

Tragedy

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Tragedy

A Short Introduction

Rebecca Bushnell

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R.B.

Preface

The notion of a “short introduction” to tragedy may seem absurd. How could anything “short” cover the genre that has produced some of the greatest masterworks of Western literature, beginning with the Greeks and extending to the present day? But one could take a lesson here from tragedy’s self-discipline, which compresses the welter of human experience into what is most significant and timely. The exercise of a short introduction allows both writer and reader to focus on the essentials.

For most twenty-first-century readers, tragedy is a text to be read or a subject in school. They find it alien or stuffy, even while they eagerly consume tragic material through television and film. The media of film and television thrive on the kind of violence, conflict, passion, madness, and catastrophe that tragedy first introduced to the stage in fifth-century Athens. But what does this hunger mean for the viability of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine, or Ibsen?

This short introduction to tragedy would hope to reinvigorate the reading of tragedy for readers who want to understand it and to feel its power, yet who often find the masterpieces of the genre too distant from their own language and world. In that sense, I would hope to make some of the more alien aspects of the genre accessible: for example, to explain that the formal conventions of classic tragedy, its set pieces and rhetoric, are instrumental to evoking conflict and tension. This little book also seeks, albeit through the written word, to restore some of the theatrical energy of these plays. It explores how these plays lived on the stages of the past, but also imagines how tragedy could be re-created in the new “enacted” media of the screen.

However, inevitably, this introduction to tragedy cannot pretend to cover all the manifestations of tragic drama from the Greeks to the present. Rather, in each chapter, the book considers selected case studies that exemplify the compelling qualities of the genre. It offers an overview of the basics of the evolution of tragedy as a theatrical genre from the Greeks to the present, in its staging, its formal qualities, its characteristic plots, and its types of heroes. Because it looks at tragedy over time, this book also grapples with tragedy's connection to the historical conditions that produced it, while it cannot relate the details of that history.

A few plays recur throughout the book as touchstones for many aspects of the art. It should surprise no one that these plays include Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*; Aeschylus' *Oresteia*; Euripides' *The Bacchae*; Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*; Racine's *Phèdre*; Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*; and (perhaps a little more surprising) Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Many other plays are discussed, of course, but I am sure I have missed many readers' favorites, and I can only say that I have written mostly about those texts that served best to tell my story. It is also quite clear that the book does not take account of the transformation of tragic themes in opera: here I can only acknowledge that opera is certainly an important strand of the inheritance of tragic drama, but the introduction was simply too short to include a consideration of it. However, film is included here, because the cinema extends the experience of tragic drama as a popular art. If tragedy has a foreseeable future, it will be on the screen, whether in the space of the cinema, television, or computer.

Similarly, unlike other scholars of tragedy, I have not extended this introduction to the study of the tragic in the novel. This study is more narrowly focused on what Aristotle understood as the distinctiveness of tragedy, as opposed to epic: it is an "imitation" and, in tragedy (like comedy), the works "imitate people engaged in action, doing things" (19). Novels and epics, while they may share the ethos and character types of tragic drama, engage only a reader. Their audience is not trapped before them, pressed to follow the action to its conclusion.

So this short introduction to tragedy does not provide all the answers or cover all the bases, but it does ask quite a few questions. Tragedy itself is a genre that poses questions about the fundamental matters of our lives, and it does not answer them. What I would hope is that when the reader puts down this book, he or she will be compelled to ask more of these masterpieces.

CHAPTER 1

Tragic Theaters

Imagine yourself in an amphitheater open to the sky, where you witness a human spectacle. Everything seems to depend on its outcome. The people you watch so intently are engaged in a struggle, matching their wit and strength. Everyone knows that in the end victory must come at the cost of another's defeat.

Surely by now you have conjured up a sporting event – no ordinary match, perhaps, but a World Cup football championship or the final game of the baseball World Series. But what if the scene were a play? What if the spectacle were not one of balls flying and limbs pumping, but of daggers, tears, embraces, and death? What difference would it make if you came not just to see bodies in action but also to *hear* words of joy and agony? Would you still feel that it mattered, that somehow, at that moment, your life was bound to those of the players?

