

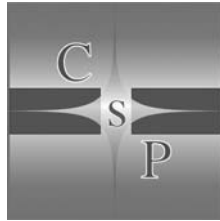
Introductions and Translations to the Plays of  
Sophocles and Euripides



Introductions and Translations to the Plays of  
Sophocles and Euripides  
Vol. I

Introduced and translated by

Harry Love



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Line numbers in all the play-texts refer to the corresponding lines in the Greek texts.



## INTRODUCTION

The seven plays and accompanying essays that comprise these two volumes are the result of some twelve years of translating and staging ancient drama for the Department of Classics at the University of Otago. Though leavened with a couple of Aristophanic romps (*Clouds*, *Lysistrata*) and some Terentian acid (*Eunuch*), the focus has been on the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides. Putting these plays before a modern audience is generally considered a worthy, if slightly eccentric, activity. And they will, if the weather's not too cold, attract a reasonable audience ranging from the well-informed, but classically starved, through modest platoons of students of classical studies, to the simply curious. Responses are, usually, gratifying, a testament to both the ancient playwrights (has anyone, for example, *ever* demonstrated greater dramatic acumen than Sophocles in *Oedipus the King*?) and to the theatrical skills of some excellent performers.

A question that does frequently arise, however, is, why do we need new translations, given that renditions of these generally better known Greek plays are innumerable and multiplying by the week? There are three answers. Firstly, asking a further question, as an actor, would you feel comfortable standing up on a stage and saying this, or this...? In many cases the answer was 'no' (and what does it mean anyway?). The challenge, therefore, and it is a perennial one, is to find some register of the ephemeral phenomenon that is modern English that can reflect some of the essential dramatic characteristics of ancient Greek with sufficient comfort for the tongue of an actor and the ear of an audience. Secondly, it's a lot of fun. Thirdly (and here candour is called for) as these productions have all been filmed and the resulting video-tapes and DVDs distributed to institutions far and wide, problems of copyright are avoided.

The translations, then, have arisen primarily from practical considerations. The success of considerations two and three is easily demonstrated, whereas that of 1 must rely on whoever is prepared to stand up on a stage and say this, or this..., and whoever is prepared to listen. But translating, as hardly needs to be pointed out, is not merely substituting the words of one language for another, especially for something as conceptually complex as a drama. In effect the translation isn't finished until the piece has been enacted because not only are we shifting it into a new linguistic medium, but into a new theatrical medium (and even further if we put it on a screen). The whole process raises many thorny questions about the nature of the original, of the new version

and of the relation between them, questions about exactly *what* is being ‘translated’ into what? Ruminations on such things have given rise to the collection of occasional essays that preface each of the plays. These reflect, too, something about the process that bridges the gap between page and stage. Given the material a text gives you to use (and to what interpretive lengths can you stretch that?) what do you want an audience to feel and to think and how do you use the available theatrical resources to achieve it? There’s not much in the essays on the latter, as resources, material and human, vary greatly, but I do incline to the notion that a text (we won’t talk of authors just yet) has designs on an audience, and that the various components of its language and structure comprise a dramatic rhetoric that it is the task of a director to facilitate. The essays are largely an attempt to articulate and analyse dramatic rhetoric. It follows, then, that the essence of a dramatic translation is to maintain as far as possible the rhetorical dynamic of the original in a form that allows it to work on those who have access to neither its language nor its theatrical conditions.

### **The Substance of Tragedy**

It is a continuing mystery to many that plays from so long ago and far away, even without the cloak of contemporary ‘issues’ draped over them, can work so powerfully on audiences who may be quite unfamiliar with Greek tragedy. There are, without going down the trail of some kind of universalist psychology, good reasons for this. It is, of course, true that the Greeks, along with everyone else, noticed that human beings, individually and collectively, die, are subject to the forces of nature in their huge variety of manifestations, and are both blessed and burdened with passions and intellect. What they have done in tragic drama is to have invented an aesthetic form that is not merely *about* this state of human affairs, but presents it in a characteristic mode that is reflected in the aesthetic and philosophic history of modern Europe. This is a dramatic tradition which, though eclipsed for long periods of time since the fifth century BC, has revived itself through the evolution of theatrical traditions from the Renaissance on. Philosophically the focus of tragic drama is on the tension between the emotional lives of individuals and the ‘objective’ world that surrounds them, natural and/or divine and social, with all its epistemological, ethical, political and metaphysical implications. Theatrically, as conventions, technology and expectations change, there is a tension, or at least a fluctuation in the relation between content, the dramatic enactment of emotional life, and the forms that



contain it, or, perhaps more accurately, shape the relation between the aesthetic object and those who observe it.<sup>1</sup>

Emotions, then, lie at the heart of the tragic project, as both the subject matter of tragedy and the dynamic that drives a particular kind of theatrical experience. Aristotle saw this in the theatre at Athens and approved: Plato saw it and did not. What they both saw but evaluated differently was the part emotions play in human perception, that our experience, our knowledge of the world is achieved through a veil of feelings, a fact which renders individual human beings weak and vulnerable in relation to the world around them. Plato most certainly considered emotions to be the weaker part of humanity and found the theatre's evocation of them a threat to his rational enterprise. Aristotle, like the tragedians whose plays he analysed, could find some value in this ambivalent and very human characteristic and in the theatrical evocation and "catharsis of emotions".<sup>2</sup>

Emotions and their dynamics are, therefore, at the heart of a translation of tragedy, not simply in the sense that one is attempting to reproduce an experience, but that emotions are evoked such that an audience can 'see' and evaluate them, assign them some kind of meaning. The experience of watching Oedipus stagger blind and bloody onto the stage, or Polymestor, or Pentheus' head on a stick held by his mother, and, perhaps even more importantly, hearing the graphic details of the catastrophe from an observer on the stage, is of a different order from watching a boxer beaten to a pulp or a bull-fighter gored by his bull; it is distanced, it is nuanced, it is dramatic and it is emotionally charged. And neither are we indulging in ritual, whatever the obscure and possibly ritualistic origins of Greek theatre. Speculation about the ritual stimulation of some atavistic corner of our subconscious is not, I think, fruitful.

