

Tragedy in the Crosshairs of the Present

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nical texts, in particular. Alongside these developments we have witnessed the rapid ascent of a subfield usually called “reception studies,” roughly the study of classical antiquity in post-antique societies and the history of classical scholarship. The field of Greek literature, in short, has been blown open. Its boundaries—generic, geographical, chronological—are no longer easily locatable.

Yet if these trends have worked together to transform what gets studied under the heading of Greek literature, they also pull in different directions. The potential for tension is most evident in the relationship between approaches that locate texts in their social and cultural contexts and those that look to their many and varied afterlives. One strategy tries to figure out what the texts meant in their immediate contexts; the other looks to a series of encounters in a range of places and times, including some close to home. Reception studies is often practiced with a primarily historicist outlook. But reception studies by nature, tracking as it does antiquity’s long tail, raises questions about the trans-historical value of ancient texts and the meaning of these texts today. These kinds of questions can be tough for classicists.

Indeed, anxieties about presentism are virtually constitutive of modern classical scholarship, founded as the model science in the nineteenth century on techniques for accessing the historical truth of the past and reconstituting its texts.¹ In the twentieth century, fascist appropriations of an idealized antiquity came to haunt uses of the classical past for present-day ends. Triumphalist classicism has been turned on its head by a political tide that has been in ascend

buoyed by highly influential readings of a handful of plays (*Antigone*, *The Bacchae*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*) by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud, tragedy has remained central to twentieth- and twenty-first-century continental philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, feminism, and literary theory, while also enjoying a robust performance tradition. There is arguably no tragedy in modernity without a philosophy of the tragic.

Unsurprisingly, in light of my remarks above about historicist trends in the field, the modern legacy of the tragic has been a problem for scholars of Greek tragedy over the past four decades. Much effort has gone into making sense of what tragedy meant not as an idea but as a genre in the context of fifth-century Athenian politics, culture, and performance traditions. Most scholars would in fact deny that anything like a “tragic” outlook on life or worldview is embodied by tragedy in its prime, cordoning off Aristotle as well as Hegel from the phenomenon of lived performance. The commitment to a historicist program can be explained not only by the discipline’s own formation as a “science of antiquity” (*Altertumswissenschaft*), which I mentioned above, but also by the wide-ranging influence of the French Hellenist Jean-Pierre Vernant, who critiqued the universalizing claims of psychoanalysis and structuralism in order to situate Greek tragedy more firmly within the coordinates of democratic Athens. In this critical climate, the pressures of modernity’s impassioned appropriation of tragedy have been seen as amplifying the pressures of the present more broadly construed. If we are going to rescue Greek tragedy from the tragic, the thinking goes, we need to cut through the interference.

But pendulums swing. Approaches that were once dynamic ossify. The turn away from the democratic context of our extant tragedies understood as the key to their

meaning has produced a renewed interest in the plays’ formal elements, without jettisoning the hope of observing tragedy as a thoroughly political genre in its original habitat.² Even more energy has been channeled into approaching tragedy via reception studies. Greek tragedy has given rise to a substantial and thriving subfield devoted to the study of reperformance and adaptation not only in all corners of the modern world but in antiquity as well. Although less attention has been paid, at least under the auspices of reception studies, to philosophical constructions of the tragic, the past couple years have welcomed a trio of smart new books published by classicists on the history of tragedy and the tragic in continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, and political theory.³ The idealist tradition is fast becoming less of a threat and more an object of study in its own right within the disciplinary parameters of classics, parameters already expanded by reception’s generous outlook on the temporal and geographical scope of Greek tragedy itself.

It will not escape readers that reception studies thus described looks like historicism by other means. They will not be mistaken. Rather than being trained on the fifth century, the historian’s gaze is now focused on key moments in the nineteenth or the twentieth. The twist is that, taken to its logical outcome, the work of historicizing interpretation—indeed, of historicizing the very dominance of historicism in recent waves of scholarship on tragedy—poses with renewed urgency the question of what it means to read, stage, or watch Greek tragedy now. The methodological implications of reception studies can be spun out in at least two ways.

On the one hand, we can frame historical self-consciousness as a necessary attempt to know thyself. As such, it entails becoming aware of the spectral presence of past readings, judgments, and critical tools that inform your own interpretations. The

process is necessarily aporetic or, to put it more constructively, recursive. You have to stop historicizing at some point and trust whatever tools you have (philology, say, or critical theory) to interpret what a text means. Nevertheless, by trying to understand why we ask the questions we do of a text and perhaps why we find the answers we do, we free ourselves up to ask different questions and arrive at unexpected answers. Such an outcome, anyways, is the hope of any method that aspires to what Michel Foucault called “genealogy.”

