

## Greek Tragedy

A general interest in literature and history are the only requirements for this course, which will take place over three two-hour sessions:

1. 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 *Prometheus Bound* and some more in-depth reading of extracts (in English).
2. The second session will begin with an examination of the historical context in which Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were writing (5th century BCE) followed by some exploration of passages from *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* in English, as well as from Euripides' *Hippolytus*. We shall also look at the role of women in Greek society as reflected in Greek tragedy.
3. The third session will include an exploration of Euripides' *Medea* and *Bacchae*, with particular reference to the concept of the tragic hero. We shall also look at the role of the foreigner in Athenian society as reflected in their drama. We shall finish with a discussion of the legacy of Greek tragedy and its influence on European dramatists like Racine, Marlowe and Shakespeare, etc.

### 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. The most famous of Classical Greek tragedies were written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in the fifth century BCE (and, generally between 490 and 405 BCE). Mostly they involve characters from Greek myth seen at a time of crisis.

**Aeschylus** is the earliest of these playwrights, and he began his writing in the early fifth century, winning 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. *Prometheus Bound*, the synopsis of which is below, was one of his later works and was probably produced only after his death.

The works of **Sophocles** overlap in date with the last works of Aeschylus, and he 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 during the siege of Samos. The politics and events he lived through inspired the themes of his plays, though the plots and characters were drawn from myth.

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. 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.

The three tragedians lived through the most exciting (because 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).

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". 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!

### **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

## **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.

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.

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.

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 her and sending Io mad.) 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.

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.