The relation between audiences and the various spectacles that confront them is principally determined by a set of mutual expectations that tend to solidify into conventional behaviours, which are themselves subject to the erosions and accretions of time. There is space here only to assert that in the invention of tragic theatre the Greeks established a form that could sustain the expression of 'serious' entertainment; that is, a form that appealed to a *theatre*

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<sup>1</sup> I do not propose here to explicate further 'the dramatic enactment of emotional life,' which I hope will become clear as I proceed and in the essays below. I would, however, strongly recommend two works of extraordinary depth and breadth that get to the heart of what is meant by 'dramatic enactment': Edward Burns. *Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage*. London: Macmillan, 1990, and E. Rozik. *The Roots of Theater*. Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of what Aristotle may have meant by referring to the "catharsis of emotions", see Stephen Halliwell. *Aristotle's Poetics*. London: Duckworth, 1986, and N. Van der Ben. "Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b27-28." In Bremer, et al (1976) 1-15.

audience (neither a congregation of worshippers nor a crowd of sporting or circus spectators) by offering an experience that stimulated thought about the experience. And the theatrical relationship they created does not inhere solely in the performative elements (actors and the physical space of the theatre) but also in the fact that the dramatic poets developed a mode of *writing*, a dramatic form that orientates a reader in much the same way as a performance does its audience.<sup>3</sup>

Any ‘serious’ art (including, of course, the seriously funny) is about reflection, and though in practice audiences are invariably collections of mixed motives, if the expectations of art are overwhelmed by inappropriate audience expectations, art will pack up its ideas and go somewhere else to reshape itself or to challenge the conventions and expectations that constrain it. And the other way round. Theatre that loses the muscularity of its dramatic content to become mere spectacle is likely to lose at least some of its audience to other genres, then collapse when a change of fashion diverts what’s left. Such has been the oscillating relation between dramatic tragedy and its audiences over the past 2500 years.

## The Shape of Tragedy

According to Aristotle, tragedy was born out of the performance of *dithyrambic* songs; ie, narrative poems about gods and heroes, sung by a chorus and accompanied by an *aulos*, or double pipe. Out of this choric story-telling developed an actor, or *hypokrites*, ‘one who answers’, through whom the most important figure in the story speaks in the first person to the chorus. “Aeschylus,” Aristotle continues, “introduced a second actor; he diminished the importance of the chorus and assigned the leading part to dialogue. Sophocles raised the number of actors to three and added scene-painting”.<sup>4</sup>

From this small beginning a couple of points can be extracted. Firstly, while there is movement away from the essential musicality of performance, from song and dance, toward the visualisation of character played by an actor, signalled initially by costume and mask, the principal source of intelligibility remains in the sung or spoken *word*, in language as the primary bearer of image

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<sup>3</sup> Cf many of Robert Browning’s monologues. ‘My Last Duchess’, eg, has all the characteristics of a dramatic scene with a structural irony that populates it with at least 2 characters other than the speaker (rather like a Greek messenger speech) and manipulates the reader into a particular perspective on events, present and past, and on the emotions that have brought them about. It is perhaps significant that serious British theatre of this period was somewhat moribund, and that the best dramatic writing in English was not for the stage.

<sup>4</sup> *Poetics* 1449a 9-19. Trans. S.H. Butcher. London: Macmillan, 1895, 17-19.

and meaning, in what someone says.<sup>5</sup> The song of the dithyramb mutates into the speech, however poetic and formalised, of identifiable characters. Hence the narrative characteristic of painting word-pictures gives way to the direct expression of thought and feeling, to the impersonation of character (*ethos*) as a means of enacting rather than describing an incident. Even in those elements, like messenger speeches, which clearly do have a narrative purpose, the emotional characteristics of the speaker are of equal importance to the narrative content as far as the dramatic effect and its significance are concerned. Greek messengers invariably have feelings about and views on the scenes they describe.

Secondly, the idea of action is intimately tied to this expression of thought and feeling. We get to know what happens and what it means through an interplay of perspectives, supplemented on the stage by conventional signals, visual (costumes, etc) and aural (music). It is this interplay that is the essentially dramatic element because it leads to the creation of dramatic distance, that gap, expressed most often as a form of irony, between the knowledge, including the emotional knowledge, of an audience and that of the figures on the stage. The dramatic object that we *see* inheres in the figures who contribute to the interplay of perspectives and feelings rather than in the scene, which is a secondary visual element. Although Aristotle refers to Sophocles' addition of scene-painting (*skenographia*), we know little about what it actually consisted of, or how integral it might have been to performance. Given the nature of the Greek stage, it seems unlikely that the primary visual focus would have been on anything much other than the actors, all the figures who move, speak or sing.<sup>6</sup> The dramatic genre, this complex relation between the object and its audience, is manifested also in the texts, in a form of writing, I would argue, that the Greeks developed out of the performative tradition of choric narratives.

One vivid example. In the third episode of *Oedipus the King* (910-1088), the Corinthian messenger brings his good news, that Polybus of Corinth is dead, and, as helpful as ever, goes further to assure Oedipus that the king and queen of Corinth were not his real parents, so the prophecy of incest and parricide is nothing to fear. As the scene progresses there is an interplay of four perspectives, each with its particular emotional characteristic. The Corinthian presses on in his avuncular fashion, unaware of the significance of what he says; Oedipus, initially relieved, is then determined to resolve his personal mystery;

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<sup>5</sup> We should remember also that the elaborate visual re-creation of scenic images on the stage is a relatively recent phenomenon and that *audiences* (ie, those who listen) have long relied on words to create images for them.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Shakespeare's bare stage. A visit to the new Globe Theatre demonstrates vividly how all the visual elements (costume, properties, even objects like ropes or the two large pillars that frame the stage) actually enhance the audience's focus on the actors.

Jocasta, sharing Oedipus' relief to begin with, becomes aware of the horrible truth behind the messenger's information; and the chorus, a little apprehensive as Jocasta departs, is then determined to put the best gloss on the situation in the concluding song as a response to Oedipus' misreading of her departure. The dramatic structure of the scene is such that the emotional experience of the audience is not merely the sum of the contributing elements on the stage. It puts them in a position to watch the short but excruciating journey Oedipus must make through the next scene to reach their state of knowledge and to 'see feelingly', to use Brecht's phrase, the emotional experience it entails.

If on one level the expression of Tragedy gave rise to a dramatic genre, a shape, that has persisted through time, on another more local level Greek tragedy was bound by contemporary conventions, literary and theatrical, that do not apply in other periods. Here I would like briefly to consider some of these, particularly the chorus.<sup>7</sup>

There is a conventional form that all known Greek tragedies conform to, which appears to reflect the dithyrambic origins, and which consists of alternate scenes (or episodes) of spoken dialogue and choric songs (*stasima*). A play begins with a *prologos*, usually spoken and setting the scene, before the chorus enter, singing (the *parodos*), followed by three or four *epeisodia*, punctuated by choric *stasima*, after the last of which is the *exodos*, or exit scene. On the face of it this looks a very rigid structure, but in practice it has proved extremely flexible and a consistently effective framework for the dramatic process it supports.

