



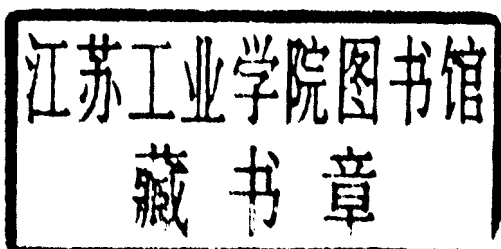
A COMPANION TO
TRAGEDY

EDITED BY
REBECCA BUSHNELL

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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R. B.

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A Companion to Tragedy: Introduction

Rebecca Bushnell

In his searing comedy, *Frogs*, Aristophanes asked his audience which tragic playwright would be better suited to inspire Athens at a time of crisis: the heroic and stirring Aeschylus or the skeptical and emotional Euripides. Dionysus descends to Hades to satisfy his longing for Euripides, who has just died, but he stumbles into a competition between Aeschylus and Euripides for the name of the greatest tragic poet. The two tragedians battle it out over style, and both poets are mocked unmercifully, but finally Dionysus declares that what he really seeks is a poet who can serve the city. Once that end is declared, it is clear the deck is stacked: when it comes to saving cities, it appears, ironists need not apply. Aeschylus is chosen as the poet to cure the state and bring peace to Athens, and Euripides is abandoned in Hades.

The premise of *Frogs* – that the tragic playwright might indeed be able to rescue the state from disaster – is critical for understanding what tragedy might mean to us today. The increasing segregation of tragic theater from public life in our own time may have seriously diminished its claim to immediacy. But we still reach out to the idea of the tragic when confronted by horror or catastrophe. Tragedy can shape experience and history into meaning, and the shock of significance may have the power to transform us. The distinction between tragedy and the merely horrific accident or catastrophe lies in our expectation that knowledge might emerge out of the chaos of human suffering.

Of course, as Aristophanes' example of Euripides testifies, tragedy has also been thought to be able to undermine social and moral order. In *Frogs* Euripides is roundly criticized for slippery morality and dragging out the filth of real life on the stage. It was also Euripides who, through his own depictions of inexplicable human suffering, displayed the inadequacy of the consolations of divinity and justice, which were the foundations of the city-state. Tragedy can be dangerous, as much as redemptive, when it opens up sores that cannot be healed.

In the West, in the centuries since Aristophanes, philosophers and poets have grappled with the question of how tragedy's formality, ethical example, and civic

role intersect – for better or for worse. Plato believed that tragedy would undermine the city-state by inciting passion and disrespect for the gods. Aristotle responded by redeeming tragedy's emotional effect through catharsis, pulling tragedy back from the city into the mind and heart of the individual spectator. The English Renaissance poet Sir Philip Sidney reinserted tragedy into the political realm, when he asserted that the sweet violence of tragedy could make kings fear to be tyrants and tyrants abandon their cruelties; his contemporaries who opposed theater were convinced that tragedy would only drive spectators to imitate the violence they witnessed. The writers who fashioned neoclassical tragedy honed the aesthetics of tragic form, apparently severing tragedy from the welter of politics yet sending a more subtle message about social order. For Hegel and Nietzsche, in different ways, the conflicts of tragedy were to be played out in a world of spirit, more than on a civic scale, while to Freud, the tragic paradigm was the drama of the human psyche.

Tragedy can thus be construed in so many different ways – and those constructions themselves show what it means to us. It may be valued and defined in purely formal terms, or it may be understood as a spiritual or world view; it may be understood as an experience for the individual reader and thus a psychological phenomenon, or as a communal or political act, and thus an historical “event.” The premise of this companion to tragedy is that in Western culture the meaning of tragedy is inseparable from history. The dramatic genre of tragedy has its roots in the religion and politics of the Greek city-state, and it lives still as a profoundly social art. Tragedy's subject is the relationship between the individual and the community in the face of a necessity that we may call the gods or history, and tragedy is performed to transform those who experience it. Tragedy's original form was shaped as much by Athenian democracy as it was by ancient religion, and its survival in European and American culture has been intertwined with the fate of dynasties, revolutions, and crises of social change. Yet, at the same time, this historical approach does not in any way devalue philosophical, religious, psychoanalytic, and anthropological readings of tragedy. While these forms of reading tragedy are themselves embedded in their own historical moments, they have powerfully affected how we have understood tragedy's cultural and ethical effects.

This companion presents tragedy as an artifact of Western culture and emphasizes its status as a dramatic genre. One could imagine composing a very different volume of chapters on the notion of the “tragic” more broadly construed, which would encompass global cultural manifestations of human suffering, especially in Asia, or one that would also extend beyond the narrower designation of tragic theater to include all performative expressions, including opera, music, film, and dance. But that is not the design of this book, which focuses on the complex *theatrical* inheritance from the Greeks to Rome and beyond, across Europe and North America, up through the twentieth century. The volume does end with an extended consideration of the appropriation and questioning of tragedy in African and Caribbean cultural traditions, where, as Timothy Reiss argues, we see how tragedy may be used against its makers.

