

# Greek Tragedy

Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz





## Greek Tragedy

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Dedicated to the memory of  
Patricia Francis Cholakian and  
Jonathan Walters,  
with whom I shared so much,  
and my beloved mother and editor extraordinaire,  
Sophie Wax Sorkin



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# Preface

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Ever since I was first invited to write this book, I have been mulling over, not to say stewing over, the question of why we should bother with the Greeks. The answers will be different depending on your position and who you are. So teachers of theater return to Greek drama as the earliest example of a formal theater that was not ritual, though, as we will see, it was connected to ritual. Those of us who are trained as classicists may want to convey what fascinates us about this body of literature (or history and philosophy). My love affair with classics began in high school, with two factors especially prominent. One, my wonderful Latin teacher (Irving Kizner) generously introduced us to Greek on his lunch hour. Two, I read Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in English during my last year of high school. I have been drawn to tragedy since then because of the depth of meaning that one can find in the poetry and because the stories themselves address very contemporary issues of the family, sex, war, and the relationship of individual to society—to name a few. To say that tragedy raises questions that we still wrestle with does not mean that the ancient solution would be identical to our own (as if there were a single ancient or modern solution to such problems). Rather, these plays enact morally ambiguous situations in a complicated way, which makes them useful as a way of thinking through difficult scenarios in our own lives.

I have written this book with my students in mind, and I am grateful to the students in the Senior Seminar on “Theme and Variation” and “Tragedy: Then and Now”; their questions forced me to sharpen my insights. I have tried to make this book as accessible and as useful as possible; scholars often have a tendency to write as if their audience were all people exactly like themselves. Writing for a general audience

has been liberating. At the same time it would be irresponsible to omit my debt to other scholars, so I have included suggestions for further reading at the ends of chapters, as well as a list of works cited.

Transliteration and translation are tricky issues. I have kept to Hellenic spellings for less common words and names, but where the Latinized version is well known, I have retained it (for instance, Kreon not Creon but Oedipus not Oidipous). Translations are my own; where I have used an existing translation, it is noted in the text after the line numbers, e.g., "(101–9, trans. Lattimore in Grene and Lattimore." In citing line numbers, which are given parenthetically in the text, I refer to the Oxford Classical Texts. For translations of the ancient authors, including the tragedies, consult the volumes in the Loeb Classical Library series for individual authors and texts (e.g., Aristotle, *Rhetoric*), which offer Greek texts with facing translations (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). Dates referring to ancient authors and texts are b.c.e. (before the common era).

Thanks to the estate of Muriel Rukeyser for permission to reprint the poem "Myth" in its entirety.

Prefaces are the place to express one's debts; I have many people to thank, and I am grateful for this opportunity to do so. Two of the major influences on my thinking, Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Jean-Pierre Vernant, died while I was completing this book; I owe them an enormous debt of gratitude, though I never studied with either of them. They were activists in their lives and impeccable scholars in their work and set a standard that will be difficult for the rest of us to live up to.

I would like to thank my colleagues in Classics at Hamilton College and Colgate University for stimulating conversations about Greek tragedy; on issues of performance, I have benefited from the perspectives of Mary-Kay Gamel, Craig Latrell, Peter Meineck, Nick Rudall, and Yana Sistovari. Carole Bellini-Sharp, Sue Blundell, Barbara Gold, Richard Seaford, and Nancy Warren graciously read drafts of chapters (some more than once), as did my wonderful students Rachel Bennek, Katie Berlent, and Lindsay Martin. Research was facilitated by supportive deans at Hamilton College: David Paris, Kirk Pillow, and Joe Urgo. It was made pleasant and productive by the library staff at the Institute of Classical Studies in London, the Centre Louis Gernet in Paris, the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, and the reference librarians at Hamilton College's Burke Library, in particular Kristin Strohmeier and Lynn Mayo. Research assistants over the

years—Keturah Brown, Katie Cameron, Cassie Sullivan, Tim Van der Voort—deserve a special vote of thanks for bibliographical assistance, line checking, and bringing order out of chaos. The editors and staff at Blackwell (Al Bertrand, Justin Dyer, Sophie Gibson, Ben Thatcher) have been unfailingly cooperative and attentive, and the readers of the manuscript gave it thorough attention from which I benefited greatly. Thanks to Clifton Ng for his careful and insightful work on the index. Norman Rosenberg provided a foundation for reading Greek tragedy in the context of other traditions. With all those thanks comes the proverbial reminder that any errors that remain are my own.

