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978-0-521-84890-9 - Greek Tragic Style: Form, Language and Interpretation

R. B. Rutherford

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GREEK TRAGIC STYLE

Form, Language and Interpretation

Greek tragedy is widely read and performed, but outside the commentary tradition detailed study of the poetic style and language of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides has been relatively neglected. This book seeks to fill that gap by providing an account of the poetics of the tragic genre. The author describes the varied handling of spoken dialogue and of lyric song; major topics such as vocabulary, rhetoric and imagery are considered in detail and illustrated from a broad range of plays. The contribution of the chorus to the dramas is also discussed. Characterisation, irony and generalising statements are treated in separate chapters, and these topics are illuminated by comparisons which show not only what is shared by the three major dramatists but also what distinguishes their practice. The book sheds light both on the genre as a whole and on many particular passages.

RICHARD RUTHERFORD has been Tutor in Greek and Latin Literature at Christ Church, Oxford, since 1982. His previous publications include *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius: A Study* (1989), *Homer, Odyssey 19 and 20* (1992), *The Art of Plato* (1995), *Homer (Greece and Rome New Surveys in the Classics 26, 1996)*, and *Classical Literature: A Concise History* (2005).

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For Emily and Nicholas

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In my opinion we ought to refine, renew, and intensify the labours of the great scholars who have paved the way for future work, like them not shrinking from the minutest scrutiny while trying to see the wood as well as the trees. We may begin by observing words, their meaning, their structure and their order, and end with observing characteristic habits of the poet's mind in shaping dramatic characters, bringing about a tragic tension, and revealing his religious convictions.

Fraenkel, *PBA* 28 (1942) 251

The reader should be enabled to *bathe* in examples.

Denniston, *The Greek Particles* vi

The prisoners sat in Poetry Appreciation chairs – strapped in. Vogons suffered no illusions as to the regard their works were generally held in. . . . The sweat stood out cold on Ford Prefect's brow, and slid around the electrodes strapped to his temples. These were attached to a battery of electronic equipment – imagery intensifiers, rhythmic modulators, alliterative residulators and simile dumpers – all designed to heighten the experience of the poem and make sure that not a single nuance of the poet's thought was lost.

Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* ch. 7

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Preface

Greek tragedy remains an inexhaustible source of enthrallment and inspiration. Nevertheless, to add another book to shelves already crammed with valuable studies needs some justification. First, recent work on the tragedians outside the commentary tradition has focused on the life of the theatre, the social and political environment of the dramas, their relation to Athenian democracy and ideology, and the impact of the plays on later literature. My own emphasis is on the dramas as poetic texts. Second, although there are many valuable studies of the individual dramatists, some of which deal at some length with language and style (the works of Anne Lebeck on Aeschylean imagery or A. A. Long on abstractions in Sophocles come immediately to mind), there is no obvious work we can consult if we wish to understand more fully how the styles of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides may be compared – what they have in common, how they differ, how far there exists a tragic *koine* or shared poetic language. My initial hope was that I might be able to provide such a book. The project has undergone considerable modification since then, but I have tried to keep the comparative aspect at the heart of it.

It soon became evident that the absence of a work of the kind I was envisaging resulted in part from the richness of material and the difficulties of presentation. To analyse a passage of Greek, even one as short as ten or fifteen lines, in such a way as to go beyond superficialities while holding the reader's attention, is difficult enough; to compare three passages (one from each major dramatist) is a cumbersome process, all the more so if one is to quote in both Greek and English in each case. Inevitably there have been compromises, but I hope to have struck a reasonable balance between quotation, discussion and comparison. At least it should be clear how much can be said, and how much is still to be done, in the critical study of tragic style and language. These terms, like others commonly used by myself and others (notably 'rhetoric'), are hard to define and delimit: some of the issues are addressed in the first chapter.

