

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.

Greek Tragedy 3: The Tragic Hero and the tragic "flaw" ("hamartia")

There is a great deal of academic discussion about what is meant by the Greek word "hamartia". It can mean mistake, and it would certainly be true that Oedipus's downfall arose because of a fundamental mistake he made (mistakenly marrying his mother after unwittingly killing his father).

"Hamartia" has also been interpreted as a flaw in character and, certainly, Oedipus's willingness to act aggressively on impulse (as seen in his reactions to Creon, Teiresias and the messengers) have more than a little to do with his tragedy.

It is therefore safer to consider "hamartia" as a combination of mistake and character flaw, with the balance differing from character to character, and from play to play. It would be glib, in the same way to put the tragedies of Shakespeare's heroes down to a simple character flaw (Lear: pride; Othello:

jealousy; Macbeth: ambition; Hamlet: paranoia). Shakespeare's characters are far more complex and contradictory than that, and so are the heroes of Greek tragedy.

Euripides' *Medea*

The play begins at the point where Medea, the "wife" of Jason (of Argonauts fame) has learned that he intends to put her aside in order to marry the daughter of the King of Corinth (another Creon). Medea does not take this news well. The chorus is a group of Corinthian women, who are at first sympathetic to and later appalled by Medea. Here we clearly see the essential helplessness of the chorus, who cannot interfere in the action.

Medea's plight is highlighted through a series of dialogues. King Creon orders her banishment, for he fears what this scorned, barbarian woman might do. Jason expresses incredulity at her reaction: he has brought her to live in a civilized country where she should rejoice in his new royal connections; instead her threats have resulted in her banishment; it is not his fault.

Having secured a place of refuge for the future with Aegisthus, the King of Athens, Medea persuades Jason that she will now go quietly. She is all repentance and asks if she may send a wedding gift to the bride. He agrees to this

Medea gets her two little boys to take a gift of wedding clothes to the princess. We later learn that the garments cling to the girl, burning her alive, and that her father is also killed by fire when he goes to her aid. Medea's act of vengeance is not yet complete: having weighed up whether it will hurt her or Jason more to carry out her next act, she errs on the side of vengeance and goes to murder her sons. Jason is distraught, as is she, but she is also triumphant and escapes, as a *dea ex machina*, on a winged chariot conveniently provided by her grandfather Helios, the Sun.

A woman and a foreigner

There are so many difficulties in this play. Medea does not fit the Aristotlean ideal of a tragic hero – and she gets away with it: she goes (child-free) to set up house with Aegisthus. Jason more readily fits the tragic mould, since, at the beginning of the play, he is about to become one of the most powerful in the land; he is also, by his own admission, a great hero. He does lose everything of value to him by the end of the play and is in an agony of grief. Jason, however,

is not at the centre of this play. Medea, a woman and a foreigner is in the central role – and she lives to fight another day.

Medea is called misogynistic and feminist by different modern commentators. It is interesting to consider how an Athenian audience would have considered the character of Medea. (They tended to mistrust foreigners, especially from the East.)

Euripides seems to be teaching that humans should have their lives in balance. They should not give in to monstrous jealousy, rage or destruction, though destiny also plays a part in his characters' doom. In the next two plays he adds to this idea of balance the proposal that men (and women) should lead a full, balanced life, enjoying physical as well as spiritual (or religious) experiences.

Hippolytus

The *Hippolytus* was produced not long after *The Medea*, in the late 430s, at the time when Athens was engaged in war with the Peloponnesians.

Hippolytus is the illegitimate son of Theseus from his union with Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. This young man, who is very handsome, has dedicated himself to chastity and is very proud of his virginity. At the beginning of the play Aphrodite, the goddess of Love, complains that Hippolytus does not give her due respect: he is wholly devoted to Artemis, the goddess of chastity. Thwarted by Hippolytus's lack of sexual appetite, Aphrodite casts a spell on Theseus's wife Phaedra and causes her to fall madly in love with her stepson.

While Theseus is away from home, Phaedra's nurse gives Hippolytus a message from Phaedra, declaring her love for him. Hippolytus is disgusted and rejects her in no uncertain terms.

Phaedra is so embarrassed and humiliated that she kills herself, leaving a note for her husband to say that she was violated by Hippolytus and could not live with the shame of it. Without waiting to hear Hippolytus's side of the story, Theseus wreaks vengeance by calling on his father to send a sea monster to kill his son.

Too late, Theseus realises his mistake, as Hippolytus dies in his arms. Artemis appears and promises Hippolytus a cult in his name dedicated to her. She is philosophical about his death but departs before she is tainted by it.

The Bacchae

In spurning physical love – and therefore, of course, the means of procreating further citizens (of great concern to the Athenians) – Hippolytus is punished by the goddess who personifies physical love. In this next play the god Dionysus (Bacchus) wreaks revenge on his mother's family, especially punishing King Pentheus for refusing to recognise the cult of Dionysus (he claims to be above such things). Pentheus is destroyed as a result and in the most horrible way: he is slaughtered by his own mother who, in a Bacchic frenzy, believes she has killed a mountain lion. It is only after returning to the city, carrying the head of her victim, that she realises that she is holding the severed head of her own son. Her gradual recognition of what she has done is horrific.

In this most bizarre of plays, Dionysus assumes human form to test his mother's relatives. (She had been mocked and spurned by them for claiming that her lover was Zeus himself.) He persuades Pentheus to enter the forest and climb a tree from which he may be able to see the (suitably lurid) dancing of the Bacchae (female worshippers of Dionysus). Pentheus betrays his own virtuous puritanism by giving way to prurience: he can't wait to see the dancers, and Dionysus is scathing about his hypocrisy. In the midst of their frenzied dance, Dionysus allows the Bacchae to spot Pentheus in his tree, though they mistake him for a mountain lion. They tear Pentheus apart.

Pentheus's grandfather Cadmus (who is also Dionysus's grandfather on his mother's side) is left grieving and bereft. The family has been well and truly punished, and Dionysus philosophises on the advisability of humans giving in to their wilder side sometimes – and in moderation.

The theme and plot of the *Bacchae* have been adopted by many later writers. Joe Orton set the play in a British holiday camp in the 60s; it was produced by the RSC at the Royal Court in 1966. Wole Soyinka adapted the play with a second chorus, to represent the unrest in his native Nigeria in 1973. More recently the original Euripidean version (in English translation) proved very popular when it toured the UK, with Alan Cummings as Dionysus.

Bibliography and further reading

Alcestis and other plays, translated by Philip Vellacott Penguin 1953

The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy, ed. P.E Easterling CUP 1997

Greek Tragedy by H.D.F. Kitto, University Paperbacks 1966 (first pub.1939)

Greek Tragedy, themes and contexts by Laura Swift, Bloomsbury 2016

Tragedy, the Greeks and Us by Simon Critchley, Profile Books 2019