

# Greek Tragedy

## Sheet 1: Greek Tragedy in its context

**Relevant Syllabuses:** SQA Classical Studies Higher: 'Social Aspects of the Classical World: Classical Drama'; AQA Classical Civilization A2 Level: 'Greek Tragedy'; Cambridge International Classical Civilization AS and A Level: 'Drama: the idea of tragedy'; OCR AS and A Level: 'Greek Tragedy in its Context'.

### The City/Great Dionysia

Tragedy was produced and performed at number of Dionysian festivals in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. But the biggest and most prestigious dramatic festival was the 'City' or 'Great' Dionysia. This was an annual religious festival in honour of the god Dionysus. Although the origin of the festival was certainly religious, recent scholarship has shown that the festival was also a very *civic* occasion by the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Evidence suggests that the festival took place in late March and was substantially expanded and reorganized under Pisistratus' tyranny in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The beginning of the official festival would have seen a suspension in city business, in the courts and the assembly. Leading up to the festival there were several religious ceremonies such as the *pompe* (procession) which was a procession of citizens to the precinct of Dionysus to perform sacrifices. There was also a competition of choral songs (dithyrambs) before the theatrical competitions. Several ceremonies took place before the start of the theatrical competitions most of which were performed by those holding civic office and the importance of these displays in relation to social and political aspects of the tragedies themselves has been examined (Hesk 2007, Goldhill 1987). These ceremonies included: a libation performed by the ten elected generals; a herald announcing the names of those citizens who had benefitted Athens who then received golden crowns; during the heyday of the Athenian empire, the tribute which the allies paid to Athens was brought onto the stage; orphaned youths whose fathers had died in battle were paraded in full military gear at state expense as a sort of rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. These ceremonies demonstrate that the festival had a very 'ideological', civic and military importance alongside their obvious function of celebrating and honouring Dionysus (Goldhill 1987).

Each tragic poet would usually produce a tetralogy consisting of three tragedies and a satyr play. They were adjudicated by judges who were appointed by lot before the competition. The audience would have been made up of most of the male population of Athens and Attica as well as the metics and many foreigners. The presence of women and children is disputed but there is a possibility that they were

allowed to attend. It is pretty clear that the *majority* of the audience were male citizens.

To fund the large cost involved in producing so many plays and the training and equipping of the chorus, the head archon in Athens (*archon eponymous*) appointed 'choregoi' who were wealthy Athenian citizens required to cover these costs at their own expense. Being a 'choregos' was one of the social duties (known as *leitourgia*) that any very wealthy Athenian could be required to perform along with the trierarchy (providing the costs for maintaining a warship) and the gymnasiarchy (providing the costs for training a team of athletes). When appointed as a 'choregos' the citizen would have to select a poet and organise the actors of the chorus and the music. The position of 'choregos' could often be used for political ends such as gaining greater popularity. (Wilson 2000; Hesk 2007).

## Tragedy and Dionysus

Tragedy was performed, then, at a religious festival in honour of the god Dionysus. But since tragic plots rarely directly focused on Dionysus – Euripides' *Bacchae* is unusual - modern readers have found it hard to understand why tragedy was appropriate for celebrating this god. Tragedy has famously become known for having 'nothing to do with Dionysus' but scholarship has always attempted to find out what was particularly 'Dionysiac' about tragedy.

There is not a lot of scholarly consensus on the issue of Dionysus' relation to theatre mainly because of the plurality of his nature. Dionysus was worshipped as god of many things ranging from food and wine, to madness, revelry, and mystery. How then is tragedy 'Dionysiac'? The origin of tragedy is largely unknown but it is believed to have grown out of ritual in honour of Dionysus. Friedrich argues that 'Dionysiac' worship may have been sufficiently complex that it acquired plots based on myths around Dionysus and then further developed to focus on other characters and myths, with Dionysus slipping out of the picture. For Friedrich, what was once ritual bound by certain constraints gradually threw them off and became dramatic art. Much like the festival as a whole, which had a religious framework but had become more and more a celebration of Athens, tragedy had evolved into something more secular (Friedrich 1996). Was this where the connection between Dionysus and tragedy ended? One scholar has argued that many tragic plots still contain elements of the 'Dionysiac' because they usually make clear that order is re-established in the *polis* after the chaos of kin-killing (Seaford 1996). Another scholar has argued that, since Dionysus is often associated with transgression and paradox, tragedy shows itself to be 'Dionysiac': it questions and challenges the *polis* ideology which had been celebrated in the civic ceremonies before the tragic competition (Goldhill 1987). Again, there is little consensus on any of these issues but these arguments at least demonstrate that tragedy, in the form that we have it in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, had ceased to have any *easily* identifiable connection with Dionysus. It functioned as civic entertainment but perhaps that entertainment also constituted an implicit

celebration and recognition of Dionysus' power, attributes and relationship to polis culture.

