

ELEFTHERIA
IOANNIDOU

GREEK FRAGMENTS IN POSTMODERN FRAMES

Rewriting Tragedy 1970–2005



CLASSICAL PRESENCES

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CLASSICAL PRESENCES

General Editors

LORNA HARDWICK JAMES I. PORTER

CLASSICAL PRESENCES

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.

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.¹ Steiner's argument that Brechtian drama makes room for tragedy, in spite of or against its Marxist dialectics,² 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 [...]'.³

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.'⁴ Eagleton identifies the anti-tragic strand of postmodernism in the tendency

¹ Brecht (1964/1948).

² Steiner (1961: 348–9).

³ Eagleton (2003: 64–5).

⁴ Ibid. 240.

to devise theoretical means in order to elude the tensions of modernity. In his view, even though postmodern theory is a resurgence of Nietzscheanism, it transcends all the violence and pain that, according to Nietzsche, lie at the foundations of tragic perception and art. Instead, according to Eagleton, in the postmodern dematerialized reality, tragic joy degenerates into 'political pessimism on the one hand, and aesthetic or theoretical *jouissance* on the other.'⁵

Paradoxically enough, Eagleton coincides with the conservative critics he sets out to refute in declaring tragedy at stake. His view of tragedy is based on the physical experience of pain that defies postmodern textual interplay as a means of communicating the tragic. Nonetheless, adaptations of Greek tragedy that employ key devices of postmodern art abound not just in contemporary playwriting but across media. That alone, of course, does not provide adequate grounds to judge postmodernism's theoretical disposition towards tragedy. The encounter between the tragic genre and postmodern modes of challenging the classical canon does not suffice to counter the claim that tragedy and postmodernism are incompatible or even mutually exclusive. Yet, the question regarding the possibility of tragedy in a postmodern world of deconstructed narratives, proliferating images, and textual pastiche is a persistent one in understanding the return to the Greek tragic texts.

The present book aims to provide a renewed materialist view of the tragic genre, analysing the prevalent modes in rewriting Greek tragedy since the 1970s. As much as tragedy is a dramatic form that ascribes shape and meaning to human suffering, it is also a discursive frame used to determine *whose* suffering is meaningful. Tragedy defined as the fall of a great protagonist in theatre seems to cohere with the everyday uses of the word: a term originating in Greek art and providing the basis of European tragic philosophies can be owned only by those subjects whose lives matter. While the term tragedy is often employed to refer to individual or collective death and suffering happening close to home, massive loss and catastrophe outside Western contexts rarely qualify as tragic. To adopt a deconstructive approach to tragedy does not equal dematerializing the tragic experience, but rather wishes to question the exclusions entailed in aesthetic readings and cultural discourses of tragedy. Rewritings of

⁵ Ibid. 227.

Greek tragedy that share the postmodern problematics of text and textuality, interrogate canons and literary hierarchies alongside structures of feeling underlying cultural conceptualizations of pain and death. Undoing the tragic texts is a gesture that strives to do away with the systems of exclusion or oppression that have been inscribed in them within a long history of reception, including those theories claiming that the (post)modern era is unworthy of tragedy.

Any attempt to appraise the transformations of tragedy in postmodernism should take into account the new significance that the notions of loss, suffering, and catastrophe have acquired in the light of parallel developments on the political, social, and global planes. In condemning the military action of the United States that followed the 9/11 attacks, Judith Butler recalls an example from Greek tragedy:

To remember the lessons of Aeschylus, and to refuse this cycle of revenge in the name of justice, means not only to seek legal redress for wrongs done, but to take stock of how the world has become formed in this way precisely in order to form it anew, and in the direction of non-violence.⁶

The use of Aeschylus as a means to reflect on the perpetuation of violence seems appropriate not because the ending of the *Oresteia* alluded to in the above passage reveals the shortcomings of legal institutions; most importantly, Aeschylus offers precisely what these institutions are short of: an insight into their own tragic genealogies. In this sense, Greek tragedy itself is subjected to critique both as a category used to legitimize acts of retribution as well as a dramatic form that epitomizes the historical paradigm of the Western world, not least in its failings and discontents.

This book focuses on rewritings of Greek tragedy between 1970 and 2005, and, although it does not intend to offer an exhaustive record of plays in this period, it aspires to provide analytical tools in order to understand the dominant tendencies in the reception of classical antiquity within postmodernism. The above time frame does not mean to demarcate the limits of postmodernism; it is rather defined by the rising debate on the notions of text and textuality in the late 1960s and the discussions around tragedy and the tragic alongside the contemplation of loss, suffering, and grievability at the dawn

⁶ Butler (2004: 17).

of the twenty-first century. The little critical attention paid to these plays appears to be all the more striking, considering the surge of interest in the performances of the Greek tragic texts within the same period, which, in addition, share similar characteristics to their contemporary textual reconfigurations.⁷ Although stage adaptations of Greek tragedy enjoy a privileged position within the fields of both classical reception and theatre studies, a comprehensive study of textual reworkings is still due. Furthermore, unlike the sociopolitical background of the late twentieth-century reception of Greek tragedy, which is discussed in many articles and books, the affinities between the theoretical enquiries of postmodernism and the adaptation of the Greek texts have not been adequately analyzed.⁸

The study of classical reception has demonstrated the dynamic role of theatre in shifting perceptions of Greek drama. The burgeoning interest in the performance of the Greek tragic plays seems to be inextricable from the broader questioning of the dramatic text.⁹ While since the 1960s the relationship between performance and the written word has been seen in terms of antagonism or resistance, within the same period prominent playwrights have produced radical adaptations of Greek tragedy. What these plays share with their contemporary forms of performance is not solely an iconoclastic and subversive take on the dramatic text; they rather attest to a larger synergy between writing strategies, performance practices, and theoretical preoccupations. In that regard, the binary opposition of text