Within this structure the role of the chorus is gradually reduced through the fifth century, or apparently so. Aristotle asserts that Aeschylus "diminished the importance of the chorus," but of the three playwrights whose works survive, the chorus features most in his, with more lines and an active part in the plot (see, eg, the *Eumenides*) as a kind of composite character. Aristotle further observes:

The chorus should be taken as part of the complement of actors, engaging in the whole action, not in the manner of Euripides, but of Sophocles. Among later poets, their choral pieces are no more relevant to the one plot than to that of any other tragedy. They are mere sung interludes, a trend begun by Agathon.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Literature on Greek theatre is voluminous and I do not intend to discuss it here. See Csapo & Slater. *The Context of Ancient Greek Drama*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1994, and for a concise account, Alan H. Sommerstein. *Greek Drama and Dramatists*. London: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> *Poetics* 1456a 25-30. For a concise but detailed account of the Greek chorus see, Helene Foley. "Choral Identity in Greek Tragedy." *Classical Philology* 98 (2003) 1-30.

This general diminution of the chorus, however, should not lead us to underestimate its dramatic significance, and although some of those of Euripides do seem less integrated into the action (in *Hippolytus* and *Medea*, for example), that of his last play, the *Bacchae*, is given a crucial role in its tragic dynamic.

It is certainly the case that after the classical period the chorus becomes more decorative than functional; the chorus in Seneca's Latin versions of the Greek plays does little more than offer more or less relevant poetic comment between acts. And insofar as such a thing as a dramatic chorus existed in the modern, post-Renaissance theatre, it had been transformed into something like a narrator, a commentator, detached from the drama, who mediates between the audience and the fictional world of the play. Shakespeare's chorus in *Henry V*, or that of Anouilh in his version of *Antigone* are typical.

The Greek chorus has in some respects been a difficult element for modern directors and audiences to deal with. Or had been until relatively recently, but as a result of a burgeoning interest in things communal and the idea of theatre as ritual, not to speak of the legacy of the 1960s and the influence of such practitioners as Richard Schechner, the chorus has come back into focus. This interest is also reflected in a renewed prominence for Euripides' *Bacchae*, a play which historically had been neglected, compared with the stage histories of, say, Oedipus, Medea and Phaedra. Schechner's own 1969 production, its influence signalled by the collection of essays, *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the New Millennium*,<sup>9</sup> and new versions like Wole Soyinka's African *Bacchae*,<sup>10</sup> put the chorus at the centre of the play, as both a political and aesthetic response to the individualist thrust and 'character' focus of more conventional theatre. This view tends to assume a conception of the chorus as somehow representative of the community, including the audience, and one means among others of ultimately dissolving the boundaries between stage and auditorium, achieving 'catharsis' or closure, even a quasi-religious experience, perhaps rendering the negative suffering of the protagonist into the positive of sacrifice and the triumph of the community over the individual.

However, the shape of tragedy as I see it does not support such a neo-Nietzschian view. The chorus is a 'character', invariably showing the same limitations of perception and knowledge that distinguish other characters from the audience. Of the choruses we have most are characterised as groups normally marginalised in fifth century Greek society and so would have spoken with no particular social or political authority.<sup>11</sup> And although it is generally the

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<sup>9</sup> E.Hall, F.Macintosh & A.Wrigley, eds. Oxford: OUP, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*. New York: Norton, 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Out of a total of 33 plays 20 have female choruses, many of them slaves or servants, 11 male and 2 (both Aeschylus) female deities. This does not reflect the predominantly male citizen composition of the contemporary audience.

case that Euripidean and Sophoclean choruses do express conventional views and feelings about the events they witness, they function principally to give an emotional underpinning to the plot, sometimes in harmony with what might be expected of an audience and sometimes not. The third stasimon of *Oedipus the King* (1089-1109), mentioned above, is a case in point, although after the play's crucial revelation in the next episode the chorus take up the emotional baton and from the fourth stasimon (1188-1222) until the end are emotionally at one with the theatre audience. But there is no sense of a resolution or closure to the tragic trauma; rather a shared knowledge of the fact that there can't be.<sup>12</sup> The important point is that however conventional a chorus might sound, in either its feelings or judgements, it is part of the fictional world, part of the interplay of perspectives that confronts an audience.

The broad shape of tragedy arises out of the dramatic relation between stage and audience. In the first instance Greek tragedy reflects its social and religious origins and a view of the world that places humanity precariously in the context of a natural (and divine) world that is infinitely powerful and functions according to non-human principles. If, as Aristotle says, tragedy is "an imitation not of men, but of action and life, – of happiness and misery,"<sup>13</sup> then it is an imitation (perhaps we should say, representation) of interaction between human characteristics that move individuals to action and the non-human characteristics that drive the wider world (ie, the gods). The tragic stage makes the invisible world of the gods visible, or at least traceable through a pattern of action that manifests itself through the visible, human world. And if happiness and misery are the subjects, the focus is on how these are experienced. The human world is confined to fleeting impressions of the present, corrupted memories of the past and a future that consists only of hope or fear, because nothing else can be known about it. Only the gods have that sort of knowledge. That is the condition of the tragic stage, down on which an audience looks from the relative security of their wider, if still imperfect knowledge of the world of the play.

This is the framework of Tragedy within which human experience is given significance. Those forces, natural or divine, exist beyond the limitations of humanity, but manifest themselves through it. For the Greeks, they were gods; for Shakespeare the pervasive presence of evil made visible in the witches of *Macbeth*, or the machinations of Iago, Edmund or Richard III; for Samuel Beckett, a void, made manifest through the increasingly desperate sense of isolation that besets his characters.

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<sup>12</sup> For an alternative view see Charles Segal. "Catharsis, Audience and Closure in Greek Tragedy." In Silk. ed. (1996) 149-72.

<sup>13</sup> *Poetics* 1450a 10-11.

Human emotions are not those of the gods. The hope and fear that characterise human perception are, necessarily, the engines of action; distorted knowledge leads to mistaken action (Aristotle's *hamartia*) and to tragedy. The pity and fear<sup>14</sup> that Aristotle found so central to the idea of tragedy are characteristic of human action. When Oedipus asks the shepherd why he saved a condemned child only for it to suffer the most horrible tragedy when an adult, his answer is, "I pitied it." And so he makes his contribution to Apollo's pitiless justice. Similarly, it is pity for his citizens that sets Oedipus on the road to his terrible discovery, and pity that moves Teiresias to attempt to hide what could not be hidden from Oedipus. On the other hand, when Artemis tells Hippolytus that she is sorry to lose such an ardent admirer, she expresses no sense of pity, but a sense of *dike*, of justice, an almost mechanical restoring of the balance, that is impervious to the suffering of any individual caught up in the process, and exemplified in her promise to make one of Aphrodite's acolytes suffer in return. It is Agave's crazed inability to hear her son's cry for pity, and so to recognise him for who he is, that allows her to dismember him on behalf of Dionysus.

