



Skenè Studies II • 8

Silvia Montiglio
There is Pleasure
When An Enemy Suffers:
Schadenfreude in Greek Tragedy

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Contents

Acknowledgments	7
INTRODUCTION	9
1 SCHADENFREUDE CONDEMNED	
1.1 Fearing the Enemy's Laughter	19
1.2 A Mark of Odiousness	27
1.3 Exultation Challenged: <i>Medea</i> and <i>Hippolytus</i>	36
1.4 Singing to Pentheus' Death: a Barbarian Pleasure	44
1.5 Divine Schadenfreude as a Foil for the Spectators' Pity: the Opening of Sophocles' <i>Ajax</i>	53
2 SCHADENFREUDE AS AUDIENCE RESPONSE	
2.1 From Fearing to Wielding Schadenfreude: Prometheus	61
2.2 Applauding the Murder of Aegisthus in Euripides' <i>Electra</i>	72
2.3 Joy in the Downfall of Eurystheus and of Polymestor	81
2.4 Let Us Dance! Lycus Is Dead	89
3 SCHADENFREUDE AND THE TRAGIC PLEASURE	
3.1 An Aesthetic Enticement	97
3.2 In and Out of the Theatre: the Special Case of Aeschylus' <i>Persians</i>	107

EPILOGUE	119
WORKS CITED	121
Index	131

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INTRODUCTION

“Schadenfreude”, German for “joy in other people’s misfortunes”, is one of the emotions of the day.¹ “We live in a golden age of Schadenfreude”, journalists and their readers lament.² The 2004 musical comedy *Avenue Q* contains a song titled *Schadenfreude*, which funnily reviews mishaps that give rise to this wicked pleasure: a waiter dropping his tray, a figure skater falling on her butt . . . Philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and cultural historians have been studying the emotion with ever-growing interest for a couple of decades. This trend, however, has not caught on among classical scholars, at least not with the same verve. This is curious because, if ever there was a golden age of Schadenfreude, it is probably not the years 2000+ but the centuries of ancient Greek civilisation. The

¹ The term no longer needs to be capitalised or italicised, since it has entered the English language in the middle of the nineteenth century. For economy, I also use the kindred adjective *schadenfroh* without inflecting it.

² *The New York Times*, December 2008, in Watt Smith 2018, 11. See also *The Guardian*, February 2022: “The pleasure of a chancer unmasked: why we are living in the age of Schadenfreude”; *The National Geographic*, July 2023: “If you’ve felt like people are crueler, you may be right”.

Greeks were competitive, gossipy, litigious, abusive; and they enjoyed seeing other people fail and fall.

The study of Greek Schadenfreude, as of other emotions, meets with a major challenge: do our terms have exact Greek equivalents?³ The problem is further complicated in the case of Schadenfreude by strong differences even among its modern definitions. Scholars agree that is a spectator's pleasure, that is, that the person enjoying the misfortune has not contributed to it; but they do not agree on the nature of the latter: for some it must be minor, as in *Avenue Q* and generally in comedy, while others admit major misfortunes. Another bone of contention is whether deservingness comes into play; and, which partly overlaps with this question, whether Schadenfreude is morally acceptable: for a number of scholars it is when it is spurred by a sense of justice, when it helps redress one's self-esteem or reinforce the cohesiveness of a group, while others invariably stigmatise it as an offshoot of envy, which we cover up or mask when we invoke the deservedness of the envied person's predicament.⁴ Yet another debated issue is whether Schadenfreude must be fully passive and, as such, innocuous: though it is a contemplative pleasure, some are willing to give it also an active thrust, stressing its release in gossip and in the *desire* to see the targeted individual meet with adversity.⁵

³ On this difficulty, see especially Konstan 2006.

⁴ These issues are variously tackled, for instance, by Portmann (2000), who connects Schadenfreude with justice (see also Ben-Ze'ev 2003 and 2014); Kristjánsson (2006, chapter 3, 95-100) for whom on the contrary Schadenfreude targets undeserved misfortune. Cfr. also Smith 2013; Manca 2019, and several contributions to Van Dijk and Ouwerkerk 2014.

⁵ For criticism of Schadenfreude as passive through and through, see especially Smith 2013, 91 and 109-39.

