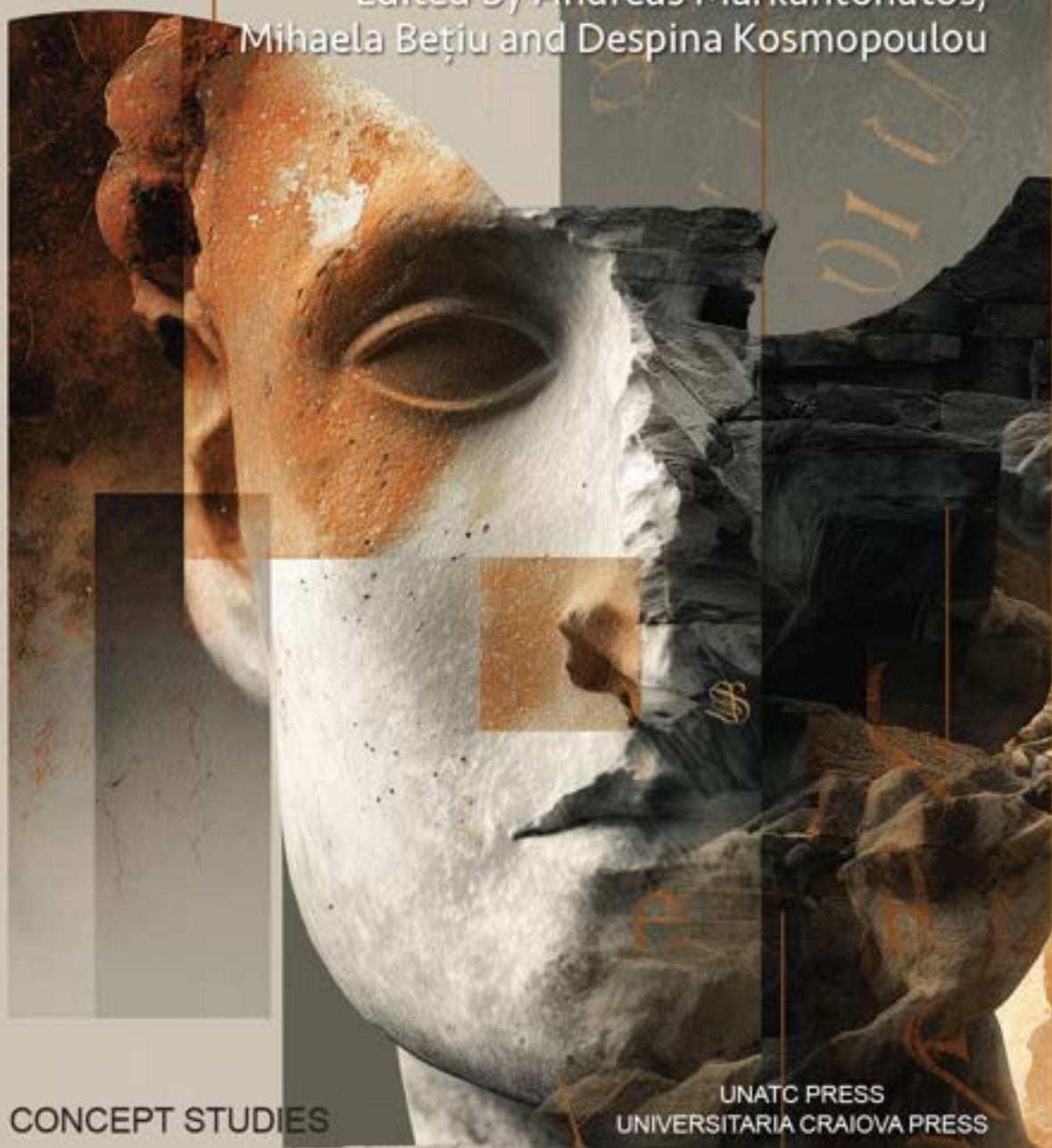


# A Dialogue Across Centuries: Greek Theatre Then and Now

Edited by Andreas Markantonatos,  
Mihaela Bețiu and Despina Kosmopoulou



CONCEPT STUDIES

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**Edited by Andreas Markantonatos,  
Mihaela Bețiu and Despina Kosmopoulou**

**Authors:** Andreas Markantonatos, Despina Kosmopoulou, Varvara Georgopoulou, Asterios Peltekis, Spyros Syropoulos, Eleni Boliaki, Katerina Arvaniti, Savvas Stroumpos.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Revisiting Ancient Greek Drama in the Modern World*

The endurance of Ancient Greek drama across centuries is one of the most striking and profound phenomena in the history of human culture. Conceived in the civic, ritual, and aesthetic world of Classical Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the tragedies and comedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Menander were in their origin tied intimately to the life of the polis. They were performed in open-air theatres before large audiences of citizens and foreigners, embedded within festivals that combined religious ritual with civic spectacle. And yet, far beyond the horizon of the ancient city-state, these plays have travelled through time, carried across languages, nations, and artistic forms, continually reappearing on new stages and in new guises. To speak of the modern reception of Ancient Greek drama is therefore to speak of a long history of transformation, in which texts composed for a world now distant have persistently revealed themselves to be inexhaustibly adaptable, resonant, and alive (Goldhill 2007).

What is most striking about this phenomenon is that the modern reception of Greek drama is never simply an act of preservation. It is always also an act of reinvention. The plays reach us through a process of transmission that is itself selective, fragmentary, and mediated. Many works have been lost entirely; others survive only in partial form; some come down to us through manuscripts copied centuries after their composition (West 1973). Yet the works that remain—whether in complete tragedies and comedies or in tantalising fragments—have proved fertile ground for reinterpretation. The act of reception is, therefore, an act of imagination. Translators, scholars, directors, poets, political thinkers, and audiences alike bring their own horizons of expectation to bear on the texts, seeing in them not a static heritage but a set of possibilities to be realised in particular times and places (Hardwick 2003). This double nature—of timelessness and timeliness—has often been remarked upon. On the one hand, Greek tragedy and comedy have long been admired for their universal themes: fate, justice, love, death, laughter, community, conflict. On the other hand, every modern engagement with these plays is irreducibly historical, conditioned by the circumstances of the moment. When Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* premiered in

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Nazi-occupied Paris in 1944, it carried a resonance that no Athenian audience could have anticipated (Anouilh 1944). When modern feminist theatre-makers revisit Medea, they explore dimensions of gender, agency, and oppression that reconfigure the meaning of the myth for contemporary audiences (Foley 2001). And when Aristophanes is staged as a commentator on modern politics, his satire reveals that the absurdities of demagoguery, war, and public discourse are not confined to the ancient polis (Hall 2007). In this sense, Greek drama is not only a legacy from the past; it is also a medium through which the present speaks to itself. The tragedies of the fifth century have proven especially fertile in this respect. Philosophers, critics, and dramatists alike have found in them a paradigm for thinking about the human condition. Hegel regarded tragedy as the dramatic enactment of a conflict between legitimate but opposed ethical forces: the law of the gods against the law of men, the demands of family against the claims of the state (Hegel 1975). Nietzsche saw in Greek tragedy the embodiment of a primordial tension between the Apollonian impulse towards order and the Dionysian drive towards ecstasy and dissolution (Nietzsche 1967). George Steiner, in *The Death of Tragedy*, argued that true tragedy was possible only under conditions of metaphysical belief, conditions that modernity has largely lost (Steiner 1961). By contrast, the structuralist analyses of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, and the feminist readings of Nicole Loraux, have emphasised the way tragedy articulates the political and social tensions of the Athenian polis, giving voice to conflicts over gender, citizenship, and power (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988; Loraux 2002).

These theoretical accounts are not abstract exercises detached from performance. Rather, they inform and are informed by the ways in which tragedy has been staged in the modern era. Few plays illustrate this more vividly than *Antigone*. Since the nineteenth century, *Antigone* has been repeatedly reinterpreted as a drama of resistance, conscience, and law (Honig 2013). In Germany, Hegel read the play as the supreme illustration of tragic conflict, while in the twentieth century Brecht reworked it into a Marxist parable about war and tyranny (Brecht 1948). Across Europe and beyond, *Antigone* has been adapted in contexts of dictatorship and civil strife, from Latin America to post-apartheid South Africa, serving as a rallying point for those who see in her defiance a model of moral courage (Steiner 1984). *Medea*, too, has inspired countless reinterpretations, from the Romantic fascination with her destructive passion to modern feminist explorations of her status as an outsider, a foreign woman who confronts betrayal with terrible agency (Morwood 1997). The *Oresteia*, meanwhile, has often been read as a political allegory of justice and the emergence of the rule of law, its modern revivals speaking to societies grappling with cycles of violence and the search for reconciliation (Macintosh 2018).

If tragedy has given modernity a language for its deepest dilemmas, comedy has provided a stage for laughter, satire, and critique. Aristophanes, whose plays lampooned politicians, intellectuals, and cultural fashions of his day, has proved surprisingly adaptable to modern contexts. His *Lysistrata*, in which women withhold sex to force an end to war, has become a staple of anti-war theatre, revived during the Vietnam War and in countless contexts of protest (Senelick 2000). *The Clouds*, which ridiculed Socrates and the new education, has often been read in relation to debates about intellectual authority, scepticism, and social change (Dover 1972). What modern directors have discovered is that Aristophanic comedy, with its exuberant obscenity, absurd fantasy, and biting satire, translates remarkably well into contemporary idioms of humour (Henderson 1975). It speaks to the ways in which laughter can be politically charged, undermining authority, exposing folly, and reimagining the possible. Even Menander, once overshadowed by Aristophanes, has contributed to the modern rediscovery of comedy as a form rooted in everyday life, his fragments illuminating the dynamics of family, love, and society in ways that resonate with modern social theatre (Arnott 1979).

Yet reception is not confined to textual interpretation. The performance traditions of modern theatre have played a decisive role in reshaping Greek drama. From the grandiose neoclassical revivals of the eighteenth century (Hall and Macintosh 2005) to the radical experiments of the twentieth, directors and performers have treated ancient plays as a canvas for innovation. The modernist minimalism of Peter Brook (Brook 1968), the politically charged productions of Ariane Mnouchkine (Mnouchkine 1990), the ritualist explorations of Jerzy Grotowski (Grotowski 1968), and the fragmented postmodern reworkings of Heiner Müller (Müller 1982) all testify to the capacity of Greek drama to inspire theatrical revolutions. In each case, the ancient texts provide not a script to be repeated but a provocation to be reimagined. In our own time, intercultural adaptations have brought Greek drama into dialogue with non-Western traditions: *Antigone* staged through Japanese Noh, *Medea* reimagined through African ritual, *Oedipus* performed in Caribbean contexts of colonial history (Goff 2005). Film, too, has become a medium for reception, from Pasolini's *Medea with Maria Callas* (Pasolini 1969) to modern cinematic adaptations that transpose ancient plots into contemporary settings. Digital media and virtual reality now offer yet another horizon, suggesting that the afterlife of Greek drama is far from exhausted.

What these examples reveal is that Greek drama continues to function as a site of cultural and political negotiation. In moments of crisis, societies turn to these plays to articulate their anxieties, hopes, and struggles. During the Second World War and its aftermath, *Antigone* became a symbol of resistance to tyranny;

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under military dictatorships, *Electra* has been staged as a cry for justice; in the postcolonial world, Greek drama has been reworked to expose the legacies of empire and to assert new cultural identities (McDonald 1992). The plays have been used to debate questions of democracy, freedom, gender, migration, and violence. Their universality lies not in timeless messages but in their extraordinary openness to reinterpretation, their ability to be appropriated for new struggles and new visions of justice.

The study of this process has itself become an academic field. Once subsumed under the broader notion of the “classical tradition,” reception studies has emerged in recent decades as a distinct area of inquiry (Martindale 1993). Scholars have shifted from asking how faithfully modern works reproduce ancient models to exploring how ancient texts are reimagined, transformed, and contested (Hardwick and Stray 2008). This methodological shift has opened the way for interdisciplinary approaches, bringing together philology, theatre studies, translation studies, performance theory, political philosophy, psychoanalysis, gender theory, and postcolonial criticism (Goldhill 2004). Greek drama, in particular, has become a privileged object of such studies, precisely because of its long and varied afterlife. To study the reception of *Antigone* is to study not only a play by Sophocles but also Hegelian philosophy, Brechtian theatre, feminist theory, and the politics of resistance movements across continents. To study Aristophanes is to examine not only the Athenian comic stage but also modern satire, parody, and the cultural politics of humour. Reception studies thus reveals the continuing centrality of ancient drama to the intellectual and artistic life of the modern world (Hall 2010).

This collection of essays is situated within that broader field. It brings together contributions that examine the ways in which tragedy and comedy have been reinterpreted in modern literature, theatre, cinema, and theory. Some essays focus on specific plays and their adaptations; others analyse broader cultural patterns in the appropriation of Greek drama. Together, they illuminate the multiplicity of receptions, the diversity of contexts, and the creative energy that sustains the afterlife of these works. The volume does not aim to provide a comprehensive survey, for such a task would be impossible; rather, it offers a series of windows onto the processes by which ancient drama continues to inspire and provoke.

At stake in all of this is a larger question: why do these plays matter today? The answer, I suggest, lies not in the illusion that they provide eternal truths, nor in the claim that they belong to us unaltered across time. Instead, their importance lies in their inexhaustible capacity to be remade. Each age finds in them a mirror of its own concerns, a vocabulary for its own struggles, a stage on which to dramatise its own conflicts. They remind us that the human

condition, though shaped by history, is also bound together by shared experiences of suffering, laughter, love, loss, and hope. In engaging with them, we are not only looking back to antiquity; we are also looking at ourselves, negotiating who we are and who we might become.

The essays that follow take up this negotiation in various ways. They show us how tragedy articulates the dilemmas of law and conscience, how comedy unmasks the follies of politics and society, how performance traditions reinvent ancient texts for modern stages, and how cultural contexts—from totalitarian regimes to postcolonial societies—appropriate Greek drama for their own purposes. They reveal, in other words, that Ancient Greek drama is not a relic of the past but a living tradition, continually reborn in new forms. To study its modern reception is to study the creative interplay of past and present, antiquity and modernity, memory and reinvention.

In the end, what endures is not the authority of the ancient texts as monuments, but their vitality as sources of meaning, provocation, and inspiration. They remind us that art is not only about preservation but also about transformation, that culture is not only about inheritance but also about creation. In this dynamic process, the stage of ancient Athens becomes, again and again, the stage of the modern world.

ANDREAS MARKANTONATOS

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SURVIVING DEATH:  
**EURIPIDES' *ALCESTIS***  
AND MYSTERY CULT

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**Abstract:** In this article I shall argue that, in addition to the Eleusinian-Orphic themes suggesting contemporary religious parallels to the characters' plight, Euripides' *Alcestis* also brings heroic narratives into the political forefront of fifth-century democratic Athens. The play frequently employs mystical motifs with intense emphasis. I have shown extensively elsewhere that as each scene progressively darkens through cleverly embedded narrative techniques, Alcestis boldly confronts death, distancing herself from superficial vanities that threaten her moral integrity. However, the play consistently underscores the pointlessness of metaphysical beliefs, particularly the illusionary benefits of an afterlife. Admetus and the Chorus strongly maintain that death is an inescapable reality. For Alcestis' heroic victory and Heracles' moral resolve to be fully recognised, the religious doctrines offering salvation must substantiate their promises. These ideologies, promising bliss in the afterlife for the righteous, intertwine with Athenian democratic discourse that valorises heroism and confronts the human tendency to diminish life in the face of death.