This last points to a crucial distinction between human and divine values, particularly the notion of 'justice', which is a pervasive theme throughout Greek tragedy. Euripides' Hecuba makes the point most clearly when she argues to an immovable Odysseus, who behaves with god-like emotional detachment, that if necessity requires a sacrifice, it should be Helen, not her innocent daughter Polyxena. Her distinction is between justice that is *fair* and distinguishes between personal innocence and guilt, (qualitative justice, if you like) and justice that is mere impersonal restoration of the balance, regardless of individuals; quantitative justice. Such a distinction is, I think, the culmination of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

## The Playwrights

Greek tragedy flourished, mainly in Athens, for a relatively brief period, historically, and of the hundreds, if not thousands, of plays written between 530

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle's word, *phobos*, is most often translated as 'fear'. However, in the context of emotions expressed through action, eg, the spectacle of a mutilated Oedipus or Hippolytus, or the horrors related by various messengers, the word 'horror' seems more appropriate. In some respects it seems that the concept of fear experienced by an audience doesn't really make sense, and may be a relic of the neoclassical notion that tragic fear induced in an audience will lead them to avoid bad things and generally behave well.

BC<sup>15</sup> and the end of the fifth century, only 34 survive more or less complete. And these few represent the work of only three playwrights among many. There is clearly much that we don't know about the breadth and depth of this dramatic art in its native habitat. However, those we do have demonstrate over a period of about 70 years<sup>16</sup> a general shift in focus and differences of individual style and technique within the rather fixed confines of literary and theatrical convention.

The Greek drama was performed as part of a religious festival. The importance of the religious context must not be underestimated, but one must also beware of overestimating it. In contrast to various paradramatic rites and pageants found in other traditional societies, Greek drama is distinguished by its secularity. Drama developed out of ritual at a time when most of Greek society underwent a transition from a dominant rural aristocratic society to a dominant urban democratic social formation and the traditional pieties began to be replaced with a civic ideology suited to the new social structure.<sup>17</sup>

In emphasising the secularity of Greek tragedy within its religious context of performance, Csapo and Slater are underpinning the 'dramatic' nature of the event as opposed to ritual significance. Though part of a ritual (the religious festivals of the Dionysia or the Lenea) that celebrates or acknowledges the order of divine and civic law and custom, the dramas offer representations of breakdown of that order, tragic and comic, which are sanctioned by and articulated through the conventional occasion. On the other hand, the plays themselves put their stories in a world thickly populated with gods, some of whom actually appear on the stage. To that extent Greek tragedy is religious; at one level they are all about the interaction between men and gods. We should not, either, regard the pantheon of gods with their various fields of expertise as mere metaphors. On the stage they are representations (as a statue or a painting would be) of entities that are normally invisible to mortal eyes. And, as I have suggested, even when they don't appear on the stage, as in *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King* and *Hecuba*, you can see where they have been. The shift in focus that happens through this complex mixture of the religious and secular comes about through a gradual shift in the balance between religious and human values; from, to put it simply, Aeschylus' focus on wilful human folly that sets in train a sequence of events beyond its control, through Sophocles' confirmation of the cruelty and grandeur of the world, yet the possibility of human greatness within the limits of human frailty, to Euripides' focus on the intrinsic value of human

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<sup>15</sup> The date of the first dramatic competitions at the newly established Festival of Dionysus in Athens, reputedly won by Thespis.

<sup>16</sup> From c.472 for Aeschylus' earliest extant play, *Persians*, to 401 for the posthumous production of Sophocles' last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*.

<sup>17</sup> Csapo & Slater (1995) 103.



relationships. It's a new, more 'humanistic' set of values and a new focus on the human institutions, marriage, family, politics, etc, that embody them.

Our two playwrights, therefore, while sharing in general terms a view of the world and the way it ticks, express a degree of individual vision that is reflected in aspects of their dramatic techniques, the manner in which they construct the dramatic rhetoric of their plays.

Sophocles' three 'Theban' plays, so called, are not a unified trilogy. They were written over a span of some 36 years, *Antigone* the earliest (c.442), though the last in the narrative sequence, followed by *Oedipus the King* (c.436-26) and *Oedipus at Colonus*, produced after his death in 401. However, taken together, the three plays present a coherent and sombre vision. Firstly, the laws of the universe are fixed and inexorable, as are the gods who facilitate them. Apollo stands behind every event, as Oedipus reveals to the chorus when they ask why he so mutilated himself: "Apollo, Apollo brought it down; but my own hand struck me" (*Oedipus the King* 1330-1). The eternal works through the ephemeral. Sophocles appears to present his world through a kind of cinematic lens. In the wide view is a universe that is vast, cold, inhuman and terrifying, where invisible gods are ever-present. The mid-view is the most positive, wherein human society can boast achievements almost as miraculous as the gods', a fruitful marriage of human ingenuity and nature's bounty, celebrated by the choruses of *Antigone* (333-375) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (668-719). The narrow focus is on the individual, whose brief existence is dominated by his capacity to feel, and, of course, his knowledge that his stay is a temporary one. Hence even pleasure is painful in the end:

The man who clings to more than a  
Moderate portion of life is a fool:  
The days pile up on the way towards  
Grief and the pleasures you knew  
Are not there when you've limped along  
Longer than you should. But relief  
Comes to all when Hades descends  
Without bridesong or lyre or dance  
And death is the end.  
(*Oedipus at Colonus* 1211-22)

The tragic paradox, however, is in the coincidence of levels one and three, in the possibility of individual greatness, when, even as they are crushed, an Antigone or an Oedipus can seem, at least briefly, to stand above it all. But if our moral sense is touched by the injustice of what happens, by the fact that the rhetoric of the plays has induced a powerful sympathy for these figures and yet

they suffer, Sophocles never allows his audience to question the gods, to bring them into the frame of judgement, but simply to accept that state of affairs as a fact of life.

Sophocles' dramatic technique is simple but effective. In both *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King* he uses dramatic irony to bring the plot to a point of tragic finality, in the former with Creon's capitulation to Tereisias' thunderous expression of the divine will (1096-1114) and in the latter with the shepherd's revelation of Oedipus' history (1171-87). What follows in both plays is an elaborate poetic statement of the tragic state of the world, in which pity and horror are left to hang like exposed nerve-ends, allowing the audience to both see it and feel it. There is no irony in the conclusions of these plays. *Oedipus at Colonus* is a little different. In some respects it is less a tragedy than a play about tragedy: Oedipus himself goes beyond the reach of tragedy, leaving the other characters behind in the quotidian world. There is a reflexive irony at the end as they all move off back to Thebes with some faint hope of reconciliation and an end to the cycle, but, as the audience would have known, the next chapter in the story is Antigone's and we are all back where we started.

