

Greek Tragedy

Week One

Friday 14 February 2020

Greek Tragedy


The course will start by looking at the development of early drama, with an introduction to Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. We shall consider Aristotle's analysis of tragedy and several stories from Greek tragedy. This session will include a synopsis of *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound* and some more in-depth reading of extracts (in English).



Greek Tragedy

Week one: What is tragedy?

A true classical tragedy (according to Aristotle) is the story of a great hero brought down low. This process involves catharsis, the release of emotions in the audience, principally pity and fear.



Greek
Tragedy


**How is great tragedy
distinctive from the
“merely” tragic?**



Greek Tragedy


Aeschylus is the earliest of the great fifth century playwrights, and he won his first prize for drama in 484.

A man of his times, he fought at the Battle of Marathon (490) and probably at the Battle of Salamis (480), on both of which occasions the combined forces of the Greeks defeated the Persians.




Greek Tragedy

Sophocles competed with Aeschylus in 468 BCE; Sophocles was still producing his plays at the Dionysia (drama festival) of 406, and outlived (just) Euripides. Again, he was fully involved in the events of the day: he was a general alongside Pericles in 441/440 at Samos.



Greek Tragedy

About ten years younger than Sophocles, **Euripides** is credited with being the great innovator of Greek Tragedy. He won fewer victories at the Dionysia than the two older dramatists, but composed some 90 plays, and more of them survive than the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles.



Greek Tragedy

We shall look at *Medea* (431), *Hippolytus* (428) and *Bacchae* (407). Very often Euripides's plays have a woman at their centre, as victim or avenger. The role of the chorus in his later plays becomes increasingly minor. (In Aeschylus's plays the Chorus has the majority of the speeches.)



Greek Tragedy

Development:

How many actors?

Chorus

Protagonist

Deuteragonist


Tritagonist



Greek Tragedy


Context

The three tragedians lived through the most exciting (and best documented) century in ancient Greek history. The end of this very rich period of Greek culture, of which tragedy was only a part, coincided (unsurprisingly) with the fall of Athens as a democracy and the defeat of the Athenians by the Spartans at the end of the fifth century (second Peloponnesian War).




Greek Tragedy

This golden age, or classical period, was never repeated in Greece, but it was analysed during the next century (arguably the age of Greek philosophy) by Aristotle. In his *Poetics* Aristotle tried to formalise the workings of tragedy and laid down rules or precepts for “what worked”.



Greek Tragedy


These have been followed to a lesser or greater extent by subsequent generations, but Aristotle was writing retrospectively rather than setting out a recipe for future playwrights to follow. Some critics of Aristotle say that his “recipe” works only for Sophocles!



Greek Tragedy


The Dramatic Unities

One of Aristotle's dramatic "precepts" was that tragic drama should observe the three "unities": unity of time; unity of place; unity of theme.

- **Time:** the action of the play is almost in real time – it all happens in one day;
 - **Place:** there is no change of scene; it all happens in one place, with acts of violence (often very horrible) taking place off-stage.
 - **Theme:** there is only one plot in each play
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Greek Tragedy

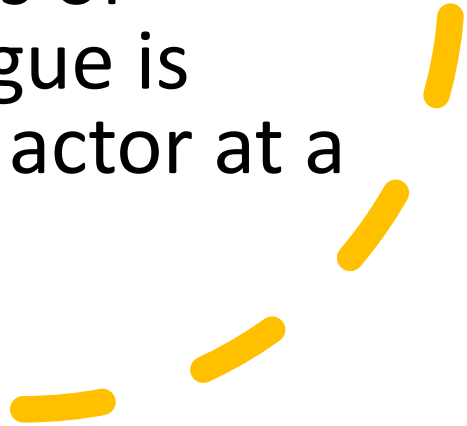
The beginnings of all literature are in verse. Epic poetry is the earliest form of European literature, as seen in the works of Homer. Drama grew out of the recital of verse, probably with one member of the chorus taking a lead, and then beginning a dialogue with the rest of the chorus, perhaps commenting on the narrative.



Greek Tragedy

The conflict and clash of drama which we recognise as the core of modern drama is not so obvious in the earliest tragedies. *Stichomythia* is sparse in the plays of Aeschylus, even when conflict is fundamental.


For the most part, in the plays of Aeschylus the dramatic dialogue is between the chorus and one actor at a time.



Greek Tragedy

Aeschylus's trilogy of plays, known as the *Oresteia*, is the most well preserved of his works, and we shall look at the first of these plays, the *Agamemnon* (produced at Athens in 458 BCE) today.

Prometheus Bound was one of his later works and was probably produced only after his death. Some suggest that it was not by Aeschylus at all.




Greek
Tragedy

Prometheus
Bound

Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*

The play is composed almost entirely of speeches and contains little action since its protagonist is chained and cannot move. At the beginning, Kratos (Strength), Bia (violence), and the smith-god Hephaestus chain the Titan Prometheus to a mountain in the Caucasus, with Hephaestus alone expressing reluctance and pity, and then departing.



Greek Tragedy

Prometheus is being punished not only for stealing fire to give to mortals, but also for thwarting Zeus's plan to destroy the human race. A chorus of Ocean nymphs appear and attempt to comfort Prometheus by conversing with him. Prometheus tells them that he knows of a potential marriage that would lead to Zeus's downfall.



Greek Tragedy

Oceanus, the Titan father of the Oceanids, urges Prometheus to make peace with Zeus. Prometheus tells the chorus that fire for the use of mankind was not his only gift; in the so-called Catalogue of the Arts (lines 447-506), he reveals that he taught men all the arts, such as writing, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, etc.