Finally, Peter J. Rabinowitz read and reread every word with a critical eye, gave moral support, and in general continued to make life possible while this book was in process. For all that and more, I am, as usual, in his debt.

# Introduction

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There is no dearth of books on Greek, or, to be more precise, Attic, tragedy, some intended for experts and some for novices, some for those who read Greek and some for those who do not. This book is not only written with students and general readers in mind, but it is also written from the perspective of certain challenges and questions that have been raised more generally by educators in the recent past. This is done deliberately, for it is my strong conviction that tragedy is not just an object from the past that we study, but that it is also re-created in the present through the active involvement of reader, spectator, actor, and director. The original context for tragedy is central to this book, but that is not its only important context.

In 2002, Simon Goldhill published a book entitled *Who Needs Greek?* You can read those words with a dismissive intonation (as my son once did)—meaning “no one,” or at least “not me.” Do we need Greek? The answer to that question has long since ceased to be an obvious yes. Classics, derived as it was from the Latin word *classicus*, meaning “top rank, the best,” used to connote just that, and, practically speaking, familiarity with the classics was required for success; its study, therefore, needed no explanation or defense. But in the U.S. and U.K., and indeed elsewhere in Europe as well, Classics as a discipline has increasingly lost that status as a signifier of class and culture. This process began with the move from Greek to Latin almost 100 years ago but has been exacerbated recently.

The academy as a whole has been involved in a large-scale dispute often called the “culture wars.” From the late sixties on, there have been basically two camps regarding the curriculum, and this division has affected the study of Classics. One camp, made up of what we

might call the educational conservatives, argues that students must know about (and honor) western civilization. Former U.S. Secretary of Education and director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, William Bennett, gave three reasons—it is our past, it is good, and the west is under attack. Lynne Cheney, head of the National Endowment of the Humanities under Republican Presidents Reagan and Bush, Sr. from 1986 to 1993, summed it up this way:

The key questions are thought to be about gender, race, and class. . . . but focusing on political issues to the exclusion of all others does not bring students to an understanding of how Milton or Shakespeare speaks to the deepest concerns we all have as human beings. . . . Should students be required to know about the Old Testament and New, about the classical works of Greece and Rome . . .? Since Western civilization forms the basis for our society's laws and institutions, it might seem obvious that education should ground the upcoming generation in the Western tradition. (12)

Such claims for the foundational importance of Greek civilization are made routinely: for instance, as I was standing on the Akropolis, I heard tour guide after tour guide assert the direct connection between ancient Greece and modern western culture, and at a conference in Havana, Cuba, the same link was affirmed for Cuban culture. One of the important arguments for the continued study of the humanities is that it can help “humanity” find its future, and Attic tragedy is one of the most privileged sites for humanistic learning. As a teacher educated and steeped in Greek literature, I, of course, find this moral centrality very attractive.

These brave assertions are often based on unexamined assumptions about the existence of a transcendent human subject, which are debatable given cultural diversity, global changes, and postmodern theory. When someone argues that we study Greek literature “to keep our past live to us,” we must analyze whose past it is. In identifying this particular heritage as “our” past, we actually create that “we” by placing ourselves in a certain lineage, but worldwide immigration debates reveal that that lineage is in the process of being defined and redefined and therefore cannot simply be taken for granted.