**Keywords:** Euripides, Alcestis, Eleusis, Orphism, Athens, democracy.

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### ***Introduction***<sup>1</sup>

In this article I shall argue that, in addition to the Eleusinian-Orphic themes suggesting contemporary religious parallels to the characters' plight, Euripides' *Alcestis* also brings heroic narratives into the political forefront of fifth-century democratic Athens. The play frequently employs mystical motifs with intense emphasis. I have shown extensively elsewhere that as each scene progressively darkens through cleverly embedded narrative techniques, Alcestis boldly confronts death, distancing herself from superficial vanities that threaten her moral integrity.<sup>2</sup> However, the play consistently underscores the pointlessness of metaphysical beliefs, particularly the illusionary benefits of an afterlife. Admetus and the Chorus strongly maintain that death is an inescapable reality. For Alcestis' heroic victory and Heracles' moral resolve to be fully recognised, the religious doctrines offering salvation must substantiate their promises. These ideologies, promising bliss in the afterlife for the righteous, intertwine with Athenian democratic discourse that valorises heroism and confronts the human tendency to diminish life in the face of death.

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1 Both the Greek text and the English translation are drawn from the Loeb edition of Euripides by David Kovacs, 1994.

2 Markantonatos 2013, pp. 131-159.

Much like the funeral speeches honouring the war dead that reinforce Athenian pride and self-respect, the Attic Eleusinian-Orphic tradition constantly reevaluates the world's worth. Both funeral orations and mystical teachings provide a sophisticated framework explaining the value of sacrifice, thereby countering the sense of despair and insignificance that can pervade human existence.<sup>3</sup> They champion a vision of truth and righteousness that extends beyond our mortal lives. This is why Euripides focuses not only on Alcestis' immense act of self-sacrifice but also on her miraculous return, affirming that mystical hopes and motives are surprisingly realistic, despite a prevailing narrative of enduring sorrow. When religious faith wavers and traditional beliefs are questioned, a pessimistic fatalism emerges, reviving old fears of divine malevolence. The play's twists, which disrupt a narrative of continuous suffering, reassure the audience of the mystical concepts' reality and the existence of other societal and political mechanisms for maintaining unity and endurance. Without this, humans would struggle to find meaning in their fight for survival. In this article, therefore, I seek to show that the dramatic perspective of the play broadens to incorporate distinctly contemporary Eleusinian-Orphic thoughts and traditions through direct allusions to Orpheus, the archetypal healer, and a host of underworld deities closely tied to Orphic beliefs.

### *Alcestis and Athenian Mystery Religion*

The play consistently questions the Attic Eleusinian-Orphic promise of deliverance from death, even as Alcestis' enduring legacy is universally acknowledged.<sup>4</sup> While her deep, selfless love earns her the heroic honour of a revered tomb, the Eleusinian-Orphic assurance of salvation receives no significant advancement in light of the undeniable tragedy at Thessalian Pherae. Faced with his wife's impending demise, Admetus retreats into poetic fantasy, ultimately acknowledging, in a profoundly moving manner, his powerlessness to save Alcestis from death. He references the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice in Hades, yet this story becomes a mere reflection of his immense loss and utter despair. The play suggests that the comforting notion of Orphic-Dionysiac bliss is severely compromised by the immediate anxieties and conflicts of subsequent scenes, diminishing any hopeful anticipation of mystical salvation:

*εἰ δ' Ὀρφέως μοι γλῶσσα καὶ μέλος παρῆν,  
ὥστ' ἢ κόρην Διμήτρος ἢ κείνης πόσιν*

<sup>3</sup> See principally Markantonatos 2012, esp. pp. 27-32.

<sup>4</sup> For some preliminary thoughts, see Markantonatos 2009a. For a general discussion of Orphic echoes in Greek tragedy, see Markantonatos 2009b.

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ἔμνοιαι κηλήσαντά σ' ἐξ Ἄιδου λαβεῖν,  
κατηλθὼν ἄν, καὶ μ' οὖθ' ὁ Πλούτωνος κῶων  
οὖθ' οὐπι κώπη ψυχοπομπὸς ἄν Χάρων  
ἔσχ' ἄν, πρὶν ἐς φῶς σὸν καταστήσαι βίον.  
(357-362)

*If I had the voice and music of Orpheus so that I could charm Demeter's daughter or her husband with song and fetch you from Hades, I would have gone down to the Underworld, and neither Pluto's hound nor Charon the ferryman of souls standing at the oar would have kept me from bringing you back to the light alive.*

In the play's second stasimon, Alcestis' immortal honour receives additional emphasis, paralleling Orphic depictions of divine splendour. This is particularly evident in the third stasimon, where Apollo is portrayed as a celestial Orpheus, enchanting wild beasts with his music.<sup>5</sup> From this point onward, the Chorus emerges as the primary conduit for Eleusinian-Orphic themes, layering mystical allusions that resonate uniquely with each audience member's depth of interpretation and familiarity with mystery cults:<sup>6</sup>

πολλά σε μουσοπόλοι  
μέλφουσι καθ' ἑπτάτονόν τ' ὄρειαν  
χέλων ἔν τ' ἀλύροις κλέοντες ἔμνοις,  
Σπάρτα κυκλᾶς ἀνίκα Καρνεί-  
ου περινίσσεται ὦρα  
μηνός, ἀειρομένας  
παννύχου σελάνας,  
λυπαραῖσί τ' ἐν ὀλβίαις Ἀθήναις,  
τοίαν ἔλιπες θανοῦσα μολ-  
πᾶν μελέων ἀοιδοῖς.  
(445-454)

*Poets shall sing often in your praise both on the seven-stringed mountain tortoise shell and in songs unaccompanied by the lyre when at Sparta the month of Carneia comes circling round and the moon is aloft the whole night long, and also in rich, gleaming Athens. Such is the theme for song that you have left for poets by your death.*

5 See also Thorburn 2000.

6 Cf. also Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, p. 318.

The impending transformation of Alcestis into a figure of radiant privilege, celebrated at Sparta's Carneia (or Carneia) festival and Athens' dramatic festivities, introduces an optimistic expectation of heroic virtue into the play.<sup>7</sup>

More than that, amidst prevailing sorrow, the anticipation of Alcestis' eternal renown sets the stage for further praise. The Chorus then offers a brief, heartfelt farewell to Alcestis, alluding to posthumous rewards for the morally pure (741-746; cf. 463).<sup>8</sup> The emotional depth of this farewell is amplified by the climactic invocation of Persephone, aligning the address with Eleusinian-Orphic tradition and suggesting Alcestis' potential role as Persephone's attendant and counsellor in the afterlife – a position evocative of Orphic reverence for Persephone's maternal protection of initiates. As the Chorus suggests, Alcestis is poised to receive Persephone's favour, much like Minos or Rhadamanthys would adjudicate the dead, affording special grace to the virtuous in the underworld:

ὦ ἰώ. σχετλία τόλμης,  
ὦ γενναία καὶ μέγ' ἀρίστη,  
χαῖρε· πρόφρων σε χθονίος θ' Ἑρμῆς  
Ἄιδης τε δέχονται'. εἰ δέ τι κάκει  
πλέον ἔστ' ἀγαθοῦς, τούτων μετέχουσ'  
Ἄιδου νόμφη παρεδρεύεις.  
(741-746)

*Alas, alas! O resolute in courage, heart noble and generous, farewell! May Hermes of the Underworld and Hades receive you kindly! And if in that place the good have any advantage, may you have a share in it and sit as attendant beside Hades' bride!*

While the play presents close parallels to the Orpheus myth, marked by both familiarity and ambiguity, it is only in the dramatic climax that we fully appreciate the Orphic themes' broader implications. It is worth noting the optimistic undercurrent in the play's mystical promises, as seen when the Chorus describes Apollo, associated with Asclepius and his life-saving offer to Admetus,

7 See Di Benedetto 1971, pp. 241-242; Conacher 1993<sup>2</sup> ad 448-9; Parker 2007 ad 448-9. See also Rabinowitz 1999, p. 102, who argues that despite the all-male character of the festival, Alcestis might have had a heroic celebration. Cf. also Pettersson 1992, ch. 3. Similarly, Rutherford 2001, p. 32, discussing the reference to the παιών-singing at the Spartan Carneia, suggests that "Alcestis is worthy of being honoured as a man in death, unlike her feckless husband". One wonders whether κυκλάς (448), meaning "the circling month of Carneia", hints at the performance of *kuklioi khoroi* at the Carneia festival in honour of Alcestis (cf. also Fearn 2007, p. 230, n. 9, who does not exclude the possibility that "*kuklioi khoroi* were a feature of the Karneia too"). Moreover, Rehm 2003, p. 125 notes that "Alcestis' singular act of dying for her husband will last forever by returning annually, much like a Christian saint's day, when martyrdom and miracle come around each year and are celebrated in the liturgy".

8 On heroic reputation, see Ekroth 2007 and 2009. Cf. also Ehnmark 1948.

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as a compassionate figure akin to Orpheus. This association, underscored by Apollo's portrayal as a shepherd capable of charming animals with his music, reinforces the culturally ingrained belief in the life-affirming power of musical celebration. His depiction as a shepherd playing the lyre while the wild animals dance round him is not in any way purposely emphasised only to be frustrated:

ὦ πολυξείνου καὶ ἐλευθέρου ἀνδρὸς αἰεὶ ποτ' οἶκος,  
σέ τοι καὶ ὁ Πύθιος εὐλύρας Ἀπόλλων  
ἤξιωσε ναεῖν,  
ἔτλα δὲ σοῖσι μηλονόμας  
ἐν νομοῖς γνέσθαι,  
δοχημῶν διὰ κλειτύων  
βοσκήμασι σοῖσι σιρίζων  
ποιμνίτας ὑμεναίους.

σὴν δ' ἐποιμαίνοντο χαρᾷ μελέων βαλῆαι τε λύγκες,  
ἔβα δὲ λιποῦσ' Ὀθρυος νάπαν λεόντων  
ἀ δαφονὸς ἴλα ·  
χόρευσε δ' ἄμφι σὴν κιθάραν,  
Φοῖβε, ποικιλόθριζ'  
νεβρός ὑψικόμων πέραν  
βαίνουσ' ἔλατᾶν σφυρῶ κοῦφῶ  
χαίρουσ' εὐφροني μολπᾶ.

(569-587)

*O house of an ever hospitable and generous man, even Pythian Apollo of the lovely lyre deigned to dwell in you and submitted to become a shepherd in your pastures, playing on his pipe mating songs for your herds on the slanting hillsides.*

*Under his shepherd care, in joy at his songs, were also spotted lynxes, and there came, leaving the vale of Othrys, a pride of tawny lions, and the dappled fawn stepping beyond the tall fir trees with its light foot danced to your lyre-playing, Apollo, rejoicing in its joyful melody.*

The audience is encouraged to draw parallels between Apollo's supernatural shepherding and Orpheus' ability to charm beasts.<sup>9</sup> References to the Thessalian

9 Cf. Segal 1982, pp. 74-75, who places special emphasis on Orpheus' music as "a potentially ordering, peace-bringing, and therefore civilizing force" (p. 75). On the accumulation of visual detail, see Fairclough 1897, p. 51; Barlow 1971, pp. 18-19.

meadows and hillsides where Apollo delights in music-making might also evoke the sacred grove of Eleusinian-Orphic tradition, a key element of underworld imagery and a symbol of agricultural abundance, aligning with Demeter's role as the harvest goddess overseeing grain and earth's fertility.

However, in the subsequent passage, the promise of Eleusinian-Orphic salvation is presented with a sense of poignant vagueness, highlighting the challenge of reconciling mystical assurances with the inevitability of death and the unpredictability of human fate:<sup>10</sup>

ἐγὼ καὶ διὰ μούσας  
καὶ μετάρσιος ἦξα, καὶ  
πλείστων ἀφάμενος λόγων  
κρείσσον οὐδὲν Ἀνάγκας  
ἤερον οὐδέ τι φάρμακον  
Θρηήσσαις ἐν σανίσι, τὰς  
Ὀρφεΐα κατέγραψεν  
γῆρυς, οὐδ' ὅσα Φοῖβος Ἀ-  
σκληπιάδαις ἔδωκε  
φάρμακα πολυπόνοις  
ἀντιτεμῶν βροτοῖσιν.

(962-972)

*I have soared aloft with poetry and with high thought, and though I have laid my hand to many a reflection, I have found nothing stronger than Necessity, nor is there any cure for it in the Thracian tablets set down by the voice of Orpheus nor in all the simples which Phoebus harvested in aid of trouble-ridden mortals and gave to the sons of Asclepius.*

Euripides' allusions to Orphic texts, as exemplified in *Hippolytus* 952-954 (ἦδη νυν αὖχει καὶ δι' ἀφύχου βορᾶς / σίτοις καπήλευ' Ὀρφέα τ' ἄνακτ' ἔχων / βάκχευε πολλῶν γραμμᾶτων τιμῶν καπνούς, "Continue then your confident boasting, adopt a meatless diet and play the showman with your food, make Orpheus your lord and engage in mystical rites, holding the vaporings of many books in honor"), underscore the intimate connection between Orphism and its

10 The Chorus accept their defeat with resignation, hence their attempt to offer a "consolation" example of far greater familial disaster in vv. 903-906; see Hodler 1956, pp. 161-162 on the Chorus' striking diction; Hultin 1965; Johann 1968; Parker 2007 ad 903-906.

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literature, suggesting that Orphic doctrines likely spread widely through written records. Notably, the “voice of Orpheus” is an evocative phrase that might conjure images of the decapitated head of Orpheus singing oracles.<sup>11</sup> This reference, coupled with the concept of *ἀνάγκη* (“Necessity”) which appears three times in the Derveni Papyrus (8.13, 13.6, 25.7) and is here intertwined with Thanatos (973-975) as an unyielding deity indifferent to human pleas, encapsulates the stark tension between metaphysical ideals and the grim reality of death’s stillness.<sup>12</sup> Soon, Heracles will introduce a new set of powerful mystical symbols, rooted in the Athenian political landscape, delineating “existence” from “non-existence”. With his extraordinary courage, he will dispel any remaining scepticism about the unverified, mystical comforts offered to humanity.<sup>13</sup>

In my view, there is ample evidence suggesting that Euripides, in the play’s closing scene, seeks to explore the complexities and challenges of mystical salvation. The old men’s deepening anguish over Alcestis’ premature death prompts somber reflections on mortality. The audience is left to ponder the veracity of the Chorus’ contemplations on human constraints and death’s invincibility. While one might overemphasise the sceptical remarks, it is crucial to recognise that Alcestis’ remarkable resurrection aims to validate the truths of Eleusinian-Orphic commitments. The profound mystery surrounding her return from the realm of the dead, following Heracles’ moral rearmament and Admetus’ emotional breakdown, transcends personal or purely human concerns. It brings coherence and resolution to an otherwise morally intractable situation, thus affirming the Eleusinian-Orphic worldview as a climactic revelatory moment.<sup>14</sup>

The audience likely perceives that Alcestis’ selfless sacrifice, with its mystical echoes, profoundly affects the moral perspectives of Heracles and Admetus. Compared to Alcestis’ extensive altruism, the self-indulgent tendencies of Heracles and Admetus’ evident frailty draw sharp criticism. Yet, both characters ultimately embrace deeper insights into human transience and vulnerability, thereby undergoing a soul-refining journey marked by frustration yet hope.<sup>15</sup> Heracles’ rowdy drunkenness is sobered by the Servant’s disapproval

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11 See Parker 2007 *ad* 966-969. Cf. also Hall 1999, p. 114.