## Tragedy, Politics and Social issues

When examining the question of how *political* Greek Tragedy was, an answer depends on our interpretation of the term 'political'. Tragedy was not political in the sense that its goal was to promote policies and the political views of the poets. The fact that the plays are set in the mythical past and often outside Athens is testament to this. But to propose that tragedies, which often played out the endangerment and sometimes complete destruction of the *polis*, had no impact on the spectators and did not demonstrate and reinforce the importance of the correct management of the *polis* would be equally naive.

It is important to remember that before the tragic competition, the audience had been subject to ceremonies which amounted to a celebration of the political and military power of Athens. Moreover it was a celebration of the actions and achievements of individuals who had benefitted the state.

'The ceremonial and organisational frame of the festival constituted a celebration of collective will and its melding with competitive, honour-seeking behaviour of individuals. . . the plays themselves present a more troubled picture of the relationship between honour-loving heroic individuals and their communities. As a result the plays take on enhanced 'socio-political resonances'. (Hesk 2007: 73)

Tragedy can be political in a number of ways, then. Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and the *Oresteia* as whole have been taken to be political because of the establishment at the end of the trilogy of the Areopagus court in Athens by Athena. Orestes is put on trial here for the murder of his mother Clytemnestra in return for her murder of his father Agamemnon and is acquitted. Thus the cycle of violence ends with the establishment of a contemporary Athenian institution and the play triumphs the values of contemporary, democratic justice over the old heroic form of justice. Tragedy is also political in that a play will often stage a clash between religious authority and political authority. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon would rightly be angered that his decree was disobeyed because of his position of power in the *polis* but a refusal to acknowledge the 'unwritten laws' of the gods which Antigone speaks of (and Tiresias confirms) brings about the deaths of those closest to him, Haemon and Eurydice.

Tragic plays can also be viewed as political because of the importance they place on deliberation and decision-making. These were particularly salient in democratic Athens where the audience would have been the very men who made decisions of policy. Hesk shows how in a number of plays the tragic events occur because of the failure of the principal character to deliberate effectively. In Euripides' *Suppliants*, for example, the Athenian king Theseus must decide whether to accept the pleas of the Argive suppliants and, having initially dismissed them, listens to the counsel of his mother, Aethra, and changes his mind to the better course. The importance of

employing and listening to good counsel to take the best course in decisions which entail consequences is emphasised in tragedy (Hesk 2011).

Although most extant tragedies originated in Athens during the time of democracy, tragedy cannot be seen as championing this form of government. The tragedians do however take pains to show how the men of mythical Athens were privileged with greater free speech and subject to a fair king and fair laws. Indeed Edith Hall has shown that a number of tragedies made of point of characterizing Athens as the best city in Greece. For example, suppliants often find refuge in Athens. Oedipus and Heracles, two heroes polluted by their misfortunes, are welcomed by Theseus and Athens whereas they would have been rejected elsewhere. No disasters happen directly to the city of Athens in tragedy. Rather it is Argos and Thebes which are the sites of most tragic suffering and city-wide jeopardy. Athenian characters, particularly its ruler Theseus, are almost always characterised positively while tyrants are usually Theban (e.g. Creon, Pentheus) and other negative characters are barbarians (e.g. Medea). (Hall: 99) However, it must be restated that tragedy was not a political medium whereby tragic poets projected policies or explicit manifestos. As Jon Hesk points out, tragedy asked political questions more often than it answered them:

‘...if you want your Greek tragedy to be politically didactic for its original Athenian audience, you have to accept that its ‘lessons’ – if indeed they can be so simplistically described – took the form of open-ended social and ethical problems rather than pat solutions.’ (Hesk 2007: 75)

As well as being political, tragedies present suffering and death as the results of a wide variety of social issues which would have been relatable to the Athenian audience. With the partial exception of religious observance and festivals, public life was an entirely male-dominated area but these plays give a voice to women, slaves and people of every kind of class and station which normally wouldn't be heard. Plays often show the breakdown of the *oikos* (household), a most important institution to an Athenian citizen, since his success in public affairs and everyday life depended on the integrity of his *oikos*. Tragedy stages troublesome relationships within the *oikos* and poses questions about the relationship between young and old, slaves and master/mistress, woman and man. These confrontations will be examined in more detail in discussions of individual plays on other sheets.