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Here I mention only one point of general relevance. Although linguists naturally have other priorities, my own interest in the language of drama is that of an interpreter: my aim is not to describe the evolution of the Greek language or to locate particular features of the tragedians' language in that development, but to understand how they used the linguistic and stylistic resources at their disposal, in conjunction with their other resources, for dramatic ends. Naturally this involves some detailed attention to particular linguistic features (such as poetic compounds, or oxymoron), but the goal is always a better understanding of their dramatic art. I am well aware that a specialist in linguistics would have produced a very different book.¹

The best way to structure the work long remained a matter of perplexity. The introductory chapter paves the way for the enquiry, and describes some of the work which I have found most useful in earlier scholarship. The next two seek to describe first the formal aspects of the genre (form, indeed, will often be a preoccupation and sometimes threatens to oust language from the spotlight; but the two are hardly separable), then the main features of tragic vocabulary and expression, the so-called *Kunstsprache*. Thematic uses of key terms, and the diversity of forms of address, also receive attention. Chapter 4 deals with imagery and personification. Chapters 5 and 6, in some ways the heart of the book, attempt comparisons of similar or interestingly contrasting passages in the three dramatists, the first dealing with the spoken elements of tragedy (prologue-speeches, rhesis, stichomythia, agon, messenger speech), the second with lyric passages (both choral song and actors' lyric). In each case a brief introduction outlines the typical features of these portions of the drama and suggests a number of contrasts between the three major dramatists. The remainder of the book consists of three essays in comparative interpretation, again making frequent use of quotations: these chapters address three topics which must be central to interpretation of Greek drama: characterisation, irony (particularly what is usually called dramatic irony, but other types are more briefly discussed), and the gnomic or 'wisdom' element. The epilogue draws some of the strands together and tries to define some of the key differences between the poets while also emphasising how much they have in common. The reader who finds it hard to see (or to remember) where a point is likely to be discussed is asked to make full use of the index.

¹ In view of this, it is a pleasure to anticipate the published version of Boas 2011, a DPhil thesis, to be published as an Oxford Classical Monograph. I was able to read the thesis soon after sending in my own manuscript: his study will do much to bridge the gap between linguistics and literary criticism of tragedy.

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Detailed though some of these discussions may be, the book is not and could not be exhaustive. My aim has been to approach the plays from many different angles, highlighting passages which are particularly rich and revealing; some scenes and central passages reappear in various contexts, considered from different points of view. Even the close readings of specific passages in chapters 5 and 6 are not meant to deal with every aspect; I count it a merit in a work that it leaves some of the thinking still to be done by the reader.

Thirty-two plays survive from ancient times, as well as numerous fragments (in the case of Euripides the term 'fragments' is somewhat misleading, since we can form a very full assessment of several plays which still survive in substantial part). On the matter of authorship, I share the *communis opinio* that the *Rhesus* is not a work by Euripides, and think it likely to be later than the fifth century; the *Prometheus Bound* I take to be post-Aeschylean. This does not deprive these two plays of interest, but on the whole I have been less concerned with them: *Prometheus* has been the object of much detailed study, above all by Mark Griffith, while I am aware of a number of important commentaries in progress on *Rhesus*. As for the genuine plays, I have neither sought to provide equal coverage nor avoided the obvious high points of the genre. Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Antigone* and *Philoctetes*, Euripides' *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Bacchae* regularly recur, and some other favourites, particularly the other Sophoclean plays and *Alcestis*, *Ion*, and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, run them close. Although all surviving plays are referred to somewhere or other, there are a few which are given little space, although they would doubtless repay more attention, which I hope others will give them.

Translations are provided for all passages of quoted Greek; these are my own unless otherwise stated, but when I have borrowed those of others I have often modified them. Sometimes a translation alone is offered, when the point does not seem to depend on the detail of the Greek text. In certain cases I may have overemphasised one feature of the text at the expense of others in order to bring out the salient point in that context. It follows that the same passage may be translated rather differently in different parts of the book.

I began thinking about the plan for the book as long ago as 1996, and some sections derive from drafts of the late 1990s; but the commissioning of my *Classical Literature: A Concise History* (published in 2005) deflected my research programme for some time, and the bulk of the writing of the present book took place between 2004 and 2011, much impeded by heavy administrative duties. The delay has however been beneficial in some

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respects, in that I have been able to make use of some recent publications of central importance, notably Alan Sommerstein's edition of Aeschylus, Donald Mastronarde's long-awaited monograph on Euripides, and the monumental treatment of Euripides' fragments by Richard Kannicht in the final volume of *TrGF*. Inevitably, other works have appeared too late for me to use them. I particularly regret that I have not been able to refer to the new commentary on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* by David Raeburn and Oliver Thomas (Oxford 2011).