On the other hand, the work of engaging the rich tradition of modern and contemporary readings of tragedy can be seen as license and inspiration for strategies of interpretation that invest tragedy with the power to shed light on the human condition, or some historically inflected version of it (modern, postmodern, post-postmodern). An approach of this kind hardly precludes critical self-awareness of one’s place in an interpretive tradition. It may actually be a precondition of enabling Greek tragedy to tell us something we do not already know. But this second approach frames the payoff of historical self-consciousness differently. The reader’s larger commitments and interests within the present function not so much to

tragedy were actively imagined as an object of what we might call, after the Stoics, *elective sympathy*? The aim of changing our terms would be to force a greater recognition of the ways in which tragedy provokes a sense, at once historically conditioned and deeply embodied, of the tensions involved in being human (being mortal, being assigned a gender, being in a family, being in a city, being embedded in a field of nonhuman powers) while, in its impossible strangeness, resisting appropriation. The language of elective sympathy invites us to think harder about how sameness and difference work together in specific ratios to make Greek tragedy matter to us now, where both “us” and “now” refer to diverse communities living out temporalities irreducible to the present alone. It offers a way of seeing modernity’s philosophies of the tragic as constitutive of the vocabularies we use to locate ourselves in relationship to Greek tragedy without determining the sense that we make of the texts.

With the term elective sympathy, then, I am trying to foreground our agency in establishing the terms of our investment in tragedy alongside the power that these texts still exercise over us. Agency, on this account, is not radical freedom, whatever that means. It is, rather, the thoughtful and creative negotiation of legacies ancient and modern, in the interest of living more fully in this world by not being fully of this world. Under these conditions, what might be the claims of Greek tragedy on our attention now?

In Greek tragedy, not being fully of the world in which one finds oneself most commonly leads to living it more fully through pain. The majority of surviving plays are about the suffering of outsized human beings: trauma, violence, carnage, grief. Fragments from others suggest that the texts we have are not unusual in this

respect. The extant plays’ speeds and rhythms are structured by the eruption and modulation of pain. This highly formal and complex scripting of tragic suffering is largely unfamiliar to contemporary American and Western European culture, making it one of the least assimilable aspects of the genre for audiences and readers (and a perennial challenge for performers). This is not to say that performances of Greek tragedy cannot be raw and intense. But its very unrelenting intensity, together with the absence of contemporary reference points for its form, can obscure the fine-grained workings of the law that Aeschylus calls “the learning through suffering.”

Pain in Greek tragedy *always* demands the work of making sense. This is true despite the fact that sense-making always falls short, leaving a remainder of senseless harm that, depending on your theories or your experience of the genre’s therapeutic effects, may or may not be metabolized through spectatorship itself. Like other remainders, the kernel of senseless harm testifies to the failure of a peculiarly human capacity to understand and, through understanding, to master the unknown. It testifies, too, to the very doggedness of the drive toward epistemic mastery. The famous “Ode to Man” in Sophocles’s *Antigone*

argue about whether Oedipus in Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* is guilty or innocent of killing his father and sleeping with his mother. But there is also a risk of discounting the problem of agency as a belated philosophical imposition, at the hands of either Aristotle or the German idealists. The problem of agency matters a lot in the tragedies themselves.

It is of course the case that the convergence of philosophy and politics makes the question of agency newly urgent in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century. But it is precisely by recognizing the creative force of the idealists' urgency that we can be more strategic about drawing out the resonances of tragic agency in the early twenty-first century. For once again philosophy and politics are converging on the conundrum of agency, and in many spaces at once. The examples can be multiplied: thinking about and through the scope, limits, and uneven distribution of human agency on scales both cosmic and local in the era of the Anthropocene; the implications of research in cognitive science and medicine for taxonomies of mind, intention, and responsibility; concerns about the capacity of courts to do the political and emotional work of defining harm and blame and assigning damages; the rapid growth of technological expansions of agency that magnify the power to harm and the power to help, thereby shifting our thinking about mortality and our control over life; the tenacity of forces of oppression that continue to work through individuals and communities and institutions with devastating consequences; the ever-fuzzier boundary between human and nonhuman actants in the various new materialisms and the causal traffic between human and nonhuman communities and networks; wars that inflict violence by drone but still send home soldiers damaged by the awful intimacy of combat. The list goes on. Suffice to say that we

are not done with tragic agency. Not even close.

What tragedy does not do is provide easy answers to the darkest puzzles of agency. But its refusal to do so does not mean it necessarily yields what Bonnie Honig has recently diagnosed as "mortalist humanism," that is, a quiescent politics bred out of the indulgence of lament and the positing of a universal community stitched together by finitude.⁵ Rather, Greek tragedy carves out spaces for dwelling with vulnerability and damage via a rich spectrum of epistemic and emotional modalities. We need aesthetic and communal spaces to work through the suffering we undergo and witness that cannot be made sense of by the poles of guilt and innocence alone—the moral, ethical, political, and emotional complexity that surrounds damage to human life. Rather than inducing paralysis, the experience of tragedy may condition more discerning, nimble, and compassionate forms of thought and action in the world beyond its boundaries. The possibility that it might do so does not exhaust its value. But nor can such potential be written off as instrumentalization.