These days we observe tragedy in the dark, less like a game and more like a private act, in the flickering light of the cinema or the gloom of the theater, unless we are sitting in our well-lit homes in comfortable chairs, transfixed by the television screen. Because we are in the dark, tragedy strikes us in our eyes, mind, and heart, but we tend not to feel it as a communal or shared experience.

But it was not always so. In classical Greece tragedy was performed in glorious outdoor amphitheaters. It was created to be played out in the open, before thousands of people, in full sight of earth and sky. In early modern England, tragedy also flourished outside in the amphitheaters of London, before audiences that mixed aristocrats and apprentices, as well as in the murky, roofed playhouses like the Blackfriars Theatre and in the elegant halls of the court. But by the end of

the seventeenth century in Europe, tragedy had moved permanently indoors, into the confines of a framed and increasingly realistic stage setting and a socially stratified playhouse. These new circumstances redefined the meaning of tragedy itself.

To begin to understand tragedy, one has to imagine it as a living art, especially as it began in the dazzling sunlight of ancient Greece. Throughout the history of tragic art in the West, from the Theatre of Dionysus to the contemporary cinema, the conditions of performance, including setting, acting style, staging, and the composition of the audience, have defined its cultural impact and significance. Most tragedy was written to be played in a theater and, as such, to be a sensory as well as mental experience. What Bert States has termed the theater's "affective corporeality" (the material conditions of performance) exists in tension with language to embody complex and often contradictory meanings (27). This chapter will endeavor to evoke a performance of a Greek play in the Theatre of Dionysus and then compare it with performances of Shakespearean tragedy in different London settings, the staging of French neoclassical tragedy in Paris, and a presentation of a play by Ibsen in a nineteenth-century proscenium theater. In each case the conditions of theatrical performance served to define the tragic experience. In the case of Greek and English Renaissance tragedy, performance informed the tensions of knowledge and belief, whereas in French neoclassical and realistic drama, it structured the tragic dynamics of freedom and imprisonment.

The Theatre of Dionysus and Athens

Most people never get a chance to see a Greek tragedy performed. They may read one in school as literature, more like a poem than as a play, for indeed, that is the way they can look on the page. But we should never forget that these were plays written to be performed in the spectacular open-air theaters of early Greece. These plays are *theater* and theaters are places for things to be seen (*theatron*), not for reading (see Taplin: 2).

Athenian society was fiercely competitive (this is, after all, the city that gave us the Olympics), and tragedy, too, was the product of a competition. Each year three playwrights fought to win the prize for the best tragedies performed at the City Dionysia, a state-sponsored

spring festival in honor of the god Dionysus. Each playwright presented a set of four plays: three tragedies and a satyr play (a more comic and vulgar piece that commented on the themes of the preceding tragedies). Going to the theater was no casual night out. It was a marathon experience, important for the welfare of the city and the honor of its gods.

These festival performances were at once religious and profoundly civic in nature. The theater belonged to both Dionysus and the city of Athens, since the City Dionysia was supported by the state. The city's leaders or *archons* would appoint a wealthy sponsor or *choragus* who would fund the production of the plays for the city's benefit. The chorus's dances and lyric language certainly evoked the mystery and power of divinity, while the actors' words and gestures echoed the formal discourse of the law courts or assembly as well as the intimate language of the family. The performances may have begun with a procession in honor of Dionysus, but they also involved appearances by political figures and the display of symbols of the imperial might of Athens (see Boedeker and Raafaub).

