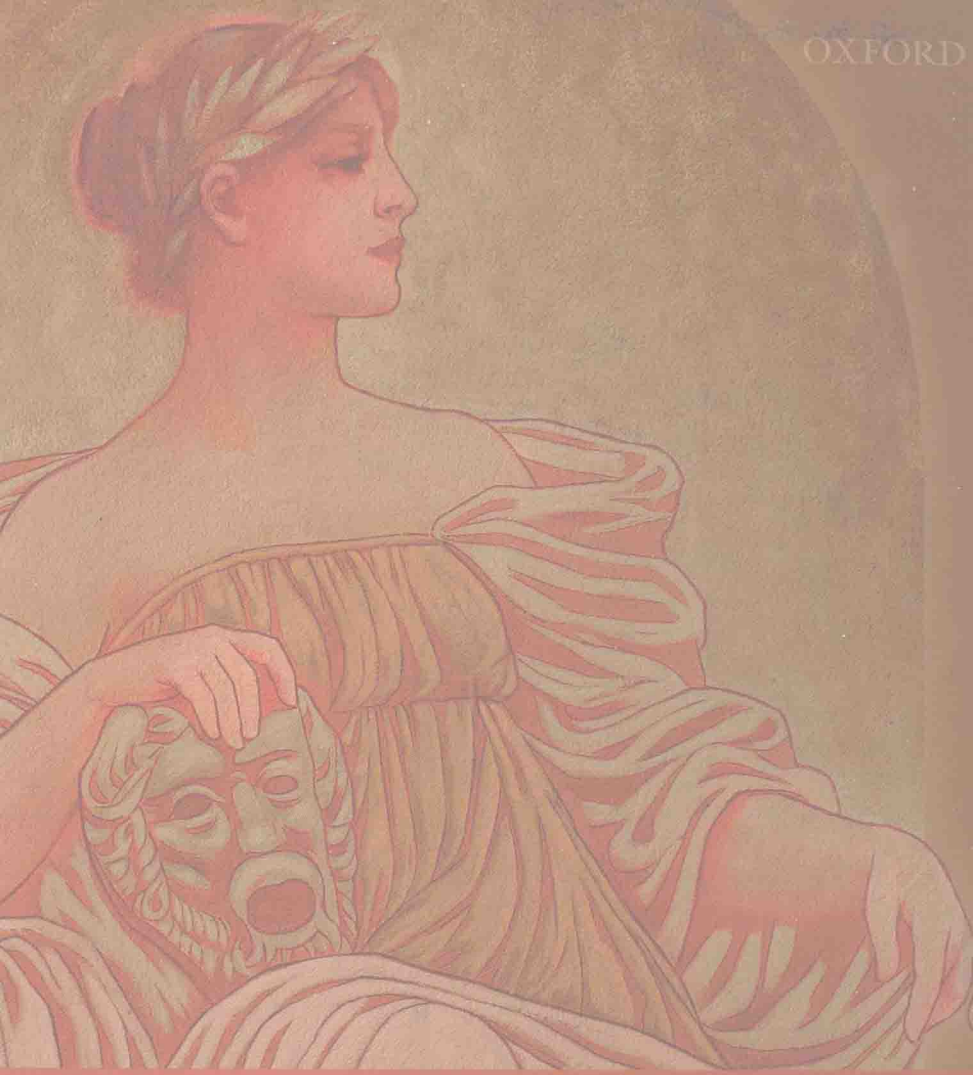

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GREEK TRAGEDY

Suffering under the Sun

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Then I saw again all the oppressed who are suffering under the sun, and beheld the tears of the oppressed, and they had no comforter, and with their oppressors there was violence, and they had no comforter; and I esteemed the dead happy who have died long ago, more than the living who are still alive; and happier than both, him who hath not been born.

(*Ecclesiastes* 4: 1–2)

