

Classical Greek tragedy and the inner world

Femi Oyeboade and Christina Pourgourides show how Greek tragedy tests established morality and helps an audience resolve its own emotional conflicts.

Drama is the representation of life and action. It provides the opportunity for an audience to participate emotionally in the transactions of imaginary characters whose stories unfold within a defined space and time. In essence, the inner world of the audience walks on the stage, speaking in lines which articulate unspoken and often unacknowledged feelings. The drama brings to life, making real and palpable, the possibilities for error, the potential for sinfulness and catastrophe, and the capacity for choice and endurance.

Classical Greek tragedy with its combination of elevated language, of song and spectacle had as its goal the enactment of a plot in which particular characters suffer a reversal in their fortunes. This reversal is the tragic, compelling force of the drama and through this, the fear and pity of the audience is aroused and expurgated, thereby producing a cathartic effect.

Aeschylus and the Oresteian trilogy

Aeschylus, born in 525 BC, is considered the father of the tragic form. He wrote 92 plays of which only seven survive. The *Oresteian* trilogy, comprising *Agamemnon*, *The Choephoroi* and *The Euminides*, is regarded as his masterpiece. This is the story of a family, the house of Atreus. The action of the first play opens on the return of Agamemnon from the Trojan war and centres on his murder by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. The second play deals with the revengeful murder of his mother, Clytemnestra, by Orestes with the support of his sister Electra. *The Euminides* is a ritual drama in which Orestes' action is tried before an Athenian court where he is absolved of responsibility and guilt.

These plays succeed because they are about a family whose members represent particular classes of individuals in the inner world of the

audience. These classes have explicit moral duties imposed upon them by tradition. The power of the play derives from the interplay between these duties and the conflicts constructed in the dramatic plot.

Orestes, for example, is motivated equally by the obligation to avenge his father's death and his need to kill his mother, in a symbolic sense, in order to assert his independence of her and to claim his potency. The act of matricide at once purifies and condemns him. His sister, Electra, exercises influence over him. She says "I have no husband and no other child", emphasising that in her consciousness the wish for her mother's death is partly determined by a need to replace her mother in her brother's affection.

Sophocles and the Theban trilogy

Sophocles, who was born in Colonus in 496 BC, wrote a hundred plays of which only seven are extant. The Theban trilogy, especially *Oedipus the King*, is regarded as his greatest achievement.

The first play, *Oedipus the King*, opens on the scene where the citizens of Thebes, exacted by pestilence and famine, sit in supplication of Oedipus. As the plot unravels, Oedipus comes to know himself, to discover fully who he is and to 'own' his crime of incest. The play ends with Oedipus being led away to exile and the chorus lamenting "behold: this was Oedipus, greatest of men". This play is dependent for its tragic effect upon the device of dramatic irony. The audience know in advance the outcome of Oedipus' search for self-knowledge: his statements and actions therefore take on exceptional clarity, meaning and significance. Aristotle regarded such discovery as an essential ingredient of tragic drama, and this notion of discovery is analogous to the notion of psychological insight.

The Oedipus myth is an important organising principle in psychoanalysis and Freud asserted "that the Oedipus complex is the nucleus complex of the neuroses, and constitutes the essential part of their

content". Freud recognised that Oedipus' persistence at self-examination was similar to the process of psychoanalysis. However, he viewed Sophocles' play as "essentially ... an amoral work" which absolved men from moral responsibility, exhibited the gods as promoters of crime and showed the impotence of moral impulses. This is a misinterpretation of Sophocles. The strength of *Oedipus the King* lies in the fact that given the force of fate and the inescapable necessity of particular actions, Oedipus still had responsibility for his actions, and guilt, remorse and punishment all applied.

Euripides and *Medea*, *Hippolytus* and *The Bacchae*

Euripides was born in 484 BC and is thought to have written 92 plays of which 17 have survived. His plays are the most modern in structure and many of these plays deal with war and also with the relationship between men and women. His technique was to portray a situation which was easy to interpret in a traditional way while using irony to subvert the basic assumptions of social life. This means that several different readings of his plays are possible; the superficial meanings often reveal a contradictory intention.

In *Medea*, he gives an account of the rejected wife (Medea) whose husband, Jason, has chosen a younger woman as his bride. Euripides uses this play to explore the place of wives and women who "at home live free from danger" but "would rather stand three times at the front line than bear children". There are several levels of understanding here. Medea who is from "a barbarous land" represents all who are not civilised, who live in a society where force does not yield to law. Her ungoverned rage is a reflection of this. The irony, of course, derives from the fact that her husband who stands for the justice and order of Greece is the very person who has broken his marriage vows. His civility is undermined by his actions which break the moral code of fidelity.

Medea deliberately plans the murder of Jason's bride and then murders her own children to spite Jason. An act which is tragic and inexcusable becomes, in the hands of Euripides, understandable.

In *Medea*, the chorus are active participants in the action of the play. They are all women and their relationship with Medea is intimate and confiding. They are the conscience of all

women, commenting upon the events as they unfold and witnessing the tragic evolution of the plot. Their complicity is not in doubt, but it is the complicity of all participant observers. Responsibility for the tragic action depends upon the perspective of the observing mind.

This examination of the relationship between men and women which characterises much of Euripides' work almost always exists alongside his concern about the power of passion to escape the control of reason and order. In *Hippolytus*, Phaedra is possessed by a passionate love for the pure youthfulness of Hippolytus who is her stepson. She struggles to resist this passion and her heroism lies in her attempt to subjugate her impulses to the rule of reason. The implicit message of this play is that "it is not for us to struggle after tiresome perfection".

The Bacchae is thought to be Euripides' greatest work. In it he addresses the primacy of revelry and celebration in human affairs. It is a complex play. The dramatic action is limited in range but the tension and symbolism of this limited action is profound. The story is simple. Dionysus/Bacchus arrives in Thebes amid ongoing Bacchic rites which Pentheus resents and attempts to stop. In the end Pentheus is killed by his mother, Agaue, and other devotees of Dionysus. The thesis is that if the pleasure principle is denied ruin will follow. Euripides is conscious of the anxiety that pleasure provokes, recognising the fear that it will be corrupting.

This is probably the most opaque of the tragic dramas, yet it is also the best example of a play in which the symbolism speaks directly to the inner world of the audience without being mediated by a well developed plot.

In the works of the classic tragic dramatists, therefore, drama utilises several devices to form alliances with the inner world of the audience. Tragic drama, especially, has this capacity to engage the private world in a discourse. It tests and on occasion subverts established morality. It arouses emotional disquiet, assuages guilt in tragic ritual, and mobilises inner reserves of endurance. These functions are not dissimilar to the aims of psychotherapy.

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