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1

Overview

Tragōidia in the democratic *theātron*

Tragedy has become quotidian—or at least ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic’ and ‘tragically’ have. In dozens of languages every day literally millions of people hear, read and speak those words and their equivalents, used to mean ‘sad’ or ‘unlucky’ or ‘regrettable’. Most of them probably have little or no idea that they are derived from a form of performance art launched in Athens just over 2,500 years ago—and there is no reason why they should. And in any case, to put it bluntly, why bother about that? Are there any good reasons for anyone, apart from some niche scholars and enthusiasts, to be interested in where and when and why *tragōidia* (as it was in Greek) came into being and flourished? It will hardly come as a surprise to learn that I believe there is. I am going to make a case for thinking that what happened all that time ago in such a very distant culture may still stimulate ideas about the value of tragedy and theatre in society—even perhaps about the strength of human creativity in facing up to the ubiquity of suffering.

The word ‘theatre’ also comes from the Greek: *theātron* first meant ‘the viewing-place’, and soon came to embrace both the

people in that space and the performances that were mounted there. This is not to claim that the ancient Greek etymology of the word somehow proves its primacy: there were other early theatrical traditions—in Egypt, China and India—and I am not in the dubious game of claiming who or where ‘came first’. The coverage of ‘theatre’ has, in any case, come through a long journey during which the range of performance events covered by the word has been capacious. And it has been radically opened up in recent times, especially through the ‘the bonfire of boundaries’, ignited some fifty years ago, which questioned whether there should any longer be any necessarily inbuilt requirements, distinctions or binaries. All the same, within this almost limitless swirl of applications, there persists—doesn’t there?—an epicentre-sense for ‘theatre’. In order to happen, the art form required and requires—requires, not just usually involves—a set of four linked conditions:

- (i) an organised event which
- (ii) gathers a public of spectators
- (iii) together with rehearsed performers
- (iv) who enact people other than themselves.

At least this will serve as a kind of working definition. I am going to make the case for believing that an annual festival event at Athens is where these phenomena first gelled. Further, that they did not exist in 510 BCE, or did so only in a rudimentary form, and that they did exist by 500. The whole business, if not actually invented in that decade, was radically advanced and coordinated during those few years. And, what is more, the performances that were launched then were *tragedies*. That means that the first theatre was to all intents and purposes the premiere of tragedy as well.

But not of comedy. The stepsister genre also goes back to fifth-century Athens, but the two did not coexist from the start. Comedy had quite different, and more folksy, roots, and was introduced into the theatre festival two decades or more after tragedy had become established. And it seems that it only became a ‘serious’ (so to speak) counterweight to tragedy in the last third of the century. So, while some passages of comedy are revealing for their bearing on early tragedy, they did not coexist as a pair right from the start. They always set out, too, to produce a very different experience in their audience. To put it very roughly, tragedy used the desire to weep to capture them, and draw them without restraint into feeling *with* the sufferings of its characters. Comedy, openly declaring its own ‘theatreness’, used the desire to laugh to attract its audience, setting up a knowing complicity, and often laughing *at* the characters—and at tragedy. It may not be irrelevant that humans are the only mortal creatures who weep and who laugh.

This same city-state of Athens also set up the first-ever constitution that has a documented claim to be called ‘democracy’. That revolution is firmly dated to the year 508, meaning that the epoch-making phenomena of tragedy and democracy emerged onto the scene hand in hand. That claim has an attractive ring to it, but it strikes unexpected dissonances under closer scrutiny. The convergent initiatives which gathered the newly democratic citizens in the newly constructed theatre space cannot possibly be coincidence, but the connections between them are far from straightforward. Why should the new political system have promoted, of all things, tragedy? Why these communal airings of conflict and distress? The organisational implications belong here in Part 1, but the larger questions about why the democracy promoted tragedy and what good it did for

people can only be confronted properly in Part 3, after looking at the actual playscripts that survive from the early years.

