

DEFINING TRAGEDY

The very term “Greek tragedy” carries an immense weight of cultural and critical baggage. Even though the cultural prestige of the genre is often the inspiration for us to read, produce, or see these plays, this very prestige interferes with our ability to appreciate them. However, we cannot expect simply to shake off all the assumptions we have inherited about what a Greek tragedy is supposed to be. We would not want to, since we could not make sense of the texts at all without the scholarship of the past. Yet with that scholarship come inherited assumptions and expectations that distort. If we can at least identify some of these assumptions, even if we cannot see the plays in some pure, neutral way – for we will always see them or read them both through our beliefs about the ancient Greeks and about the genre, and through the concerns and presuppositions of our own place and time – we can at least see them more freshly.

There is one basic tension in any encounter with Greek tragedy that we should not even want to escape. These plays come from an ancient culture that is in some ways very distant from our own. Yet we expect them to move us and even to help us better understand our lives. If we rush too quickly to find universal meanings, we will probably ignore or misread whatever is profoundly different. But if we read them entirely as documents from a foreign culture – a polytheistic, slaveholding, misogynistic culture – they will lose their power. Again, tragedy has attracted all kinds of interpretive approaches, and part of its enduring place in the canon of both education and the theater is surely the result of its adaptability. Any given way of reading or seeing is both

liberating, because it releases us from the limits of previous methods, and confining, because it prevents us from seeing facets with which it is not compatible. So when we study Greek tragedies, we do best if we constantly shift perspectives, universalizing and historicizing. This is simply an especially demanding case of what we always do when we read a story or see a play, as we both use our expectations to make sense of the experience and modify our expectations as the work unfolds (in the “hermeneutic spiral”).

It is not hard to produce a neutral definition of what we mean by “Greek tragedy” by defining Greek tragedy historically and formally. Tragedy is a form of drama, invented in the territory of Athens in the sixth century BCE. Almost all our surviving plays and fragments of plays were composed for performance at Athenian festivals of Dionysus, mostly the City Dionysia. A few were first produced elsewhere: Aeschylus composed a tragedy called *Women of Etna* on a commission from King Hieron of Syracuse for a festival to inaugurate his new city, Etna, and Euripides composed tragedies for King Archelaus of Macedon. Euripides’ extant *Andromache* was perhaps composed for the city of Argos. These, however, imitated the Athenian model. Although almost all our surviving plays are from the fifth century BCE (Euripides’ *Rhesus* is probably from the fourth), new tragedies continued to be produced at Athens until the middle of the third century BCE, and in this same century, at Alexandria, tragedy was patronized by Ptolemy II Philadelphus. Seven Alexandrian tragic poets were called the “Pleiad” (after the constellation Pleiades – but not all the sources give the same seven names). Two hundred sixty-nine lines are preserved from a tragedy by Ezekiel called *Exagogê* (“Exodus”), whose main character is Moses. This was probably written in the first century BCE; no choral fragments have survived, so we do not know whether it had a chorus, or whether it was ever produced or intended for the stage. Although the standard edition of the fragments of Greek tragedy lists authors of the fourth century CE, the *Exagogê* is the last ancient Greek tragedy of which a substantial fragment is extant.

So a Greek tragedy is a drama that Greeks called “tragedy” – but this is a painfully superficial definition. They must have had reasons

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for calling some performances “tragedies” and presenting them at festivals under this name rather than another. Tragedies have obvious formal similarities with each other, and these allow for a different kind of definition. First, by content: a tragedy was a drama usually based on traditional legend, set in a past that was already remote for the ancient Athenian audience, although great events of history, even recent history, could also serve as the basis for tragedy. The lost *Capture of Miletus* and *Phoenician Women* of Phrynichus and the surviving *Persians* of Aeschylus treated events from the lifetimes of many members of their audiences with all the grandeur of heroic tradition, and in the fourth century the unknown author of the “Gyges” tragedy of which a substantial piece has been found on papyrus took a story from the historian Herodotus. Late in the fifth century, the tragedian Agathon presented a play whose plot and characters were completely invented. But the traditional stories, often told in the old epic poems, were the standard. The tragedians only rarely used a story directly from the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, but they took many of their plots from the “Cyclic” epics, the (now lost) poems that told what happened before and after the two most canonical poems.