12 On the concept of *ἀνάγκη* in Euripides and especially in the play, see, for instance, Otto 1955, pp. 261-286; Riemer 1989, pp. 107-109; Hose 1991, p. 208; Mikalson 1991, pp. 26-28; Pucci 1994 and 2005.

13 Cf. Egli 2003, pp. 15-20. On *hieroi logoi*, see Baumgarten 1998.

14 On the play’s remarkable complex of moral issues, see (e.g.) Burnett 1965; Lloyd 1985; Gregory 1991, pp. 19-49; Goldfarb 1992, who draws from Arrowsmith 1963; Rabinowitz 1993, pp. 66-99; Rehm 1994, pp. 84-96; Ferrari 2004, pp. 258-260; Iakov 2012, *passim* and 2020; Slater 2013, esp. pp. 31-66; Markantonatos 2013, ch. 2 with exhaustive bibliography.

15 See also Ehrenberg 1973<sup>2</sup>, p. 253, who is right to point out that knowledge comes to Admetus rather late though not too late that ‘to be alive in unhappiness may not be preferable to death’ (esp. v. 940, ἄρτι μὲνθάνατο).

(747-772, 803-804), while Admetus, facing societal condemnation (954-961) and realising his wife's happier state in death, stretches his anguish to its limits (935-936). Despite ominous forebodings of a meaningless world, Heracles' admirable deed allows Admetus to continue his life with renewed hope, knowing now that his struggles bear significance.

### ***Epilogue***

To sum up: both religion and poetry possess the extraordinary capacity to transcend human limits, defy death, and envision a supernatural existence. In Euripides' *Alcestitis* and Attic Eleusinian-Orphism, death is ultimately conquered. Heracles, destined for Olympian greatness, physically overcomes Thanatos without descending into the underworld. This triumph, while primarily physical, does not diminish the play's mystical depth nor detract from the metaphysical intensity of the miraculous events at Thessalian Pherae. The play's unexpected turning point has far-reaching moral implications, leading to an optimistic realisation: human misery is penetrable, the absoluteness of Necessity can be challenged, and the capricious whims of the gods are not entirely inscrutable.

The political significance of the play to an Athenian audience is clear and immediate. Euripides stages characters within an Eleusinian-Orphic framework to emphatically underscore that celebrating lives dedicated to selfless labour, alongside the perpetuation of death-defeating mystical traditions, reinforces the essence of the heroic ideal. This ideal was crucial for the survival of the Athenian polis, embodying an untiring quest for honour through creative effort and steadfast bravery. Attic tragedy and religion acted as vital bulwarks against moral decay, extolling civic power and duty in the face of death, and dispelling any reservations about the Greek core moral conviction that reputation and high merit surpass the value of life itself. Mystical lore, in particular, elevated a set of principles and beliefs upheld by Athenian citizens. Despite the presence of myth-debunking scepticism and a realism that often frustrates hope, the Eleusinian-Orphic concept of salvation, as lauded in the play, weaves human suffering into the civic fabric of the polis.

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# LOOKING AT SOME STRIKING **TRANSFORMATIONS OF CLYTEMNESTRA** IN GREECE AND FRANCE

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**Abstract:** The role of Clytemnestra was shaped by ancient authors as that of a traitor, casting an unmistakably negative image upon her character. By the twentieth century, however, Clytemnestra had undergone a significant evolution from the deceitful, immoral, and scheming figure of the Middle Ages to the passive female archetype of the Renaissance and Classical periods. From the twentieth century onward, playwrights have approached the ancient heroine in a markedly more sympathetic light. In French theatre, Marguerite Yourcenar, in her emblematic stage drama *Clytemnestra or Crime*, reclaims the myth of the Atreidae to disparage the societal conventions that constrain women to prescribed roles, while simultaneously unmasking the traditional hero through the demystification of Agamemnon. In Modern Greek theatre, Andreas Staikos, through a systematic engagement with ancient dramaturgical elements and a unique mode of textual reception, portrays a Clytemnestra who oscillates within a repetitive pattern, continually transforming and regressing between mythic archetype and personal narrative. Lastly, in *Letter to Orestes*, Iakovos Kambanellis explores the allegorical dimensions of Clytemnestra's character. Despite the play's adherence to a recognizably conservative framework, it subtly critiques the constructed culpability associated with the social roles of both genders. These three adaptations ultimately redeem Clytemnestra, thus elevating her from a symbol of eternal condemnation to one of complex vindication.

**Keywords:** Clytemnestra, Yourcenar, Staikos, Kambanellis, reception.

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## **Introduction**

The intertextual dialogue among texts creates a new semantic environment, in which meaning is reshaped (Siafleakis, 1989, pp. 15-19). Mikhail Bakhtin observed that such interrelations generate a hybrid communicative framework (Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 257-326). This study focuses on the metamorphoses of Clytemnestra's (Cf. Komar, 2003; De Martino et al., 2017) archetype from antiquity to the present. The malign image of the "traitress" in ancient literature gives way to a more complex, though still morally ambiguous, figure in the Middle Ages, and then to a passive woman in the Renaissance and Neoclassical periods. By the twentieth century, modern dramatists revisit the character with renewed empathy and insight, presenting her as a misunderstood figure.

Yourcenar, in her emblematic poetic drama *Clytemnestra or Crime*, adopts a distinctly feminine perspective on the myth of the Atreidae, deploying it to critique oppressive societal norms through the demystification of Agamemnon (Cf. Ieranò, 2014, pp. 57-79). The play dismantles the idealised masculine persona that society imposes, highlighting the confinement of women within those structures.

Furthermore, in Modern Greek theatre, Staikos methodically appropriates the ancient dramatic tradition, crafting a Clytemnestra caught in an existential and performative cycle. The character repeatedly transforms as she oscillates between myth and personal trauma, trapped in a liminal space that blurs historical, psychological, and theatrical boundaries. On the other hand, Kambanellis, in *Letter to Orestes* (Cf. Pavlou, 2017, pp. 283-297; Kosmopoulou, 2021, pp. 2-17), constructs a dramaturgical monologue that highlights the allegorical complexity of Clytemnestra. The play challenges traditional readings by granting her a voice of personal and historical testimony. In doing so, it questions the guilt imposed by gender roles and reflects the broader socio-cultural evolution of myth in the modern world.

Together, these adaptations reframe the archetype of Clytemnestra not as an icon of transgression but as a symbol of transformation. They illuminate the intertextual continuum through which myth survives, evolves, and resonates anew in each era. Within this continuum, the modern playwright becomes both creator and reader, thus forging a new interpretative framework in which ancient voices are once again heard, albeit refracted through contemporary sensibilities.

### ***The Mythological Archetype of Clytemnestra through the Ages***

The mythological nucleus of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Cf. Sommerstein, 2012 pp. 25-38; Zeitlin, 1978, pp. 149-184; Winninghton-Ingram, 1948, pp. 130-147; cf. Conacher, 1987) echoes the reconfiguration of a much older myth, one likely traceable to Homeric epic and Attic oral traditions (Lesky, 1983, pp. 247-248). Aeschylus closely follows the traditional archetype of Clytemnestra, not only in terms of her characterisation but also in her actions and underlying motivations (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 2015, pp. 79-82, ll. 1319-1347). His tripartite structure – murder, vengeance, and trial – derives from Homer, who portrays Clytemnestra as a scorned wife (Homer, *Ilias*, 2015, A 112-116, p. 8), whose motive for murder lies in the sacrifice of Iphigenia rather than in adulterous betrayal.

Aeschylus reinterprets this mythic material in light of his own historical and sociopolitical context, forging new symbols and patterns while sustaining a dynamic dialogue with inherited motifs (Papadopoulos, 1999, p. 243). Clytemnestra is depicted as a *gunaika androboulon*, a “woman with a man’s mind”, one who transgresses gender norms by usurping male prerogatives. In the patriarchal ethos of the fifth century BCE, vengeance was considered a strictly masculine pursuit, and Clytemnestra’s enactment of such retribution renders her, in every sense, a “lesser” being, that is, a moral outlier (Mosse, 1983, pp. 48-58). Her self-justification, her extramarital sexuality, and her commanding public

rhetoric mark her as distinct from her female contemporaries. She vacillates between male and female behavioural codes, thereby forming a complex figure of dual identity (McCLure, 1999, p. 88). She becomes the archetypal black widow of myth, a true “spider-woman”, whose twisted persuasion welcomes Agamemnon with divine honours, only to ensnare him (Synodinou, 2015, p. 435; Taplin, 2005, pp. 56 – 63). The act of murder reveals her chilling detachment, as all pretences collapse. As a “woman with an androgynous will”, she decides, acts, and bears the consequences, triumphing over her victim and shunning her resultant infamy (Synodinou, 2015, p. 435). The murder chamber – her bedroom, and, by extension, the city itself – becomes a space of entrapment, shared by both her and her lover (Kosmopoulou, 2017, p. 128).

Not all tragedians regarded Clytemnestra with sympathy. Yet each addressed her mythic persona; for tragedy in the fifth century BCE functioned as a moral institution: it shaped civic values, proposed ethical paradigms, and prepared citizens for their roles within society. The polis regarded theatre as a *koinon agathon* (“a public good”) and its archetypes exemplified sacrifice for the collective or destruction by personal vendetta. Clytemnestra (Markantonatos, 2022, pp. 16-17), as a symbol of resentment and its disastrous consequences, thus served as a negative model. The famous line “O mother - not mother!”, spoken by Electra in Sophocles’ *Electra*, captures the essence of his Clytemnestra: a woman deeply resented by her daughter, who identified completely with the memory of her father. Sophocles’ Clytemnestra is portrayed as cold, unrepentant, and devoid of maternal affection. She acknowledges her deed but remains haughty and intransigent, attempting to rationalise her actions within a legalistic framework (Cf. Koulandrou, 2018, p. 64).

Euripides, by contrast, offers a different portrayal. His Clytemnestra appears self-centred and unsympathetic. She pleads with Agamemnon to spare Iphigenia but infuriates him through her arguments. Her selfish detachment is evident in her inability to empathise with her daughter’s imminent death. Later, she openly threatens Agamemnon, signifying her growing sense of agency under duress. In Euripides, the once-submissive wife becomes a reluctant rebel (Synodinou, 1985, pp. 55-56), provoked into action by tragic circumstance. By the twentieth century, the mythic narrative is once again upended. Modern authors, among them Kazantzakis, Ritsos, Sikelianos, and Elytis, revive<sup>1</sup> ancient tragic themes to reflect upon their own historical moment (Pefanis, 2005, p. 63, 75; Blesios, 2021, pp. 437-453). They do not merely imitate; they transform. The classical myth serves as a lens

<sup>1</sup> For ancient tragedy revival, vd. further G. Ieranò, *La tragedia greca: origini, storia, rinascite*, Salerno Editrice Rome, 2010.

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through which they interpret contemporary existential and political crises. Elytis, for instance, reimagines Clytemnestra as a metaphor for evil, betrayal, tyranny (even dictatorship!), thus adapting the ancient archetype to critique the condition of modern times (Cf. Koutrianou, 2002, p. 213).

These reinterpretations do not aim to dismiss the ancient narrative but to confront it anew, to find in its mythic resonances a timeless human condition. As modern authors reimagine Clytemnestra, they preserve her mythic lineage while endowing her with contemporary significance. In doing so, they transform her from a static emblem of treachery into a dynamic emblem of resistance, introspection, and, at times, justification.

### **Clytemnestra in the *Fires* by Margeurite Yourcenar**

Marguerite Yourcenar draws inspiration from the mythic archetype of Clytemnestra and, through an intertextual reworking of her story, reconceives the murder of Agamemnon not as an act of political vengeance but as a crime of passion. Her Clytemnestra is no longer a power-hungry usurper but a woman confronting the ravages of time, rejection (Yourcenar, 1974, pp. 181-185; Smith, 1993, p. 16) and emotional desolation. Haunted by the erosion of youth, she is driven to murder not by premeditated malice, but by a desperate impulse to preserve her dignity and secure her fading desirability. Even in the moment of strangulation, she oscillates between a thirst for revenge and a plaintive yearning for love, seeking not dominance but recognition and emotional intimacy (Yourcenar, 1974, pp. 181-185).

In Yourcenar's retelling, Clytemnestra is a heroine trapped by the expectations of others (Cf. further P. Kalogeropoulou, 2018, p. 217). Standing before a silent, unseen court of justice, she delivers her monologue as an *apologia pro vita sua*, attempting to justify her actions and take stock of her life. She speaks not with bombast but with the self-awareness of a woman who has lived under the weight of roles imposed upon her. The dramatic form of monologue becomes a confessional space (judicial, introspective, and performative), where Clytemnestra testifies not only as a character, but as a symbol of womanhood writ large.

Yourcenar's *Clytemnestra or Crime* thus transposes the myth of the Atreidae into modern psychological and social registers. It strips the mythic figures of their ancient grandeur and places them within the realm of emotional verisimilitude (Pefanis, 2009, pp. 217-234). Unlike the Aeschylean heroine, who regards Agamemnon with indifference, Yourcenar's Clytemnestra is in love with him. An intertextual dialogue arises from this contrast: the ancient figure commits murder as an act of political reprisal and defiance, while her modern counterpart seeks

connection with a man who no longer sees her. The contemporary Clytemnestra becomes a surrogate for every woman who has suffered humiliation and oppression, that is, every woman who, deep within, has contemplated revenge as a means of reclaiming lost selfhood (Yourcenar, 1974, p. 177).

This Clytemnestra does not seek to destroy but to be seen. Her plea is existential, not ideological. Her marriage to Agamemnon was not a choice freely made, and the subjugation she endured compelled her to suppress her own desires and aspirations in favour of conforming to the expectations of patriarchal honour. Agamemnon's militaristic ambitions made her feel abandoned, and his return with a pregnant concubine shatters her psychological balance. Her emotional disintegration is slow but inexorable, culminating in a violent act intended less as punishment than as a cry for acknowledgement.

