

## **If we can only appreciate tragedy through its performance, can we ever appreciate classical Greek tragedy fully?**

Living in a society over 2500 years after the performance of the first Greek Tragedies, at first, the idea of tragedy seems to be inaccessible; our lack of information concerning the original performance style ensures that the modern performer often has free artistic licence to interpret original texts – not by choice, but as a direct result of this lack of knowledge. Yet the fourth-century poet Antiphanes' words, "the stories are all well-known to audiences before anyone opens his mouth", imply that the widespread knowledge of tragedy is enough to show how an entire nation appreciated tragedy, some of whom would never have seen the plays being performed; therefore appreciation is not solely gained through performance. The themes of tragedy transcend the era they were composed in and are constantly recycled into new vessels of meaning, producing "unexpected echoes in popular culture", reflecting this deep-rooted significance of Greek tragedy in societies spanning over centuries.<sup>1</sup> However, it is possible to appreciate tragedy fully by reinterpreting it from a modern perspective to make "the play matter to today's audience in the way that it mattered to the original audience".<sup>2</sup>

Our main limitation in the full appreciation of Greek tragedy is our inability to be present at the original performances; the closest we can come to appreciating the plays is to find out how they were originally produced and attempt to reproduce them as best as we can, through analysis of three main types of primary sources. Firstly, physical artefacts including masks, pottery and frescoes give a detailed insight into performance. For example, take the description of an Apulian bell-krater by the Tarporley Painter (Figure 1) that depicts "three chorus men for a satyr play (an "ancient Greek drama that preserves the structure of tragedy while adopting a happy atmosphere"), two of the men hold their masks while the third begins to dance".<sup>3</sup> This provides strong evidence of the specific details of costume and theatrical nature of tragedy.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in the Salon of the Muses in the Pio-Clementine Museum, mosaics are found illustrating 22 figures performing tragedy, so accurate that hence we may reproduce the costume of an actor "as accurately as if he were before us on the stage".<sup>5</sup> Due to the lack of physical remains of clothing, these artefacts become evidence of the utmost importance when dealing with the reconstruction of costuming and performance standards.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, historians and scholars provide invaluable explanations of the structure of Greek tragedy. The most famous is Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he summarises developments in the performance of tragedy, such as Aeschylus' addition of the second actor and Sophocles' introduction of scene painting, which help us to conceptualise the performances.

Finally and most significantly, we have the texts of tragedies themselves, of which there are thirty full plays, from the three most famous Greek Tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. A collection of their most important plays was produced for the Library of

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<sup>1</sup> Rutherford, 2013, p.1

<sup>2</sup> Hardwick, 2009, p.2

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/satyr-play> , 2016

<sup>4</sup> Bolin and Corthell, 1996

<sup>5</sup> Bates, 1906

<sup>6</sup> Powers, 2014

Alexandria in the third century BC, which was then continually copied by scholars afterwards, who paved the way for medieval manuscripts to be transcribed. Although we are incredibly fortunate to have such important texts, they are useful in providing a logistical approach rather than conveying the manner of performance required of the actors, due to the absence of stage directions within the texts themselves. Also, if one was to stick strictly to the Athenian performance using masks, the acting style would have to contrast the modern “realistic” style of acting, with significant use of facial expressions, whereas an original masked actor communicates “by voice and stylized body gesture” which a contemporary audience might find harder to appreciate.<sup>7</sup> The only constant in all tragedy, the Chorus, uses choreography and integrated music which is challenging to replicate. It is a futile endeavour to appreciate tragedy through modern performance and to retain all the same aspects of the original performance; limited information means that we will always fall short and never truly replicate the style of production. Greek producer Socrates Carantinos states “instead of dragging the Ancients down to our own level, let us wake up and go out to meet them”; this implies that by utilising “passive” modern interpretations, we are ignoring the authentic experience of Greek tragedy and are not actively appreciating the original form.<sup>8</sup> However, a “play is unproducible unless adapted for modern audiences”, creating a paradoxical state of production which implies that we can never fully appreciate Greek tragedy through performance since we cannot reproduce them exactly as they were performed.<sup>9</sup>

There is a certain contextual background required to fully appreciate Greek tragedy. As opposed to today, when theatre-going is a regular form of entertainment, from an academic and leisurely point of view, the original performances of tragedy in Athens were a principal aspect of the annual spring festival dedicated to Dionysus, the patron of theatre. Although very little is known regarding the specific origins of tragedy, the vast majority of information we have stems from the Great Dionysia festival.<sup>10</sup> The title “Tragedy” is thought to come from a ritual performed to worship Dionysus, called the *trag-ōdia*, or “goat song”, which is a reference to the goat-like appearance of satyrs who venerated the god and the goats they sacrificed.<sup>11</sup> Visitors from all over Greece came to this esteemed event, to amphitheatres holding 10,000 to 20,000 people.<sup>12</sup> This religious background is something which a modern audience would never be able to relate to; therefore it would not appreciate the sanctity of tragedy, especially with the idea of modern Hellenism being largely neglected. Furthermore, there would have been allusions to other plays, poetry or performance styles of which we have no record and therefore cannot appreciate.<sup>13</sup>