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So many people have helped me enjoy Greek tragedy over the last forty years that it is almost churlish to single out individuals. Nevertheless, I cannot fail to record that I have been inspired by the teaching at Nottingham Girls' High School of Sheila Harris and Kathleen Reddish and at Oxford of the late Tom Stinton and Ruth Padel; by the examples of Pat Easterling, Helene Foley, Margot Heinemann, and Froma Zeitlin; by the writings of Lewis Campbell, Allardyce Nicoll, and R. P. Winnington-Ingram; and by the enthusiasm of the hundreds of students and members of the general public I have been lucky enough to harangue. I have enjoyed watching scores of productions, and have been truly overwhelmed by the impact of several, especially Ninagawa's *Medea*, Peter Sellars's *Ajax*, Northern Broadsides' *Oedipus*, Katie Mitchell's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Tony Harrison's feature film *Prometheus*, and Yael Farber's *Molora*. Theatre writers and directors who have been kind enough to talk to me about their work include Claudia Bosse, Marina Carr, Tony Harrison, Frank McGuinness, Ellen McLaughlin, Blake Morrison, Barrie Rutter, Colin Teevan, Jatinder Verma, and Yana Zarifi. Conversations with Fiona Macintosh (the most astute theatre critic alive) and with my other colleagues at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama—Peter Brown, Felix Budelmann, Stephen Harrison, Stephe Harrop, Pantelis Michelakis, Scott Scullion, Rosie Wyles, and especially Oliver Taplin—underlie every page of this book. So do discussions of the continuing impact of ancient politics and philosophy with Ahuvia Kahane and Richard Alston at the Centre for the Reception of Greece and Rome, Royal Holloway. Everyone at OUP has been as kind and efficient as usual, especially Hilary O'Shea, Dorothy McCarthy, Jenny Wagstaffe, Kathleen Fearn, my excellent copy-editor, Tom Chandler, and Sarah Newton who read the proofs. I also thank my family for refusing to see life tragically, especially my remarkable husband Richard Poynder, to whom the book is dedicated.

E.H.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

APGRD	Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama
Csapo & Slater	Eric Csapo and and W. J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1994)
DK	Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz (1966), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker.* 3 vols. (Dublin and Zurich, 1966)
Hall (1989)	Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian* (Oxford, 1989)
Hall (2006)	Edith Hall, *The Theatrical Cast of Athens* (Oxford, 2006)
PCG	R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.), *Poetae Comici Graeci* (Berlin, 1983–).
PMG	D. L. Page, *Poetae Melici Graeci* (Oxford, 1962)
TrGF	Bruno Snell and Richard Kannicht (eds.), *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Göttingen, 1971–2004)

Translations from the Greek are my own unless otherwise indicated

CONTENTS

Introduction: What is Greek Tragedy?

> The sun looks upon the suffering of both of us,
> Neither of whom has done anything against the gods
> To deserve your death.
>
> (Admetus to his dying wife in Euripides' *Alcestis*, 246–7)

Two and a half thousand years ago three Athenian Greek men—Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles—between them composed between two and three hundred tragic dramas. But only thirty-three plays, perhaps ten per cent of their total output, survived to be performed in theatres and read today. My book has just one purpose, which is to make the texts of these thirty-three plays more interesting and accessible. The texts, after all, consist merely of rows of printed words—usually all that survives of the dazzling multi-medial open-air shows that enthralled the ancient Greeks for centuries.

It is worth thinking about why their tragedies matter in the first place. Greek tragedy (which in practice always means 'Athenian tragedy') only matters if you believe that tragedy, more widely defined, has itself played a significant role in your own culture. The word 'tragedy' was the word that was given by the ancient Greeks to their more serious theatrical performances, performed in the open air under the unforgiving Mediterranean sun. It was a term that probably once meant 'goat-song', a reminder that tragedy had an ancient and intimate relationship with religion and especially with rituals involving praise of the gods and animal sacrifice to them. But by the fifth century BCE, 'tragedy' meant a specific kind of solemn drama performed in particular public contexts; it has subsequently come to name not only a whole genre but an emotional register and an aesthetic and indeed ethical category. When we see the word 'tragedy' in a news headline, we know that the

article will contain an account of terrible suffering. But how do we define what was so distinctive about these ancient Greek plays that they became the foundational examples of a medium that would exert such a lasting cultural influence?

There have been as many definitions of Greek tragedy as there are surviving plays, but most definitions centre on a handful of specific features. With the solitary exception of the earliest tragedy, Aeschylus' *Persians* (472 BCE), which is a 'history play' set only eight years before it was first performed, all the Greek tragedies were set in what even their original audience felt was the distant past. The heroes and heroines they portray—Agamemnon, Antigone, Heracles—were believed by the Athenians of the fifth century BCE really to have existed, but several centuries earlier. Greek tragedy therefore involved a form of communal ghost-raising—bringing famous but long-dead figures back to life. This dimension is brought into focus when a ghost appears within the tragedy itself: Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, for example, whose physical corpse the audience has seen only minutes previously, or Polydorus in Euripides' *Hecuba*, who can find no peace because he has received no burial rites. Nietzsche had a point when he identified the uncanny moment when Heracles leads the veiled Alcestis back from the Underworld to her living husband, at the climax of Euripides' *Alcestis*, as the scene that epitomizes every spectator's experience of tragic actors.[1]

