way they experience loss is colored by these roles, and allows students to consider the presence of differential perspectives within political community. As Audre Lorde (2007) reminds us in her essay, "Age, Race, Class, Sex," it is critical not to mistake unity for homogeneity. Enemy voices and women's voices alike compound as reminders of unity against assumptions of homogeneity. This helps complicate notions of community, and can push students to reconsider the contours and consequences of political life, both in its lived experience and the lived experience of its demise. As we turn to tragedy as a source of diversity, we also engender new sets of questions that emerge from such study.

Further, beyond bringing new voices and perspectives to light in our shared analysis of the nature of political life, the laments of the Trojan Women might serve as a reminder of the catastrophe of war, and raise questions about uses of violence. Further, it raises questions about what we can do in the face of world-changing catastrophe. What resources are available, if any, to help cope with the destruction of our world? What kind of agency do we possess to avert such crises? These are questions that necessitate living and working together, and as such, operate at the core of any politics. These questions are not unique to Euripides' *Trojan Women*; it is not just Hecuba and Andromache that must confront their future at the end of the world. Instead, these are questions that are intertwined with climate change, nuclear instability, and countless issues that contemporary political society must confront. To be sure, these questions about the nature of collective life in a changing moment are at the heart of classic canonical works from familiar thinker such as Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson. Though the historical context is different, the scope of their questions and the urgency of their solutions are strikingly similar. Taken together, these plays provide students with alternative voices and viewpoints through which to interrogate the political world around them. They also make the existence of multiple perspectives and answers normative.

Commentary as a Source of Diversity

In addition to the issues and questions raised throughout the play, an exploration of the scholarship that engages these plays provides two additional avenues to enhance inclusion on introductory syllabuses. First, it offers a chance to engage with authors beyond the canon, specifically non-male authors. The scholarship of Elizabeth Markovits and Demetra Kasimis provide two important examples of critical engagement with *Medea*, which build on a number of

the aforementioned questions, and explore their continued relevance. Markovits' work engages Medea's rejection of her role as mother, and understands this as a mark of agentic behavior (2018, 108). This is a significant interpretation of the play, as it explores the link between empowerment and agency, two important ideas for undergraduate students to grasp as they begin to interrogate the contours of the political world. Further, Markovits' work links the questions to gender and motherhood, which are questions that remain pertinent—consider the contemporary debates around paid maternity leave and the expansion of the welfare state. Kasimis' forthcoming work engages the question of Medea's status as refugee, examining the role this status plays both within and beyond the play. Like Markovits' work, there is a continued relevance of such scholarship, as the contemporary moment is punctuated with stories of ICE and exile of undocumented immigrants. Neither Markovits nor Kasimis is canonical, but their engagement with this play adds to the voices and perspectives present on a syllabus.

Further, as this discussion suggests, the work of these authors, and others who engage tragedy in the present moment, offer a chance to put these ancient texts in dialogue with contemporary questions. This renders such texts alive in this new future. As Bonnie Honig (2013) demonstrates with her masterful re-reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*, every reading of a text is in fact a re-reading. The contemporary perspective can illuminate long-dead or even new questions in ancient texts. Our students might indeed find something new within these plays, or they might observe an age-old link that operates at the core of politics. Kasimis' exploration of Medea's refugee status engenders questions about the very nature of inclusion and citizenship, and its relationship to the exercise of power. This is a question that populates the work of many political scientists, but might also impact the lives of our students—perhaps there is a Dreamer in the audience, or a DACA recipient. The questions raised by this play, and by these plays, when filtered

through the contemporary condition, illustrate the continued relevance, and potentially build the skills to ask questions about the political world.