The Theatre of Dionysus still nestles on the southeast slope of the Acropolis, which looms over it as a monument to Athens' ruined splendor, and its original shape is still visible, although eroded by the centuries (and the round orchestra has been split into a semicircle) (see Illustration 1). In the fifth century BCE the audience sat on that hillside in a crowd that was between 15,000 and 20,000 strong. They were arranged in a semicircle overlooking a round *orchestra* or "dancing place." A chorus composed of amateur citizens in costume inhabited the orchestra, chanting and dancing, or sometimes standing in silence or mingling with the actors. At the back of the orchestra was a building called the *skene* (now long gone): this space belonged to the professional actors. They would enter the scene either from doors in the *skene* or from passageways or ramps (*eisodoi*) on either side when a character was understood as coming in from the country or traveling (see Illustration 2). Two kinds of stage machinery also provided access to the playing area: one was the *mechane* or machine, which would allow an actor to come flying onto the stage (thus giving rise later to the term *deus ex machina*, or "the god from the machine"), and the *ekkyklema*, a wheeled platform that could be rolled out from the *skene*, often for the display of bodies. The *skene* served not only as a place for the actors to change their costumes but also to represent interior space:

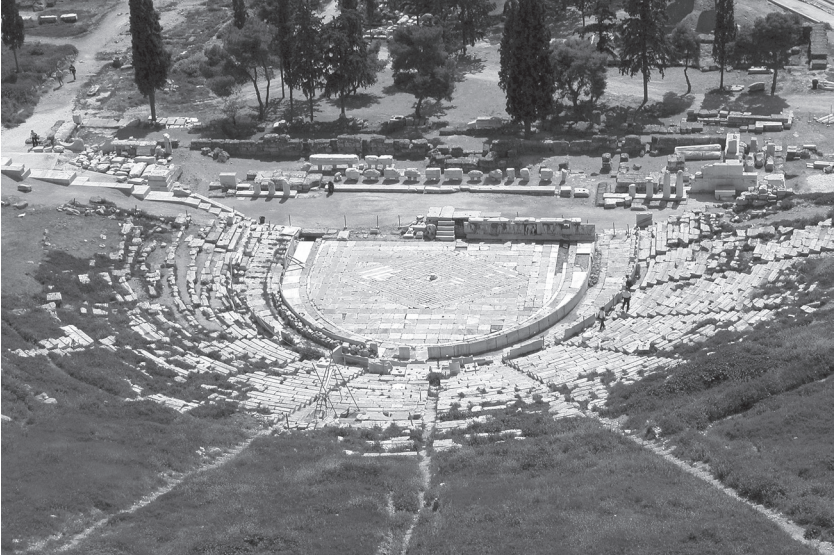


ILLUSTRATION 1 The site of the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens today.
Photo © istockphoto.com/Michael Palis

the palace, cave, or hut from which the actors emerged into the public eye and to which they retreated, often to commit acts of terror while hidden from the audience. While it may have been decorated with painted cloths for dramatic effect, the primary function of the *skene* was to define unseen indoor space as opposed to the public space inhabited by the chorus (see Halleran).

Even while Greek tragedy was a spectacle to be *watched*, it was also notable for not showing the most horrific acts (in contrast to English Renaissance tragedy, which reveled in stage blood). Oliver Taplin has cautioned us about thinking that in the Greek theater the *action* takes place offstage, if you think that “action” is just battles and sea-fights: “This is to miss the point that the stuff of tragedy is the individual response to such events; not the blood, but tears” (160–1). The Greek audience did not experience horror through seeing unspeakable acts. Instead, the horror would erupt from anticipating or imagining violence, or in witnessing its emotional waste.

What did the audience actually see? They watched male citizens transformed into a chorus of 15 individuals, sometimes men and