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Prometheus is then visited by Io, a human girl, who is trying to escape the attentions of Zeus. (Zeus had turned Io into a cow, and a gadfly sent by Zeus's wife Hera is chasing Io and sending her mad.)




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Prometheus tells her that Zeus will eventually end her torment in Egypt, where she will bear a son named Epaphus. He says one of her descendants (an unnamed Heracles), thirteen generations later, will release Prometheus from his own torment.



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- Finally, Hermes the messenger-god is sent down by an angry Zeus to demand that Prometheus tell him who threatens to overthrow him. Prometheus refuses, and Zeus strikes him with a thunderbolt that plunges Prometheus into the abyss. So ends the play.
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Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*

There is plenty of action in this play: two people are killed, one of them Agamemnon, the king. The other is Priam's daughter, Cassandra. All the violence takes place off stage (because it is "obscene").

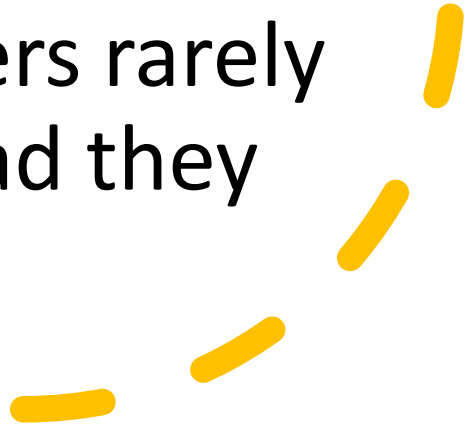


Greek Tragedy

Aeschylus's Agamemnon

Aristotle would have recognised this play as a fine example of a tragedy. Agamemnon is the tragic hero. There is pity, fear and horror galore.


Still, however, the characters rarely speak to each other; instead they converse with the chorus.



Greek Tragedy

Aeschylus's Agamemnon

The people of Argos have been awaiting their king's return from the Trojan War for ten years. A constant watch is being kept for the arrival of Agamemnon, the Greeks' Commander in Chief, who led the Greek forces in pursuit of Helen, his brother's wife, who ran off with Paris, prince of Troy.



Greek Tragedy

The guard speaks:

Gods in heaven

*- you have seen me watching here from this tower
for more than a year,
stuck to the roof of this building
like a guard dog.....*

*I have stared long enough into this darkness for
something that never comes.....*

*I am sick of this darkness, sick of the heavens,
waiting for that one light that never comes.....*



Greek Tragedy

*Perhaps it will never come, that victory
light, the beacon flare that leaps from
peak to peak bringing the news from
Troy,*

“Victory, victory after 10 years”.

The one word Clytemnestra prays for.



Greek Tragedy

*Queen Clytemnestra- who wears
a man's heart in a woman's body,
a man's dreadful will in the
scabbard of her body like a
polished blade. A hidden blade.
Clytemnestra reigns over fear.*



Greek
Tragedy

*Everything's changed in this palace.
The old days, the rightful king,
order, safety, splendour, a splendour
that lifted the heart – all gone.*

You gods, release me.

*Let that flame come leaping out of
the East*

To release me.



Greek Tragedy

*Where did that light come from? In pitch darkness
That point – that's new.*

*It's the right place! It just appeared.
And it's getting bigger. A fire!
The beacon!
Tell the queen –
It's the beacon.....*

*Troy has fallen.
The king is coming home.*



Greek Tragedy

Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* cont.

At last, the very morning when this play opens, the flames of a series of beacons announce the arrival of the king.

We are told by the chorus of the sacrifice Agamemnon made of his own daughter, Iphigenia, at Tauris, when the Greek fleet was becalmed.



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The chorus is given the bulk of the words in this play, and they recognise Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's queen, as speaking like a man. She welcomes her husband with flattering words, even though he has brought his new mistress, Cassandra, home with him. The queen ushers them in to be bathed after their long journey.



Greek Tragedy

Cassandra delays her entrance to the family home for some time, while she reveals a prophecy to the Chorus that both she and Agamemnon will be butchered by Clytemnestra, who in turn will be killed by her son, Orestes, as part of the curse of the House of Atreus.

She enters the house, screaming that she can smell blood.

The chorus debates what they should do next.



Greek Tragedy


The bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra are revealed, as Clytemnestra triumphs in her revenge for her daughter. Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's lover, also emerges and gives more background to the curse, while also threatening the Chorus with violence. Clytemnestra decrees that the curse is done and the violence is at an end.



Greek Tragedy

Clytemnestra:

If I was treacherous,
When Agamemnon cursed this house
afresh
Painted the walls with a fresh cast of curse
By killing his own daughter,
His treachery was worse.
While I wept myself blind
He closed his eyes.
And the sword he brought down
On the nape of her neck
Severed his own backbone.



Greek Tragedy

Chorus:

*Where is the right or wrong
In this nightmare?*

*Each becomes the ghost of the
other.*

Each is driven mad

By the ghost of the other.



Greek Tragedy

Clytemnestra:

I killed him.

I'll bury him.

There will be no fuss.

No futile, pompous display.

A quiet affair –

And Iphigenia, his beloved daughter

Who died a mere girl,

Will welcome him

To the land of the dead

With a silent kiss.



Greek Tragedy

Chorus:

*Revenge begets revenge,
Truth spins and evaporates
As blood drains from the head.
It is the law of Zeus:
A life for a life.....
But this law of Zeus
Is a kind of disease
Inherited through the blood.
See how it has crazed
Every member of this house.*



Greek Tragedy

Clytemnestra:

The killing is over

Having heard Cassandra's prophecy, we know differently.....



Greek Tragedy

Bibliography and further reading

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