There are countless examples of scholarship that engages Greek tragedy. Indeed, this is a growing area of research among political theorists. Markovits' treatment of *Medea* alongside questions of agency and assemblage, and Kasimis' engagement with the play along the axis of inclusion and exile, both serve as helpful examples of a broader body of work that revisits these plays with new eyes. Their essays add to the growing body of scholarship that envisions Greek tragedies as important texts through which to engage age-old questions of politics. Other helpful examples come from Peter Euben's (1990) important contributions on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Euripides' *Bacchae*, which takes up the questions of membership as introduced in these plays; Simon Stow's (2017) analysis of Aeschylus' *Persians*, which presents the significance of empathizing with the suffering of one's enemies; Arlene Saxonhouse's (1990) rendering of Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, which once more engages the way the tragic play offers a chance for women to step into the public sphere; and of course Bonnie Honig's (2013) expert rereading of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which returns to this familiar text to offer a conspiratorial reading of the relationship between Antigone and Ismene, unlocking new possibilities within this ancient text. Each of these authors illuminates the way that reading Greek tragedy connects to broader questions, but also, in doing so, brings new voices to the conversation about political life. This is yet another way that tragedy can engender diversity on our introductory syllabi, and can help students contemplate questions about political life anew, through engaging with ancient texts.

Promoting Creativity alongside Inclusion

Including these plays on introductory syllabuses, alongside scholarship that engages the plays, works to enhance inclusivity in a number of ways. In particular, they bring new voices into the conversation about the nature of politics, and encourage multiple perspectives and treatments of the questions at hand. There is an added benefit that can emerge, if desired, alongside inclusion and diversity: creativity. Here, I highlight two explicit avenues connected to creativity, and end with offering a potential assignment for interested teacher-scholars. First, because these plays provide many voices, instead of one that dominates the entire narrative, there is space for interpretation and creative thinking. Unlike the philosophical treatises that make up much of canonical political thought, tragic plays put the power of speech into the mouths of many. While it is possible to find the voice of the author within the play's protagonist, I argue here that the presence of multiple characters democratizes voice in important ways. In turn, this opens the way for multiple interpretations, and as such, further creativity connected to political thought. For example, in *Medea*, while Medea's voice is central to the action in the play, the Chorus of Corinthian women provides an interesting counter—initially they agree to support her campaign for revenge, but later they contemplate intervening in Medea's filicide. Though they ultimately do not intervene, they express their reservations, which provide a counter to Medea's position. This reveals a tension within the play, and one within the group of women. One possible interpretation here is that Medea's actions are deemed excessive even for women in the play—this renders the position of women multidimensional within the play. Within this play, there are multiple layers of friends and foes, representing various levels of the power hierarchy within Corinth and Greece. Examining the conversations and viewpoints that emerge in the course of the play, around Medea's actions and otherwise, can offer a sense of the complexity of political life, and can point to the need for creativity in completing analyses of politics.

Further, as the discussion of secondary scholarship demonstrates above, there is a contemporary dimension to engage here. Though these plays are set multiple millennia before the modern day, the questions we find linger until the present moment. As Kasimis (forthcoming) establishes the question of exile in *Medea* is one that links the past to the present, as the modern interpretation of *Mojada* suggests. The Mexican immigrant afraid of ICE raids is today's Medea, which is clear in one re-staging of the play, the recent *Mojada* (Boehm 2015). The questions of membership, authority, inclusion, motherhood—these are ideas that operate at the heart of political life, but also continue to raise questions about its nature. Questions about reception and context, however, need not be confined to the stage and screen. Asking students to transpose the setting and content of Euripides' plays provides an outlet for creativity, and a chance for instructors to observe the extent of comprehension on the part of their students. This allows students to engage the plays through their own imagination, while simultaneously building on the skills of interpretation and analysis, by asking students to apply their understanding of the play by extending its reception to a context of their choosing.

In this assignment, students are asked to brainstorm in small groups about potential applications of the play's central message. This requires that students articulate what they understand to be the central message of the play at hand. As evidenced above, there are multiple 'correct' answers for such an exercise. For example, one group of students settled on the challenge of filicide for *Medea*, while another focused on female empowerment in the face of oppression. These groups, in turn, produced differing contexts to apply the play's messages. Group 1 examined abortion laws, while Group 2 looked at *Medea* as an allegory for the #MeToo movement. After identifying the central idea, each group then transposed the play into their identified context. Group 1 conceptualized Medea as a pro-choice activist within a society intent on outlawing abortion. This

transformed the dynamics of the play, and emphasized the way the government sought to effect control over Medea's body, which is present in the original text, but took on new life in this group's reworking of the play. The clash between Jason and Medea was restaged to become one between traditional laws and progressive views. Jason becomes representative of the way such laws can function to oppress marginalized, powerless groups, wrenching control away from the women whose bodies are now up for grabs within such a power struggle. Medea is transformed into the spokeswomen for a broader movement, pushing against the usurpation of control.