The Bibliography is long, but would have been many times the size if I had included everything that might be thought relevant to this enquiry. In particular I have been sparing in listing modern works on critical theory, stylistics and so forth, and studies of other poetic dramatists, above all Shakespeare. Omission of such works, therefore, should not necessarily be taken to imply ignorance.

Although no part of this book has appeared in print before, some of the themes are addressed in an essay in a recent *Companion to the Ancient Greek Language* (Rutherford 2010), and a shorter account will be found in an entry on 'Language' which I have contributed to the forthcoming Wiley-Blackwell *Encyclopedia of Greek Tragedy* (edited by Hanna Roisman).

I cannot do justice here to the many great scholars, some of them no longer living, whose lectures, teaching and publications have influenced my own work; but like all serious students of tragedy I stand on their shoulders. Several friends and colleagues have helped and encouraged me in the writing of this book. Robert Parker has probably forgotten the occasion, but a conversation about my future plans in 1997 spurred me to think more seriously about this as a long-term project. Since then his cheerful confidence that a book would one day emerge has heartened me at difficult stages. Christopher Collard and Pat Easterling advised me in the formative stages and have always been ready with fresh advice. Peter Parsons has offered similar encouragement, suggesting possible lines of thought with typical modesty; and although Oliver Taplin has moved more in the realm of the reception and performance of drama, I hope he will find some things to give him pleasure in this volume. I have also benefited from conversations with Michael Silk and still more from his published work. For reading one or more chapters I am happy to thank Felix Budelmann, Anna Clark, Pat Easterling, Stephen Halliwell, Gregory Hutchinson, Christopher Pelling and Laura Swift. I am especially indebted to Patrick Finglass, who volunteered to read the entire book in draft and covered it with acute observations and helpful corrections. His forthright

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deletions have spared the reader much verbiage. He also generously sent me copies of a number of items old and new which had escaped my notice, as well as allowing me to consult substantial parts of his commentary on *Ajax* well before publication. I have subsequently been greatly assisted by the comments of the anonymous readers of Cambridge University Press (later identified as Donald Mastronarde and Michael Silk). At all stages Michael Sharp, Jo Lane and Christina Sarigiannidou at the Press have given support and assistance. Special thanks are due to Muriel Hall, whose acute and meticulous copy-editing has immensely improved the final product. Peter Parsons has given invaluable help with the proofs.

Other debts are less specific and more personal. Catherine Whistler has dispelled my despondency on many occasions, as well as reminding me at the right moments that life is not all about research and publications. The volume is dedicated to two of my oldest friends, who have shared both life and scholarship since my first year (indeed, in Nicholas's case my first week) as an undergraduate in Oxford, and whose friendship has given added zest and value to the study of tragedy along with much else: 'For there is no man that imparteth his joys to his friend, but he joyeth the more; and no man that imparteth his griefs to his friend, but he grieveth the less.'²

R. B. R.

² Bacon, *Essays* xxvii, 'On Friendship'.

Abbreviations

Names of ancient authors and titles of their works are normally abbreviated as in *OCD*, except that A. = Aeschylus, S. = Sophocles, E. = Euripides (and note that 'E. *Her.*' refers to Euripides, *Heracles*, but 'E. *Heracl.*' to his *Heracidae*). Periodicals are either as in *OCD* or given in full. Other abbreviated titles are as follows.

Abrams, <i>Glossary</i>	M. H. Abrams, <i>A Glossary of Literary Terms</i> (5th edn, New York 1985)
<i>Bauformen</i>	W. Jens (ed.) <i>Bauformen der griechischen Tragödie</i> (Munich 1971)
Bruhn	<i>Anhang to Sophokles</i> , ed. F. W. Schneidewin and A. Nauck, vol. viii (Berlin 1899)
<i>CAH</i>	<i>Cambridge Ancient History</i> (Cambridge, 2nd edn 1961–)
Campbell, 'Essay'	L. Campbell, 'Introductory essay on the language of Sophocles', in <i>Sophocles, the Plays and Fragments</i> (Oxford 1871–81), vol. i, 1–98
<i>CHCL</i> i	<i>The Cambridge History of Classical Literature</i> i: Greek Literature, ed. P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox (Cambridge 1985)
Csapo-Slater	E. Csapo and W. Slater, <i>The Context of Ancient Drama</i> (Ann Arbor 1994)
Denniston	J. D. Denniston, <i>The Greek Particles</i> (2nd edn, Oxford 1954)
<i>DFA</i>	A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, <i>The Dramatic Festivals of Athens</i> , 2nd edn revised by J. Gould and D. M. Lewis (Oxford 1968, reissued with supplement 1988)