However even in the centuries following the first performances we can observe changes in how the Ancient Greeks appreciated Greek tragedy. For example, audiences disapproved of Euripides’ tragedies, due to his tendency to modernise characters, making heroes “less

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<sup>7</sup> Grene, Lattimore et al., 2013, p.8

<sup>8</sup> Brockett, 1961, p.318

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Sowerby, 2015, p.78

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.77

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppacorino/INTRO\\_TEXT/Chapter%20%20GREEKS/Greek\\_Theatre.htm](https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppacorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%20%20GREEKS/Greek_Theatre.htm)

<sup>13</sup> Hardwick, 2009, p.1

heroic” and represent the “passions of women” and “recent developments in philosophy and music” in greater detail than any playwright beforehand.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, “it was above all in schools that Euripides became the most important author of tragedies” as children read and analysed his work – the superlative strongly shows how the Greeks then encouraged academic appreciation.<sup>15</sup> The improved opinion on Euripides shows that appreciation alters as time goes on because audiences and societies are constantly evolving. Apart from appreciation through the reading of texts, for centuries after the original performances, plays have been reinterpreted through different media. This ranges from the earlier reworking of tragedy by Romans (such as Seneca’s and Ovid’s versions of *Medea*) to recent operas, poetry, artwork and dance-dramas, displaying tragedy’s appreciation through other means, not just performance.

To prove that it is possible to appreciate Greek tragedy fully, let us refer back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In this Aristotle defines tragedy as an imitation, or *mimesis*, of “an action that is serious and also as having magnitude.”<sup>16</sup> He also adds that tragedy is a form of drama presenting “incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to interpret its *catharsis* of such emotions”.<sup>17</sup> Since these serious actions are carried out in the play by individuals used to convey a message on how people act within a world plagued with many adversities, it can be inferred that tragedy is *mimetic* of society and how it acts as a whole when pushed to its limits. Nowadays the noun as a concept has adopted pejorative connotations: it is defined as “a sad event, especially one that involves death”.<sup>18</sup> This definition identifies the presence of sorrow, which tragedy accommodates more than any other literary form. Death, loss of love, pride, war, and abuse of power were common themes which reflected the tumultuous society of Ancient Greece. It is interesting to note that these themes are still relevant today: “We live in a cataclysmic age, our world increasingly torn by war, sectarian violence, terrorism, and environmental disaster.”<sup>19</sup> Bryan Doerries said this just five years ago, proving that the struggles of Athenian Society are not only similar to but mirror ours.

He argues that now Greek tragedy is needed to “help us face the darkest aspects of our humanity”.<sup>20</sup> A key example of this is in 2008 when, after a performance of Sophocles’ *Ajax*, concerning the burden of life after war, “a military spouse said, “My husband went away four times to war, and each time he returned, like *Ajax*, dragging invisible bodies into our house. The war came home with him.””<sup>21</sup> This powerful and moving statement clearly shows how the themes of suffering transcend the fifth century and are now more relevant than ever, and confirms that we can appreciate Greek tragedy fully since suffering has been the one constant across the centuries. Aristotle’s idea of *catharsis*, “a purging of the pity and fear aroused by the tragic action”, is seen in this instance.<sup>22</sup> The idea of going to cinemas to watch the latest

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<sup>14</sup> Grene, Lattimore et al., 2013, pp. 1-2

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.2

<sup>16</sup> <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/film-and-lit/tragedy-hnd.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, 2020

<sup>19</sup> Doerries, 2015

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/film-and-lit/tragedy-hnd.pdf>

romantic comedy and crying to cleanse your emotional system stems from *catharsis*, and since we have proof that tragedy incites such an intense emotional response due to relatability to the tragic protagonist's *peripeteia*, or shift of good to bad fortune, we can conclude that we can fully appreciate Greek tragedy.

Furthermore, David Greig's "*Bacchae*" at the 2007 Edinburgh festival provides more ironic evidence as to the transferable nature of the themes of tragedy. Spectators commented that "the ending was too modern", thinking that it was "some kind of dubious 'post-modern addition'", when in fact Greig "followed the Greek quite closely".<sup>23</sup> This humorous account therefore distinctly shows how the modern audience can appreciate Greek tragedy since they are unable to distinguish between contemporary and ancient ideas of suffering; this is because they are the same.