Euripides' tragedies have a different tone. He was felt to be more 'realistic' in his portrayal of people; as Aristotle noted, "Sophocles says he made men as they should be; whereas Euripides made them as they are."<sup>18</sup> Few if any of his characters achieve the kind of grandeur of Sophocles' major figures, and his tragic world, while no less harsh and unforgiving than Sophocles', seems also more capricious. This is at least in part due to his dramatic technique, a different kind of irony and a different way of managing an audience's awareness of the emotional experience. Within the conventional shape of Greek tragedy, Euripides inserts a structural principle of juxtaposition. This principle works on a number of levels, both thematic, in that it asserts a three-level view of the world, similar to Sophocles' (the wider, god-populated universe, the world of human institutions and the emotional world of the individual); and functional, as a means of manipulating his audience's responses.

More so than his older colleague, Euripides puts gods on the stage. They provide a context for action – quite literally in the case of *Hippolytus*, where the action takes place between statues of Aphrodite and Artemis, the two contending goddesses who drive the plot of the play. Unlike the invisible Apollo of Sophocles' plays, these divinities, while no less powerful and ruthless, are explicitly contrasted with the feelings and actions of their human subordinates, and they do not come off very well. They are kept in the frame, so to speak, and the non- (or in-) human values that they exhibit are juxtaposed to the emotional

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<sup>18</sup> *Poetics* 1460b 34-6.

lives and often confused ethics of the human players. But we are left in no doubt where our sympathies lie.

And where divinities enter more directly into the action, as Dionysus does in the *Bacchae* and *Medea* at the conclusion of her play (her human attributes have been stripped away by Jason's betrayal and the (semi-) divine grand-daughter of the Sun reacts with characteristic vigour), the juxtaposition of two inimical sets of values is made quite explicit. What the gods do in response to human transgression may be 'just', but it is not human, as Cadmus suggests to an uncomprehending Dionysus:

CAD: We beg you, Dionysus, we have been wrong.

DION: You were slow to see. When you should have, you did not.

CAD: We understand. But this is harsh.

(*Bacchae* 1345-7)

Which looks like a bit of an understatement.

The structural principle is most evident in plays like *Hippolytus* and *Hecuba*, both of which have been criticised at various times for being structurally flawed, for falling into two halves which, as far as the plot is concerned, appear only tenuously related. The point is that Euripides is less concerned with consequences as such, or the fact that necessity (whether Sophocles' *moira*, or the simple reality of divine omnipotence or human power over others) will produce a particular outcome, than with a variety of possible perspectives on what happens. Thus we have boxes within boxes, where actions, whatever their causal relation, more importantly reflect on each other. Within the frame of the goddesses' pique (the first box), Phaedra struggles with her passion and decides to act to preserve her 'character' as wife, mother, queen, and Hippolytus, hearing from the nurse of her feelings for him, roundly condemns her, and all women (the second box); Phaedra executes a plan (and herself) to achieve this, falsely accusing Hippolytus as she does so, and Theseus, stricken by his wife's suicide, condemns Hippolytus to death (the third box); Hippolytus, innocent, is destroyed. Within each of these boxes is a mix of ethical and emotional confusion, where innocence and guilt are inextricably tangled and the audience is ruthlessly pushed backwards and forwards between ethical condemnation and emotional sympathy.

This is not the sort of irony that Sophocles indulges in. In both *Hecuba* and *Medea* Euripides manipulates powerful sympathy for the two women whose worlds are turned upside down by betrayal. Then he turns the tables on his audience in order to juxtapose their feeling and their judgement. *Bacchae* is perhaps the most sophisticated example of this rhetorical device. Further, with Dionysus on stage as manipulator of the plot, Euripides' ironic structure shifts Greek tragedy to a potentially different sphere. The structure of *Bacchae* is the

precursor of a comic mode, in which the clever manipulator manages the plot and exploits his special relationship with the audience. The difference is that Dionysus' descendents have lost their divinity and joined the ranks of those they make fun of. In comedy we can laugh at the cleverness of the slave who fools his betters, confident in the knowledge that life will resume its normal rhythm at the end. Dionysus allows you no such confidence.

In general terms the two dramatists may be said to share the world-view of their time, but within the limits of the artistic conventions of their milieu, they express it differently. What they share is a vision of humanity founded on the reality of emotional life in a world that does not share the experience. They differ, at least in part, in tone and style. Sophocles' high seriousness and broad sweep, and his ability to adjust the focus down to the most intimate human experience, make him the George Eliot (or Thomas Hardy) of fifth-century Greece; Euripides' irony, his sharp adjustments of focus and feeling, would have made him proud to have been the author of *Vanity Fair*.

# INTRODUCTION: OEDIPUS THE KING

## ‘SAD FORM OF ALL OUR FATE’

### **The idea of a Text**

Presenting any classic drama to a modern audience is a challenge. Presenting the likes of *Oedipus*, *Hippolytus*, *Hamlet* or *Lear*, or the handful of other plays that represent the core of a theatrical and literary tradition stiffens the challenge still further. Such plays are generally understood as literature first and only secondarily as theatrical artifacts. It is usually as written texts that they are experienced, and the significance that we attribute to them derives from the same analytical processes that are applied to other literary forms. Given such a history, a couple of inferences can be drawn.

Firstly, as landmarks in the history of ideas, these plays have become encrusted with meanings and associations which carry with them expectations about their significance that go far beyond anything their authors may have understood. Oedipus and Freud go hand in hand in a manner quite alien to anything that Sophocles and his Athenian audience could have known. Lear has been a source of moral lessons that Shakespeare, from his Renaissance perspective, might have found quite bizarre. And the very conception of a tragedy has undergone countless permutations ever since Aristotle accorded it critical notice. Insofar as these texts have become part of the texture of our ideas about the world, any interpreter foolhardy enough to risk presenting them on a stage has to confront a host of pre-judgements and expectations.

Secondly, these plays are great *literature*. Their longevity is due, first, to the obvious fact that they have been recorded in written form, and, secondly, to their capacity to withstand the critical scrutiny that literature of all genres must undergo. Though written to be performed, they were written for stages and audiences very different from our own. And if they maintain their power in performance, it is not simply because they are theatrical as well as literary artifacts. Both stages and pages are subject to change in the way that we look at them and in the assumptions we make about what we expect to see. But the

stage, rather more than the page, is subject to the pressures of the moment, to conventions and expectations that reflect the more localised characteristics of a society: its sense of community and entertainment; its conception of dramatic illusion and style; its technology; even its economy. Not all dramatic texts survive these changes (try, for example, to produce much of Restoration or eighteenth century tragedy credibly on a modern stage), but some do. There must, therefore, be some quality, some characteristic in the texts of those, like *Oedipus*, that survives the test of credibility, something which transcends translation into another theatrical environment.