Moving to Greece, we face an additional difficulty: the lack of a word for Schadenfreude until the fourth century, when ἐπιχαίρεκακία and the correlated ἐπιχαίρεκακος appear in Aristotle and in comedy. Aristotle is also the first to define the emotion, consistently as the flip side of envy.⁶ But as much as Aristotle is a sharp observer of his world and the keenest analyst of emotions, his definition of Schadenfreude is reductive and does not mirror the spectrum of applications of “joy in the misfortunes of others” in Greek culture at large. Before the appearance of the term ἐπιχαίρεκακία, Greek uses a number of related (and unreleted) verbs and periphrastic expressions to describe manifestations of Schadenfreude – for instance χαίρω, ἐπιχαίρω, γηθέω (rejoice in [evils]), χάρμα or ἐπιχαρμα γενέσθαι (becoming victim of rejoicing), κακόχαρτος (rejoicing in evil) – and the joy in question not only stems from preexisting envy but also from anger and especially hatred. One of the strongest triggers of Schadenfreude is indeed enmity. This is not surprising, since most Greeks divided those around them into friends and enemies; yet Aristotle leaves enmity out of his definition. When targeted at an enemy, Schadenfreude is always acceptable or even laudable because an enemy is always a bad person, and as such he deserves his misfortune and the glee that it brings to his enemies.⁷

Another notable feature of the Greek emotion is its tendency to make itself heard. Many of us consider Schadenfreude a private pleasure, which we prefer not to display be-

⁶ *EN* 1107a 8–11; 1108b1–6; *EE* 3.7.1233b16–25; *Rhet.* 1387a1–3; 1388a23–26. See also *Magna moralia* 1 27.2.

⁷ Very few Greeks thought that an enemy could be a good man. One of them is in tragedy (Eur. *Hcl.* 998–9). See also Theognis 1079–80 (West); Pindar, *Pyth.* 9.95.

cause we feel ashamed of it, except occasionally in politics and sports. In Greece, by contrast, it can find release even in taunts and mocking laughter. The second-century CE lexicographer Pollux glosses ἐπιχαίρειν with verbs like “laughing at” (ἐπιγελάων, ἐπεγγελάων, καταγελάων), “exulting” (ἐφήδεσθαι, καταχαίρειν), “boasting” (κατεύχεσθαι), “trampling upon” (ἐπεμβαίνειν), “jeering” (ἐπιχλεύαζειν). The only name he gives to the emotion is “derision” (πρᾶγμα δὲ μόνον ὁ καταγέλως), while he explains ἐπίχαρτος, “object of malicious joy”, as καταγέλαστος, “worthy of derision”.⁸ The aggressive voice of Schadenfreude, in its turn, strongly qualifies its passive and innocuous nature. Its manifestations more often than not add insult to injury; they are blows to one’s honor and are therefore much feared in a society in which a man’s value resides in his reputation.

Tragedy largely fits this picture. Characters perceive Schadenfreude as a dangerous force. It often takes the shape of derision and is tightly connected to enmity; in fact, it rouses only from enmity. It is never directed, as in other genres, at neighbours or rivals: these categories of people are too petty to inhabit the world of tragedy; and so is envy, which appears infrequently.⁹ Tragic Schadenfreude is rather

⁸ Pollux 5.128 and 3.101.7. He does not record *epichairekakia*, probably because the term had not yet spread outside philosophy.

⁹ Goldhill (2003) argues that the rivalrous emotions have a minor presence in tragedy and Sanders (2014, 118) observes that *phthonos* narratives are comparatively rare in the genre. Sexual jealousy is however prominent: think of Deianeira, Hermione (in *Andromache*) and Medea. Envy is forefront in the parodos of *Ajax* (157). Stanford (1983, 35) notes both that envy is mainly confined to the gods and that it is involved in several characters’ sexual jealousy. He also includes *epichairekakia* among the emotions present on stage.

an expression of hatred, a pre-taste or an after-taste of revenge. The term “enemy”, however, in tragedy applies also to family members, who normally should be among one’s closest friends. The inclusion problematises the morality of Schadenfreude even against enemies: can a mother’s pleasure in the death of her son-turned-enemy be acceptable? How do the other characters on stage respond to her glee? How does the audience? The same questions can be asked about divine Schadenfreude. For gods, too, can act like enemies and rejoice in the demise of mortals who have offended them. Again, do the other characters on stage approve? Does the audience?