Tragedy was a specific kind of drama. It was performed by actors (at Athens, no more than three) and a chorus of twelve, later fifteen, who sang and danced, assisted by a player of the *aulos*, a reeded wind instrument. For the most part, actors used spoken verse, mainly the iambic trimeter, or recitative, while the chorus sang between scenes, but the chorus leader could speak on behalf of the group during actors’ scenes, while the actors could sing, both in responsion with the chorus and in monody. The structure was regular but flexible. The drama began with a prologue, which could be a monologue or a dialogue, but which always provided basic information about the setting and the initial situation. The prologue speaker(s) could exit, or could hide from another actor, or could stay to meet the chorus. After the prologue, the chorus entered in the *parodos*, a song in the course of which the chorus identified itself, for each chorus had a distinct identity within the play. The drama would then proceed with an alternation of scenes and songs, ending with a few final lines from the chorus.

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The songs between episodes followed the norms of Greek choral practice. There were various types of rhythm available, each with its own short units, *cola*. For each song, the poet recombined these cola and variants on them to create a unique *strophe*, and the song then used this pattern again in an *antistrophe*. A different combination could follow, the *epode*, or there could be another strophic pair. The chorus danced along with these songs. Song was not confined to these act-divisions. Actors and chorus could sing in response to each other, an actor could sing a solo, or one actor could sing while another answered in spoken verse. The longest song in surviving tragedy is the lament/magical rite performed by chorus, Electra, and Orestes at Agamemnon's tomb in Aeschylus's *Libation Bearers*, with eleven strophic pairs (306–475). Especially in late fifth-century tragedy, there were astrophic songs in which there is no repeated pattern, particularly actors' solos. Every song was different, but songs fit into traditional, recognizable types until the late fifth century, when new, highly virtuosic styles became influential. Song had two main functions in tragedy: it could serve to move the singer(s) slightly away from the immediate action, to a different plane on which the singers could try to make sense of the action, or it could express emotions too powerful for ordinary speech.

Actors and chorus (exclusively male) wore elaborate costumes and masks that covered the entire head, but the *aulos* player was not masked and was not part of the imitated action. Even the spoken verse used a "high" diction, avoiding vulgar language completely and restricting colloquialism, while allowing words from earlier poetry that were not employed in everyday speech. Although sometimes actors spoke in an otherwise empty performance space, so that they effectively spoke to the audience, and choruses often sang when no actors were present, tragedy never explicitly broke the barrier and addressed the audience or acknowledged that it was a performance, as contemporary Old Comedy frequently did. (Many scholars, however, see tragedy as highly metatheatrical in more various ways.)¹

¹ So, for example, on Euripides' *Bacchae* alone: Segal 1997, 215–71; Foley 1985, 205–58; Goldhill 1986, 265–86.

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Tragedy also had defining characteristics beyond its formal features. Its main characters were noble, although they might be disguised as beggars or enslaved. Choruses, who could participate in the action by, for example, revealing secrets, could not stop an act of violence, so they were often women, slaves, or old men. The fates of the characters were taken seriously. The plots may end happily or sadly, but the stakes are always high. For example, Euripides' *Ion* has a happy ending, but only after Ion's mother has tried to kill him, and he has come close to killing her.

The possibility of divine intervention in the action also defines the imagined world in which tragedy takes place; this world is controlled by the traditional gods of Greek mythology, either under the supreme direction of Zeus or as individuals who may even criticize each other, as the Heavenly Twins, Castor and Polydeuces, say at the end of Euripides' *Electra* that Apollo's oracle telling Orestes to kill his mother was not wise (1246). The audience expects that all oracles and prophecies will be fulfilled, and the poets use these predictions to manipulate audience expectations – but a world in which all prophecies come true is not exactly the world any person has ever lived in. A god may deliver the drama's prologue or appear at the end to tell the characters what they must do, or the characters may complain of the gods' indifference so that the audience is aware of their absence, but a tragedy in which the gods are not relevant is hard to imagine.

While there are many other important details about how tragedy was structured, styled, and performed, these are the essentials that made a tragedy recognizable and distinct from a comedy, an epic recitation, or any other kind of performance. Thirty-two tragedies survive in mostly complete form, while there are fragments of many others, quoted in later authors or found on papyri in Egypt, ranging from a mere title or citation of a rare word to entire scenes. Sometimes a play had more than one title in use, since the original title, usually the name of an important character or the chorus, might be shared with many other tragedies. So Sophocles' famous tragedy was probably originally *Oedipus*, but people began to call it *Oedipus the King* to distinguish it from *Oedipus at Colonus*. If such a later title was quite different from

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the original, we do not always know whether two titles known from the ancient world represent two different plays, so we do not know exactly how many different plays are represented.