As any editor will confirm, all texts are variable, and dramatic texts especially so. Besides the usual interference of editors, printers, translators, even authors with changeable minds, dramatic texts undergo the interpretation and embellishment of directors and actors before the final product is put before an audience. Even so, it is the text that is the foundation upon which theatrical success is laid; or rather, particular qualities of text that embody both the general characteristics of good literature and the specific characteristics of the dramatic genre. In spite of appearances, and of the fact that *theatre*, as the name implies, is a visual medium, mature drama derives its essential qualities from the fact that it is, in the first instance, a written form:

...Greek drama, though orally performed, was composed as a written text and in the west was the first verbal genre, and for centuries the only verbal genre, to be controlled completely by writing.<sup>1</sup>

The peculiar qualities of this form are manifested through plot and character.

The development of a complex plot of the kind described by Aristotle in the *Poetics* arises from dramatists' ability to shape a series of events into a tight climactic structure, to transform the events of a 'story' into a complex and often ironic 'plot'. Rather than a collection of episodes which have only a loose structural relationship and a more or less exclusive focus on events that occur within each one, the dramatic plot takes its episodes and juxtaposes them so that their significance arises from their interaction. Scenes are not self-contained episodes, and their placement is crucial to the sense and effect of the whole, even in plays as apparently loosely constructed as Shakespeare's. This structural character conceivably has an effect on the use of language; that is, whether 'poetic' or naturalistic, there is potential for the intricate and reflective vocabulary and imagery that drama shares with other literary genres. Thus irony is generated. Although irony is not exclusive to drama, it is an essential

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<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word*. London: Methuen. 1982. 142. This statement is, no doubt, an oversimplification, but it does point to something significant about the way in which dramatic tragedy is conceived.

characteristic of tragedy. And *Oedipus* is the Greek play in which plot-generated irony is realised in its most sophisticated form. This is the foundation of tragic effect, of the manipulation of emotional content and expression which determines the kind of audience response that distinguishes tragedy.

Secondly, character. It is axiomatic that tragic characters are complex, or 'rounded':

The first approximations we have of the round character are in the Greek tragedies, the first verbal genre controlled entirely by writing. These deal still with essentially public leaders rather than with the ordinary, domestic characters that can flourish in the novel, but Sophocles' *Oedipus* and, even more, Pentheus and Agave and Iphigenia and Orestes in Euripides' tragedies are incomparably more complex and interiorly anguished than any of Homer's characters. In orality-literacy perspectives, what we are dealing with here is the increasing interiorization of the world opened up by writing.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the place to discuss the 'tragic hero', the 'tragic flaw', or 'greatness of soul'. Let us simply say that the interior anguish experienced and expressed by tragic characters points to a more sophisticated psychology than is evident in the characters of older, oral literary forms. It arises, not from any analysis or commentary offered by the author, but from the same structural characteristics that give us tragic irony. There would, obviously, be no tragic effect without characters, but they, in the end, cannot be distinguished from the structure of events that involve them: they grow out of that soil as the mythical first citizens of Thebes grew out of theirs. The complex dramatic plot lends to the concept of character a correspondingly complex range of perspectives and the creation of an intricate relationship between the story, the characters and the audience: it creates dramatic distance.<sup>3</sup> In spite of the tendency of the Greek, and particularly the Sophoclean, chorus to generalise about the world they live in, there is nothing resembling a narrator who speaks directly to an audience. There is no authoritative figure who tells the audience what to think and what to feel. Theatrically this might not always appear to be the case (who else does the chorus speak to when there is no-one else on stage?), but in the more significant context of available knowledge of events and of perspectives on feelings about those events, the chorus is invariably distinguishable from the audience. The effect is rather like that of a Shakespearian soliloquy, which may evoke sympathy from an audience, but is uttered from the unique perspective of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ong (1982) 152.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H.D.F. Kitto's suggestion that Sophocles' introduction of the third actor is a means of creating complex perspectives on situations and on principal characters. *Greek Tragedy*. London: Methuen, 1961. 151-8.

character involved. David Bain makes the point by analysing the nature of direct address in a Shakespearian chorus. He concludes:

This [the opening Chorus of *Henry I*] with its second person plural verbs, first person plural adjectives and pronouns, and final appeal for the audience's favour inhabits a different world from that of Greek tragedy. Shakespeare is the heir of another tradition, or rather the confluence of two traditions which both admit of address to the audience, the renaissance tradition transmitting New Comedy through the medium of Plautus and Terence to the modern stage and the native tradition of the mystery cycles.<sup>4</sup>

It should be added that such direct address is rare in Shakespeare, and absent altogether from his tragedies. There are, however, 'choric figures' in Shakespeare's tragedies. These are not choruses in the Greek sense, but characters with special features which derive from native English traditions.<sup>5</sup>

The chorus will be discussed at greater length below. However, they are only one facet of Greek tragedy and, though important, not the one which bears the greatest burden of tragic effect. That is the prerogative of the major characters. It will suffice for the moment to say that the complex perspectives that form the basis of rounded characterisation are a consequence of the potential of written forms to manipulate the relationship between a 'text' (using the term very loosely, to include the written object and the stage presentation that derives from it) and an audience, to generate irony and dramatic distance.

If the idea of a text is emphasised here, it is to lay a foundation for the discussion that follows. The dramatic text is important, not merely as words written down, but as something that is conceived according to the principles and potential of written literature. Other theatrical traditions may have written texts, like those of the English mystery plays, but their origins are significantly different from those of the Greek tragedies. Further, they maintain many of the characteristics of oral literature written down, and their theatricality is focussed more on emblematic display than on depth of characterisation.<sup>6</sup> It is on the

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<sup>4</sup> David Bain. "Some Reflections on the Illusion in Greek Tragedy." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 34 (1987) 13.

<sup>5</sup> See, L. Scragg. "Iago... Vice or Devil?" *Shakespeare Survey*. 21 (1968) 53-65; and H.W. Love. "Seeing the Difference: Good and Evil in the world of *Macbeth*", *AUMLA*. 72 (1989) 204-28.

<sup>6</sup> It should be emphasised that any particular work takes its place in a hypothetical spectrum from oral narrative to dramatic form, thus exhibiting, according to its particular traditions and period, degrees of 'oral' and 'writerly' qualities. English mystery plays, for example, do show some elements of dramatic form, but there is a long way to go before the flowering of seventeenth century English drama.



premise of the primacy of the dramatic text that discussion of the stage, the significance of experience and emotion and the translation will be based. But first, some background to the play of *Oedipus the King*.