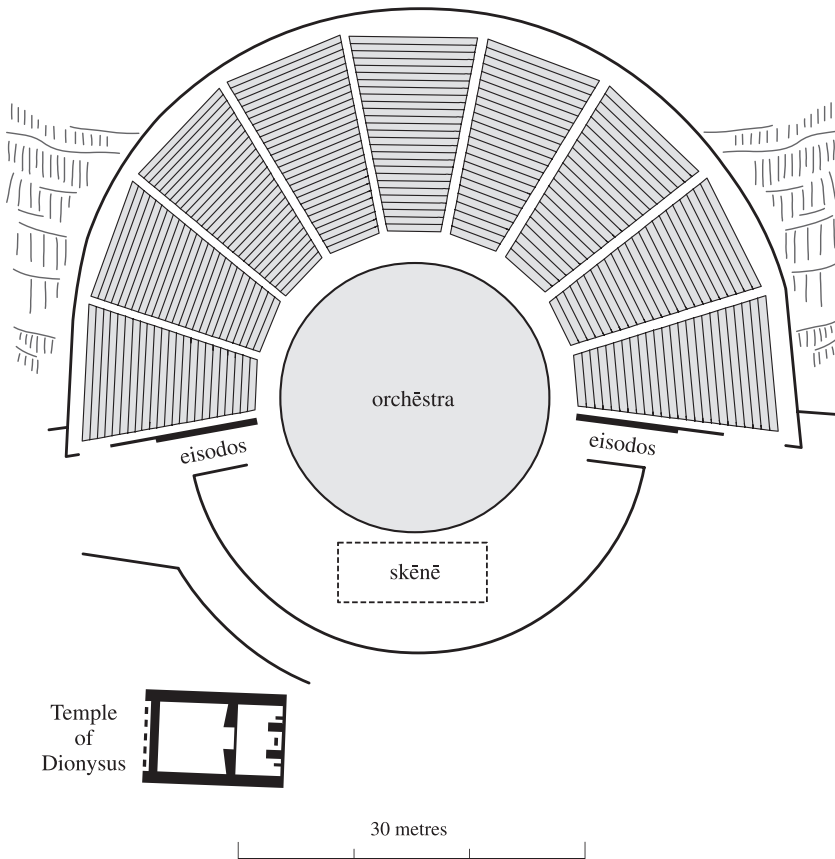


ILLUSTRATION 2 A schematic design of the Theatre of Dionysus, Athens, based on J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (London, 1971), p. 50

sometimes women. The chorus entered after the opening scene and remained in the orchestra for the entire play, sometimes silent, sometimes speaking with the actors, and sometimes singing and dancing for the choral odes that separated the acts of the tragedy. Juxtaposed with the chorus's intricate songs were scenes of intense confrontation, accusation, seduction, and leave-taking played by the actors. All those on stage were men, regardless of the part, dressed in elaborate robes as appropriate to their character and wearing masks.

These masks were not the stiff caricatures that we think of today when we visualize the comic and tragic masks. Rather, the evidence suggests that they were more naturalistic if not individualistic, representing character types. The mask is one of the aspects of Greek theater most foreign to contemporary Western theatrical practice. It is hard for us to think how we could appreciate theater without seeing the details of facial expressions (even more so now when the cinematic close-up enlarges faces to gigantic proportions). But remember that this was a vast, open-air theater and most of the thousands of spectators would have been distant from the scene. It has been argued that the point of the mask was to present the character in the context of a role, not a specific individual, a creature from the distant past, not the present (Taplin: 14). However, at the same time this generality must have clashed with the verbal individuality of the characters (think of Clytemnestra, Electra, Creon, or Helen). In this sense, the mask represented a role that collided with the living language and voice of the actor who spoke the part.

To illustrate the power of Greek tragedy in its own time, we can try to visualize a performance of Euripides' *Bacchae*, a play that is brilliantly self-conscious of its status as theater. *The Bacchae* was Euripides' last play, performed after the poet's death in 404 BCE, when Athens was in the final throes of the Peloponnesian War. It presents the agonizing story of the death of Pentheus, murdered by women – and his own mother – driven mad by Dionysus, who has returned home to Thebes to avenge the city's impiety and make the people believe in his divinity.

The first to speak is the god of theater himself, Dionysus, who enters announcing that the place is Thebes, and that he is a god who has taken on human form to prove that he is a god. The spectators are faced immediately with a paradox: what does it mean to have an *actor* declare that he will convince his audience that he is in fact not what he appears but rather divine and all-powerful? We cannot know exactly what Dionysus' mask looked like, although we can assume that it was as an effeminate man with a curled wig attached, figuring the role that the god played in presenting himself to the others as a priest of Dionysus. The mask must have had a double value: it represented an actor who played a god masked as a human. The mask thus directly challenged the audience's belief in everything it witnessed.