Tragedy's focus on death is expressed in other ways than in breathing new life into the stories of the long deceased. Greek tragic audiences repeatedly heard characters who were about to die deliver their last words.[2] In such significant speeches and songs, one of the main poetic images for denoting the boundary dividing life from death is sunlight. When Antigone sings her own funeral lament, she takes one last, lingering look at the 'bright Sun', before leaving the stage to die (879–80). Just before he impales himself on Hector's sword, Ajax says farewell to the Sun forever, asking him to take the news across the Aegean Sea to his parents in distant Salamis, on which he also shone (845–51):

> And you, O Sun, as you drive your chariot across the steep sky,
> When you catch sight of my fatherland,
> Hold tight your golden rein
> And report my ruin and my doom

To my ageing father and to her who nursed me.
The poor woman! When she hears this news,
The whole city will resound with her loud lamentation.

All these tragic heroes or heroines uttered their laments under the sun which beat down upon them and whose light they were about to leave forever; the audiences who watched and listened shared that sunlight with them. The same sun that watched their miseries still shines down on our troubled planet today.

Whether the heroic figures in tragedy die or not during their plays, they live in unusually close communion with the dead. The deceased whose absence troubles the living are almost always close relations: spouses, parents, children, siblings. The living who perform rituals, lament inconsolably, or are harassed by spectres and Erinyes (Furies), are suffering because they are bereaved of their kin, or because they have killed them. This feature distinguishes the ancient Greeks' tragedy fundamentally from their other serious genre, Homeric epic. Kin-killing hardly features in the main frame narratives of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where people stick by their kin while slaughtering enemies from rival households and kingdoms. But in tragedy the murder of another member of the same household is a recurring plot-type. Clytemnestra kills her husband, Orestes kills his mother, Oedipus kills his father, Medea kills her children, Agave kills her son, Creon sentences his niece Antigone to death.

The first person to analyse systematically the differences between tragedy and other kinds of poetry was a northern Greek called Aristotle. He studied with the Athenian philosopher Plato a few decades after most of the extant tragedies were composed, and while living in Athens no doubt attended theatrical productions as well as reading the plays. Eventually he began to lecture on literature himself, and his *Poetics* contains the gist of what he argued to his students was essential to tragedy. He said that tragedy's effectiveness was partly a result of the emotions aroused 'where the suffering involves people closely connected, for instance where brother kills brother, son father, mother son, or son mother' (ch. 14, 1453b 19–22). Here a key word is added to the fundamental tragic constituents of death and familial ties, and that key word is *suffering*. Tragedy is a representation of a serious event that involves suffering, which made audience members feel pity for

the sufferer and fear that the same thing could happen to them. Centuries later, when the concept has divested itself of many of its other, specifically Greek, characteristics, this constituent—suffering—remains central to the definition of all 'tragic' events in the theatre, fiction, or newspapers.[3] The representation of specific instances of suffering is one of the very few things that will always be central to the historically mutable medium of tragic drama. The suffering can take many forms, and the sufferers react to it in diverse ways. But suffer they do, or the play they are in would not be a tragedy.

Many of the other elements that have sometimes been deemed necessary and definitive constituents of the genre (for example, the high social class of the sufferer, or tragedy's ability to *ennoble* suffering) prove not, on consideration of significant twentieth-century examples such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), to be necessary to tragedy at all. It is suffering that unites Sophocles' Oedipus, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and Miller's Willy Loman, who dies after suffering, with precious little dignity, as a way of life: his son Biff says that the result of the career path Willy chose is 'To suffer fifty weeks a year for the sake of a two-week vacation'.[4] That in Loman's life the proportion of suffering to non-suffering is as high as 50 : 2 is, moreover, in itself suggestive of the *concentration* on suffering implied by tragedy. As Aldous Huxley put it in a brilliant essay that discussed the difference between tragedy and other 'serious' genres, tragedy omits all the everyday parts of life that dilute its effect. Tragedy does not tell the 'whole truth' about life—that even at times when you are terribly bereaved, domestic tasks must be done.[5] Moreover, in order to build up its effect, tragedy takes a certain period of time—what Aristotle called its *mēkos* or extension (*Poetics* ch. 7, 1451a 5): a joke can make someone laugh in a matter of seconds, but it is almost impossible to imagine what might constitute an effective one-minute tragedy.

