

RESPONSE

of a member of the dissertation committee to the dissertation of Iurina Ekaterina Sergeevna on the theme: «Ancient literature as a philosophical discourse: the ideas of the Sophists in the tragedies of Euripides and the comedies of Aristophanes», submitted for the degree of a candidate of Philosophical Sciences in the specialty 09.00.03. – History of Philosophy.

Ms. Iurina's thesis suggests that the Athenian tragic and comic drama of the fifth century BC addressed in a systematic way some fundamental questions of both philosophy and linguistics: the relationship between signifier and signified, of seeming and reality, and of the relativity of different kinds of truth because of different vantage points of perception. These are not only ontological and cognitive questions, but religious and political ones. The introductory part of the thesis introduces the history of these issues in Greek thought, with particular emphasis on the Sophists, and on Platonic sources; the subsequent argument is a close reading and analysis of several plays in which consideration of these problems is inferred.

The research put into the thesis is comprehensive, the approach to the material is measured and precise, and the style of presentation is lucid. The thesis is a contribution to knowledge of one of the most important periods in the history of human culture, the "Golden Age" of Athens. It illuminates an aspect of the Classical drama— its deliberate treatment of philosophical issues— that should complement and enrich the reading of these plays by students. As such, the thesis in book form will be of use to both specialists and general educators.

The thesis raises a number of questions. To what extent was the average Athenian viewer at the Dionysian festival, where these plays were performed, able fully to comprehend subtle, even subliminal, philosophical messages of this kind and how can we gauge this? How much is known of the reaction of the audience to plays and the level of education of the average viewer? Was there discussion of the plays in some public forum afterwards? It is possible to read a play and reflect upon the different levels of meaning the playwright may have intended. But isn't drama by its very nature predicated on the immediate reactions of an audience? And would not the audience be more interested in, and alert to, popular and topical questions, rather than what we might now call purely academic ones?

This is where the question of Sophists and sophistry comes in. Many Sophists, Ms. Iurina writes, were aliens; and they taught skills in public debate that would be useful to lawyers and demagogues— is there an indication that extra-philosophical prejudices came into play in attitudes toward them expressed in these plays? Since some characters are thus identified, what if any are the rhetorical markers provided for a member of a theatrical audience to identify a discourse as specifically Sophist?

Many problems of the subject have to do with nomenclature. *Pragma* can be understood as "expedient advantage" in some instances. It gives us our words "pragmatic" and "pragmatism" (as, indeed, sophistry derives from the Sophist). Both of these have a

PK 09/2 - 144 om 24.03.2020

negative connotation of seeking advantage without moral constraint. How does one translate *dike*, for example? Is *pravda* (p. 37) adequate? The Russian word, founded on one for rightness, gives us *spravedlivost* "fairness" and *pravosudie* "(fair) judicial procedure". But the Russian term by itself means "truth" and that is self-evidently not what the word justice alone implies. The triad of plays of Aeschylus addressing the conflict between the claims of Orestes and Clytemnestra exemplify the Athenian system of justice as balancing conflicting *logoi*, of reconciling two competing claims, each of which is true. Athena's tie-breaking vote on the jury suggests that justice here involves also a political interest— the maintenance of the patriarchal order of Hellenic society. The concessions to the two parties do not establish what is true; they are pragmatic ones enabling them to co-exist.

The issues addressed go beyond the problem of signifier and signified. In the *Peloponnesian War* of Thucydides, it is observed that after the watershed marked by the Funeral Oration of Pericles the fog of war and its politics caused even the most clear and basic terms to change their meaning. The Sophist Callinicles (p. 58) argued that law protects the weak against the arbitrary justice of the strong, and this might be seen as a principle protecting Socrates, for example; but given the latter's adherence to an aristocratic party that Aristophanes bitterly opposed, could Callinicles' assertion also be seen as an anti-democratic stance?

Some of these issues have to do with the political context of the Athenian plays, in which philosophical issues are intimately linked to class and party politics. But in addition one would ask, given the accusation of atheism leveled against Socrates, to what extent the issue of competing *logoi* has to do with religion. The Dionysian festival was dedicated to a god, one of whose key aspects is his transcendence of rationality. Does the treatment of the question of being and seeming imply anything about the nature of religious experience, and the quality of divinity?

To sum up, this extremely rich and scholarly dissertation, which is of great value for both academic research and education of students in the Greek drama, raises questions of three kinds: 1. Performance and reception theory: was the audience interested in, and conditioned to, the presentation of recondite philosophical arguments? If so, why would that be the case? And how can we know? 2. The question of competing views of reality has a juridical overtone, and touches upon the factional politics of Athens, including the politicization of rhetoric noted by Thucydides as reaching extremes during the war with Sparta. George Orwell wrote an essay, "Politics and the English language." To what degree is politics relevant to the present thesis? 3. The plays were performed in the context of a religious festival. Does the reconciliation of opposites suggest an embrace of the irrational or supra-rational?

In my view the thesis is excellent and the very fact that it raises such questions as the above, to which future readers of the book will add further questions of their own, underscores its intellectual acumen and importance. It should be accepted without alteration in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

The dissertation of Iurina Ekaterina Sergeevna on the theme «Ancient literature as a philosophical discourse: the ideas of the Sophists in the tragedies of Euripides and the comedies of Aristophanes» conforms to the basic requirements established by the Order dated 01.09.2016 № 6821/1 «On the procedure for awarding academic degrees at St. Petersburg State University», the applicant Iurina Ekaterina Sergeevna deserves awarding the degree of a candidate of Philosophical Sciences in the specialty 09.00.03 – History of Philosophy. Clause 11 of the said Order has not been violated by the candidate for the degree.

Member of the dissertation committee James R. Russell, Doctor of Philosophy, Professor, Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies, Harvard University and Lecturer in Jewish Studies and Hebrew, California State University, Fresno.

Signature: 

Fresno, California, 25 February 2020.