⁷ The theatrical performances of Greek tragedy provide the subject of numerous studies, often with a focus on individual plays—e.g. Hall, Macintosh, and Taplin (2000) on Euripides' *Medea*; Macintosh, Michelakis, and Hall (2005) on *Agamemnon*, Macintosh (2009) on *Oedipus the King*. The role of Greek tragedy as a means of renewing contemporary theatre aesthetics has been addressed by both classical reception and theatre studies, e.g. Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley (2004), Fischer-Lichte and Dreyer (2007), and Goldhill (2007). Dreyer (2014) discusses performances of Greek tragedy since the 1960s, applying key concepts of tragic theory. The diachronic reception of specific plays or mythological figures in both literature and theatre is the topic of several edited collections, e.g. Clauss and Johnston (1997), De Martino (2006), and Beltrametti (2007).

⁸ McDonald and Walton (2002), Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley (2004), and Goff (2005) focus on the sociopolitical concerns articulated in recent adaptations of Greek tragedy. Laera (2013) analyses performances of Greek tragedy in Europe against the political and cultural discourses going back to classical antiquity.

⁹ The quest to consider theatrical performance independently of the dramatic literature led to the establishment of the new discipline of *Theaterwissenschaft* in the early twentieth century. See Fischer-Lichte (1999c; 2008: 29–37).

and performance fails to grasp the ways in which theatrical performances shape perceptions of textuality. Stephen Greenblatt concedes that, 'as soon as you collapse everything into something called textuality, you discover that it makes all the difference what kind of text you are talking about'.¹⁰ This collapse, in Greenblatt's view, calls attention,

to genre and rhetorical mode, to the text's implicit or explicit reality claims, to the implied link (or distance) between the word and whatever it is—the real, the material, the realm of practice, pain, bodily pleasure, silence, or death—to which the text gestures as that which lies beyond the written word, outside its textual mode of being.¹¹

The emphasis on the text's references to the material and bodily experiences outside the written word (as well as the use of the term *gesture* itself) proposes a conceptualization of the text in terms of performance, which arguably extends beyond the scope of Greenblatt's analysis.

If performance by definition involves a certain tension with the dramatic text, rewriting allows us to follow the process of textual transformation and observe the extent to which the classical text is followed, invoked, or resisted. Of course, dialogues between texts in their innumerable permutations provide the basis of every adaptation.¹² However, the modes adopted in recent adaptations of Greek tragedy suggest a shift of paradigm. Since the 1970s plays based on Greek tragedy do not just offer reworkings of well-known tragic plots and themes; intertextuality here takes the form of an extended preoccupation with the prototype as a textual entity. What was predominantly an *adaptation* of the tragic myth gives its place to the *rewriting* of the classical text.

This turn in the adaptation of Greek tragedy can be understood in the context of poststructuralist ideas of the text formulated in the late 1960s. Not only do these recent plays shift emphasis from myth to text but they do so posing issues of textuality that have been debated extensively within poststructuralism. The treatment of the literary text as a fluid and polyphonic cultural product whose meaning is bestowed upon the successive reading communities does not occur in theory alone, but can also

¹⁰ Greenblatt (1997: 16).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Genette's seminal study (1997/1982) offers a thorough analysis of the spectrum of textual metamorphoses. The interest in adaptation as a distinct field of study, as evinced in several specialized publications and academic journals, has shifted the focus from texts to media and from adaptive practices to the receiving communities.

be evinced in the way tragedy is adapted. While the classical text is invested with an authority that often resists radical interpretations—in a way evocative of Roland Barthes's notion of the Work¹³—at the same time it lends itself to deconstructive readings. In that regard, rewritings of Greek tragedy seem to align with the theoretical challenges to canon and textual canonicity alongside other forms of authority. Whether intentional or not, this tendency shows that major playwrights have been amenable to the theoretical investigations of poststructuralist theory, which, in turn, help to articulate concerns of postmodernism, more broadly.¹⁴ Even when these plays are not directly influenced by the theory, they can still be seen as products of the same intellectual climate.

The study of rewriting can acquire a particular significance for the field of classical reception, by inviting the dialogue between reception theory and the growing literature on adaptation. The model suggested here seeks to reconcile the different implications of the term reception itself: reception theory, as launched by Hans Robert Jauß, pushed the study of literature in a historicizing direction, by focusing on the significance of the artwork for the receiving communities, both contemporary and future.¹⁵ In classical reception studies, however, the term is mainly used to describe the *Nachleben* of classical antiquity in later artworks, not necessarily with reference to readers' or audiences' responses. The transformations of the Greek plays urge critical discourse to shift away from the close analysis of the product and to lay emphasis on the processes of production and reception in line with recent theories of adaptation.¹⁶ The processes of reception are more intricate than a formalist comparative study between ancient and modern artworks can ever evince; nor can they be sufficiently studied

¹³ Barthes (1977/1971: 155–64).

¹⁴ It is important to stress at this point that in the following chapters the terms poststructuralism and postmodernism are not used interchangeably. Although both terms are used with reference to the plays under examination, I use 'poststructuralist' to refer to the textual concerns and the relationship with the prototype, while I turn to 'postmodern' when discussing the wider problematics explored in these plays.

¹⁵ See Jauß's pivotal essay 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory' in Jauß (1982/1970). This was Jauß's inaugural lecture at the University of Constance in 1967. An earlier version of the text in English appeared in *New Literary History* in 1969.

¹⁶ Hutcheon's (2006: 6–9) tripartite definition views adaptation as product, process of (re-)creation, and process of reception.