### **Background: the Play and the Story**

The story of Oedipus is well known, and any one of a number of variants of it was probably known to Sophocles' original Athenian audience. Two lost epic poems, the *Thebais* and the *Oedipodeia*, recounted the story of the Sphinx, and of Oedipus, Jocasta and their children. Odysseus, in Hades for the duration of book XI of the *Odyssey*, encounters Jocasta (Epicaste) amongst a host of mournful shades. Aeschylus produced a Theban tetralogy, including the *Laius*, *Oedipus*, *Seven against Thebes* and a satyr play, the *Sphinx*. Only the *Seven* has survived. Other tragedians, Euripides and Theodectes, also used the Oedipus story.<sup>7</sup>

Sophocles, however, did not merely recycle the story. He modified details and shifted emphases; he restructured it to give it a character and a significance that earlier versions did not share. To that extent his play and his plot were new to his audience. Rather than presenting a series of events in the cycle of myth, or, like Aeschylus, pursuing the motif of a family curse (the tragic sequence begins with Laius' *disobedience* toward Apollo's injunction not to father a child, and follows the consequences through to the final expiation of sin and extinction of the family), Sophocles concentrates on the dynamics of character in an unprecedented manner. He uses the story of prophecy, parricide and incest as the context of action, rather than as the action itself. This is a significant distinction because it allows us to see how and why the play is structured as it is. It allows us to see the dramatic principles that underlie the creation of character and the kind of significance to be attributed to the nexus of emotions that we call 'tragic'. It also offers actors an analytical handle on the characters they have to represent.

It is perhaps too easy to see the motifs of parricide, incest and fate as the substance of Sophocles' play. We have been encouraged to do so by innumerable schools of thought over many years. That *Oedipus* presents these motifs and, by means of the characters' responses to them, tells us something about what they might mean, and what fifth century Greeks might have expected them to mean, is not in dispute. And the responses that they evoked then are largely the responses they might be expected to evoke now: moral and social evaluations of parricide and incest have changed little in the history of

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<sup>7</sup> See A. Lesky. *A History of Greek Literature* (trans. J. Willis and C. de Heer) London: Methuen, 1966. 79-80.

western society, though the notion of fate, of a predetermined course of life for individuals, is perhaps a rather more vexed question. Clearly, if we thought parricide and incest trivial or funny, it would be difficult to regard *Oedipus* as anything other than a historical curiosity. What has changed over time is the way that writers, and dramatists in particular, have treated these motifs, and, where the story of Oedipus is the vehicle for them, the relative significance accorded to each. Richard McCabe pinpoints the source of their lasting relevance:

The incest motif may thus be developed as a metaphor or analogy for any number of human problems related to changing concepts of natural, positive or divine law. Wherever desire of any kind is opposed by prohibition, wherever scepticism erodes received doctrines, the theme of incest may emerge as a powerful dramatic focus for the resulting conflict since it involves the very nature of man as a political animal – ‘political’, that is, in the widest sense of the term: the attitude of the *polis* to the proper relationship between governors and governed, law and licence.<sup>8</sup>

The focus on incest as a vehicle for exploring ‘law and licence’ has undergone a shift from Sophocles’ presentation of it in *Oedipus*. Rather than dramatising incestuous *fear* and the trauma of revelation, the focus shifts to a dramatisation of incestuous *desire*, conscious or unconscious, consummated or not. Dryden’s and Lee’s version of *Oedipus*, for example, has the protagonist walk and talk in his sleep in Act II, invoking “Vultures [to] gnaw out my incestuous heart,” and momentarily to imagine, while embracing Jocasta, that he holds Merope in his arms. This is a psychological interest more akin to Euripides’ treatment of the incest theme in *Hippolytus*, than to anything in Sophocles’ play. There is no sense in the latter of conscious or unconscious desire, but simply the fact that the relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta is illicit, and so brings down the wrath of the gods. We are concerned with pollution rather than guilt, and Oedipus is the unfortunate cause of it all, at least as far as the human actors of the play are concerned – the gods we will return to later. Such a distortion of nature is a collapse of order and the values that make society (including family) coherent: the man who is son *and* husband, father *and* brother, has no identity in the scheme of things and must be purged, whatever his degree of culpability.

The parricide motif functions similarly. Given the fact that we are concerned with kings and princes, the guardians of civil and political order, the untimely death of a father might be seen to have more than personal

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<sup>8</sup> Richard A. McCabe. *Incest, Drama and Nature’s Law 155 -1700* . Cambridge: CUP. 1993. 25.

significance. Laius was, as Oedipus is, 'father' to his people, as much as he was father to his child: Oedipus' reiteration of *O Tekna, O Paidēs* (children) to the citizens of Thebes is hardly accidental. Oedipus is, as the chorus continually remind us, a good king, and he was, as the exodos strongly suggests, a good father. And to all appearances he had been an exemplary son. Sophocles seems to have been at pains to separate the crime of parricide from any kind of motivation that Oedipus might have had for doing anything. He doesn't kill his father because he wants the throne; he kills his father unwittingly and then, with all apparent propriety, is given the throne as a reward for saving the city. The significance of the death of Laius is not in why he died, or even, necessarily, what specific person did the deed, but that the father of the man and of the city has suffered murder, and Justice, a 'law born of heaven,' demands that a culprit be found and punished. Without justice the order of things is distorted and nature is out of joint.

Clearly, the parricide and incest motifs are more intimately related at a deeper level, and as Oedipus' investigation progresses the emphasis shifts almost imperceptibly from one to the other. The movement is from public suffering to private tragedy, but never to the extent that one displaces the other because the significance of this private tragedy is fixed firmly in the public domain. It is in this sense that both incest and parricide provide the context of the tragedy, rather than its substance.

