

The background of the book cover features a low-angle shot of bare, dark tree branches against a pale, overcast sky. A large, bright white circle is centered on the page, serving as a backdrop for the title and author's name.

Sean McEvoy

Tragedy

the basics

ROUTLEDGE



TRAGEDY

THE BASICS

Tragedy: The Basics is an accessible and up-to-date introduction to dramatic tragedy. A comprehensive guide for anyone undertaking a study of the genre, it provides a chronological overview and history of tragic theory. Covering tragedy from the classics to the present day, it explains the contextual and theoretical issues which affect the interpretation of tragedy, examining popularly studied key plays in order to show historical change. Including a glossary of key terms and suggestions for further reading, *Tragedy: The Basics* is an ideal starting point for anyone studying tragedy in literature or theatre studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Many philosophers, writers and literary critics have striven to provide a definition of tragedy. Their formulations have typically worked when applied to a narrow range of tragic texts, but don't work when applied to the broader range of art works which are generally recognised as tragic. This book will consider different theories of tragedy but won't offer one of its own. It seems somehow reductive to do so, given the scope of the term. But if we cannot define the concept of tragedy precisely it does not mean that it is not perfectly meaningful. It makes sense to talk of events in real life as tragedy (R. Williams 1979: 13), and the word in the same sense is used to talk about works of art.

What tragic works of art have in common is that they deal with death, grief and suffering, both physical and psychological. In taking what is most painful and terrible in human life and shaping it into a representation which may have beauty in its own right – and may even give pleasure – tragedy has a crucial role to play in how we cope with, and try to make sense of, those things which cause us most distress and which are the sources of our deepest fears. How, and indeed, whether, in its theatrical form, tragedy finally succeeds – or even can succeed – in playing this role is something this book will explore. Whatever the facts of the matter, people have been responding to the facts of human

suffering in Western culture by writing tragedies for nearly 2,500 years. Hugh Grady offers a useful working definition of stage tragedies:

They are plays that take on issues of death, of suffering, of identity, of human nature, of human meaning and more. They never supply tendentious answers to any of these issues but instead explore, curse, rage, joy and wonder in ways that shift as we move from culture to culture and age to age.

(Grady 2014: 796)

In fact, as Grady suggests, what we call tragedy is constantly evolving, and the problem with the term is that once we start using it to describe one particular form of theatre the genre has already moved on to a related, but different kind of work (Grady 2014: 792).

Tragedy can be found in all art forms: in fiction, in poetry, in music, in dance, in opera, in the visual arts, in television drama, in graphic novels and probably in computer games. This book, however, is focused on theatrical tragedy, without denying for a moment the equal validity and importance of other kinds of art as specimens of the tragic. Tragedy began on the stage in ancient Greece, and this book will trace its development in the theatre from ancient Athens to the present day. The scope of this book is also limited to the theatre of Europe and America and the drama of the Western tradition. Again, this is not to dismiss or denigrate tragic art in other cultures in other traditions at different periods of history. Indeed, I hope that readers of this book may subsequently want go further, and to study tragedy as it appears in other art forms and in other parts of the world. But given the space available, this book is written for students of Western theatrical tragedy, which remains a central and much-studied strand of the genre.

Ancient Greek tragedy dramatises the relationship between the immortal gods and mortal humans in its attempt to make sense of death and suffering, injustice and cruelty. When dramatic tragedy was revived again Christianity offered a narrative which could be used to explain why these things happen, and will end for some, but it seems that narrative was never strong enough to stop

dramatists feeling the need to explore their own societies and values through the medium of tragedy. When science and reason began to wield a powerful influence in Western thought, in a movement sometimes known as the **Enlightenment**, tragic suffering came to be seen by some as a part of a benevolent process leading ultimately to a better world. In the twentieth century the idea that history was working its way towards a happy ending for all lost a great deal of credibility for many, and some influential critics proclaimed the death of tragedy itself. But theatrical tragedy is still being written in the twenty-first century, and still has important things to say about our world today, as this book will show.