This study tackles these and related questions. It investigates the connotations of Schadenfreude, its contributions to a character makeup; where and why one’s Schadenfreude is censured, or, alternatively, where and why it is endorsed by other characters, the chorus, and presumably the audience. I also ask whether the emotion can have an aesthetic function in a genre which aims to provide the sympathetic and participatory pleasure of tears, that is, a pleasure which is the furthest from joy in another’s pain. Schadenfreude can enhance a feeling of moral satisfaction in justice done, but is this satisfaction part of the tragic pleasure? How does the emotion relate to pity, its opposite and a major ingredient of that pleasure?

Before delving into the topic, however, we have to ask how Schadenfreude plays out specifically in dramatic performances in which violent deaths are recounted on stage, disfigured or dead bodies are often exposed, and characters who display or betray the emotion have interlocutors, internal audiences and external spectators. Malicious glee can arise in a character or a group of characters who have not contributed anything to the targeted misfortune but also in the

agent herself, when she rejoices at the announcement and the recounting of the ruin she has inflicted or at the sight of the sufferer: *un si doux spectacle*, as Corneille's *Médée* will call it, one without which her success would be imperfect.¹⁰ The doer then becomes a delighted spectator or audience of her deed¹¹ and manifests her pleasure to other characters or to the chorus. The audience in the theatre, in turn, is called to respond positively or negatively to expressions of Schadenfreude on stage.

But how can we figure out the emotional responses of a fifth-century audience? We cannot pass off our own reactions as those of Athenian spectators, and we should also be wary of conceiving the audience as a single body.¹² Aristotle emphasises how greatly audiences varied in their emotional reactions, according to age, temperament, habits, fortunes.¹³ How would such a diverse audience respond, for instance, to exultation in a successful revenge? About Euripides' *Hecuba*, Froma Zeitlin says that revenge on the stage arouses the conflicting emotions of satisfaction and terror in the audience (Zeitlin 1996, 213). Does then a character's outburst of joy,

¹⁰ See *Médée* 4.5.1275-7: "Ma vengeance n'aurait qu'un succès imparfait / Je ne me venge pas, si je n'en vois l'effet / Je dois à mon courroux l'heur d'un si doux spectacle".

¹¹ Allen-Hornblower (2016, 8-9) mentions Schadenfreude among the possible reactions of a doer who steps back from her action.

¹² On these issues, see Oranje 1984, 25; De Jong 1991, 110; Goldhill 2009, 29; Roselli 2011 (who also stresses the dramatist's addresses to the audience as a united group, though more in comedy than in tragedy); Wohl 2015, xiii: "given that the Athenians rarely agreed about anything, it seems doubtful they were of one mind in their response to tragedy, either with their fellow viewers or . . . even within themselves".

¹³ *Rhet.* 2 12-17 (1388b31-1391b3). See Stanford 1983, 48.

like Hecuba's in that play, tilt the balance toward one or the other? Does it enhance the spectators' satisfaction or does it alienate them from the avenger, pushing them to take in the horrific qualities of the revenge and to feel pity for the victim? Spectators might be divided because of disposition, values and life experiences. There are, however, verbal and visual clues that allow us to gauge whether and how the playwright is trying to mold their emotional response. For Schadenfreude, he can rely on the comments of internal audiences, appreciative or critical, shared or split, to displays of it;¹⁴ on the general moral makeup of the gloater and of the victim; on the appraisal of the latter's ruin, as deserved or not; and on the emotive impact of the visual. We shall keep these factors in mind in considering the interplay between episodes of Schadenfreude, either displayed and dissimulated, on the stage and the responses to them expected in the theatre.

¹⁴ Munteanu (2012, 3-4, 14; 142-9; 232), discussing tragic pity, stresses the importance of internal responses to suffering as directions for the external audience. Among similar lines, Allen-Hornblower (2016 *passim*, e.g. 3) thinks that the reactions of a doer turned spectator of his deed might affect the audience. The question is: how? Will the audience feel the same emotions as the internal spectator? See also Cairns 2017.

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