Fate is the most intractable of the trio. Tragedies of fate are commonplace, from the Greeks through to the present, whether predestination takes the form of some arbitrary fiat of the gods, Calvinistic original sin, psychological determinism, or the social determinism of more recent times. But, dramatically, fate is problematic. If drama, and tragedy in particular, relies on characters who act, who make decisions and choices that are psychologically credible, then its effect is compromised by characters who are mere cyphers for some abstract principle. And Oedipus, caged in by prophecies as he is, has been considered at various times to be the victim of fate, *par excellence*. Such a view is Senecan rather than Sophoclean: "...it was Seneca rather than Sophocles who transformed the myth into a thorough-going tragedy of fate, and it is Seneca Renaissance dramatists imitate when they employ the incest theme to similar effect."<sup>9</sup>

Fate, however, should be distinguished from probability. That Oedipus' incest and parricide are predetermined is an indisputable fact; that he should, because he is who he is, act and suffer as he does is a dramatic necessity. The internal logic of dramatic character and action necessitates, not a particular outcome, but an outcome that is psychologically consistent and

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<sup>9</sup> McCabe (1993) 75.

credible. This is part of what it means to talk of a ‘rounded’ character. The notion that ‘Character is Destiny’ is much older than Sophocles, but the form in which he expresses it in this play takes it beyond simple determinism and invests it with a moral dimension, or at least a moral complexity, that is reflected in the achievement of a tragic effect. I use the word ‘moral’ advisedly. That is, as members of an audience we are enabled to evaluate, emotionally and intellectually, the motives, actions and experiences of the characters. An act of evaluation implies some element of choice or responsibility on the part of those being evaluated. If Oedipus is not responsible for incest and parricide, he is responsible for his motives and methods of discovery and for what he does after he has unearthed them. A tragedy of fate leaves little room for this kind of response – no evaluation, merely the vicarious experience of “blasting Fates... quaking terror of Disease, Wasting and black Pestilence, and mad Despair.” Seneca’s Oedipus rails against fate because, lacking stoic detachment, he fights against it. If his ‘crime’ is nasty, the world is nasty, and the Roman Oedipus is hardly able to rise above it.

### **Dramatic and Theatrical Machinery**

When a play appears on a stage it is driven by two, usually complementary, forces: the dramatic and theatrical machines. The first consists of elements derived from the text, like language, structure and the principles of action and character; the second consists of the features of an actual stage and a real audience. As dramatic texts are usually written with a theatre and an audience in mind, these things are likely to be reflected in the text itself, as, for example, in a modern, naturalistic play, the stage may be described in great detail in stage directions. These details are not extraneous to the dramatic character of such plays, but are explicit expressions of the theatrical machinery that is implicit, but no less important, in plays of other periods that do not have them. It is also the case that a text written for one kind of theatre may be produced in a context that distorts it out of all recognition – a common enough occurrence in modern productions of plays from other periods which tends to reflect somebody’s judgement of audience expectations; a repackaging for today’s market. In practice it is impossible to avoid this to some degree, given the fact that re-creation of theatres of past periods is difficult, and audiences, impossible. How far the link between dramatic and theatrical machinery can be stretched before it breaks will always be a matter of dispute. It is with this link in mind that I will discuss the stage, action and characterisation and the chorus of *Oedipus*.

Stages, as one might expect, represent places. These may be specific or unspecific; they may be more or less realistic or symbolic; they may reflect some qualities of characters in the play, or they may invoke atmosphere or feelings that the audience is invited to enter into, to ‘empathise’ with. The space in which actors move may represent a conventional world that is relevant to the play, or it may be so shaped as to suggest a universe beyond that which the audience actually sees, but which is a necessary context for what they do see. Such was Shakespeare’s stage and so too, in a less obvious way, was Sophocles’.

Greek theatre was, by our standards, only marginally naturalistic, a reflection at one level of a difference in available technology. Its sheer size and capacity, and its being an outdoor theatre, precluded the intricate effects that can be achieved in an enclosed modern theatre. The most prominent features of the stage, the *skene*, the *orchestra* and the two side entrances (*eisodoi*), offered relatively little scope for the kind of representational detail that we might expect from a modern stage. Only the first, the structure, which in this case would represent the facade of Oedipus’ palace, could be suitably decorated. It might have been quite elaborate, in order to reflect the stature of its occupants. The *orchestra* was essentially an unspecific space, the territory of the chorus, but which might have been continuous with the small area in front of the *skene* where most of the action took place. That this place represents a Theban street or square in front of the palace is simply inferred from what the characters say. Such a minimal degree of specificity is all that is necessary to begin to make sense of the action.

As important as these details are as an immediate setting for the action, their relation to the wider significance of the stage is just as important for the sense of the plot as a whole. The *eisodoi* lead to a greater world outside, to Corinth, to Delphi, to a world populated by gods and people whose actions affect the protagonists. This is the larger world from which the smaller world of the stage takes its definition. Some of the people from this other world appear on the stage (Teiresias, the Corinthian messenger and the shepherd), but the gods do not, as they do in the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides. However, their presence, as from an unseen world beyond the immediate perception of the protagonists, is almost as palpable. The stage is ‘present’, spatially and temporally; the world outside is past, future and beyond, interpenetrating with the present<sup>10</sup>. And the audience exists in the wider world, knowing more and

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Peter Arnott: “One of the most powerful aspects of *Oedipus the King* is the way in which past action is created for us, simultaneously with present action: past and present continually intertwine, illuminate each other and entangle, until they meet in the dreadful

seeing more than the actors in the drama. They have, for the duration of the play, a god-like view of men and women who endure all that Fate, the gods and chance can throw at them. They can see patterns of significance emerge, which are not apparent to the actors, and which would not be apparent to themselves in their ordinary lives outside the theatre. The theatre enables them to distinguish the subjective world of the actors from the objective world outside, and so to interpret events on the stage from a privileged point of view.

The distinction between the inner and outer spheres is a principle that underlies the mechanics of the plot, and which generates dramatic distance. The characters are contained within the 'present' of the stage, into which the outside intrudes in the forms of a plague, of prophecies, oracles and messengers' tales, all of which have to be interpreted. From their privileged perspective the audience knows, if not the precise meanings of things, what is true and what is doubtful. When Teiresias tells Oedipus that "You are this land's pollution," they know he speaks the truth and can observe Oedipus' understandable incredulity, and even sympathise with his anger and frustration. When Jocasta casts doubts on oracles, they know she must be mistaken because, however confusingly expressed, oracles must be true. The audience can watch Jocasta interpret the Corinthian's story in one way, and Oedipus in quite another, and know which of them is deluded. Perhaps they shake their heads in disbelief as Oedipus dismisses his wife as a snob and rhapsodises about being "Fortune's boy." The source of the irony that is essential to tragic effect is thus built into the theatrical machinery as much as it is built into the structure of the plot. The two are complementary.

## The Prologue

The structure of *Oedipus* is relatively simple and economical, consisting of six scenes separated by choric songs. The first, the Prologue, sets the scene and the background to the action, and the following episodes present a series of conflicts between Oedipus and other characters until, at the end of the fourth, the tragic revelation is complete. The final scene (*exodos*) is curious in some respects. It adds very little, if anything, to the action; the plot, insofar as it consists of Oedipus' pursuit of the truth of his origins and Laius' death, has concluded with the shepherd's revelation. Its purpose is to complete the emotional structure of the play, not so much as a resolution of conflicting emotions, but as a clarification of them.