This book starts with the Greeks and Romans, and considers what tragedy meant in these two ancient, but still formative and influential cultures. In this chapter, and all the subsequent ones, there is an account of a number of representative (and often studied) plays of the period. There is also a brief account of the social, political and cultural context in which the plays were first written and produced. In between the plays you will also find shaded boxes which present the ideas of important theorists and critics who have written about tragedy. Generally speaking the content of the boxes relates directly to the texts in that chapter, but some – such as the ideas of Aristotle, Hegel and Nietzsche, who appear in Chapter One, have a wider relevance to the whole book. When references are made to other books the author of the book, date of publication and the page number referred to appear in brackets. References to plays in Chapters Two and Three often give act, scene and line numbers (e.g. 3.3.53–60) rather than page numbers; but, when it is helpful, the page number of the edition referred to appears at the beginning of the reference. Full details of the book referred to can be found in the References section at the back, listed alphabetically by author. Full reference is given the first time the text under discussion is mentioned; just the page numbers subsequently. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare's plays come from *The Complete Works*, second edition, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Important terms are explained in the glossary, and whenever terms listed in the glossary appear in the text they are in **bold type**.

A book on plays that present misery, suffering and death might seem a gloomy prospect. But not only does the genre of tragedy contain some of the most powerful and beautiful plays in world literature, it also offers a series of remarkable insights into how Western culture has sought to understand what is valuable in life, and even, in the words of the contemporary British tragedian Edward Bond, most valuably, to talk of both ‘the causes of human suffering and the sources of human strength’ (Bond 2013: 109).

GREEKS AND ROMANS

CLASSICAL TRAGEDY

CONTEXTS: THE FESTIVAL OF DIONYSUS AT ATHENS

Our word ‘tragedy’ comes from the ancient Greek word *tragoidia*. There’s no agreement about the word’s origins. It may have meant ‘goat song’ (Hall 2010: 1), perhaps referring to the ritual slaughter of an animal which accompanied the original performances. Sacrifice to the gods was always an important part of Greek public events, and for the Athenians the theatre was perhaps the most important of these.

All the ancient Greek plays which have survived were performed in Athens at the great annual festival in honour of the god Dionysus, who was the god of wine and drunkenness, but also of the theatre. There was a connection: at the theatre dancing, singing and acting produced an altered state of mind for performer and audience – and the performance itself was a religious ritual. The Athenian tragic theatre was a unique event, a sacred state celebration where the citizen audience became emotionally involved in the suffering of the characters but also explored religious, political and social issues as a community.

The first tragedies were performed in about 534 BCE when Athens was ruled by a small group of rich aristocratic families, but all the plays we have were written after the establishment of the

democracy in 508/7 BCE. Athens was at that time the most powerful of the different city states of the Greek world. Its central democratic institutions were the Assembly and the law courts. The Assembly made law and decided questions of peace and war and consisted of the entire citizen body of the city (the *demōs*), which in fact comprised less than 20 per cent of the city's population, since it did not include women or slaves. The large juries in the law courts were also drawn from the citizens. In both institutions the people sat on a semicircular slope around a central area where opposing parties argued their cases, then voted to express the opinion of the people on the issue. The Theatre of Dionysus, located on the southern slope of Athens' citadel, the Acropolis, had a similar layout to both the Assembly and the law courts, and at the end of three days of tragic performances the audience would also vote, in this case to decide which tragic dramatist had won the festival that year. The first tragedies were not then commercial entertainments which people could choose to attend if they wished to and could afford it. They were the centrepiece of a religious and civic event which was a crucial part of Athenian cultural and political life, and shared some common formal features with other democratic institutions. In all these institutions so much depended on the purposeful use of language and argument, and an anxiety about the power of language to persuade or to deceive is central to so many Greek tragedies.

The Festival of Dionysus took place in late February or early March. It drew visitors from all over the Greek world, but its main audience was the male Athenian citizen body. It looks as if women didn't attend; or, if some did, they would not have been the 'respectable' wives of those citizens. They took no part as writers or performers or otherwise (Goldhill 1997a: 61–6). During the festival there was an expectation for all citizens to attend the theatre. It cost two obols to get in, but the state provided a grant to any citizen who could not afford this sum. Some scholars believe that the fifth-century BCE theatre could hold up to 16,000 spectators (Goldhill 2004: 223); others that temporary wooden seating was erected for the Festival which could only accommodate 4,000–7,000 (Csapo 2007: 99). On the first day of the festival four rituals took place. First, animal sacrifices were supervised by the ten generals, the most important

military and political officers of the state. Then a list of citizens who had benefited the city in the previous year was read out, and chests of silver bullion, the tribute of other Greek subject-cities, were paraded in the theatre. Finally, the state-fostered orphans of war veterans who had just come of age were presented with armour and weapons and took an oath of loyalty to the city and were given special seats. Each of these rituals set out to promote the power and prestige of the Athenian state and its democratic values. Hymns to Dionysus sung by boys' and men's choirs called dithyrambs completed the first day. Yet, even though Athens was proud of its theatre, the plays that followed on subsequent days did not set out particularly to glorify the city (though at times they did that), but rather to question and contest the community's values and ideals: they sought to encourage 'self-reflection on personal, familial, intellectual and political issues of general concern' (Goldhill 2004: 232). The earliest tragedies, then, set out to provide a communal exploration of the most serious issues; it is no surprise that death and suffering should be at their heart.