Bennett and Cheney were defending canonical education against attacks that had been levied in the U.S. by experts in the growing fields of Latino Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies, and,

somewhat later, Cultural Studies and Gay and Lesbian Studies. These scholars debated Bennett's underlying assumptions and constitute my "second camp." They asked what makes the history of Europe "our" history for non-European men, or for women of any race? Moreover, the name "Classics" for the study of Greek and Latin implies that there was only one classical period, when in fact many cultures might be said to have their own. Were students also well educated if they didn't know anything about Latin America, Africa, and Asia? What about Islam? Racial and ethnic diversity is increasing across Europe and within the U.S., and educational resources are scarce. These critics asked educators to justify teaching Greek literature, which comes from a society that used slave labor and marginalized women, to the exclusion of other literatures.

Part of what had made knowledge of Greek culture essential was the myth of "the Greek Miracle," which credited the Greeks (and more particularly the Athenians) with creating drama, philosophy, lyric poetry, and history as we know them from nothing and with no outside influence. But Afrocentrists have questioned the pride of place given to Greece, with its corresponding devaluation of Africa. Even a moderate position today would concede that there were outside influences on Hellenic culture, as Greek myth and the evidence of trade routes attest.

One extreme position ("throw the old texts out") is more or less a straw person; although there was (and is, though more ironically these days) much talk about "dead white men," few scholars, and of course no classicists, seriously entertained getting rid of the whole tradition. Nor do we need to accept the other extreme position—that tragedy is essential reading because it is a crucial part of western civilization, the best that has been thought and written—to see interest and value in the plays. Tragedy and Greek philosophy have, after all, been part of the European/Euro-American intellectual and cultural traditions. The references to these texts make information about them necessary for much academic work. Moreover, the Greeks were asking questions that we continue to ask, not perhaps because every person or every culture has the same questions, but because we have been formed in a culture that has studied Greek literature and philosophy.

There are, however, many approaches to the study of tragedy. Until quite recently, tragedy was viewed primarily as text. Classical philologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced texts and commentaries, establishing what the Greek actually was, what it

meant, and how to translate given words and lines. Any critic of tragedy must depend on the monumental labor of these scholars. One continuing strand of criticism treats the texts that these scholars established as great works of literature; the dense language of the plays rewards that approach. New Criticism in the 1950s and 1960s, a method of close reading that stressed the coherence and interpretation of the text itself to the exclusion of everything else, built on earlier forms of humanism that made tragedy accessible to the modern reader by emphasizing its universality. It focused on elements that were familiar and comfortable, such as character, themes, and images.

Close reading of the text itself, however, offers a limited perspective; so, for instance, a study of fire imagery in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* benefits from attention to Greek myth that might or might not be mentioned in the play but would have been understood by the original audience. The study of tragedy in larger contexts has come to predominate more recently, overlapping with rather than superseding the more strictly linguistic and literary approaches. Structuralism, which is based in anthropology and related to Saussurean linguistics, has been very productive in Classics. The name most prominently associated with structuralism is that of Claude Lévi-Strauss; he developed a method for analyzing myths and other phenomena as part of universal structures that underlie and organize cultures, by analogy to the structure of language. Focusing on a matrix of binary oppositions (the raw and the cooked, famously), he sought the logic behind seemingly disparate elements. Though Lévi-Strauss was not a literary scholar, he studied the Oedipus myth, interpreting all the variants, as part of the system of endogamy/exogamy. His work and that of Louis Gernet have led to a great deal of further work on these oppositions as they appear in Greek tragedy and society. For instance, Euripides' *Hippolytos* shows a young man who is a hunter and associated with the wild; he resists the domesticated and political realms of the city. In general, tragedy is seen to challenge order by revealing tensions between the elements in the various binaries before ultimately resolving them. The binary oppositions remain a fruitful way of approaching the plays, as we will see in Part II.