Tragic theatre through time

Tragedy as a form of theatrical performance has proved undeniably resilient. That claim holds good regardless of whether or not everything included under that label has any feature or quality in common (another question for the closing pages). Back at the start there was first the ‘golden age’ in fifth-century Athens, from which some playscripts, of first Aeschylus, and then of Sophocles and Euripides, still survive. Tragedy then remained firmly a prestige art form throughout the ancient Greek and Romano-Greek eras. It spread out quickly from Athens—this dissemination has been vividly compared to the wildfire spread of early cinema—and flourished creatively all across the far-flung Greek diaspora for some three centuries. Theatre, both tragedy and comedy, became as essential a marker of Greek culture as the gymnasium. So it makes sense that it was one of the first forms of literature to be adopted in the non-Greek city that during the second century BCE rapidly became the greatest power-centre in the Mediterranean world: Rome. Think of all those theatrical motifs in Roman wall-painting, including the iconic pair of tragic and comic masks.

Many tragedies, *tragoediae*, partly based on Greek models and partly adapted to the different culture, were composed and performed in Latin. By far the most important additions to the longer-run history are the ten plays preserved under the name of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who lived—and famously ended his life—in the mid-first century CE. While heavily indebted to the Greek classics, by then nearly half a millennium old, they are also quite different in tone, structuring and

philosophy. It is still an open question whether they were ever actually staged; and, if they were, how far that experience was ‘theatre’ in a sense that was recognisably like that of the Greeks of earlier centuries. Whatever the answers about Seneca, by the time of the later Roman empire, in both its Latin-speaking western and Greek-speaking eastern spheres, tragedies were generally encountered as educational reading rather than as an experience in communal life—more a thing of the past than of the present. But, even though seldom if ever performed complete, they went on being thought of as having that potential right up until the ‘end’ of classical antiquity—a long-drawn out process, but well under way by 500 CE. Up until then many of the Greek texts continued to be copied and read—nearly a thousand years after their first composition—as is proved by copies on papyrus from ancient rubbish-heaps and mummy-stuffing excavated in Egypt.

It is at this stage that tragedy encountered its greatest jeopardy in relation to cultural ideologies, especially the monotheistic faiths. During the next eight hundred years or so, the survival of classical poetic texts was at the mercy of Christian doctrine and practice, and tragedies, like nearly all pagan literature, were copied only sparsely. Most were irrecoverably lost, and of the various alleged ‘deaths’ of tragedy’ this was far the closest to a real extinction. Texts and interest in them only survived thanks to that most extraordinary ‘close shave’ through which knowledge of ancient Greek, along with many manuscripts, was conveyed to the west of Europe just before the advance of Ottoman power brought the Byzantine era and its culture in the east to an end. That is how the ancient Greek playscripts that are still around today were gradually rediscovered—some preserved in a single manuscript—then re-copied, and eventually printed.

During the fifteenth century tragedies, meaning first Seneca and then gradually the Greeks, began to be seriously read and discussed. Then in the next they were increasingly regarded as actually realisable in a theatre. Momentously, new tragedies began to be created and performed in the major European vernaculars, and the hibernating art form was reawakened, going on to flourish and to produce the most marvellous new manifestations. Tragedy was reborn—from Shakespeare to Schiller, Racine to Rita Dove. It is not to the point to debate what might or might not be called ‘tragedy’ (although I have my own opinions—what Chekhov labelled his ‘comedies’ I count among the greatest of all tragedies!) Theatre practitioners, and indeed theatre-readers, are at liberty to make of it whatever they find worth their while. What matters here is that there have been and are plays that aspire to be recognised as tragedies, some of them new, put on all the time all over the world. How many months go by without a new production of *Macbeth* or *The Cherry Orchard* or *The Crucible* opening in the world’s leading theatres? How many months without an ancient Greek tragedy in some form?