In the prolonged absence of her husband, the burden of household and political responsibility fell upon her, prompting an internal shift wherein she gradually assumed masculine roles (Smith, 1993, pp. 16). Yet her adoption of masculine traits never fully aligns her with the Aeschylean "man-souled" (Sivetidou, 2013, p. 130) woman; rather, she remains fundamentally driven by affective needs. Her actions are not inspired by power-lust but by the hope of reclaiming intimacy. Even her attempts to awaken Agamemnon's jealousy through her relationship with Aegisthus reveal a longing to rediscover her femininity. Her betrayal is deeply entwined with maternal impulses (Cf. Pefanis, 2009, pp. 217-234); she does not simply seduce, but nurtures. In this light, Yourcenar's Clytemnestra is not the cold manipulator of tradition but a woman whose motherhood lies dormant within her erotic desire.

The extramarital affair does not supplant her love for her husband; rather, it accentuates her desperation. She humiliates herself in a futile attempt to provoke Agamemnon's desire, hoping to regain her feminine pride (Yourcenar, 1974, pp. 178-179). The murder becomes an act of existential despair, an effort to compel recognition, to discover whether she was ever more than a possession in his eyes. It is a crime born not of cruelty but of abandonment and scorn, distinct from the calculated murders of traditional mythology. After the act, no catharsis follows: Agamemnon's ghost haunts her, and she realises that not even her own death would offer redemption. A vicious cycle is thus perpetuated, endless, infernal.

When we compare the ancient and modern figures, a key divergence emerges in the sphere of personal redemption. The ancient Clytemnestra is a chthonic avenger, unrepentant and defiant. The modern Clytemnestra likewise lacks remorse, but her stance is not one of ideological resistance. She submits to her fate as a victim of emotional subjugation, rather than a transgressor of cosmic order. Both women are defiant in their own ways, but while the Aeschylean heroine

confronts the norms of her time head-on, the Yourcenarian one remains ensnared in gendered stereotypes. The ancient audience of Athens, as citizens of the polis, were required to pass judgment on Clytemnestra's fate; the contemporary viewer, by contrast, becomes a silent juror in an emotional and psychological trial. Where the former weighed civic order against familial vengeance, the latter is invited to explore the intimate wounds of a woman stripped of voice and agency.

### **Clytemnestra in Staikos' *Clytemnestra*?**

*Clytemnestra?*, the first theatrical work by Andreas Staikos, was written in 1974-1975 and draws its initial impulse from Sophocles' *Electra*. This experimental drama stands out for its linguistic inventiveness and distinctive theatricality. Staikos deconstructs the ancient material and reconstructs it into a meta-theatrical exercise, a dramatic rehearsal in which the tragic characters of Electra and Clytemnestra, here portrayed as contemporary actresses, engage in a fragmented, self-reflective confrontation. The scene is set in an undefined, rudimentary theatrical space: a row of empty chairs, a trunk, and a couch. These bare elements become the setting for a rehearsal-as-drama (Ziropoulou, 2015, p. 242), where the two exhausted heroines, itinerant performers without a permanent theatrical home, carry their symbolic and physical baggage.

Within this minimalistic stage, the actresses rehearse extended excerpts from Sophocles' *Electra*, interspersed with lyrical interjections and confrontational dialogue. These textual segments function both as citation and transformation, as the play's language continually shifts between registers (*i.e.* tragedy, comedy, melodrama, farce), each evoking different epochs and theatrical conventions. The resulting oscillation underscores the instability not only of genre but of character identity. The two women are caught in an emotional and rhetorical duel, which increasingly centres on their shared history and their conflicting perceptions of love and guilt.

The thematic core of the play is love (Bakonikola-Georgopoulou, 2000, p. 152-157; Tzoumaka, 2001, pp. 355-362) – its absence, distortion, and fatal consequences. Electra, unloved and isolated, begs Clytemnestra to kill her, while Clytemnestra proclaims that love itself is an illusion, reducible to “suffering” and “mud”. Both confess to having loved the same man, Aegisthus, who thus becomes a catalyst for their mutual betrayal. Their shared lover binds them in sin (Staikos, 2001, pp. 138-139), but also in theatrical performance. Through the lens of rehearsal, the boundaries between role and reality collapse; myth becomes biography, and vice versa.

Although the dramatic structure lacks linear action in the traditional sense, it is precisely this fragmentation that allows Staikos to explore the dynamics

of transformation. The drama unfolds through stylistic modulation, rhetorical interchange, and constant textual play (Staikos, 2001, pp. 134-135; Cf. further Ziropoulou, 2015, pp. 243-244). His Clytemnestra is not a stable entity but a figure caught in an infernal cycle of repetition and disguise. She moves fluidly between the mythic and the personal, continually morphing in response to the performative space and the textual material. The result is a theatre of endless metamorphosis, of a self in flux.

What distinguishes Staikos' treatment from more overtly revisionist dramatists of the twentieth century is his subtlety. He does not offer a radical feminist reinterpretation, nor does he idealise or vilify Clytemnestra. Instead, he subjects the archetype to a theatrical *jeu d'esprit*, an improvisatory dance of meanings, voices, and masks. The ancient text becomes a tool of improvisation rather than a fixed script; the myth of the Atreidae serves less as narrative foundation than as thematic scaffolding. Electra is not rewritten so much as re-performed, re-imagined without the closure of a definitive version. Staikos avoids psychologising his heroines in the traditional sense. Rather than treat them as fully fleshed-out characters, he presents them as theatrical constructs, that is, figures who are always on the brink of becoming, never complete. In doing so, he emphasises the fluidity (Tsatsoulis, 2007, pp. 100-112) of identity and the impossibility of essentialising characters. The drama thus stages not a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense, but a meditation on theatricality itself (Bakonikola-Georgopoulou, 2001, p. 11-19; Samara, 1999, pp. 224-231). Delirium alternates with stillness, performance with authenticity, myth with parody. The tragic form is hollowed out and reanimated as a game, indeed a paradoxical theatre of reality.

Staikos' work is shaped by the broader European theatrical movements of the 1970s, particularly the metatheatrical experiments associated with postmodernism. His dramaturgy is deeply influenced by his mentor, Antoine Vitez, who famously directed *Electra* three times during this same period (Varopoulou, 1992, pp. 9-12). Echoes of Vitez's theatrical philosophy, especially the notion of "open text" and interpretative multiplicity, resonate throughout *Clytemnestra*.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Staikos transforms the tragic material into farce, employing Aegisthus as an object of mutual erotic entanglement. In this scenario, Clytemnestra becomes a parody of the seductress delighting in flouting moral codes and testing the limits of theatrical convention. Scenes of violence are rendered absurd, subverting expectations and transforming moral dilemmas into performative standoffs. The dramatic tension does not arise from the plot's progression, but from the dialectical confrontation between two female voices, each seeking validation, each entrapped by fate, and each transgressing traditional boundaries.

Ultimately, *Clytemnestra?* offers neither exoneration nor condemnation. It reframes the myth within a theatre of play, wherein myth is re-performed rather than retold. Clytemnestra emerges not as a heroine or villain but as a theatrical effect – real and false in equal measure, as she would be in life and on stage. Staikos' Clytemnestra is thus a palimpsest: a character both ancient and modern, archetypal and ephemeral, caught in the perpetual rehearsal of selfhood.

### **Clytemnestra in Kambanellis' *Letter to Orestes*.**

Iakovos Kambanellis' *Letter to Orestes* is a modern monodrama that exemplifies the techniques of metatheatre (Grammatas, 2006, p. 57). That is, a self-referential play in which theatre reflects upon itself, often presenting plays-within-plays or dramatising theatrical processes. In this work, Clytemnestra's voice is reclaimed through the epistolary form, as she writes to her estranged son, who is both physically distant and emotionally remote. This reimagining of the myth offers a deeply personal reinterpretation of a story repeated countless times and filtered through the ideological frameworks of each historical period. In Kambanellis' version, Clytemnestra is not merely a tragic figure from the past, but a woman speaking directly to her son in a final attempt at reconciliation and truth-telling.

The monologue operates on two levels: it is simultaneously a confession and a defence. Clytemnestra recounts her version of events not only to prevent Electra from committing matricide but also to summon her son back to her side before she dies (Kambanellis, 2011, pp. 108-110). Her narrative begins with an involuntary marriage to a dynastic husband, a figure of patriarchal power who reduces her to reproductive utility. Their relationship is defined by domination and emotional alienation. Agamemnon, obsessed with securing a male heir, ignores his daughters and brutalises his wife. Electra, unloved and undervalued from birth, despises her mother for killing her father, but also for giving birth to her as a girl, thereby dooming her to a life of disregard. In Kambanellis' radical reinterpretation, Agamemnon's obsession with lineage culminates in a shocking act: the rape of Clytemnestra in order to produce Orestes, who is then raised in the austere mould of militaristic masculinity. This reframing casts Clytemnestra not as a power-hungry adulteress but as a victim of systemic violence and sexual domination. Her letter does not seek to excuse the murder but to contextualise it (Ladogianni, 2011, p. 413; Pouchner, Athens, 2018, p. 252). She demands to be heard on her own terms, within a moral and emotional framework that transcends the binary judgments of classical tragedy.

The dramatic power of the piece lies in its deviation from ancient norms. Unlike the monologues of ancient tragedy, which are bounded by dramatic logic (Diamantakou-Agathou, 2010, p. 58; Kambanellis, 2011, p. 25) and immediate dialogue, Kambanellis' *Clytemnestra* addresses an absent figure, her son, thus creating a monologue that functions as both introspective soliloquy and emotional invocation. The ancient tragic monologue, delivered within a communal space of ritual and performance, is here replaced by an intimate, introspective communication between mother and child. From the late twentieth century onwards, a theatrical tendency to isolate mythic archetypes emerged, detaching them from their original multi-character dramas, and reframing them as protagonists in self-contained monologues. These hypertextual or intertextual reinterpretations allow modern authors to project contemporary concerns onto ancient frameworks.

The setting of *Letter to Orestes* is deceptively modest: a space resembling a rehearsal room, sparsely furnished and theatrically undefined. Yet it is also a profoundly interior space, reflective of Clytemnestra's psychological state. She appears on stage as a modern woman, sipping coffee and smoking a cigarette, before gradually assuming the mythic persona she has inherited. Though her external appearance belongs to the present, her speech is imbued with the gravitas of myth. Kambanellis carefully maintains the aura of ancient tradition while reimagining it in a contemporary light. His *Clytemnestra* is a tragic figure in a modern sense: not because of hubris or divine punishment, but because of the inescapable roles and expectations society imposes upon women. Her "real self" never fully coincides with the archetype she must inhabit. Nonetheless, she bears the weight of that archetype and its fatal legacy. Her moral downfall is evident, yet Kambanellis compels the audience to see in her not a villain, but a human being shaped (and scarred) by history.

Symbolically, Clytemnestra's act of killing Agamemnon is not only an act of personal revenge, but a metaphorical rejection of a militaristic, imperialistic, and patriarchal order. The fallen king becomes the embodiment of oppressive structures. In contrast, Aegisthus, whom she chooses not only as a lover but as a political alternative, is cast as a gentle, idealistic figure representing a more peaceful, egalitarian way of life. Her alliance with him expresses both a desire for survival and a yearning for a different model of human relationship (Cf. Misopolinou, 2015, p. 230).

***Closing remarks***

The myth of Clytemnestra, as revisited in twentieth-century and contemporary theatre, reveals a profound shift in the understanding of tragic archetypes. The narrative framework of myth undergoes transformation, becoming an imitative and reflective context through which modern playwrights engage with perennial human concerns. As we observe the trajectory of Greek dramatic tradition, we see certain mythic figures continually re-emerge, not in identical form, but transformed by the moral and ideological pressures of each new age. Modern Greek dramaturgy, and European theatre more broadly, has returned repeatedly to the figure of Clytemnestra, not only because she is a symbol of betrayal and revenge, but because she embodies the transgressive woman, a figure who challenges, subverts, and ultimately redefines the social and moral order. From the time of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to the modern reinterpretations by Yourcenar, Staikos, and Kambanellis, the myth of Clytemnestra has been a barometer of cultural change.

In Aeschylus, she is the fatal “spider-woman” who usurps masculine power, an agent of cosmic disruption. In Yourcenar, she becomes a woman driven to violence by emotional degradation, yet still longing for connection and dignity. In Staikos, she is a theatrical construct, fluid, performative, caught in an endless interplay between myth and modernity. And in Kambanellis, she is a tragic mother reclaiming her narrative through the intimacy of a final letter to her son. Yourcenar’s Clytemnestra loves her husband even in death, despite the humiliation he inflicted upon her. She is unrepentant, but not unfeeling. Staikos’ Clytemnestra is carnally playful and ensnared in a ceaseless performative struggle with Electra over a shared lover. Kambanellis’ Clytemnestra, by contrast, confesses her crime not before a court, but in a private appeal to her child, an attempt to reveal her wounded femininity and reclaim her maternal identity.


All three reimaginings converge on a common goal: to humanise the archetype without negating its mythical force. The figure of Clytemnestra is thus not dissolved by modern reinterpretation, but deepened. She emerges as assertive, independent, and emancipated, yet still tethered to the original matrix of myth from which she arose. Ultimately, she remains the first woman in Western literature to adopt male agency and to seek vengeance in a world governed by patriarchal codes.

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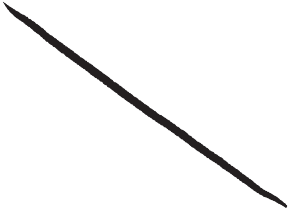
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# **THE PERFORMANCES OF AESCHYLUS' ORESTEIA ON THE MODERN GREEK STAGE OF THE 20TH CENTURY: A STORY OF DIRECTORIAL RECEPTION**

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**Abstract:** Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is one of the most important texts of Western culture and its staging remains a priority for theatre practitioners all over the world. On the Modern Greek stage, the trilogy made its debut in 1903, with a production by the newly established state theatre, the Royal Theatre, directed by Thomas Economos, a student of the German school. Throughout the 20th century, the trilogy continued to be a focal point and engaged the most prominent directors from both state-sponsored and independent theatres. The Aeschylian text gave them the opportunity to express their vision on the important theme of reviving ancient drama, whether by staging the complete trilogy or selected parts of it. The creation of "schools" in this field owes much to the various stagings of *Oresteia*. The National Theatre's approach, marked by German influences, K. Koon's more "Greek" interpretation and hybrid styles that combine both traditions, all represent significant attempts at recreating the trilogy. Directors such as F. Politis, Dim. Rontiris, T. Mouzenidis, Alexis Minotis, Sp. Evagelatos, G. Michilidis brought dynamic interpretations to the stage, sparking creative dialogues on the topic. The Aeschylean *Oresteia* became a benchmark for directors, while the interpretation of its charming roles is registered in the important moments of Greek acting.

**Keywords:** Euripides, Alcestis, Eleusis, Orphism, Athens, democracy.

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## ***Introduction***

The staging of *Oresteia* on the modern Greek stage during the 20th century holds particular significance in the history of Greek theatre. From the beginning of the century until the first manifestations of postmodernism, Greece's most eminent directors and actors considered the performance of *Oresteia* a hallmark of theatrical achievement. In this article, I shall focus on landmark productions of the complete trilogy, staged either by state institutions or by independent theatre companies. These performances constituted major milestones in the evolution of directing, acting, and aesthetics, leaving an indelible mark on the history of the revival of ancient drama.