Psychological criticism has attended to a different set of deep structures, those taken to reside not in the culture *per se* but in the human psyche. Looking at the plays in this way at its most general takes character (more than poetic form or cultural concepts) as central; more specifically, critics have followed psychoanalytic theory, seeing

evidence of the Freudian model of human psychological development in the tragedies. Freud found in Greek myth evidence for the universality of the stages and structures he had discovered (especially his Oedipus and Electra complexes); narcissism is named for Narcissus, a mythic figure who was in love with his own reflection. While Freud's claims are extravagant and challenged on many grounds, particularly in view of the gendered nature of his analysis and the great variety in cultures, his theories have nonetheless been useful in looking at tragedy. The same Hippolytos, for example, can be seen through a psychological lens, which would give his resistance to sexuality a different flavor and emphasis. Other psychoanalytic theories, e.g., Jungian and Lacanian, have also used Greek myth and been used to some extent in reading tragedy. Jung studied the archetypes for human behavior and found them in Greco-Roman myth, while Lacan built on and departed from Freud's analytic model. He is best known for his concepts of the mirror stage and the symbolic, both of which can be used to decode tragedy.

Jacques Lacan makes up part of the poststructuralist movement, which, though much less expansive than structuralism in its effect on classical studies, has nonetheless had an impact. Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, a foundational text for deconstructive criticism, works closely with Plato. Though it is daring to sum this school up in a phrase or two for an introduction to tragedy, I will risk it. Where structuralism emphasizes the binary oppositions and the ways in which they are mediated in culture, deconstruction emphasizes the ways in which the supposed hierarchy of terms is not really stable. Its effects in discussions of tragedy can be seen most readily in the places where closure is deferred and questioning is celebrated.

At the same time that these ways of reading Greek tragedy in relation to other fields have found acceptance, there has also been heightened attention to the political and ritual contexts of the original productions. These approaches will be taken up in detail in Chapters 1 to 3, but let me say a few words here. The attention to ancient context is helpful in that it may offer a middle ground between the two camps identified earlier. If we seek to understand tragedy as a creation of the democracy of Athens, which was both extremely radical and at the same time based on fundamental exclusions, we can not only celebrate its achievements (as Bennett and Cheney would have us do) but also turn our attention to the elements that were excluded in order to create the system (a practice that Cheney, however,

laments). Thus, we can look at the class, race/ethnic, and/or gender constructions within the body of literature. The modern investigation of the relationship between inside and outside is prefigured in the Greek/Persian conflict (configured as west and east), and the issues of class and gender that have led some critics to want to displace Classics from the curriculum are also prominent in these very texts. Modern feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, and multicultural criticism have challenged the status of these so-called classics; as the rest of the book will make clear, we can employ those frameworks to enrich our readings of the plays. At the same time, we can examine what they can tell us about the problems that plague us in those arenas. We can look at the ways in which tragedy enabled Athenians to face their contradictions as a way for us to think about how we will face our own. In looking at ancient Greece not with nostalgia for the good old days but with recognition of the price that was paid for the affluence of Athens, we can focus on similarities as well as differences between us and them. I will develop these topics, as well as the relations between mortals and immortals, in Part II.

As part of the stress on the ancient context, there has also been a deepening emphasis on the performance of the plays, with critics approaching them as drama (from a Greek word for doing) or theater (from a Greek word for watching). Taking seriously the element of performance in antiquity has in turn led scholars to a consideration of contemporary performances, which can give us new insight into the past as well as the present. When a tragedy is staged, directors and actors have to find a way to reach the contemporary audience; watching these productions or reading about them can reveal elements in the play that you hadn't thought about before. Thus, the modern production can illuminate what the original might have meant. At the same time, adaptations and productions must articulate what they find of continuing significance in these ancient plays. Whenever we are at war, for instance, we seem to turn to Greek tragedy. In these cases, production choices can also inform the audience about its own time.

Can there be modern tragedy? Some writers, arguing that tragedy is dead, point out that there is no longer a controlling religious frame of reference; with the loss of the gods and the concept of fate, they say, we have lost the capacity for creating tragedy. It seems premature, however, to talk about the death of religion. In fact, fundamentalist religious groups (from whatever faith) seem to be very much at the forefront in the early twenty-first century. Tragedy's religious

resonance can be used to broaden contemporary secularism: it suggests that not everything is knowable by humans, nor can everything be controlled by humans. Another view of the death of tragedy maintains that in antiquity tragedy centered on those with elevated stature, and we don't have that mythic structure today. But the poor, the oppressed, the victims of injustice, are in a privileged position for understanding tragedy and for living it; they know well that there are constraints on them that might constitute fate, and that they are not totally free agents. Indeed, in what are called contemporary tragedies, economic or political forces often replace the divine/mythic level.