## **Philosophical attitudes to Tragedy:**

### **Plato and Aristotle**

#### Plato

The philosophers Plato and Aristotle both developed theories about tragedy and its nature and were also interested in the effects which tragedies had on the audience.

Plato's *Republic* sets out to theorise the perfect state and tragedy is excluded from it. Plato believed that tragedy, and poetry in general, were damaging to the soul because they represented a false, pessimistic world-view. Such falsities, for example, were the fact that gods brought about evil. The goal of man, for a philosopher, was to achieve *eudaimonia* (happiness, prosperity) and Plato could not reconcile tragedy's constant display of suffering with this view. Plato recognised that poetry had a powerful, almost spell-binding, effect on its audience, and in the case of tragedy, that it aroused emotions which were damaging to the soul. By watching tragedy, people would become more susceptible to these emotions which were, in the ideal person, suppressed and controlled.

Stephen Halliwell summarises Plato's conception of, and objection to, tragedy in the following four ways:

- Tragedy represents a 'medium for a world-view or overarching sense of life'
- Tragedy is based on a 'restrictedly human, embodied perspective which excludes the truth of the divine'
- Tragedy expresses 'ultimate values and commitments' which are false
- Tragedy takes the view that death is 'something whose interpretation is central to the outlook of life' (Halliwell 1996)

Plato acknowledged that poetry and tragedy had a pleasurable effect on the audience but since they did not impart truth and often grave falsehoods, he was highly suspicious of them. This confirms that tragic poets were believed by many to be teachers of the people - the comic renditions of Aeschylus and Euripides agree with this assumption in Aristophanes *Frogs*. Plato would not have been so hostile towards tragedy and poetry if he did not believe his fellow men took tragedy to be authoritative and educative.

### Aristotle on tragic plot and characterisation

The other most influential discussion of tragedy is Aristotle's *Poetics*. This examines poetry and has a section on the nature of tragedy. Aristotle's *Poetics* is most influential for its analyses on the structure of tragic plots and character, as well as tragedy's function and effects on the audience. For Aristotle, tragedy was 'mimesis' (representation, imitation) of 'praxis' (action). He believed that tragedy resulted from human action and it is this which is his focus in the treatise rather than the pain and suffering itself. Aristotle did not object to tragedy like Plato but saw in it a genuine attempt by humans to understand happiness, success and failure. As Halliwell points out,

'Aristotle's view of action implies that the fabric of tragedy, or indeed all of poetry, is the representation of human purpose striving for realisation, and

therefore falls within the purview of practical or ethical philosophy.’ (Halliwell 1986: 141)

In Aristotle’s theory of tragedy, the plot holds the most important position. Plots in tragedy should be:

1) A whole body, with a beginning, middle and end where the actions of each are interconnected.

2) The plot should have ‘unity of action’; any action which occurs must occur out of probability or necessity within the world of the play. Aristotle condemns the use of irrational episodes such as ‘deus ex machina’. The best tragedy will occur unexpectedly but as a direct result of human action taken earlier in the play. Thus Oedipus, in *Oedipus the King*, gets closer to his tragedy with every action he takes, but he does not expect it.

3) The plot should be of a certain length and be serious in tone.

4) The plot should be either ‘simple’ or ‘complex’ but ‘complex’ is better. Simple plots will include a *metabasis* (change of fortune) but in complex plots the *metabasis* will occur through *peripeteia* (reversal) and *anagorisis*-recognition. *Peripeteia* occurs when a character produces an effect opposite to what he intended, and *anagorisis* when the character comes to know the full meaning of his action. Aristotle much admired *Oedipus the King* because the *peripeteia* and *anagorisis* of Oedipus occur at the same time.

The second most important part of tragedy is characterisation. Aristotle believed that characterisation should occur as a result of the action taken and ethical choices made by a character.