One difficulty of great concern for scholars of tragedy is invisible to the spectator in the theater or reader of a translation: the texts stand at the ends of long chains of transmission by manual copying. Errors are unavoidable. Sometimes they are easy to fix, like an obvious typo in a modern book, but often they are not. In some cases, the copy itself may go back to a text based on a performance that made changes to the original. Most experts think that the end of Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes* is a later addition and that at least parts of the final section of Euripides' *Phoenician Women* are also later interpolations. Most also think that parts of *Iphigenia at Aulis* are not by Euripides, and they agree that its final messenger speech is not authentic. On the other side, parts of Dionysus's final speech in *Bacchae* are obviously missing. In any case, the play we read or see represents an editor's judgment, and of course often a translator's too.

All the surviving Attic tragedies come to us under the names of Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides, although most scholars believe that Aeschylus did not compose *Prometheus Bound* (it may be by his son, Euphorion, and have been produced under his name) and that the *Rhesus* we have is not the one Euripides wrote but was confused with it.² The *Iphigenia at Aulis*, although its core is Euripidean, is so difficult that the standard edition of Diggle uses marginal signs to indicate the probability that any particular passage is by Euripides.³ From each of these, a selection of plays (probably made in the second century CE), seven of Aeschylus and Sophocles, ten of Euripides, was copied in the Byzantine period. For Euripides, by pure luck one section of an alphabetical edition also survived, so that we have nine more plays (one is a satyr play). We do not know the principles of the selection, but it is striking that *Electra* plays by all three are included, suggesting that the selector(s) wanted comparison to be possible, and the *Rhesus* was

² *Prometheus*: Griffith 1977; Euphorion as author, West 1990, 51–72. *Rhesus*: summary in Kovacs 2002, 349–52.

³ Diggle 1994, vi.

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included even though its authorship was already doubted in antiquity (Hypothesis b), probably because it could be compared to the version of the same story in Homer.

Tragedy, however, is hard for us to disentangle from “the tragic.” Greek tragedy is the beginning of a long tradition, and naturally we look for commonalities within this tradition: Greek tragedy should have features in common with Seneca and then with Shakespeare. Of course, it does have commonalities with its descendents. Revenge tragedy, for example, is a special subgenre that is well worth looking at comparatively. The entire tragic tradition, from Greek tragedy onward, concerns itself with some core issues: the vulnerability of human life; the value of facing the limits of our control with courage; and the powerful, sometimes inescapable, effects of our decisions. However, if we place “the tragic” at the center of what we expect from Attic tragedy, we will seriously distort the corpus that we have. Greek tragedy, in fact, is the ancestor not only of later tragedy but of important strands in comedy. Euripides, especially, composed plays in which long-separated relatives were reunited, including the extant *Ion* and *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, and *Hypsipyle*, *Cresphontes*, and *Antiope*, of which substantial fragments survive in papyrus.

The continuing influence of Aristotle’s *Poetics* is part of the problem. Aristotle was probably the greatest literary theorist in history, but even now many readers treat him not as an early theorist and interpreter of tragedy, and one with his own prejudices, but as an authority. The *Poetics* is often a filter through which we see tragedy – and, indeed, literature in general. This, too, is a problem. It is also peculiar, because most of us are not actually followers of Aristotle, and Aristotle’s way of reading tragedy is profoundly Aristotelian. Aristotle has very little interest in some aspects of tragedy that were obviously important for ancient audiences and that could be important for us – spectacle, for example, and music. He cared more about plot than anything else, and in looking at the emotional side of tragedy, he was mostly concerned to defend it against Plato.

So Aristotle defines the tragic emotions as pity and fear, and suggests that it is the task of tragedy to “purge” these emotions – the

famous “catharsis.” (There has been an endless debate about whether the analogy in “purging” is medical or religious.)⁴ Plato had argued that tragedy harmed its audience by encouraging self-indulgent emotionality (*Resp.* ii 376e–398b9; x 595–608b10), so Aristotle claimed that it actually did not make people more emotional but less: viewing tragedy relieved excessive pity and fear. There is, as far as I know, no empirical basis for this claim, although it surely rests on the experience of feeling, after seeing a play, that one has passed through an emotionally wrenching experience. Nobody really knows what the longer-term effects of tragedy are. Although the vast debate about the meaning of catharsis, and whether it is a ritual or a medical purification, is important for understanding Aristotle, it has little to contribute to the understanding of tragedy.