### **1. The first *Oresteia* – 1903**

The first Greek staging of *Oresteia* took place in November 1903 (Sideris 1976, 186-202) and coincided with several pivotal developments: the establishment of the first Greek state theatre, the formal emergence of the director as a distinct role, and the introduction of the German theatrical tradition to the Greek stage.

Although director Thomas Oikonomou (Sideris 1973, 89-99) possessed substantial artistic credentials, having studied in Vienna and having worked closely with the Meininger troupe, he was compelled to adhere to the mandates of the Royal Theatre's administration. The translation, authored by Professor Georgios Sotiriadis (Mavroleon 2016, 57-107) was a hybrid of purist and demotic Greek, based on Schlehner's adaptation of Wilamowitz's rendition. The production, staged as a three-act play, significantly abridged the original text – particularly the choruses – and introduced numerous alterations in the dialogue.

Despite Sotiriadis' attempt to strike a balanced linguistic tone, his translation provoked fierce opposition, most notably from Professor Georgios Mistrionis (Mavroleon 2016, 57-100) of the University of Athens' Faculty of Philosophy, who passionately advocated for the tragedies to be performed in Ancient Greek. The student uprising that ensued resulted in one fatality and multiple injuries. This event captured the attention of the intellectual community and the press, leaving little documentation regarding the artistic features of the performance. Nevertheless, Oikonomou's production, rooted in the naturalistic style learned from the Meininger troupe, sought historical authenticity through elaborate sets and costumes imported from Vienna's Burgtheater, extensive rehearsals, strategic lighting, and complex crowd scenes. The greatest difficulties arose in the portrayal of the chorus, much of which was cut, thereby sacrificing Aeschylean lyricism. In *Eumenides*, the Erinyes were portrayed by merely five men (Arvaniti 2001, 41).

A significant moment of interest in this performance was the debut of seventeen-year-old Marika Kotopouli as Athena in *Eumenides*. More noteworthy, however, was her opening recital of an ode to Aeschylus composed by poet Kostis Palamas for the occasion (Karadonis 1954, 1416-1420). This inaugural Greek performance of the trilogy was intrinsically linked to the contentious linguistic and national debates of the time. It simultaneously ignited a fruitful dialogue concerning the revival of ancient drama and cemented the imperative that such revivals be undertaken by the state theatre institutions of Greece.

## **2. *Oresteia* directed by Dim. Rontiris**

The next complete staging of the trilogy – approximately fifty years later – reflected profound transformations in both the performance and reception of ancient drama. Since it was founded in 1932 (Georgopoulou 2009, 247-287), the National Theatre had become the chief platform for ancient drama, continuing to draw upon German theatrical traditions. This was obvious in the choice to inaugurate the National Theatre with *Agamemnon*, directed by Fotos Politis Dimitris Rontiris, who trained extensively in Austria

and Germany, staged the entire *Oresteia* in 1949 in a four-hour performance at the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, using Ioannis Gryparis' translation Georgousopoulos 1983, 233).

Rontiris' key innovation lay in his treatment of the chorus: he consciously distanced himself from the Germanic *Sprechchor* (group polyphonic recitation), adopting instead a monophonic choral style that approximated a single note per syllable, as purportedly done in antiquity. Rontiris collaborated closely with composer Menelaos Palladios and choreographer Rallou Manou. He emphasised rhythmic speech and musicality, drawing on Byzantine and folk traditions to bring out the lyrical qualities of the text (Katsounaki, 1993). Critics became fixated on the treatment of the chorus, particularly its relation to speech, music, and movement, as well as the overall cohesion of the production. Rontiris returned to the trilogy in 1954 and 1959, the latter at Epidaurus, with notable changes, such as Elsa Vergi replacing Kotopouli as Clytemnestra and the continued collaboration with choreographer Loukia. Despite divided critical opinion, Rontiris' successive productions realised his vision of a systematic method for performing tragic rhythm and unifying lyrical and dramatic expression. The 1959 performance is widely considered his most accomplished work, reflecting a mature directorial vision (Katsounaki, 1993).

### 3. *Oresteia* directed by T. Mouzenidis

In 1972, Takis Mouzenidis – also trained in Germany and a director for the National Theatre – staged *Oresteia* during the colonels' dictatorship (Greek junta). Initially performed at the Aldwych Theatre in London as part of the “World Theatre Season”, the production received mixed reviews (Arvaniti 2020, 152-159). Some attributed its shortcomings to the political climate, which had led to the exclusion of prominent actors for ideological reasons. Comparisons to Minotis' *Agamemnon* (1966), with Katina Paxinou as Clytemnestra (Arvaniti 2020, 152-159), worked to its detriment. Nevertheless, many critics praised the chorus, which harmonised rhythmic speech and music.

Mouzenidis restaged the production in July 1972 at Epidaurus. His direction adhered to the classical National Theatre style, augmented by “cinematic” elements such as spotlight tracking of protagonists during monologues. While visually striking, this innovation was deemed inappropriate for tragedy. The performance leaned heavily towards naturalism and spectacle. The chorus, despite the involvement of leading choreographers, followed conventional methods. Aronis' Clytemnestra was criticised, particularly because of her background in Aristophanic roles. Only Dionysis Fotopoulos' costumes were widely praised for their

innovation (Arvaniti 2020, 58-59). This production marked a turning point, revealing that state theatre had exhausted its capacities for reviving ancient drama and opening the door to more experimental approaches.

#### 4. *Oresteia* directed by K. Koun

Karolos Koun's Art Theatre (Magyar 2004, Mavromoustakos 2008), having previously explored ancient drama (Magyar *ibid.*, 124-130, 133-136), undertook two consecutive productions of *Oresteia* at Epidaurus (Georgopoulou, 2013, 27-38). Koun, in a pre-performance interview, highlighted the trilogy's timeless political and existential themes. The first production was criticised for truncating the choruses, lacking originality, recycling familiar motifs, and failing to convey the poetic atmosphere of Aeschylus' work. The casting choices further undermined the staging

Koun responded to criticism not theoretically but practically, by staging *Oresteia* again in 1982. This version, in collaboration with author-translator Thanassis Valtinos, emphasised abstraction and ritual.

A key innovation was the unification of the trilogy: the programme did not distinguish among the three plays or their casts, underscoring the production's ritualistic cohesion. The use of masks, previously marginalised, was central to this aesthetic (Koun, 1982). Koun drew upon elements of ancient ritual, Greek tradition, absurdist theatre, Brecht's epic theatre, and Orthodox liturgy. All components – acting, music, set, costume, and chorus – were reimagined to reflect this new vision. The actors appeared on stage before the performance officially began, transforming into their roles before the audience (Kritikos 1982) – a technique reminiscent of Michael Chekhov and Grotowski. Maya Lymberopoulou's Clytemnestra, replacing Melina Mercouri, was especially praised (Georgopoulos, 1982, 24-35). Katia Gerou's Cassandra epitomised the ritualistic essence of the production (Dromazos 1982). Audiences welcomed the innovation with enthusiasm, filling the theatre on both nights.

#### 5. *Oresteia* directed by G. Michaelidis

A decade later, in 1993, George Michaelidis staged *Oresteia* at the Open Theatre, utilising a closed space to enhance the clarity of tragic speech (Michailidis, 28.11.1993). While the intimate setting allowed for emotional nuance, it diminished the epic and transcendent elements that tragedy traditionally conveys. Michaelidis combined ancient motifs with modern theatre influences from Brecht, Grotowski, Meyerhold, Artaud, and Eastern traditions. His study of the Eleusinian Mysteries, Delian rites (Michailidis 1996), and funerary rituals fueled

the ritualistic core of the performance. In reference to the roots of tragedy, the director concludes: “Now that we know some things, we do not bring tragedy to Byzantium, but we return Byzantium from where it began, to its roots” (Michaelidis 22.12. 1993). The “patterns” that he identified in all three plays of the trilogy, and which refer to timeless elements and symbols of all cultures, were the director’s main guide in staging the *Oresteia*.

In this production, actors and dancers appeared together on stage before the beginning, openly assuming their roles (Michaelidis 18.11.1993). The performance embraced expressionism, pantomime, and physical extremity. Dionysis Fotopoulos’ set design, dominated by a deep red hue, reinforced the ritualistic tone. The frequent use of shouts and resonant sounds aimed to evoke the rhythm of primal rituals. Despite shared aesthetic values with Koun’s production – abstraction, schematic austerity, and ritual – both performances struggled to achieve harmony between the constituent elements.

## 6. *Oresteia* directed by S. Evagelatos

Spyros Evagelatos (Georgopoulou 2003, 111-128), an eminent philologist and theatre scholar, sought to reconcile European and Greek approaches to ancient drama. He resisted allegiance to any singular school of thought, advocating for stylistic flexibility (Evagelatos 1976, 75-76). Given the peculiar structure of the trilogy, he chose to present the plays in reverse order: *Eumenides* in 1986, *Choëphoroi* in 1987, and *Agamemnon* in 1988, culminating in a full trilogy in 1990. He explains:

I ended up thinking of the reverse order, because in all the performances I had seen, even the most notable ones, the *Eumenides* were always an overlooked part. That is why we started with what is key: the moment where the logic of the whole trilogy is revealed. It is the most aesthetically abstract play, yet it concludes in the most logical way: the establishment of a new institution, the Areopagus, the Supreme Court, which is a historical compromise (Hatzigiannaki, 1988).

Evagelatos argued that *Eumenides* is the linchpin of the trilogy – abstract, metaphysical, and intellectually demanding (Evagelatos 2004, 67). Its 1986 production, accompanied by K.X. Myris’ new translation, set designs by Giorgos Patsa, and music by Mikis Theodorakis, achieved much of what the director envisioned. The chorus of Erinyes, choreographed by Maria Hors, was the focal point of the performance. *Choëphorae* was staged without cuts, at Epidaurus, featuring a different aesthetic from that of the *Eumenides*. The chorus, acting as the protagonist of the action, wear no masks, but instead a white, intense and unrealistic make-up, “a mask in motion” as the director typically describes it (Spanopoulou 1987). He points out that this tragedy has no beginning and no end, it floats, just like his performance.

As far as acting goes, the renewal of expressive methods was noticed, blending the abstract and realistic styles. The ultimate and main goal was rendering the meaning of the text. In the main roles, Eleni Hatziaargyri's Clytemnestra was clearly superior (Varopoulou 2011, 354-355). Completing the reverse order of the trilogy, the following summer, in 1988, Evagelatos would stage *Agamemnon*, the most "solid" work of the trilogy in his opinion, (Spanopoulou, 1988). Justifying the reverse order, he argues that "*Agamemnon* is a different work if you see it alone, separate from the others, and another if you see it ending with the *Eumenides*, after *Choephorae*". The vital role of the chorus was a constant concern for the director, who edited the choreography himself. By all accounts, he was very satisfied (Varopoulou, 2011, 357). The in-depth study of the text, both from a philological point of view and as far as dramaturgical rendering and stage interpretation go, produced a thoughtful performance, open to interpretations, which met the director's original goal of presenting both the timeless and contemporary elements of Aeschylean dramaturgy.

The overall presentation of the tragedy was eagerly anticipated by the artistic community. In reviews of the individual performances, critics had identified weaknesses and were awaiting their correction. They were also curious to see how the reverse order of staging would impact the interpretation of the entire trilogy. The full performance lasted three and a half hours, including two intermissions. Prioritizing the modern audience's connection with the ancient text, Evagelatos found the experience of staging each play invaluable, as it allowed him to identify shortcomings in this area (Agelicosopoulos 1990).

Despite his original intentions, Evagelatos made several cuts to the text. Improvements were made in acting, music, scenery and choreography, particularly in the *Eumenides*. Strict critics, such as Eleni Varopoulou, described the whole project of the trilogy as "an essential achievement in Greek performance studies" and praised the "extremely effective use of the reverse order" (Varopoulou, 2011, 358). The audience of 7.500 rewarded the performers with sustained applause – even in the rain. Combining the philologist's scholarly rigor and the artist's insight, Evagelatos exemplifies a successful collaboration between Classical Philology and Theatrology – a strong bridge between the Greek study of theatre and international theatre theory and practice. Working with both skilled and tactful collaborators, he managed to remain true to his vision: "Coming from within the National Theatre I tried not to conform to any particular school, but to create a differentiation – a play within a play – that projects the meaning of each play and seeks an aesthetic unique to each text" (Agelicosopoulos, 1990). Evagelatos' work showcases a productive intersection between Classical Philology and Theatre Studies. He refused to adhere to any rigid methodology, instead seeking meaning and aesthetics specific to each text.

### **Closing Remarks**

The vibrant history of *Oresteia* on the Greek stage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century attests to the enduring vitality of tragic discourse in its homeland. These performances not only assimilated new theatrical forms but also illuminated their intrinsic connection to tradition. *Oresteia* remains a living work, combining ritual and psychology, poetry and narrative, existential depth and political insight, as well as forever engaging in a dialogue with awe-inspiring truths at the heart of Greek culture.

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# ANCIENT DRAMA AND HOMERIC EPICS: A RETURN TO SOURCES

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**Abstract:** The article attempts to define the subject and motives of the Athenian tragedy as a living organism that evolved from the source of Homer's epics through the lenses of the three tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, according to the development of the Athenian democracy. This evolution is defined by the change of nature that the hero goes through within the Greek cultural consciousness and his relationship with the divine. Also, an important accent is put on the shifting of societal attention from the individual to the collective, specific for democracy. The methodological framework of the present study is grounded in close philological readings of selected Greek tragedies that creatively engage with Homeric epic material. The analysis focuses on the transformation and adaptation of epic motifs within the theatrical context, tracing how the tragedians reconfigure foundational narrative patterns inherited from Homer. Through three-core point of view – Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's *Myth and Tragedy* – the article tries to show the sources of ancient Greek drama in Homeric texts by supporting the theory that states that Homer's texts are the means and drama an end.

**Keywords:** Homer, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

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## Introduction

The present study draws selectively on three critical frameworks, each grounded in the primary texts to which they refer: Firstly, on Nietzsche's Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy<sup>1</sup>: Homer's "Apollonian" clarity versus tragedy's "Dionysian" dissolution of boundaries and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* as a synthesis: Athena's courtroom (*Eumenides*, 681-710) imposing Apollonian order on Dionysian chaos. Secondly on Aristotle's *Poetics* – especially in the verse between 1449b-1453a were: we identify "epic mimesis" (epic imitation) as narrative report versus "tragic mimesis" (tragic imitation) as embodied performance, and also "Anagnorisis" (recognition): Odysseus' scar.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's structuralism in *Myth and Tragedy* were they are mentioned Tragedy as: "the negotiation of myth in the «agora» (fora, forum) and the «polis» (the city) reframing heroic individualism as civic responsibility"<sup>3</sup>.