‘...Characterisation, to correspond to Aristotle’s concept must involve the manifestation of moral choice in word or action; if this is lacking, then characterisation cannot properly be predicated of the play.’ (Halliwell 1986: 151-2)

Stephen Halliwell identifies four key concepts in Aristotle’s theory of character in *Poetics* 15:

- Goodness or excellence- a character must conform to moral standards and have good moral intentions. This arises from the fact that suffering of a character should be undeserved.
- Appropriateness- a character’s values and behaviour should reflect those expected according to sex, social status, age etc.
- ‘Likeness’ a character should be such that the audience can relate to him or her.
- Consistency-To ensure the unity of action, characterisation should be consistent. After being characterised in a certain way, a character should not then be characterised completely differently in subsequent actions. (Halliwell 1986: 158-162)

## Hamartia

Two terms important to the understanding Aristotle's theory of tragedy are *hamartia* (sometimes translated as 'error', sometimes as 'flaw' or at other times as 'mistake') and *katharsis* ('purification', 'cleansing', 'purging'...all translations are partial towards a particular interpretation of the term). Determining exactly what Aristotle meant by these terms has been difficult and has prompted much discussion.

To make these terms clearer and more understandable, the arguments of Stephen Halliwell will be referred to. In the *Poetics* Aristotle argues that in the ideal tragedy the *metabasis* ('change in fortune') will occur as a result of *peripeteia* ('reversal') and *anagorisis* ('recognition') through a *hamartia*. Stephen Halliwell has argued that the confusion caused by such a term has resulted 'from the assumption that *hamartia* is a self-contained or technical doctrine, a unique Aristotelian perception placed at the centre of the treatise.' (Halliwell: 215) Instead, Halliwell has argued that *hamartia* is what reconciles the paradox in Aristotle's theory of tragedy that on the one hand a character should remain morally innocent in the light of his reversal of fortune but on the other hand the reversal must be intelligible from his own actions.

'The effect of the direction of thought in ch.13 [of the *Poetics*] is gradually to narrow down the circle which delimits the area of tragic possibility where essential moral innocence coexists with *active* causal implication in the suffering which is the upshot of the plot. It is, so to speak, somewhere in the space between moral guilt and vulnerability to arbitrary misfortune that *hamartia* ought to be located.' (Halliwell 1986: 220)

The *hamartia*, then, resides with the character who causes the tragedy but it is not a moral defect. It is rather a failing to understand the true nature of an action which is often the *hamartia*.

## Katharsis and the emotions

Although the primary focus of Aristotle's treatise is the structure of the action, he does offer an insight into what the effect of tragedy on the audience should be. He says that tragedy should arouse 'pity and fear to accomplish the *katharsis* of such emotions.' The interpretation of this term has again caused much trouble because of its wide application in the Greek language. It means 'purgation' or 'purification' and has been used with regards to purification of the body from physical illness, cleansing or purification of pollution of a religious site, or purification of the soul. Again, Stephen Halliwell has attempted to shed light on this term, arguing that Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, did not believe that the emotions were separate from the rest of the mind.

'It is of the highest significance for the understanding of the *Poetics* to give full weight to Aristotle's refusal to follow Plato in largely severing the emotions

from the other faculties of the mind. Pity and fear (though, of course, not these alone) are to be regarded not as uncontrollable instincts or forces, but as responses to reality which are possible for a mind in which thought and emotion are integrated and interdependent.’ (Halliwell: 173)

Halliwell argues that, in Aristotle’s theory, the emotional responses of pity and fear are a natural reaction to the plot of tragedy, where a character suffers from his action though his innocence is still intact. In short, the emotional response is a consequence of understanding the complex tragic plot and not an impulse brought on at the sight of suffering. Therefore, Halliwell has seen in tragic *katharsis* not an indication of the belief that tragedy allows the audience to ‘purge’ themselves of their emotions like pollution or disease, which is the belief of many, but ‘harmonisation’ between the emotions and rational thought.

‘...tragic *katharsis* in some way conduces to an ethical alignment between the emotions and the reason: because tragedy arouses pity and fear by appropriate means, it does not, as Plato alleged, “water” or feed the emotions but tends to harmonise them with our perceptions and judgements of the world. (Halliwell 1986: 201)

The vagueness of Aristotle’s statement makes it plausibly interpretable in a number of ways. What is generally agreed is that it amounts to a defence of tragedy against Plato. Whereas Plato believed tragedy’s tendency to arouse to the emotions was harmful, Aristotle argues that the emotions are improved and used in the right way through the understanding of a complex tragic plot of action and character.

## Further Questions

This sheet has introduced students to a number of important contextual frameworks for understanding Greek tragedy: the civic-military-religious ceremonies and rituals that surrounded the performance of tragedy at the City/Great Dionysia; the very fact that tragedy seems to have a relationship with the worship of Dionysus; the social and political circumstances of the plays’ producers, funders and audience; the near-contemporary philosophical responses of Plato and Aristotle. Students can pick one or two of these headings and think about how useful (or not) the details and analysis under each heading might be for understanding and interpreting their set plays.

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