In contemporary American culture, we have a deep and desperate need not to see suffering: to fix it with technology or laws, to ignore it or blame it on someone else. Tragedy does not replace medicine or law or politics. But it does have the capacity to flesh out the human sciences by transposing them into worlds where their mechanisms get jammed. Its provocation is to ask whether and how suffering itself can be creative. If tragedy seen in these terms bears the residues of the idealist tradition, idealism's traces bear witness to the urgency and power of its readings of the texts themselves. We court narcissism in believing that sophisticated problems of subjects and objects, of necessity and what is "up to us," of the human and nonhuman are uniquely modern. I want to close by look-

ing very briefly at three versions of these problems, loosely allied with law, medicine, and politics, as endemic to the historical moment of tragedy. My aim in doing so, in an essay ostensibly about the “now,” is to enlarge the autonomy of tragedy as the condition of its viability in this present.

Sophocles’s Oedipus is a cipher from the start. In the *Oedipus at Colonus* (performed approximately two decades after the *Oedipus Tyrannus*), Sophocles scripts two modes of making sense of what has happened to Oedipus that meet but do not merge. When Oedipus, blind and nearing the end of his life, first has his infamous name pried out of him by the chorus of elderly Colonians, he slips into a rhetorically polished speech of self-defense. I am a man, he says, whose deeds were suffered more than acted, who went unknowingly along the path he traveled.⁶ Midway through the play, he revisits this language of ignorance and blamelessness in a blistering rebuke to Creon, who has stirred up old slurs to goad Oedipus’s newfound protectors into expelling him from their city.⁷

Oedipus here is very much the master of the legal vocabularies that had been refined over the course of the fifth century. The appropriation of legal vocabulary by the tragedians is the main reason why Vernant put so much emphasis on the evolution of legal thought as a condition for the historical development of Athenian tragedy, which he located at the juncture of older religious paradigms of blame and punishment and fifth-century legal institutions.⁸ But the mode of the law-court interacts with others. Once the chorus has agreed to let Oedipus wait for their king Theseus, they return to the story of his life, now told through song and punctuated by lament. Oedipus does not give up the language of blindness and innocence here. But as another kind of sense-making surges up around it, suffering becomes the con-

dition of Oedipus’s life, what defines it as his own even as he disclaims ownership of the actions that create it. His hands are not stained and yet without the stain (*miasma*)— and the ongoing work of making sense of the stain— he does not exist. The law is little help here.

What about medicine? A number of scholars have noticed a spike in “medical” vocabulary and depictions of disease in tragedy toward the end of the fifth century. These developments are usually chalked up to a vague “realism” and sometimes secularization, particularly in Euripides. I have elsewhere argued that they can be more productively understood as part of the larger story about tragic agency. More specifically, they stand at the heart of new ways of thinking about human nature, vulnerability, and agency stimulated by the emergence of a concept of the physical body under the aegis of naturalizing medicine and the larger “inquiry into nature.”⁹

What makes these developments so powerful for tragedy is the fact that the open-ended structure of the symptom allows the eruption of pain and violence to sustain different kinds of narratives of cause, some attached to gods, others to generic or named diseases. In the last decades of the fifth century, Greek tragedy is working out the implications of different kinds of stories that can be attached to the symptom. By emphasizing gods, tragedy figures the human being as a vehicle of daemonic power, as we saw above. This figuration is always problematic. But the spike in the language of disease, together with an increased use of medical language and imagery, radically expands the space accorded to the human as an incubator of harm to self and others in accordance with the contemporary conceptualization of the corporeal interior as the space of disease and the origin of the symptom. The body on this model comes to figure the strangeness of what is both not self— for what is

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new about the physical body and its nature is its status as an object— and constitutive of self. It thereby enlarges and sharpens tragedy’s conceptual resources for problematizing agency. Euripides’s *Orestes* maps a very different world by turning the Furies, who appear onstage in the final play of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, into the unseen hallucinations of an Orestes now described with the language of disease as a man capable of murder without divine sanction. The disease motifs of the same playwright’s *Hippolytus* magnify the ethical conundrum of Phaedra’s desire. The stakes of disease-language often go unrecognized by scholars of tragedy. But as we wade deeper and deeper into the complexities of subjectivities formed through biopolitics and biotechnology, perhaps we are ourselves at a historical moment to appreciate more fully the shock of the physical body as a concept, one that upends what it means to be a subject and an agent in ways as powerful as the democratic institutionalization of the law. From this vantage point, the drama of the symptom and the medicalization of tragic agency acquire new depths.

The trust we place in medicine and law to deal with questions of harm and blame can make tragic agency especially powerful and disturbing. Our own attachment to the idea of the individual, however, is sometimes said to distort the way we interpret ancient tragedy. The chorus, on this line, is the perennial problem of modernity. There is a risk here of overcorrecting a fixation on the isolated hero and losing sight of the shifting coordinates—

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