1 Nietzsche, F. (1886) *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism* (original German title: *Die Geburt der Tragödie, Oder: Griechentum und Pessimismus*, first edition in 1872 as: *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*), translated by W.M.A. Haussmann, Ph.d., §4-5.

2 Homer, *Odyssey* 19, 392-466, versus Oedipus' self-blinding in Sophocles *Oedipus the Tyrant*, 1270.

3 For further discussion see: Vernant, J.P., Vidal – Naquet, P. (1990) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, NY: Zone Books, p. 32.

Through this three-core point of view we'll attempt the identification of the sources of ancient Greek drama in Homeric texts by supporting the theory where Homer's texts are the means and drama an end.

The methodological framework of the present study is grounded in close philological readings of selected Greek tragedies that creatively engage with Homeric epic material. The analysis focuses on the transformation and adaptation of epic motifs within the theatrical context, tracing how the tragedians reconfigure foundational narrative patterns inherited from Homer. Material will emerge by a close reading of: *Agamemnon's* reworking of *Odyssey's* "Nostoi", Philoctetes' subversion of *Iliad's* heroic code and *Hecuba's* inversion of *Iliad* twenty-four's lamentation scenes.

From this vantage point, firstly, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* reworks the "nostos" motif of the *Odyssey*, offering a tragic reinterpretation of the return, wherein homecoming signifies not redemption but retribution – an "oikos" tainted by ancestral guilt and divine wrath.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* subverts the Iliadic heroic code. The eponymous character, isolated and physically broken, becomes an anti-hero who challenges the Homeric ideal of "arête" (excellence in war) and introduces psychological and ethical complexity foreign to epic values.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, Euripides' *Hecuba* inverts the lamentation scenes of the *Iliad*. *Hecuba* is no longer merely the grieving mother; she becomes an active agent of vengeance and justice, thereby reshaping the poetics of suffering and tragic agency.<sup>6</sup> This comparative approach, juxtaposing tragedy with its epic antecedents, sheds light on the dynamic interplay between narrative memory and theatrical performance. It reveals how tragedy not only inherits but also transforms the epic legacy, crafting new modes of mythopoetic expression.

## 1. Homer's tragic revision as a source of ancient Greek drama

The Athenian tragedians' engagement with Homeric epic represents not merely literary adaptation, but a profound philosophical and aesthetic metamorphosis. This paper traces how Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides systematically reconfigured Homeric paradigms to interrogate fifth-century Athenian anxieties about justice, agency, and divine order. Where Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (8th century BCE) present a world of aristocratic heroism and clear moral hierarchies,

4 For further discussion see: Goldhill, S. (1986) *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 78-81.

5 For further discussion see: Segal, Ch. (1995) *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 95-110.

6 For further discussion see: Foley, H.P. (2001) *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 280-285.

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Athenian tragedy (5th century BCE) transforms these elements into a medium for democratic and existential inquiry. Through the enormous changes that humanity experienced in this unique period of this Mediterranean corner of the earth, where the citizens of the Athenian democracy – in an equally unique social system like the city-states model – experienced the transition from the heroic, strong muscular man (Aias, Achilles) to the new improved human model, the intelligent, new man (Ulysses – Odysseus), we received the gift of Theatre and ancient Greek drama, that was a transformation of the Homeric oral literature speech in a rhetoric philosophical way of dramatic/theatrical presentation of some mythical or historic facts presented by great poets through this aforementioned very interesting period lensed.

### ***1.1 The Crisis of Heroism***

From Homer to Sophocles, and subsequently to Euripides, based on the extant ancient texts, heroic figures – such as Achilles in Homer – are gradually transformed into “new type” individuals. This transformation occurs through the awareness and acquisition of a jurisprudential understanding by the citizens of the fifth century BCE, a knowledge rooted in a growing perception of human development. This juridical knowledge emerged because of both cultural advancement and the biological evolution of the human species. It was apprehended through literature, which reaches its apogee in ancient Greek civilization following a fifty-year period of intense progress – first in mathematics and philosophy, and subsequently across all known sciences of the time – as well as in politics, culminating in the establishment of democratic governance. The theatre, as an art form, is a direct offspring of this democracy.

The fundamental shift that led from the epic discourse and literary structures of Homer’s works – texts shaped by an oral narrative tradition – can be identified, among other things, through the following significant theoretical frameworks: Homer’s Achilles (Homer, *Iliad*, 9, 410-416) chooses “kleos” (glory) over survival, embodying the epic warrior ideal. On the contrary, Sophocles’ *Ajax* (815-865), finds his heroic identity rendered obsolete in a world valuing “sophrosyne” (moderation) over martial prowess. Respectively Euripides’ Heracles (Hercules, 1340-1393) descends into madness, his labors meaningless before divine caprice.

Through this tripartite framework, we are led to the gradual deconstruction of the heroic model. The heroism of epic narrative discourse, for the rationalist Sophocles, undergoes a transformation from the “man of muscle” (Ajax) to the “man of mind” (Odysseus), who – assisted by the goddess of Wisdom (a

symbolically significant choice) – claims the “scepter” of the human species from his now-outdated warrior predecessor and assumes a leading role in human development as the newly evolved form of man.

Euripides, an even more radical “modernist” for his time, takes this deconstruction a step further by presenting Heracles, yet another “hero”, as experiencing utter decline and ultimately accepting his defeat. Through the evolution of the Heracles myth, further deconstructs the divine order as it had been conceived and accepted by his tragic predecessors, Sophocles and Aeschylus.

Through this complete dismantling of both heroism and the absolute sovereignty of the gods of ancient Greek religion, we are gradually led to the progressive collapse of cosmic certainty.

### ***1.2 The Collapse of Cosmic Certainty***

The disruption and eventual dismantling of cosmic certainty – as formulated over time from the oral narrative mode of Homeric epic to Euripides’ radical and subversive theatrical treatment – is reflected in the representation of the divine across distinct literary genres (epic and drama) and through the differing poetic visions of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. This evolution is evident in how each engages with the divine: Homer’s Zeus upholds a clear moral order (Homer, *Iliad* 1.5: “The plan of Zeus was being fulfilled.”), Aeschylus’ Zeus (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 160–183) operates through the cryptic principle of “*pathei-mathos*” (learning through suffering) and Euripides’ gods are either absent or actively malevolent (Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 1060–1120).

### ***1.3 Theatricalizing the Epic***

The theatricalization of the epic emerged organically, as the dramaturgical structure inherent in Homer’s evocative, descriptive narrative was already ripe for dramatization. This predisposition toward theatrical representation gained fresh impetus in ancient Greece, driven by a pressing need to comprehend the epochal transformations that unfolded during the half-century following the birth of democracy in Athens. This period saw an immense leap in human cognition, which in turn created a demand for a new “tool” that could facilitate human adaptation to this unprecedented reality. That tool was none other than theatre and the art of drama itself – born of that very necessity.

The combination of Homer’s dramatic narrative structure and the aforementioned societal need gave rise to theatre in the form preserved for us through the enduring texts of the three principal tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides), as well as the comic-lyric poet Aristophanes. This theatrical tradition

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is further documented in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which captures aspects of theatrical practice, and throughout the historical records of that era. Beyond Aristotle's *Poetics*, the trajectory toward the theatricalization of Homeric epic can also be traced through the works of both earlier and later writers, historians, and philosophers, including, but not limited to, the following: Plato, particularly in his dialogues (*Republic*, *Ion*, *Laws*), where he critically engages with Homer and tragedy, revealing both their cultural authority and the evolving perceptions of mimesis and performance in the classical world. On the other hand, Herodotus, who frequently refers to Homeric themes and figures, treats them not only as part of a mythic past but also as reference points for understanding historical causality and human character. In a different way Thucydides who, despite his critical and empirical approach, retains structural and stylistic elements reminiscent of epic narration, while simultaneously displaying a dramatic sensibility in his set speeches and character portrayals. Longinus, in *On the Sublime*, who analyses the grandeur of Homeric expression in comparison to later literary forms, offering insight into the rhetorical and emotional power that would influence tragic dramaturgy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who discusses the evolution of Greek prose and poetry, drawing links between Homeric narrative techniques and later dramatic developments. In a parallel field, Philostratus and the Second Sophistic, where rhetorical reenactments and Homeric performances in declamation suggest a continued blending of epic and theatrical modes well into the Roman era. In modern times, Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, famously positions Homeric clarity (the Apollonian) in dialectical tension with the chaotic force of Greek tragedy (the Dionysian), thus proposing a philosophical framework for understanding the transformation from epic to drama. Finally, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, whose structuralist readings (*Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*) map the shift from mythic narrative to tragic performance as a reflection of evolving political and social structures in the polis.

These figures, spanning antiquity to modernity, contribute to a broader intellectual and cultural narrative that illuminates the gradual reconfiguration of the Homeric epic into the embodied, dialogic, and civic form of Attic theatre.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Homeric similes "As lions stalking prey...", *Iliad* 5, 554-558, create aesthetic distance. Tragic violence occurs offstage but is viscerally reported (e.g., the blinding of Oedipus in *Oedipus the Tyrant*, 1270-1279). The chorus transforms from Homer's passive observers, *Iliad* 3, 146-160, to active participants in Sophocles, *Antigone* 332-375.

## 2. Thematic Affinities: Heroism, Fate, and Recognition

The tragic engagement with Homeric themes reveals both continuity and radical innovation. In this section we will try to examine three core thematic transformations through Nietzschean, Aristotelian, and Vernantian lenses in order to deeply understand the relation between Homer's epic world and theatre plays of ancient Greek dramaturgy.

### 2.1 The Deconstruction of Heroism

The Homeric conception of heroism, especially as embodied in the “aristeia” (excellence) of Achilles in *Iliad* (Homer, *Iliad* 20, 381–502), presents a paradigm of battlefield excellence that culminates in the aestheticization of death: Achilles re-enters the war with superhuman ferocity, slaughtering countless Trojans with divine assistance. His rage, sanctified by the gods and sanctioned by heroic code, reaches its apogee in a moment of sublime violence. This is what Jean-Pierre Vernant famously described as the “beautiful death”, whereby the hero gains immortality through a glorious end that suspends the natural limits of human life within the cultural imaginary of the epic (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1991, p. 63).

In stark contrast, Sophocles' portrayal of Ajax's suicide, in his masterpiece *Ajax*, undermines this ideal. Certainly, the case of Ajax in Sophocles' tragedy carries additional dimensions. This play constitutes a rare exception within the extant corpus of ancient Greek drama, as it features the on-stage death of the tragic hero – specifically, by suicide. Through this dramatic choice, Sophocles attributes yet another significant function to the theatrical art: its capacity to reflect on human existence and social structures. Ajax's symbolic failure to retain his weapons and assert his leadership offers the contemporary spectator a unique experience of normative reflection through the medium of theatre. The awarding of Ajax's arms and command to Odysseus – assisted, not incidentally, by the goddess of wisdom – signifies a profound cultural transition. The symbolic meaning here is deliberate: Odysseus, aided by Athena (goddess of wisdom/sophia), inherits both the hero's arms and the reins of command in the Greek army. This transition, as discussed earlier, becomes the dramaturgical vehicle for the emergence of a new human model: the “intelligent” man replaces the “heroic” warrior. The invulnerable hero is defeated not by force of arms, but by sophia – wisdom – and it is through divine intervention that the “wise” man inherits the sceptre of leadership from the now obsolete paradigm of the “heroic” man. This shift marks not merely a change in theatrical narrative but signals a deeper ideological transformation: the ascendancy of cunning, adaptability, and intelligence over brute strength and martial honour.

Returning to the previous reasoning, far from an ennobling or redemptive gesture, Ajax's death is marked by futility and personal disgrace. His failure to exact vengeance and the collapse of his heroic identity result not in epic transcendence, but in isolation, madness, and ultimately self-destruction. The aesthetic order of Homeric "kleos" (glory) is replaced here with tragic dissonance. As Charles Segal observes, in *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, the tragic death in Sophocles does not affirm values but exposes their limits and contradictions (Segal, 1981, pp. 110–113).

This transformation may be further illuminated through a Nietzschean lens. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche identifies the tragic hero as "the Dionysian mask through which Apollo speaks his final truth" (Nietzsche, §7, p. 44). That is, the heroic figure becomes a site where the tension between illusion (Apollonian form) and chaos (Dionysian dissolution) is enacted. Achilles, though momentarily transcendent, is still trapped in an Apollonian framework of glory and order. Ajax, by contrast, succumbs to Dionysian fragmentation; his breakdown points toward the failure of the heroic ideal itself. In this sense, the tragedy does not simply mourn the loss of epic values – it interrogates and deconstructs them from within.

This trajectory from Homeric "kleos" to Sophoclean pathos signals a cultural and philosophical shift: from the affirmation of heroic identity to the recognition of its tragic fragility. Heroism is no longer unproblematically aligned with excellence and honour; it is refracted through doubt, irony, and ultimately death devoid of meaning.

## 2.2 "Moira" (fate) vs "Hamartia" (sin)

The movement from epic to tragedy is marked not only by a transformation in heroism but also in the conceptualization of responsibility and causality. In Homeric epic, the force of "moira" – fate – is portrayed as an immutable order that even the gods acknowledge. A clear instance of this is found in Hector's speech to Andromache in *Illiad*, where he accepts his predetermined death with tragic composure and a sense of noble inevitability. His words exemplify what M.S. Silk has described as "heroic fatalism" – the epic hero does not resist fate but embraces it as a source of meaning and honour (Homer, *Iliad* 6, 440–465).

In contrast, Greek tragedy introduces the notion of "hamartia" – a flaw or error – as the primary engine of downfall. This shift is not merely literary, but deeply ideological. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the protagonist's catastrophic "anagnorisis" (recognition) and self-blinding emerge not from divine will alone, but from his own ignorance and impulsive actions. His lines in *Oedipus the King* convey this realisation: "Ah, all is clear at last. O, light, let me look on you one final time!" (Sophocles, 2004, *Oedipus*

*the King*, 1182–1185, p. 78). Here, Sophocles displaces absolute fate for the burden of personal agency – a shift reflective of democratic Athens’ growing concern with moral and civic responsibility. As Martha Nussbaum argues: “the tragic subject becomes accountable not simply to the gods, but to a humanised polis, where the consequences of one’s choices reverberate socially and politically” (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 25–30).

This evolution is further illustrated in the movement from Odysseus to Orestes. In *Odyssey*, Odysseus’ use of strategic deception before Penelope is marked by cleverness and control – it is a morally sanctioned *Mētis*<sup>8</sup>, a hallmark of Homeric intelligence. However, in Euripides’ *Electra*, Orestes employs similarly deceptive tactics, but with significant ethical ambiguity. His feigned report of his own death, delivered to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, raises troubling questions: is deception still heroic, or has it become a symptom of inner fragmentation and ethical decay?

According to the view of an important researcher: “Euripidean tragedy dismantles the Homeric confidence in *Metis* by subjecting it to moral scrutiny” (Goldhill, 1986, p. 91). Orestes’ lies are no longer a tool of survival or strategy; they point toward a crisis of moral clarity. What was once a sign of heroic resourcefulness becomes a manifestation of ethical disintegration in a world no longer ordered by absolute codes. In sum, the transition from *moira* to *hamartia* reflects a broader cultural shift: from a “cosmos” (world) of ordained outcomes to a “polis” (city) of contested responsibilities. The epic hero accepts his fate; the tragic hero must answer for his choices, ushering humanity into a new also very interesting era.