The larger-than-life characters, the elevated language, and the mythic plots make Athenian tragedy distant to today's students. Can it still stir our emotions? In speaking about the Oedipus complex, Freud argued that the ancient play could move us only because it touched on a universal desire. Marx too wondered why Greek art still gives us pleasure; he found the answer in history, arguing that it represents our own childhood. In other words, we are nostalgic for the past. In either case, viewing tragedy is not simply an intellectual or political exercise. The plays raise questions of life and death, of family dynamics and their relationship to the political realm, and they do so with awe-inspiring intensity. To return to contemporary adaptations, modern writers and directors often respond to the affective element of drama. Charles Mee, a contemporary playwright and one of the great creative spirits of the present, goes back to antiquity for inspiration. Here is what he says about the relationship:

I've been inspired a lot by the Greeks. I love the Greeks because their plays so often begin with matricide and fratricide, with a man murdering his nephews and serving the boys to their father for dinner. That is to say, the Greeks take no easy problems, no little misunderstanding that is going to be resolved before the final commercial break at the top of the hour, no tragedy that will be resolved with good will, acceptance of a childhood hurt, and a little bit of healing. They take deep anguish and hatred and disability and rage and homicidal mania and confusion and aspiration and a longing for the purest beauty and they say: here is not an easy problem; take all this and make a civilization of it. (2002: 93–4)

Mee adds material from newspapers, popular songs, and the like. At the beginning of *The Trojan Women a Love Story*, Mee writes:

*The Trojan Women a Love Story*, based on the works of Euripides and Berlioz, was developed with Greg Gunter as dramaturg and incorporates shards of our contemporary world, to lie, as in a bed of ruins, within the frame of the classical world. It uses texts by the survivors of Hiroshima and of the Holocaust, by Slavenka Drakulic, Zlatko Dizdarevic, Georges Bataille, Sei Shonagon, Elaine Scarry, Hannah Arendt, the Kama Sutra, Amy Vanderbilt and the Geraldo show. (1998: 160)

The family and world history, feeling and thinking, are intermingled in his view.

Part I will develop the ancient performance, political, and ritual contexts I have mentioned here. In Part II, we will look at a group of the plays selected in part because they are so often read and taught, but also for their relationship to the themes and methods set out here. In that section I will emphasize issues of interpretation, in antiquity as well as today. The book concludes with a consideration of some significant modern performances.

### Suggestions for further reading

On the culture wars, see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

On Afrocentrism and classics, see Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); for an opposing view, see Mary Lefkowitz and Guy McLean, *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

For an example of formalism, see H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London: Methuen, 1956). For structural anthropology, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963) and *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

Following from Louis Gernet, most important is the Paris school of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, especially *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 2 vols. (New York: Zone Books, 1988); the work of Charles Segal, e.g., *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) and *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), exemplifies this school in the U.S.

For an early psychoanalytic perspective, see Philip Slater, *The Glory of Hera* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968). Other examples are George Devereux, *Dreams in Greek Tragedy: An Ethno-Psycho-Analytical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) and Bennett Simon, *Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece: The Classical Roots of Modern Psychiatry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978). Charles Segal's work *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) is in part a psychoanalytic approach to that text.

For an early Marxist analysis of drama and specifically the *Oresteia*, see George Thomson, *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Origins of Drama* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1946). More recently, see Peter Rose, *Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth: Ideology and Literary Form in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

Feminist criticism or work on gender in tragedy is vast and still emerging; a recent collection of essays by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard, *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), has interesting material on tragedy; on the question of women's speech in general, see Laura McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Helene Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Other suggestions will follow other chapters.