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<i>FGrH</i>	F. Jacoby, <i>Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> (Berlin and Leipzig, 1923–58)
<i>GGL</i>	W. Schmid and O. Stahlin, <i>Geschichte der griechische Literatur</i> 1.1–5 (Munich, 1929–48)
<i>GLP</i>	D. L. Page, <i>Greek Literary Papyri</i> (Loeb series, Cambridge Mass. 1942)
Guthrie <i>HGP</i>	W. K. C. Guthrie, <i>History of Greek Philosophy</i> , 6 vols. (Cambridge 1965–81)
<i>IG</i> ἰ³	<i>Inscriptiones Atticae Euclidis anno anteriores</i> , ed. D. M. Lewis et al., 3 vols. (Berlin and New York 1981–94)
Kranz	W. Kranz, <i>Stasimon</i> (Berlin 1933)
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> , 8 vols. (Zurich and Munich, 1981–99)
<i>LSAM</i>	F. Sokolowski, <i>Lois sacrées de L'Asie Mineure</i> (Paris 1955)
<i>LSCG</i>	F. Sokolowski, <i>Lois sacrées des cités grecques</i> (Paris 1969)
<i>LSJ</i>	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, <i>A Greek English Lexicon</i> (9th edn, Oxford 1940), with revised supplement ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford 1996)
<i>ML</i>	R. Meiggs and D. Lewis, <i>A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions</i> (Oxford, 2nd edn 1988)
<i>Musa Tragica</i>	<i>Musa Tragica: Die griechische Tragödie von Thespis bis Ezechiel</i> Unter Mitwirkung von R. Kannicht . . . ed. B. Gauly et al. (Göttingen 1991)
<i>OCD</i>	S. Hornblower and A. J. Spawforth (eds.) <i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> (3rd edn, Oxford 1996)
<i>PCG</i>	R. Kassel and C. Austin, <i>Poetae Comici Graeci</i> (Berlin 1983–)
<i>PMG</i>	D. L. Page, <i>Poetae Melici Graeci</i> (Oxford 1962)
<i>PMGF</i>	M. Davies, <i>Poetarum Melicorum Graecorum Fragmenta</i> , 1 vol. to date (Oxford 1991–)
Preminger-Brogan	A. Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (eds.) <i>New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics</i> (Princeton 1993)
<i>SFP</i>	C. Collard, M. J. Cropp and K. H. Lee, <i>Euripides. Selected Fragmentary Plays</i> 1 (Warminster 1995) and

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	C. Collard, M. J. Cropp and J. Gibert, <i>Euripides. Selected Fragmentary Plays II</i> (Warminster 2004)
Taplin	O. Taplin, <i>The Stagecraft of Aeschylus</i> (Oxford 1977)
TGFS	<i>Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta Selecta</i> , ed. J. Diggle (Oxford Classical Texts, 1998)
TrGF	B. Snell, S. Radt, R. Kannicht, <i>Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta</i> i- v (Göttingen 1971–2004)
Wales	K. Wales, <i>A Dictionary of Stylistics</i> (London and NY 1989)
West, <i>GM</i>	M. L. West, <i>Greek Metre</i> (Oxford 1982)
West, <i>AGM</i>	M. L. West, <i>Ancient Greek Music</i> (Oxford 1990)

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Note on texts

Citations from the tragedies are normally taken from the Oxford Classical Text. Aeschylus is quoted from Page (1972), Sophocles from Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990), and Euripides from Diggle (1982–1994). Hence I follow not only their text (and colometry) but their attributions in disputed passages unless explicitly stated. But I have of course constantly consulted the other standard editions, especially West for Aeschylus, and important variations are noted when this is significant for the argument. For Aristophanes I use Dover's text of *Clouds* and *Frogs*, Austin and Olson's of *Thesmo.*, and Wilson's OCT for the rest. Citations of tragic fragments are always from *TrGF*, of comedians from *PCG*.

Fragments of authors other than the dramatists are cited from the editions generally considered standard: e.g. Merkelbach-West for Hesiod, Snell-Maehler for Pindar, Jacoby for historians. Where there might be uncertainty, I generally specify.