### 2.3 *Anagnorisis (recognition) and Identity*

We could make a comparison between Homeric and tragic “anagnorisis” (recognition). In “Homeric world” we have a different perspective on this specific issue: In *Odyssey*, for example, recognition (anagnorisis) is often achieved through tangible physical markers, which serve to re-establish identity within the narrative. The most iconic example is the scar on Odysseus’ thigh, revealed during his encounter with Eurycleia (Homer, *Odyssey*, 19, 393–507). This token (*semeion*) confirms his identity not only to others but also to the audience, reinforcing the hero’s continuity and bodily integrity across his trials and transformations. The recognition is thus external, verifiable, and reaffirming of an enduring selfhood

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8 According to Acusilaus, *Metis* was born with *Eros* and *Aether*, from the union of *Erebus* and *Night*, who came from *Chaos*. She was considered the goddess of wisdom and prudence, qualities that she bequeathed to her daughter, the goddess *Athena*. *Metis* was the personification for the ancients not only of wisdom and prudence but also of the kind of cunning and vigilance, represented by *Odysseus* among humans and by the fox among animals.

(Schein, 1995, p. 266). On the other hand in ancient Greek drama we have the Tragic “Anagnorisis” (recognition). In sharp contrast, tragedy introduces “anagnorisis” (recognition) as a destabilizing moment of internal rupture. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the eponymous hero’s self-recognition – when he exclaims “*O, light, may I look on you for the last time!*” – marks the collapse of his prior self-understanding. Here, “anagnorisis” is not merely the revelation of a hidden fact, but the unravelling of the subject who perceives it. Oedipus does not gain knowledge that affirms identity; he learns that he has always been what he never believed he could be. This recognition brings about “peripeteia” (reversal), but also a philosophical crisis regarding the coherence of identity itself (Knox, 1957, p. 176).

In a theoretical framework we could focus on some important theories like Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In this philosophical essay, he differentiates between forms of recognition in epic and tragedy (*Poetics*, 1452a). Aristoteles defines “anagnorisis” as “a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune”. In epic, such recognition is often grounded in external tokens (*semeia*), like scars, rings, or memories. These serve narrative resolution without destabilizing character. In tragedy, however, recognition is tightly intertwined with “*pathos*” and “*peripeteia*” (adventure) and leads to an inner transformation: tragic anagnorisis in Sophocles “... undoes the coherence of self... it is not simply knowledge, but the reconfiguration of the person who knows” (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 109). Thus, whereas Homeric identity is stable and recoverable, tragic identity is contingent and fractured by the very process of knowing.

## 2.4 *The Divine Reimagined*

The divine realm, as conceived in Homeric epic, is a tangible and immanent force – visibly intervening, personally engaged, and often anthropomorphically aligned with human affairs. In contrast, Attic tragedy reconfigures the divine presence, often invoking it through silence, absence, or inscrutable distance, thus reflecting a shift in theological imagination from Homeric “oral” immediacy to tragic “written” ambiguity.

As a result, we could conclude that in “Homeric Gods” existed a kind of “visible intervention” and “divine proximity” also.

On the contrary in *Odyssey*, the gods do not merely influence the world passively; they manifest in direct, perceptible ways. One of the clearest examples occurs in *Odyssey* when Athena appears in the form of Mentor to assist Odysseus in his climactic confrontation with the suitors. The goddess stands by him, offers tactical guidance and, crucially, enhances his physical prowess – a striking depiction of “human – divine” cooperation in “heroic” warfare. Her presence, both in disguise and in her true form, asserts the Homeric conception of the gods

as companions-in-arms of mortal heroes (Homer, 1967, *Odyssey*, lines 22.205–240; cf. 16.156–200). Homeric theology is marked by a clarity and confidence in divine order; gods are arbiters of justice but also guardians of personal oaths and familial integrity – particularly Athena in her consistent support of Odysseus and Telemachus, whom she protects with almost maternal dedication (Segal, 1994, p. 41). This divine immediacy reflects a pre-political “cosmos” (world) in which justice is enforced through a direct line between Olympus and the mortal world.

On the other hand, in Euripides’ “tragic universe” the Gods withdraw ushering in an era of “tragic divine absence”. Euripides’ *Hippolytus* for example dramatizes a world in which the gods are present not through direct engagement, but through absence, silence, or opaque cruelty. Artemis, who champions chastity and reveres her devotee Hippolytus, remains absent throughout his downfall. Only after his death does she appear, too late to save him, to pronounce divine regret without responsibility (Euripides. *Hippolytus*, lines 1321–1368). The tragedy is intensified not only by Aphrodite’s malicious orchestration at the play’s beginning, but also by Artemis’ cold inability to intervene, even when aware of the truth.

The gods in tragedy often become emblems of impersonal power or ideological critique. The cruelty of Aphrodite and the impotence of Artemis highlight a disenchanting vision of divine justice, one in which mortals suffer despite – or because of – divine whims: Euripides “presents a world governed by divine forces whose justice is not necessarily human or even coherent” (Sourvinou-Inwood, 2003, p. 248), signaling a darker theological outlook than that of Homer. In the era of tragic poets and the golden age of Athenian democracy there is also a “democratization of the divine”. From a scholarly perspective Greek tragedy “democratizes” the divine by removing the gods from their privileged intimacy with the heroic elite and rendering them abstract agents whose actions affect the “polis” (city) at large (Vernant, 1988, pp. 23–44). In epic, gods function as personal allies or “antagonists” (competitors) of individual heroes. In tragedy, however, the divine reflects communal tensions, political anxieties, and moral dilemmas. This shift parallels the evolution from a heroic ethos to a democratic civic consciousness, where gods no longer uphold the fate of individuals but rather preside over collective human error and fragile justice. In Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, for instance, the divine hierarchy does not serve justice but reaffirms cosmic imbalance. Artemis’ withdrawal from action and Aphrodite’s ruthless assertion of power render human agency tragically futile. This transformation is not simply theological but ideological – the gods no longer mirror aristocratic codes of honour but symbolize a broader interrogation of moral certainty and political order in the democratic “polis” (city) (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1990, p. 258).

### 3. Rewritings of Homer in “tragic’s world”

Greek tragedy often operates through a process of palimpsestual reworking – rewriting Homeric myth within a civic, theatrical, and philosophical framework that destabilizes epic certainties. We could better understand this process following indicatively some parts of ancient Greek plays that illustrate how tragic poets critically reimagine Homeric narratives, not only for aesthetic purposes but as a form of cultural interrogation.

#### 3.1 *Oresteia* and the “*Nostoi*” (Nostos’ plural)

*Odyssey* recounts Agamemnon’s return from Troy as a cautionary tale: his murder at the hands of Clytemnestra is reported with ominous solemnity but without moral ambiguity – Aegisthus is the villain, and Orestes the avenger. Homer’s narrative retains the ethical clarity of heroic justice: the homecoming (nostos) is fatally obstructed by personal betrayal, not systemic fault (Homer, 1967, *Odyssey*, lines 3.254–312).

In contrast, Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* rewrites the “nostos” motif as a metaphysical ordeal. The crimson tapestry scene in which Agamemnon is seduced into walking upon imperial red cloths, marks not merely a gesture of pride but a symbolic transgression. The visual excess becomes a metaphor for the guilt of the Atreid house and the pollution of war. This act could be faced as the visible eruption of the tragic: “...the fabric signifies both victory and defilement, collapsing the distinction between glory and crime” (Vernant, 1988c, p. 29). Philosophically, the scene also echoes Nietzsche’s concept of the “Dionysian entanglement” – the fatal merging of life, suffering, and ecstatic horror that lies beneath Apollonian order (Nietzsche, 1999, §9). Agamemnon’s entrance, both triumphant and cursed, reflects the tragic entrapment of agency within ancestral necessity.

The structural contrast culminates in the opposing forms of revenge: Odysseus’ solitary and righteous massacre of the suitors stands against Orestes’ moral impasse and his eventual trial in *Eumenides*: “...where the *Odyssey* restores personal and social order through dike, the *Oresteia* problematises justice itself, requiring the intervention of Athena and the establishment of civic institutions – a shift from private vengeance to collective deliberation” (Zeitlin, 1984, p. 70).

### 3.2 *Philoctetes and the Iliad*

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* stages an implicit dialogue with *Iliad* 9, in which Achilles must choose between glorious death and a long, obscure life. Achilles' heroic decision — to die young but remembered — crystallizes the epic ideal of “arete”. His suffering is noble, his fate exemplary. Philoctetes, however, offers a revisionary response. His wound, described with visceral intensity is not a mark of “kleos” (glory), but a site of marginalization and abjection. Exiled and rotting, he embodies a hero whose suffering isolates rather than ennoble. Sophocles dismantles the epic paradigm by confronting the audience with the physical and ethical consequences of heroism removed from the social frame that legitimizes it.

Aristotle's concept of “pathos” as “noble suffering” in the *Poetics* is thus interrogated. Philoctetes' pain is not metaphorical or moralized, but intensely corporeal and politically charged. His wound cannot be redeemed through honour, only instrumentalized by others — notably Odysseus — turning him into an object of strategic necessity rather than a subject of epic glory. According to the opinion of some scholars reading of Greek tragedy as a space where “the vulnerability of the good” is exposed finds powerful expression in *Philoctetes* (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 395). Arguing that Sophocles challenges any facile identification of suffering with moral nobility: pain is not a test of virtue but a brutal fact of life, one that may destroy or deform the soul. Thus, *Philoctetes* rewrites the Homeric ethos from within, showing how the heroic ideal collapses when removed from the narrative frameworks that previously sustained it.

### 3.3 *Euripides' Hecuba vs Iliad 24*

Homer's *Iliad* ends on a note of profound “pathos” (as noble suffering): Priam's journey to ransom Hector's body is marked by dignity, grief, and a brief reconciliation between enemies. The moment affirms the possibility of shared humanity beyond the devastation of war. On the contrary, Euripides' *Hecuba*, offers a bleaker counter-narrative. In *Hecuba*, the once-regal Trojan queen blinds the Thracian king Polymestor in an act of visceral revenge for the murder of her son Polydorus (Euripides, 1995, lines 1048–1135). The nobility of Priam's mourning is replaced by the horror of a mother turned Erinyes. The *Hecuba* does not end with mourning but with mutilation, rage, and the loss of all moral certainty. This Euripidean moment is described by Snell as the: “*discovery of ethical ambiguity*” (Snell, 1953, p. 25). *Hecuba* is both victim and executioner, righteous and monstrous. The play reveals the collapse of traditional ethical polarities and dramatizes a world in which the categories of honour, vengeance, and justice bleed into one another. Vernant adds that *Hecuba* inverts ritual structures: “...

where Homeric mourning involves lament and supplication, Euripides offers sacrificial vengeance with no catharsis” (Vernant, and Vidal-Naquet, 1990, p. 270). The tragic reworking here is not merely a psychological deepening but a structural dislocation of the very cultural rituals that once allowed grief to find meaning.

### 3.4 *Cyclops*: Satyr Play as Homeric Critique

Finally, Euripides’ *Cyclops* – the only surviving satyr play – parodies *Odyssey* 9.105–566, the episode of Odysseus and Polyphemus, but with a sharply political and ideological undercurrent. While the Homeric version presents Odysseus as a cunning and heroic survivor, Euripides transforms the encounter into a grotesque carnival of drunkenness, sexual innuendo, and Dionysian subversion. Through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, *Cyclops* functions as: a space where epic hierarchies are suspended and inverted (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 122–134). The noble Odysseus is ridiculed, and the monster becomes a drunken caricature of tyrannical power. The satyr chorus, with their phallic jokes and unruly exuberance, dismantles the epic gravity of Homer’s narrative. More significantly, the play can be read as a political satire of Athenian imperialism: Euripides’ Polyphemus, who boasts of lawlessness and detests the gods, “... mirrors the hubris of imperial Athens rather than the barbarism of a Cyclops” (Hall, 1989, p. 144). The transformation of Homeric narrative into satyr play thus enables a critique not only of myth but of contemporary political ideology.

### **Conclusion: The “tragic afterlife” of Homer**

The Athenian tragedians’ engagement with Homer represents a paradoxical movement: a return to epic origins that is also a radical act of re-signification. Tragedy does not merely adapt Homeric material; it rethinks the very terms of myth, ethics, and representation. This study has demonstrated how the tragic stage becomes both a philosophical homecoming and a cultural departure from Homeric poetics.

Tragedy – in this “democracy era of tragic’s” – transforms the aristocratic “ethos” (moral) of “kleos” (glory) into the civic experience of “pathos” (as noble suffering and a way to knowledge). Where the Homeric hero is defined by individual glory and genealogical honour, tragic characters become representatives of collective suffering and ethical dilemma. The chorus, often drawn from marginal or vulnerable social groups – women, elders, slaves – replaces the epic bard and introduces a new form of collective voice: The chorus serves as the people’s conscience, mediating between personal catastrophe and communal responsibility.

This way of philosophical reflection that democracy and ancient drama created, led in the Birth of Western Subjectivity. Greek tragedy becomes the laboratory for what Bruno Snell termed “*the discovery of the mind.*” Whereas Homeric characters are driven by divine will and heroic codes, tragic figures interiorize conflict. Ajax’s soliloquy – in Sophocles’ *Ajax* – or Phaedra’s tortured admission of desire in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* reveal the emergence of inwardness, guilt, and ethical reflection. This inward turn inaugurates the modern concept of selfhood: fragmented, opaque, and tragically aware of its own limits making tragedy the “ultimate” means of Athenian self-criticism.

Tragedy no longer functions as a mythic celebration but as a civic critique. Ancient Greek drama – especially tragedy – became a “*laboratory of the polis*” (city), where Athens interrogates its own foundations through myth (Vernant, 1988b, p. 29). In Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, the cycle of Homeric vengeance is supplanted by a juridical system rooted in deliberation and rationality. In *The Trojan Women*, Euripides confronts Athenian imperial violence by reimagining the victims of Troy not as distant foes but as “...*mirrors of contemporary suffering*” (Hall, 2010, p. 220). The tragic “polis” (city) turns Homeric “Kleos” (glory) into political responsibility.

Summarizing the theoretical part of the issue we could emphasize regarding Nietzschean Dialectic that the tragic reworking of Homer exemplifies the Apollonian/Dionysian dialectic. Homer offers structured beauty and epic measure, but tragedy shatters that form, giving way to Dionysian chaos, rupture, and ecstatic terror. The tragic chorus dances on the edge of madness and insight (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 1999, §10). Correspondingly – in relation to the Aristotelian Transformation – Aristotle’s katharsis depends upon Homeric emotional material – grief, fear, pity – but gives it theatrical embodiment. The tragic stage becomes a site where myth becomes experience, and audience members engage in shared moral reflection. Finally, according to the modern reception, the Homer-tragedy dialogue continues across of the centuries. Seneca’s *Troades* reimagines Euripides through Roman stoicism. Anouilh’s *Antigone* transposes Sophocles’ heroine into a Nazi-occupied France. These adaptations affirm that “...**Homeric tragedy is not static legacy but a generative form of cultural memory**” (Goldhill, 2007, p. 221).