Even those who are inclined to think Greek tragedies do not deserve so much attention can’t deny their reach and resilience. Since the texts and translations were first printed and the first productions mounted in the early modern period—*Oedipus the King* (*Edipo re*) at the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza in 1585 was a landmark—their vigour has sometimes grown, sometimes receded, but they have never become moribund. Creative productions have, in fact, increased exponentially in recent times: the twentieth century saw many more than the nineteenth, especially in its last quarter; and the twenty-first has seen even more again. In various forms and transformations Greek tragedies have been more widely and frequently performed in the

last fifty years than in any comparable period since the second century BCE. And this holds good even without spreading the net to take in their multiplying presence in other art forms, including film, dance and novels. The spread of locations that have mounted Greek tragedies now reaches far beyond the formerly dominant cultures of Europe and North America. And they have also accommodated a vast range of audience demographics and of performance spaces and circumstances, including acting styles, music, movement and dance, levels of diction, degrees of naturalism or stylisation and more. Recent archiving reveals that in modern times they have been mounted in at least eighty countries (105 if touring productions are included) and in sixty-four languages. It seems clear that these plays from nearly two-and-a-half millennia ago still speak to many people of many kinds and from many cultures. They still move them, still make them think and respond.

Taking some bearings

Two leading threads run through this first part of this book. One is the relation of tragedy to preexisting traditions of storytelling in the Greek world. While vitally indebted to them, theatre did not merely develop them, but created a whole new mode of direct presentation through which the performers 'enacted people other than themselves.' I shall argue that theatre was not an evolution, but a revolution, and its directly physical presentation opened up a whole new relationship between the audience and the story world.

The second thread pulls together the actualities that had to be put in place for tragedy to come into being and develop. This compressed survey of the evidence, documentary and material, for the theatre-event encompasses such matters as the

practicalities and infrastructures of the festival occasion along with the recruitment and rehearsal of the performers. I shall compile a kind of checklist with ‘job descriptions’ of all the people and their skills, and of the material artefacts that were needed in order to bring the tragic world persuasively to life. All this new creativity, labour, organisation and expense demonstrate the energy and ambition of the pioneers. The revolutionary leap into direct enactment brought with it a combination of artistic innovations, including fundamental features of Greek tragedy such as movement within a specific space, the interleaving of spoken and sung elements, imbuing material objects with significance, and, not least, the masks. I spend time on these technical resources because I believe they have far-reaching consequences both for the interpretation of the plays, the territory of Part 2, and for how they affected their audiences, the leading concern of Part 3.

These time-bound studies, if seen in a wider perspective, arguably chime with a twenty-first century cultural movement. Approaches to the plays through their own reality and realisation resonate with a shift in ideas, sometimes known as the ‘new materialism’, which advocates greater awareness of the non-human and material worlds and their powers. This has arisen in part as a response to the all-too-real horrors of resurgent brutality, and to the way that humans are recklessly destroying much of the living world and Earth’s natural resources. These grim realities have prompted a turning towards more active, physical and environmentally conscious perspectives in the creative arts. Outward-looking recognition of actualities is coming to supersede the previous self-regarding strategies which sought through subversion and deconstruction to undermine any firm notion of reality.

In a microcosmic reflection of this new ‘actualism’ I am viewing Greek tragedies as material events rather than as mere

constructs or epistemological challenges with the individual self at their centre. Fresh attention to the practicalities encourages the viewing of the plays themselves as creating other worlds with a life of their own. And this license leads towards interpretations which bring out a thought-provoking, even dislocated, relationship with the outside sociopolitical powers that be. This tension, especially in relation to democracy, will loom large in the concluding Part 3. I shall also return there to the question of whether the practices and priorities of the first fifty years of Greek theatre still have some prompts to offer creative practitioners and their audiences today—not compulsorily, but potentially. An informed consultation with the past, rather than being a restraint, may prove enriching.

Mark Griffith has recently compiled an admirably inclusive and even-handed survey of twenty ‘critical approaches to Aeschylus’, but I don’t think that the underlying drift of this book fits any one of them. One of the two closest is his number xvii, ‘Performance criticism: ancient theatre and staging’, but I am looking at this as a means to wider perspectives rather than as an end in itself. The other is his viii, ‘Affective/aesthetic—the pleasures of theatrical art for the art’s sake’, but I would replace ‘for the art’s sake’ with ‘for the audience’s sake’—or even ‘for humanity’s sake’.

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