Because Aristotle has very precise views about the conditions under which people feel pity and fear, he then has to define the proper tragic plot:

So the organization of the finest tragedy should be not simple but complex, and it should be imitative of things that cause fear and pity, since this is the special area of this kind of imitation. First, it is clear that virtuous men should not appear changing from good to bad fortune: for this is neither pitiful nor fearful, but disgusting. Nor, again, bad men from bad to good fortune, for this is the most untragic of all, for it is neither sympathetic nor pitiful nor fearful. Nor, further, should an intensely bad man fall from good to bad fortune. Such a plot would have the sympathetic, but neither pity nor fear; for pity is for someone who is unfortunate but does not deserve to be, fear for someone like us, so that this outcome will be neither pitiful nor fearful. Such a man is the one who is not exceptional in excellence and justice who changes to bad fortune not through badness and wickedness but through some mistake, one of those of great good fortune and reputation, such as Oedipus, Thyestes, and the famous men of such

⁴ Halliwell 1986, Appendix 3 (350–6), summarizes the various interpretations.

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families. It is necessary, then, that the good plot should, therefore, be single, rather than double as some say, and should change not from bad to good, but, conversely, from good to bad, not through wickedness, but through some great mistake, and involve a person either such as has been described, or better rather than worse. (*Poetics* 13, 1452b30–1453a17)

These few sentences have probably done more harm to the appreciation of Greek tragedies than any others. The word *hamartia* has often been rendered as “tragic flaw.” This has led to an endless hunt for the faults in the characters of tragic protagonists, whether their misfortunes are the result of these flaws or not. Yet even when the word is translated “mistake” or “error,” so that Aristotle can be describing the results of ignorance, there is no reason that we should follow Aristotle’s rules for deciding what makes a tragedy good.

To be sure, some excellent tragedies can be described this way, especially the *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus’s terrible misfortune is certainly the result of mistakes. Yet even for the *Oedipus Rex*, the Aristotelian formula easily leads readers to trivialize the tragedy by providing an easy moral. The heroine of Sophocles’ *Antigone* certainly has a difficult personality, and if she were less fierce, she would probably not bury her brother and so bring about her death; but she is doing the right thing, not making a mistake. Creon in that play fits the Aristotelian scheme much better. He wants to be a good king, but is ruined by his stubbornness. Still, even though we may want to see them as equally important characters, we can only make the play follow Aristotle’s precepts by distorting Antigone’s role – and *Antigone* is one of the most influential and popular of tragedies.

Many other Greek tragedies do not fit this rule at all. In the next chapter, Aristotle himself says that the best action belongs to tragedies in which the murder of a relative is prevented by a last-minute recognition, even though the tragedies he mentions, such as the surviving *Iphigenia among the Taurians* and the *Cresphontes* (fragmentary, but with substantial remains), had happy endings (*Poetics* 14, 1454a5–9). Many tragedies show a change from bad to good fortune without such a close escape from interfamilial killing. Euripides’ *Helen*, for example,

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begins with the heroine a lonely, threatened exile in Egypt, and ends as she returns to Greece with her husband. In Sophocles' *Electra*, the heroine helps her brother kill her detested mother and stepfather. Some have characters who fall into misfortune without any obvious "error." In Euripides' *Heracles*, the evil tyrant Lycus plans to kill Heracles' family while the hero is in Hades, performing the last of his labors. In the nick of time, Heracles returns and kills Lycus. Then the goddess Insanity, under direct orders from Hera, drives him mad, and he kills his wife and children. He is certainly mistaken in thinking the children belong to his enemy, Eurystheus, but the madness is sent by a goddess who hates Heracles for reasons having nothing to do with his character. On the other side, many characters in tragedy commit terrible crimes knowingly and yet receive pity from the audience, such as Euripides' Medea, Phaedra in his *Hippolytus*, Electra in his *Electra*, and Orestes in *Orestes*, because Euripides often directs the audience's attention less to whether the character deserves to suffer than to the forces that have pushed the character beyond limits.

Only a few sentences after the passage quoted, Aristotle lists Telephus as a typical tragic hero, but the story is that Telephus is wounded while defending his own territory against the Greeks who attack him by mistake. Only the inflictor of the wound, Achilles, could heal it. All three of the famous tragedians composed tragedies about Telephus (there are considerable fragments of the one by Euripides). Telephus makes no tragic error, but he suffers rather than the Greeks. The plays about him were about how he came to Agamemnon's palace in disguise and made the Greeks help him – in Euripides' play, he took Agamemnon's infant son, Orestes, hostage. Philoctetes, also the subject of tragedies by all three (only Sophocles' survives), accidentally trespassed in the sanctuary of a minor goddess, Chryse, and was bitten by a snake. This is a "mistake," but it has no moral significance, and it has nothing to do with Philoctetes' character. Because his wound would not heal and stank, or because he screamed in pain, the Greeks abandoned him on the island of Lemnos. Later the Greeks learned from a prophecy that they could not capture Troy without Philoctetes, and the tragedies depict their attempts to persuade, trick, or bully him into rejoining