The logic of the structure of this companion is thus twofold. The first set of chapters, on “Tragic Thought,” unfolds a variety of modes of interpreting tragedy

through different modes of thinking and experience, religious, philosophical, political, psychoanalytic, and historical. The chapters by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood and Richard Seaford root our understanding of Greek tragedy in religion and in the practices of the worship of Dionysus, the god whose contradictions define the essence of tragic ambiguity. The contributions on tragedy, philosophy, and psychoanalysis by Kathy Eden, Mark Roche, James Porter, and Julia Reinhard Lupton take up the most important philosophical and theoretical framings of tragedy, beginning with Aristotle's extraordinarily influential *Poetics*. In different ways, Aristotle remains a point of reference for Hegel's refocusing on the tragic dialectic, Nietzsche's returning tragedy to Dionysus and redefining it as the essence of modernity, and Freud's and Lacan's reinterpretations of tragic paradigms in the psychic and symbolic orders.

The final part of this section on "Tragic Thought" takes up three ways of reading tragedy historically and politically, since recent scholarship on tragedy has turned strongly toward rooting tragic drama in the time that produced it. Deborah Boedeker and Kurt Raaflaub's chapter on tragedy and the Greek city-state complements the earlier chapters on tragedy and religion, in analyzing the function of Greek tragedy in the context of the Athenian politics. Hugh Grady looks at Marxist, cultural materialist, and new historicist interpretations of English Renaissance tragedy, while Victoria Wohl considers the evolution of feminist readings of Greek tragedy.

The second part of the companion, "Tragedy in History," follows the historical development of tragedy from classical Greece to modernity. Since the Greeks, the notion of tragedy has always been retrospective, looking backward with a sense of loss, and thus a great deal of attention is to be devoted to a fresh assessment of Greek tragedy. Rather than focusing on the individual Greek playwrights, the chapters consider issues that cross over the entire extant corpus of tragic theater. Alan Sommerstein's chapter on tragedy and myth and Ruth Scodel's on tragedy and epic explore the dimensions of Greek tragic plots and their relationship to the patterns defined by well-known stories of Greek culture. Michael Halleran discusses what we know of the performance of tragedy in ancient Greece. Claude Calame considers the unique role of the chorus, while Sheila Murnaghan uncovers the role of women in tragic drama (as an extension of the issues raised by Wohl's chapter). Ralph Rosen offers us the perspective that Old Comedy brings to fifth-century tragedy, and Alessandro Schiesaro concludes this section with a study of the Roman transformations of Greek tragedy.

The following three parts of this companion offer perspectives on critical moments in the afterlife of ancient tragic theater: the tragedies of Renaissance England and Spain; French, English, and German neoclassical and romantic tragedy; and the theatrical transformation of tragedy in the modern era. In each of these eras, we can see that writers and audiences struggled with the weight of the past. The models provided by Greek tragedy could be seen as the foundation on which a compelling new tragedy could be built, sweeping away the detritus of moribund, sentimental, or corrupt popular theatrical culture and restoring the mythic essentials of Western culture. However, classical tragedy could also be seen as the dead hand of the past, a

frozen shell of a time long gone and of a world irrelevant to present values. The chapters on English and Spanish early modern tragedy by myself, Matthew Wikander, Michael Neill, and Margaret Greer open up a immensely vital moment in the history of tragedy, when playwrights were experimenting with new classical forms and played to kings and commoners alike, staging astonishing acts of violence and passion, regicide and rebellion. The following section on neoclassical and romantic tragedy shifts the focus to France and Germany (while Jeffrey Cox's chapter considers the extension of the conflicts of English Renaissance tragedy into the following two centuries). The three chapters on French tragedy by Richard Goodkin, Mitchell Greenberg, and Barbara Cooper follow the trajectory of French tragic drama from the overthrow of sixteenth-century Baroque theater through the extraordinary and rarefied phenomenon of neoclassical tragedy to its defeat, in turn, by melodrama and romantic theater in the nineteenth century. The final section, with chapters by Gail Finney, Brenda Murphy, and Timothy Reiss, offers an overview of the canonical modern reinterpretations of tragic theater in Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean. None of these chapters covering the history of tragic drama was intended to be comprehensive in covering all tragic authors or plays of a particular period. Rather, they are meant to suggest to the reader the critical questions of their time: how did tragedy, at that moment, *matter*, for writers and audiences alike.

Because of the companion's breadth, the contributors recognized that the chapters must be able to speak many different disciplinary languages but also be intelligible to nonspecialists. We wanted the chapters to enlighten readers across disciplinary divides, so that, for example, experts on Greek tragedy would communicate clearly to those in modern drama, or anthropologists and philosophers to literary scholars. It is an ambitious end, but all the more critical a task, given how the practice of reading tragedy has changed in the past two decades, especially in classical and Renaissance studies. At the same time, the chapters that follow here are not uniform, whether in style, method, or critical orientation, partly because they stem from many different disciplines and critical traditions. The reader will in fact find some disagreement among scholars on several contentious issues in the history of scholarship on tragedy, and quite appropriately so. This companion is not meant to provide a single point of view or narrative, but rather to give the reader a sense of the richness of the most current scholarship on the genre as reinvented across a great span of time and space.

What the contributors do clearly share is *their* conviction that tragedy matters: that is, that at critical points in the history of Greece, western Europe, and North America, tragic theater functioned as a vehicle for the expression of the deepest fears and most radical dreams of the society and culture that engendered it. The tragic scene may be played out in a stifling drawing room or on a battlefield, but wherever it happens, the experience has the power to evoke a culture's conceptions and questions about authority and the extent to which we determine the course of our own lives.

Part I
Tragedy and the Gods