Another key aspect of Greek tragedy which resonates with us is Aristotle's idea of *hamartia*, the fatal flaw which leads to a tragic hero's downfall. He argues that the hero should not be virtuous, because *catharsis* and true appreciation of the tragedy stems from "fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves", not a perfect archetype no one can relate to.<sup>24</sup> One reason as to why modern audiences appreciate Greek tragedy is because the reality that other entertainment forms skirt around is that we as humans are not perfect and are all plagued by hubris and spite. The realistic portrayal of *hamartia* is especially significant for women: the tendency to over-sexualise and objectify women in contemporary drama to an audience of voyeurs has damaged women's sense of identity. Although "the great flaw of modern plays is they try to make women nice", tragedy embraces women's inner *hamartia*: "these women are terrible, and have the courage of their horror."<sup>25</sup> This is pushed to the extreme, as tragedy presents murderous, cunning, and terrifying women, reflecting their flaws.

As well as refraining from attempting to ameliorate women's characters, this portrayal can be interpreted as being a reflection of women's struggles in Ancient Greece. Euripides' *Medea* persuasively summarises feelings of oppression at the patriarchy's hand in her most famous speech, sometimes called a rhetorical argument on Euripides' part: "We women are the most beset by trials / of any species that has breath and power of thought".<sup>26</sup> Euripides describes how women are forced to accept men as masters of their bodies, which predicts a scarily accurate portrayal of how some women are forced to live in the twenty-first century. These words, scorned by the original Athenian audience, were so fully appreciated by modern audiences that they were transformed into a translation "so politically powerful that it became one of a number of iconic texts adapted for recital at suffrage meetings".<sup>27</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst comments on the relevance of *Medea* in "The Suffragette Movement": "the moral of the stories is clear: it is the failure of men which forced these women to act and by acting empower themselves".<sup>28</sup> This directly mirrors the actions of the Suffragettes which at the time seemed just as radical as *Medea*'s. She also defines herself as "foreign", which

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<sup>23</sup> Hardwick, 2009, p.1

<sup>24</sup> Hays, 2018

<sup>25</sup> Foley, 1999, p.4

<sup>26</sup> Grene, Lattimore et al., 2013, p.82

<sup>27</sup> Wilkinson, n.d.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

effectively “Others” her and isolates her even further based on her heritage. The fact that the modern audience and readers of tragedy are much more diverse in both gender and culture means that they can now identify with the tragedy more than a privileged, white, and entirely male original audience could ever hope to. Therefore to a certain extent, a modern audience can appreciate Greek tragedy and its themes more than ever before.

But if we can only appreciate Greek tragedy fully through its performance, we can use this thematic appreciation, so that although we cannot exactly reproduce the tragedies physically, it can be made possible to emulate the same emotional effect on the audience in modern adaptations. Our relatability to tragedy is materialised in the plethora of modern interpretations that rework the original texts to reflect how a modern audience appreciates it. Our school recently put on a production of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, whose message was made stronger by the fact that, contrary to the original all-male cast, it was performed by an all-female cast. Since the play explores in great depth the struggles of women in society and idolises a heroine who is unafraid to break the law to pursue what is morally right despite her lower place in society, this tragedy was incredibly poignant to all cast members, many of whom even shed tears on stage in *Antigone*’s final goodbye to the world, in a shared moment of pure *catharsis* of the cast. It was a powerful way of reclaiming the female narrative, since none of the males in the original performance, whether actor or spectator, would ever have been able to identify with and therefore appreciate Greek tragedy as fully as women today would. Therefore by adapting tragedy to fit the lens of a modern viewer and ensure that the same level of *catharsis* is attained, a modern audience can fully appreciate Greek tragedy.

To conclude, our journey to fully appreciate Greek tragedy is ridden with immeasurable hindrances: we will never be able to reproduce the original Athenian-style performance. However, due to parallels between the struggles of the modern-day and the fifth century BC, we possess the innate skill to translate the intent of tragedy into a modern format, so that we as an audience, through reading and viewing, can fully appreciate Greek tragedy. We do not appreciate Greek tragedy through the superficial act of watching it for its entertainment value; it inspires a much deeper emotion in us that cannot be replicated by performing it exactly as an Ancient Athenian cast would; although the central themes are the same, certain aspects such as costume and performance style would not resonate within us, as we cannot relate to this foreign interpretation and so would not achieve *catharsis*, which Aristotle defines as the effect of tragedy. Therefore I think we can appreciate Greek tragedy fully, when we adapt it to reflect our modern society more accurately, with the effect that the play matters to us in the way that it mattered to the original audience.<sup>29</sup>

Word Count: 2,497

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<sup>29</sup> Hardwick, 2009, p.2

## Illustrations



**Figure 1** - An Apulian bell-krater by the Tarporley Painter (400-380 B.C., Sydney 47.05) depicts "three chorosmen for a satyr play"

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