Normally, on the second day of the Festival, five comedies were performed, and a jury selected the best play. Then on each of the following three days three tragedies by a single author were performed, followed by a 'satyr play': a short comedy featuring a chorus of satyrs, half-man half-goat creatures with large erect phalluses (Wiles 2000: 31). At the end of day five another vote took place to determine which tragic poet had triumphed that year.

Three professional actors played all the speaking roles. The performance area was known as the orchestra, a circular (or, in this period possibly trapezoidal) 'dancing floor'. The actors shared this space with the chorus. The chorus consisted of young amateurs, originally twelve in number, later fifteen. Readers and audiences today, used to modern dramatic forms, can overlook how central the chorus were to the Greek theatre. The tragic chorus were on stage for all but the opening lines of the play, participating in the action and also singing and dancing five 'odes', which punctuated but also commented on the 'episodes' of the play. Principally, they helped the audience to 'become involved in the process of responding' to the drama, which often, in these complex and harrowing plays, meant 'dealing with

profoundly contradictory ideas and impulses' (Easterling 1997a: 164). Choruses often draw on mythology to set up analogies with the action of the play which encourage moral, religious and political reflection, or sing poetry whose imagery and symbolism enhances and deepens both the drama and the conflict of ideas in the play. Their songs create moods and evoke emotions central to the dramatic narrative. What they rarely do is offer mere narrative. The chorus has been taken to represent the voice of the democratic community, in tension with the individual (the conflict between the *demos* and the aristocrats was central to Athenian political life), but the choral odes were written in the Doric, not Athenian dialect, and often represented marginal groups such as slaves and women (Gagné and Hopman 2013: 23–4). The chorus were thus both in the drama as a fictional group of characters and outside the drama as ritual representatives of Athens in the Festival of Dionysus. They are the voice of the poet and the voice of the community (Gagné and Hopman 2013: 27), and they are also themselves.

All the performers wore masks, and exotic-looking, brightly coloured and decorated costumes. The masks were lightly constructed whole-head constructions, and their function was not to amplify the voice; they were part of the ritual costumes in the rite of Dionysus, in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the use of mask in some African or Haitian ritual. The costumes signified that the action was taking place in the heroic age of gods and heroes, not in the present, and often set away from Athenian soil. Indeed, the myths of the Trojan War and its aftermath figure large in the plays we know about. The setting of tragedies in the heroic past allowed the plays to reflect on Athenian concerns at a safe distance (perhaps in a similar way to how Shakespeare set his tragedies in Denmark or ancient Rome). We do, however, know of two plays which were set in contemporary times. Aeschylus' *Persians* (472 BCE) dramatised the Persians' defeat at the hands of their Greek enemies at the battle of Salamis. The dramatist Phrynicus wrote a lost play called *The Capture of Miletus* (494 BCE) about the destruction of the Greek city by the Persians. Notoriously, the author was fined and the play subsequently banned because the work 'reminded them of a disaster which touched them so closely'

(Herodotus 1972: 395). Some distance between the dramatic fiction and reality was apparently required to enable the reflection which was central to Greek tragedy.

Behind the acting area was the *skene*, a one-storey building with a central double door. Actors could enter from this door as if emerging from a building, or from the side aisles, when they would be entering from the open air: all the action in tragedy takes place outside. When the dramatist wanted to show what had happened inside the *skene* a wide trolley, the *ekkluklema*, could be rolled out from the central doors, typically to display the corpses of a killing that has just happened inside, such as when in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* Clytemnestra gloats over the body of Agamemnon, the husband she has murdered alongside his concubine Cassandra (see below, p. 10; Aeschylus 2003: 92). A crane-like device, the *mechane*, could be used to fly actors as gods in the air, or to produce effects such as when the child-killer Medea escapes from Thebes in chariot pulled by dragons (see below, p. 27; Euripides 1997: 35).

