

ELEFTHERIA  
IOANNIDOU

# GREEK FRAGMENTS IN POSTMODERN FRAMES

*Rewriting Tragedy 1970–2005*



CLASSICAL PRESENCES

OXFORD

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GENERAL EDITORS

Lorna Hardwick · James I. Porter

Attempts to receive the texts, images, and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome inevitably run the risk of appropriating the past in order to authenticate the present. Exploring the ways in which the classical past has been mapped over the centuries allows us to trace the avowal and disavowal of values and identities, old and new. *Classical Presences* brings the latest scholarship to bear on the contexts, theory, and practice of such use, and abuse, of the classical past.

*Greek Fragments in Postmodern Frames* focuses on adaptations of Greek tragedy between 1970 and 2005, arguing that rewritings of Greek tragic texts in this period can be used as a tool to uncover a significant dialogue with postmodernism. Despite the large number of adaptations in recent years, the idea still persists that tragedy is incompatible with postmodernism, even that postmodernism precludes it both as an aesthetic form and as a way of perceiving the world. This volume seeks to demonstrate that the extended intertextual engagement of the plays under discussion with their prototype texts amounts to more than straightforward adaptation but to a rewriting of these texts in ways akin to the renegotiation of authorship and textuality proffered by poststructuralist thought. Such adaptive strategies are not only integral to interrogating the authority of the classical canon and the power structures embedded in its reception, but have also given rise to the development of tragic modes and tropes peculiar to the period: in analysing these it seeks on one hand to show how tragedy continues to provide a means of articulating contemporary cultural and political preoccupations, while on the other it draws upon a cultural materialist methodology to resist fixed definitions of tragedy and to question established frames and representations.

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*for Artemis*





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for showing me a great deal about empathy in many different ways; with this dedication, I hope to pay part of the debt due to our parents, Charis and Georgia.

*Birmingham*

*20 December 2014*

## *Author's Note*

All citations from the Greek texts are taken from the following Oxford Classical Texts editions: Aeschylus: D. Page (1972), Sophocles: H. Lloyd-Jones and N. Wilson (1990), and Euripides: J. Diggle (1981, 1984, 1994). The translations into English are taken from the volumes in the Loeb series and the Greek text is provided in the footnotes throughout. The abbreviated titles for the Greek plays in the footnotes follow the house style of the third edition of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

The collected edition of the modern plays is cited, when available, unless there are specific reasons to prefer the first edition. In the main text, the dates in brackets next to the titles of plays indicate the year of first publication and production. In the footnotes and the bibliography, the date of original publication of both primary and secondary sources is supplied next to that of the edition cited. All quotations from primary sources and secondary literature appear in a published English translation. In cases where a published English translation was not available, the quoted passages appear in my own translation. The characters' names in dramatic dialogues are capitalized throughout. Modern Greek names and titles are transliterated in the Bibliography.

Ephemera, theatre programmes, and audiovisual material are cited only in the footnotes, not in the Bibliography.



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## Introduction

### *Tragic (Trans)Formations: Greek Tragedy and Postmodernism*

Canons rarely speak to histories of inclusion and exclusion; part of their legitimacy comes from the power to efface the artistic practices, institutions as well as the larger cultural politics at work in the process of their formation. Yet, the various responses to canonical texts across time can break these processes open anew. In the case of Greek tragedy, the responses are not limited to the philological debates on the ancient texts themselves, but involve long-standing controversies over the definition of tragedy and the tragic. These controversies reveal the cultural and political stakes in tragedy, even in cases where the aesthetic autonomy of the genre is being fervently advocated. Philosophical discourses as divergent as Hegelian dialectics and Nietzsche's irrational pessimism take recourse to the Greek tragedy in developing their key concepts and categories. The central place of tragedy within modern intellectual traditions reinforces the canonical authority of the classical texts, while at the same inviting readings and reworkings that seek to question it. Since the 1970s there has been a proliferation of adaptations that use the Greek tragic texts as a means to interrogate the foundational narratives of modernity. Evoking the postmodern critique to the literary and philosophical canons, the revisiting of the classical text uncovers the value systems and power relations embedded therein. In these adaptations, the canon is treated as the product of material, discursive, and cultural transformations laid bare in the act of rewriting.

Rewritings of Greek tragedy prompt an understanding of intertextual relationships beyond formalist approaches. Even though adaptation

inevitably deals with questions of genre, in the case of tragedy these questions are complicated by the troubled relationship between tragedy and modern criticism. The impossibility to come to grips with the aesthetic and philosophical implications of tragedy has been proclaimed from different critical standpoints. Following Nietzsche's view that tragedy does not sit comfortably with a rational world view, George Steiner argued that tragedy has become extinct in modern drama. In a less mournful manner, Bertolt Brecht's call for an epic or dialectical theatre for a scientific era pronounced the death of tragedy.<sup>1</sup> Steiner's argument that Brechtian drama makes room for tragedy, in spite of or against its Marxist dialectics,<sup>2</sup> is consistent with his general view of tragedy as a strictly aesthetic category. On the other hand, the critical efforts to reconcile tragedy with the materialist perspective entail a disavowal of tragic metaphysics. In fact, it is the unbreakable unity between tragedy as a dramatic genre and tragic occurrences in real life that materialists have been keen to maintain. The more recent contribution to this debate is Terry Eagleton's book *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*. Eagleton embarks on the twofold project of demonstrating Marxism's tragic perspective as well as affirming tragedy as part of human experience. The links between the aesthetic and philosophical category of tragedy and tragedy in real life are argued to lie in bodily pain and suffering. Yet, even in Eagleton's inclusive view, there remains a theoretical and cultural position that is deemed as inherently inimical to tragedy—namely, postmodernism. If anything, according to Eagleton, tragedy strives to make sense of suffering and therefore, 'if human beings are in fragments, they are not even coherent enough to be the bearers of tragic meaning [...]'.<sup>3</sup>

Although Marxist criticism views both the tragic genre and the tragic feeling to be susceptible to transformations, the possibility of experiencing tragedy in today's theatre or in contemporary reality remains in question. According to Eagleton, whereas poststructuralism does not preclude the possibility of tragedy, postmodernism entails a conscious repudiation of it: 'while poststructuralism remains ensnared in high modernist melancholia, postmodernism seizes a chance to leap beyond the tragic by tapping into the diffuse, provisional, destabilizing forces of post-metaphysical capitalism.'<sup>4</sup> Eagleton identifies the anti-tragic strand of postmodernism in the tendency

<sup>1</sup> Brecht (1964/1948).

<sup>2</sup> Steiner (1961: 348–9).

<sup>3</sup> Eagleton (2003: 64–5).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 240.