A tragedy that did not represent suffering in some concentration and with some sustained build-up could not be tragic, by any criterion—ancient Greek, Renaissance, or contemporary. There is always *agony* inherent in it—whether psychological or physical, whether bereavement, boredom, or bodily mutilation. Yet 'the dramatic representation of suffering', although necessary to the definition of tragedy, is in itself insufficient. The process of staging agony

as spectacle must in a sense be abusive. We must have a good reason for wanting to watch another human suffering terribly, even in the theatre, if we are not to become sensation-addicted voyeurs. There remains, however, an obvious difference between the way that suffering is represented in tragedy and the way that it was represented in ancient Roman gladiatorial displays (which often were staged quasi-dramatically as combat between mythical heroes) and its manifestation in contemporary hardcore pornographic films. Tragedies, gladiatorial shows, and pornographic movies share dramatic form, enacted narrative, and agony, but neither the sole nor central goal of tragedy is the arousal of excitement or desire.

Many tragic poets have written scenes that play on this difficult borderline between arousing desire and arousing a more contemplative reaction: in Euripides' *Hecuba*, the reported death of the half-naked Trojan princess Polyxena, in front of an internal audience of thousands of Greek soldiers, is a graphic example. It invites the external spectators to take sexualized pleasure in the description of the young woman, who has torn her gown 'from her shoulders to her waist beside the navel, revealing her breasts and her torso, most beautiful, like those of a statue' (558–61). Yet the account simultaneously insists that the spectators raise to consciousness their own suspect reaction; moreover, and most importantly, the pornographic element in this scene is inseparable from the overriding *ethical* question it asks, which is why the Greeks had seen fit to sacrifice the young woman in the first place.

Greek literature elsewhere gives thought to the processes by which shocking or repulsive sights can simultaneously fascinate. In Plato's *Republic* these conflicting impulses illustrate the way that discrete elements in the soul combat one another, and this process is illuminated by the example of an individual named Leontius. On walking past the dead bodies lying near the place of Athenian public execution, he 'felt at the same time a desire to see them and a repugnance and aversion'. In the end he gazed his fill, but felt angry with himself for so doing (4.439e 7–440a 3). It may have been thinking about this issue that led Aristotle to his remarkable insight in the *Poetics* into the aesthetic process by which repulsive sights are alchemically transformed through art into something not only bearable, but actually enjoyable, legitimate and instructive to

contemplate. In arguing that the desire to imitate is innate in humans, he introduces the analogy of learning from works of visual art: 'We feel pleasure in looking at the most exact portrayals of things that give us pain to look at in real life, the lowest animals, for instance, or corpses' (ch. 4, 1448b 10–12). This statement articulates the process by which the painful constituents of material reality, even the decay-prone physical remains of the dead, is aestheticized by art. This sentence partly explains why the art galleries of the West are crammed with pictures of individuals undergoing death, combat, assault, rape, and torture. It also suggests how tragedy can be understood. The misery undergone in tragedy is not something we would elect to see another individual suffer in reality, but in the theatre we can 'feel pleasure in looking' at it as well as learn from it.

One working definition of tragedy, therefore, could be that it constitutes the dramatic expression of an *enquiry* into suffering, an aesthetic question mark performed in enacted pain. For tragedy, while representing an instance of suffering in dramatic form, always asks *why* it has occurred. It is not a matter of whether the suffering is of a particular type or quality: neither the Greek audiences nor Shakespearean ones are likely to have drawn much distinction between pitiful and 'tragic' agony. Philoctetes' abscessed foot is as fit for arousing tragic fellow-feeling as Iphigenia's death sentence, Lear's isolation, or Hamlet's alienation. The philosophical interest is in the *causes* of the suffering rather than its neuropathology.

Suffering and enquiry into it are in turn closely linked with the two emotions that Aristotle, in his lectures, associated with the tragic audience. The function of tragedy, he said was to arouse pity and fear (*Poetics* ch. 6, 1449b 27). Spectators feel pity for the sufferer who is being impersonated—Oedipus or Orestes, for example. If the tragedy works properly, they will also feel fear, since they will realize that something similar could perfectly well happen to them; the fear is born of a recognition of the uncontrollability of the forces in human life that have brought the suffering on its victims. The cause of the suffering could be mistaken identity, uncontainable emotion, divine wrath, a family curse, the conventions of ancient warfare, or simple bad luck; but the tragedy will explore the causes of agony and bring home to spectators the extent to which they were or were not avoidable. This means that what is