In Athenian tragedy, then, a stylised depiction of human suffering was placed on display in the open air, but not simply for 'entertainment' or to evoke sentiment. Tragedy, many critics argue today, had an educational function for the good of the city: not to teach any kind of 'message', but to encourage emotionally engaged reflection on the nature of the values and ideals that were shared – or contested – within the community. In the darkest days of the long war with Sparta the comic dramatist Aristophanes wrote in his play *Frogs* about how Athens needed to bring back one of the great, but dead tragic poets from the underworld. Dionysus himself goes down to Hades. Euripides asks him why he needs a tragic poet. His answer shows how important tragedy was to the Athenians: 'to save the city, of course', is his reply (Aristophanes 1964: 208).

In this chapter we will look at one trilogy and five other plays which represent well what Greek tragedy meant to the people in the Theatre of Dionysus. We will also consider the responses of some important philosophers to Greek tragedy, responses which have been influential to thinking about tragedy in later years. Finally, we'll look at how the Romans developed tragedy in their own way.

Work from only three dramatists out of the hundreds who wrote for the Greek stage survives. Aeschylus (525–456 BCE) fought in the battle of Marathon against Persia. Since he increased the number of actors from one to two he can be seen as the founder of Greek tragedy. Sophocles (c. 496–406 BCE) was twice elected a general and was a priest of Aesculapius, the god of healing. Euripides (c. 485–406 BCE) was associated with radical thinkers and philosophical sceptics, men who cast doubt on the conventional religious and political views in the city. At the end of his life for some reason he left Athens for the court of the king of Macedonia.

AESCHYLUS, *THE ORESTEIA* (458 BCE)

Only one complete tragic trilogy of three plays written by a single author to be performed on one day of the Festival survives. The plays are *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides* by Aeschylus. Collectively they are known as *The Oresteia* since their central character is Orestes, the son of King Agamemnon of Argos.

Agamemnon had led the Greek forces in the war against Troy, a war fought to regain his brother's wife Helen, who had been abducted by Paris, prince of Troy. As the first play in the trilogy explains, before the Greek expedition could sail the goddess Artemis had demanded the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia in return for favourable winds. *Agamemnon* actually begins with a chain of beacons bringing news to the palace at Argos of the fall of Troy after ten years' fighting. Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra has not, however, forgiven her husband for the killing of Iphigenia. She has taken as her lover Aegisthus, whose father, Thyestes, had been tricked into eating a meal of his own sons' flesh by Agamemnon's father Atreus, in vengeance for Thyestes seducing his wife. When Agamemnon arrives home with his slave and concubine, the Trojan prophetess Cassandra, Clytemnestra pretends to offer a welcome to her husband and persuades him to walk into the palace on a crimson tapestry. Once inside, she and Aegisthus murder Agamemnon and Cassandra and display their bodies to the city. The chorus of old men protest, but are powerless to act against both the murder and the seizure of power.

The second play, *The Libation Bearers*, begins with Electra, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, joining the chorus of the Queen's slaves pouring libations (ritual offerings of fluids, usually wine) on the tomb of Agamemnon. Her brother Orestes, who had not been in Argos when the murders took place, appears and identifies himself, and declares that the oracle of the god Apollo has ordered him to take vengeance for his father. With the collusion of Electra and the chorus, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are killed by Orestes, and now their bodies are put on display. But at the very end Orestes is tormented by invisible Furies, the Erinyes, demon-like female avenging spirits demanding retribution for his mother's death.

The last part of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, begins with Orestes, now in exile, seeking sanctuary at the shrine of Apollo at Delphi. But the chorus of Erinyes arrive in pursuit. Apollo seeks to protect him, and the goddess Athena arranges for a trial to settle the issue of whether vengeance must be taken on Orestes, to be judged by a panel of Athenian jurors. At the court of the Areopagus in Athens Orestes is acquitted on the strength of Athena's casting vote, and the Erinyes are pacified by Athena's offer that they become honoured guardians of the city, worshipped and offered tribute. They will in future be known as the Eumenides, 'the kindly ones'.