Following the identification of central ideas and a new context, students must rewrite scenes from the play to place it in the contemporary context. In doing so, they exercise the muscle that requires careful attention to the specific messages present in the original text, but brings their own imagination to that text. Rewriting the dialogue in such a way pushes students to engage with the text from a new angle, this time not only to analyze what is happening within the text, but to recreate it in a different context. Such an exercise promotes comprehension, analysis, as well as application. But, it does so in a way that simultaneously celebrates the creative impulses of the students, which, to me, is a critical component of any political theory class. So often, we teach students the important skills of critique and analysis, which are incredibly important elements of political thought, or key aspects of joining the conversation of political theory. But, promoting creativity is more elusive. Essay assignments often require that students demonstrate their understanding and their ability to analyze and apply the tenets of a given text; they are incredibly important tools for any scholar. In contrast, this assignment goes beyond these elements of the toolbox—it does not forsake them, but instead requires creativity in addition, and as a central aspect of the assignment. Of course, this can be daunting for students who are familiar with the conventions of essay writing. However, assignments that celebrate student creativity simply add

another layer of critical thinking, and do so in a way that might unlock further understanding for these students.

To summarize, this exercise begins with students in small groups, identifying the central theme of one play. Then, groups generate a new context in which to restage the play. They rework the character descriptions to conform to this context. Then, students work together to rewrite scenes from the play in this new context, giving new dialogue to the characters, reworking the contours of the story to fit the context. Following this exercise, students write up a justification for the new context and new characters, in which they revisit the central themes of the play and articulate the thought processes behind their creative rendering of the play. This is only one example of an assignment that promotes student creativity in addition to comprehension, analysis, and application. But, it is significant that such an assignment grows out of an engagement with tragedy. As we think about inclusivity on our introductory syllabi, we can also think about the ways in which different kinds of texts promote different skill sets. Inviting new voices onto our syllabi can also act as a gateway to promoting new pathways of thought. Ultimately, promoting inclusivity on syllabi should work to enhance the critical perspectives that emerge from engagement with not only the texts themselves, but more broadly, the general questions that animate the study within these courses as well. By potentially engendering opportunities for students to be creative by mobilizing the text, and the ideas within, this presents new avenues of thought and engagement with other texts that inform the ways we understand the political world at hand.

Conclusion

There is a general effort for professors to diversity their syllabuses, particularly those for introductory courses (see for example: Parrish 2007; Bray and Campbell 2005; Glover 2010). This effort is commendable, and can take many forms. Ancient political thought, perhaps more than other areas, presents a particular difficulty in this regard. There simply exists a dearth of sources from authors outside of the traditional white, male voices that tend to populate political theory syllabi. However, as this essay demonstrates, Greek tragedy should be understood as a resource for diversity and inclusion. Engaging these plays does not necessarily introduce authors who conform to traditional standards of diversity—Euripides is still, for all intents and purposes, a white male playwright. But, if we consider the content of these plays, and the characters that emerge within the text, a more diverse understanding of political life comes into view. Greek tragedy allows multiple voices and viewpoints to take the stage, and as such, diversifies the perspectives offered for students to take up in their analyses and attempts at unpacking the nature of political life. Further, scholarship on tragedy offers another avenue through which diversity and inclusion might take shape. This can be on traditional measure, insofar as many female scholars engage with these plays—this allows syllabi to expand beyond the traditional white, male voices. This can also be in a broader sense, insofar as scholarship on tragedy offers yet another layer of analyses to add to the multiple voices and viewpoints that emerge within the plays themselves. But, diversity and inclusion is not simply about who is present on our syllabi; it is also about the kinds of critical engagements made possible for students. Importantly for my analysis, these texts can promote creativity in students. From this creativity emerge a new set of critical perspectives on the age-old questions we ask about politics. At the end of the day, the aim of diversity and inclusion is to do just that. Such an approach does not have to be confined to tragedy, but can also

be extended to additional texts and questions, but here I advocate for tragedy as one potential path into such an exploration.

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