Written at a time when Athens was increasingly confident both in its own position at the head of the Greek world and also in its democratic institutions, the *Oresteia* has most frequently been read as offering a validation of the city's view of itself. In particular, the trilogy has been taken to show how the meaning of the Greek word *dike* ('justice'), is crucially refined through the progress of the dramatic action. Clytemnestra uses the term in its sense of 'vengeance' to justify the murder of her husband in retribution for the killing their daughter. Orestes also uses the term in this sense to account for his murder in turn of his mother Clytemnestra, only to bring the Erinyes onto his trail themselves demanding his destruction in the name of *dike* in the sense of 'right retribution' (vengeance can be excessive or cruel). But, when the citizen jurors of Athens – with the aid of the goddess Athena's casting vote – acquit Orestes and the pacified Erinyes agree to become guardian deities of the city, *dike* in the sense of

legal justice is asserted as the resolution of the blood feud in the house of Atreus. The old aristocratic code of personal vengeance is tamed and civilised by the assertion of the voice of the community and the rule of law in history's first-ever murder trial. As the mid-twentieth-century critic H. D. F. Kitto (1966: 94) put it, 'the Areopagus, the prototype of all courts of justice, is a divine institution, a barrier against violence, anarchy, despotism: and at the first meeting of this court Athena sits with her fellow-citizens. Wrath ... gives place to Reason.' Athens shows its political system, also with divine approval, to be the culmination of a rational historical process. Edith Hall (2010: 211) writes that the play reflects:

the real historical development of the archaic Greek city-state from the constitutional monarchy apparently portrayed in *Agamemnon*, through to the tyranny maintained by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in *Libation-Bearers*, and thence to the Athenian democracy in *Eumenides*. This last play, uniquely in Greek tragedy, portrays a city that can govern herself without either tyrant or king.

Aeschylus' powerful pattern of dramatic symbolism across the trilogy can also be seen to work to reinforce this idea of a process which leads from violent, individualist turmoil to civic peace. The crimson tapestries on which Agamemnon walks as a **hubristic** monarch on his way to his murder in the first play (Aeschylus 2003: 77) are echoed in the civic crimson robes which the Erinyes wear as they process to their new home in a cave under the Acropolis (187). The chain of signal beacons which announce the destruction of Troy as an act of vengeance at the beginning of *Agamemnon* (54–5) has its structural counterpart in the torches carried by the religious procession of Athenian maidens who accompany the Erinyes as they exit as *Eumenides* at the end of the third play.

But not only Athenian democracy is promoted by this dramatic process. In deciding on the acquittal of Orestes, Athena's jury also validate Athenian patriarchy, the absolute dominance of men which was such a salient feature of Athenian society. In decreeing that Orestes should not be punished for killing his mother the play argues that 'fathers are more important than mothers, that

men are more important than women, and that if women have a public role at all it is in religion rather than politics, legislation or law enforcement' (Hall 2010: 227).

This view of the *Oresteia* as a confident assertion of core Athenian values is opposed by the work of Simon Goldhill, who characteristically finds it more of a challenge to its audience. Goldhill analyses the different ways each character uses the notion of *dike* and finds no simple resolution or agreement that legal justice has superseded individualist vengeance by the end of the play. Indeed, the failure of characters to communicate with each other in the play is partly the result of a lack of a shared understanding of important words and concepts such as *dike*. Goldhill focuses on the role of Athena in casting her decisive vote. The fact is that the Athenian jurors cannot agree on whether Orestes should be punished. It takes decisive action from a female figure 'who transgresses the boundaries of sexual definition' (Goldhill 1986: 31), who deploys all the arts of **rhetorical** persuasion to win over the Erinyes, to close the action of the play. For Athena is a warrior goddess with no mother, a virgin who (in the most often repeated version of the myth) sprang fully armed from the forehead of her father Zeus, king of the gods. Because 'no mother gave me birth', she declares, 'in all things/ but marriage I wholeheartedly approve/ the male' (176–7). Just as the trilogy's narrative action is framed by effective dramatic symbols, so the figure of Athena at the trilogy's conclusion is structurally balanced by the figure of Clytemnestra in the trilogy's opening. She too displays the qualities associated with male warrior figures – bravery, a capacity for violence and a high sense of her own honour – and achieves her aims by a cunning use of rhetoric, in persuading Agamemnon to walk on the tapestries and enter the palace where he will be murdered. Rather than the play's ending asserting the dominance of the rational values of the community and the dominance of the male, writes Goldhill, 'the final reconciliation of divine and human forces in the city' (Goldhill 1986: 31) is achieved by a figure who doesn't fit the definitions to which a female or a citizen is supposed to conform in the 'rational' legal system of Athens. It's not law, but rhetoric, that brings resolution, and the power of language to make an argument not necessarily based on reason and evidence triumph