**Epilogue**

The present work could future provoke on a further inquiry into understudied aspects of the Homer – tragedy nexus in different ways. For example, by a Lacanian approach: recognition (anagnorisis) scenes in Homer and tragedy could be reread through a Lacanian way of psychoanalysis as sites of subject formation, the gaze, and symbolic loss.

Also, regarding the performance studies and theatre practicing the present study could be proven very useful as a basis for a new way of stage presence of drama or a new dramaturg model even an acting model as well. Comparative analysis of rhapsodic and dramaturgical modes of delivery could probably illuminate how the Homeric epic was re-experienced in the tragic theatre, not just as text but as event – embodied, affective, and political, leading in a new approach of stage presentation of Homeric literature.

In alignment with this interpretive framework, the National Theatre of Northern Greece – under the artistic direction of the present author for the last three and a half years – has chosen, for its major summer production, a conscious return to the sources: to Homer and epic poetry, which constituted the foundational matrix for the birth of tragedy and ancient drama.

Distinguished Greek director Michail Marmarinos, internationally acclaimed for his innovative theatrical vision, directs a production titled “Z’, H’, Th’: The stranger. A visit to three rhapsodies of the *Odyssey*”, an ambitious theatrical endeavour that seeks to rediscover the epic substratum from which ancient drama originally emerged.

Ultimately, the tragic afterlife of Homer lies not in fidelity to a fixed canon but in the restless reinvention of myth for new historical horizons. The tragedians did not preserve Homer; they exposed and transformed him – making him endure process in a never-ending renegotiation of our relationship with the narrative epic and the Homeric universe up to our era.

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**EXILE AND ASYLUM IN TRAGIC  
DISPLACEMENT:  
THE REFUGEE CONDITION  
IN EURIPIDES' *MEDEA* AND  
SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS AT COLONUS***

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## CONCEPT STUDIES

**Abstract:** This essay examines the representation of asylum and exile in two foundational Greek tragedies: Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. By comparing the protagonists' journeys through the lens of Ancient and Modern political thought, it explores how ancient Greek drama anticipated contemporary debates around displacement, hospitality, and moral belonging. The work also investigates the tragic dimension of the refugee condition and how it is intertwined with gender, justice, and divine authority, thus offering critical insights into the perennial relevance of ancient tragedy.

**Keywords:** tragedy, asylum, Medea, Oedipus, exile, hospitality, Greek drama.

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### ***Historical, Political, and Theatrical Framework***

For Athens the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE was a period marked by imperial expansion, civic experimentation, and frequent warfare, which rendered questions of foreignness and political belonging intensely relevant. Concepts such as *xenia* (guest-friendship), exile (*phygē*), and asylum (*asylon*) were not abstract ethical ideals but practical, often contested elements of civic life and an essential functioning of Greek society (Goldhil, 1986, pp. 81-82).

Exile in the 5th century BCE was a common political and legal mechanism. Citizens could be ostracized through democratic vote, leaders exiled in the aftermath of political shifts, and defeated populations driven from their homelands following war. The word *xenos* in Greek encompassed a wide semantic field, meaning both "foreigner" and "guest," oscillating between welcome and threat. As Edith Hall explains, "Greek tragedy persistently explores the anxieties provoked by the arrival of the stranger" (Hall, 1989, p. 56). This was not just a thematic concern but reflected the Athenians' own ambivalent relationship to outsiders: while Athens prided itself on a myth of openness and hospitality, in practice this ethos was selective and politically expedient.

Central to Athenian identity was the polis—the city-state—not only as a political unit but as an embodiment of civic belonging and cultural cohesion. The polis was the matrix of one's rights, duties, and identity. To be exiled from the polis was to be cut off from the structures that conferred dignity and protection. The absence of a homeland thus implied moral

vulnerability and political liminality. According to Goldhill (1990), “the polis is the site of identity and the arena of moral decisions... tragedy locates its dilemmas at the edge of the civic frame” (p. 27). It is precisely at these edges that the protagonists of *Medea* and *Oedipus at Colonus* stand.

The institutions of *asylon* (protection from forced removal) and *xenia* offered theoretical frameworks for understanding hospitality, but they were not universally applied. Asylum was typically tied to temples and altars, while *xenia* operated as a reciprocal, aristocratic code. In tragedy, these norms are repeatedly put to the test, dramatizing the tensions between the promise of protection and the realities of rejection.

Long before Sophocles and Euripides, it was Aeschylus who addressed the subject of displacement and abandoning one’s country. In *Suppliant Women*, Aeschylus dramatizes the plight of the Danaids, who flee forced marriage in Egypt and seek asylum in Argos and explores the figure of the refugee and the broader notion of otherness, foregrounding the ethical and political tensions that arise in encounters between host communities and displaced individuals. The Danaids’ foreign appearance, non-Greek customs, and language serve to underscore their alterity (Syropoulos 2017 pp. 120–121). King Pelasgus is faced with a complex moral dilemma: to grant them protection and risk military conflict with Egypt, or deny them sanctuary and incur divine retribution. Despite their classification as “barbarian” and “unhellenic” (Syropoulos 2017, p. 128), the Danaids are ultimately received by the Argives, in a gesture that reflects both the civic values of Athenian democracy and the religious imperative of aiding suppliants.

This interrogation of otherness continues in Euripides’ *Helen*, where the protagonist, displaced in Egypt, is caught between foreign cultural norms and the memory of her Hellenic identity. Her vulnerability within an alien social structure reflects the precariousness of the refugee condition and the limits of hospitality in contexts defined by cultural divergence (Syropoulos, pp. 12–13).

Another two emblematic plays by Sophocles and Euripides, might allow us a more thorough understanding of the burning issue of refugees and asylum seeking. *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Medea* can be read as meditations on the fragile nature of hospitality and the politicization of sanctuary. Greek tragedy itself was deeply political. Performed during the City Dionysia, a festival embedded in civic life and attended by citizens, magistrates, and foreign dignitaries, tragedy reflected and refracted public concerns. As Zeitlin (1996) argues, “the Athenian theater offered a space for

rehearsing civic identity and confronting collective anxieties” (p. 85). The dramatization of exile and foreignness allowed the audience to confront the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The tragic stage became a site for ethical experimentation, where the dilemmas of asylum could be reimagined and contested.

Euripides’ *Medea* was produced in 431 BCE, at the onset of the Peloponnesian War—a time of rising tension and growing suspicion of foreign influence. The play’s staging of a barbarian woman being cast out by a Greek city resonates with contemporary fears of instability and betrayal. *Medea*’s identity as a foreigner, a woman, and a wielder of magical powers coalesces into a potent symbol of the Other. Her eventual acquisition of asylum through cunning—rather than through institutional or divine protection—questions the accessibility of formal asylum for those marked by difference.

In contrast, Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, produced posthumously in 401 BCE, emerges in a different political climate: one of Athenian decline following the city’s defeat in the Peloponnesian War. The play reflects a mood of introspection, self-defense, and ethical positioning. *Oedipus*, a blind and polluted exile, seeks sanctuary at Colonus, a sacred deme outside Athens. The Athenian king Theseus offers him refuge—not out of political calculation, but out of moral conviction. This image of ethical leadership may be read as a response to a war-weary city attempting to reassert its identity as a just polis in a changing world.

The location of *Oedipus at Colonus* in a real Attic setting—Colonus, Sophocles’ own deme—adds a layer of immediacy and civic resonance. The audience would recognize the grove of the Eumenides not as mythic abstraction, but as a physical place. In this way, Sophocles binds myth to geography, tragedy to politics, and memory to space. The play constructs Athens as a moral polis precisely by defining its treatment of the foreigner. Thus, the foreigner becomes a test for the city’s ethical commitments.

*Medea* and *Oedipus at Colonus* were not composed in a vacuum. They reflect, critique, and reimagine the dynamics of political exile and asylum within the matrix of 5th-century Athenian civic ideology. Their protagonists stand at the margins of the polis, embodying the contradictions of a society that simultaneously celebrated hospitality and policed its borders. By examining these works through the lens of their historical and theatrical contexts, we can better understand how the ancient stage constructed—and contested—the figure of the refugee.

### *Medea – The Refugee of the “Other”*

In Euripides’ *Medea*, the eponymous character embodies the refugee in multiple overlapping forms: as an exile from her homeland Colchis, as a woman abandoned in a foreign city, and as a figure marked by cultural and magical alterity. Medea is not merely displaced geographically; she is ontologically alien to the city of Corinth. Through her portrayal, Euripides explores the liminality, fear, and politicized vulnerability that accompany the refugee condition, especially when intersecting with gender and ethnicity.

From the opening lines of the play, Medea’s status as a displaced person is established. The Nurse recounts her arrival:

“She hath given all for him, / And now is scorned and cast away. /  
He hath taken to his house another bride” (*Medea*, ll. 19–21, trans. Murray).

Medea’s very identity is constructed through the lens of exile and sacrifice. She abandoned her father, her homeland, and committed crimes for Jason’s sake—acts which sever her from the possibility of return and position her in permanent estrangement. She is doubly alienated: by space, and by the betrayal of intimate loyalty.

Her position in Corinth is one of tolerated presence rather than full integration. Despite being married to Jason, her foreignness is never forgotten or forgiven. Jason himself reminds her:

“Thou comest to a land of Hellas and hast learned justice and the use  
of law, instead of the brute rule of force” (*Medea*, ll. 536–537).



The Medea sarcophagus. Baths of Diocletian,  
Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagus\\_Medea\\_Terme.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagus_Medea_Terme.jpg)

Here, Jason's rhetoric crystallizes a colonial narrative: he positions Medea as a barbarian civilised by Greek influence, reinforcing her outsider status even in marriage. Her "gratitude" is expected; her demands for rights are framed as transgressions. Rabinowitz (1993) observes that Medea's body and voice are perceived as threatening due to her refusal to submit to these cultural hierarchies (pp. 139–145). The threat she represents to the city becomes evident in Creon's decision to expel her. He declares:

"I fear thee—no need to cloak my words—that thou mayest do my child some irreparable harm" (*Medea*, l. 282).

Despite having committed no act of violence at this point, Medea is imagined as dangerous simply because of her otherness. The association of the refugee woman with potential violence becomes a justification for preemptive exclusion—a dynamic tragically familiar in modern refugee politics. Her exile is decreed summarily, without trial or negotiation, and framed as a political necessity for state security.

Unlike Oedipus, who appeals to divine law and receives protection from Theseus, Medea is denied all formal avenues of asylum. This contradicts all sacred values of *xenia*, "a stranger's only manner to proceeding in ancient Greek society" (Sezer, 2015, p. 217). She responds with a bitter awareness of her vulnerability:

"This is not the first time, Creon. Many a time before have I been wronged." (*Medea*, l. 354)

In this moment, her voice echoes that of the archetypal displaced: wronged, unheard, and cornered. However, Medea does not remain a passive victim. She reconfigures her own access to asylum through cunning negotiation with Aegeus, king of Athens, who arrives by chance. In a calculated appeal, she offers him the promise of fertility in exchange for sanctuary:

"I will end thy childlessness, for well I know the charms to make thee father. Only do thou swear to me to shelter me in Athens." (*Medea*, ll. 709–712).

Aegeus accepts, not because of a moral imperative but because of what Medea can offer. The asylum she secures is conditional, transactional,

and dependent on her utility. This interaction highlights themes of reciprocity and mutual benefit in the context of seeking and granting asylum. Medea's situation reflects the vulnerability of individuals seeking refuge, as she is displaced and reliant on the goodwill of others (Mueller 2001, p. 480). In this reversal, Euripides subtly critiques the politicization of sanctuary—how it is rarely granted for justice alone, but often exchanged in webs of benefit and alliance.

Medea thus offers asylum to herself by navigating power where none was formally given. Her escape in a chariot drawn by dragons—provided by her divine grandfather, the Sun—further disrupts the narrative of passive displacement. She becomes a fugitive of mythic proportions, able to defy borders through divine lineage and intellect. Yet this empowerment comes at the cost of human loss: the murder of her own children, an act that forever alienates her from ethical community.

The culmination of her narrative raises complex questions. Is Medea a monster or a symptom of a system that denied her dignity, rights, and voice? As Rabinowitz notes, “her rage is the scream of the silenced” (1993, p. 144). Her decision to kill her children is both a final act of control over her fate and a symbolic severing of all ties to the city and the man who betrayed her.



Callas and Zaccaria ~ Medea, Covent Garden June 1959." *Flickr*,  
 uploaded by painting in light, 10 Jan. 2015,  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/w77t/15985202990>.

Hall (1989) reads Medea as a reflection of Athenian anxieties over cultural purity and imperial identity. Medea, with her hybrid lineage and transgressive agency, unsettles the boundaries between barbarian and citizen, guest and enemy (p. 56). Her very presence on the Athenian stage would have provoked debate about how the polis should treat those who stand outside its normative identity.

In contrast to Oedipus, whose suffering is rendered noble and politically useful, Medea's pain is pathologized and feared. She is denied public sympathy, and her narrative of betrayal and abandonment is overshadowed by the moral horror of her vengeance. This disparity reflects ancient gender politics: Medea's voice, though articulate and justly outraged, cannot access the same legitimacy afforded to a male exile. Her status as a woman intersects fatally with her foreignness and her resistance to passive suffering.

The figure of Medea thus dramatizes the refugee condition as one shaped by exclusion, suspicion, and conditional mercy. She begins as a supplicant but ends as a mythic fugitive, having claimed asylum through unorthodox means. Her story invites reflection on the mechanisms through which host societies define, control, and ultimately reject the stranger—especially when that stranger defies gendered and cultural expectations.

In the broader context of this study, Medea represents a model of “non-belonging,” of the refugee who is never fully admitted into the host society's moral contract. Her tragedy lies not only in her acts, but in the social architecture that left her no other means of self-preservation. As we turn to Oedipus in the following chapter, we shall see a strikingly different treatment of the displaced: one that hinges on sympathy, legitimacy, and the ethical agency of the host city.

### ***Oedipus – The Refugee King***

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles offers a radically different vision of exile and asylum than the one we encounter in *Medea*. Oedipus is not cast out in fury and vengeance, but arrives as a broken figure—blind, aged, and accompanied only by his daughter Antigone. Yet, through divine prophecy and the ethical intervention of Theseus, he is transformed from outcast to sanctified hero. The play, Sophocles' final dramatic work, is not merely a sequel to *Oedipus Tyrannus*, but a philosophical and political meditation on the nature of suffering, hospitality, and the spiritual potential of the refugee. From the beginning, Oedipus announces his helplessness and foreignness:

“Antigone, child of this blind old man, what land have we reached, whose city? Who will receive the wandering Oedipus with paltry gifts today?” (*OC*, ll. 1–4; Murray, 1911).

His very first words foreground his statelessness and dependence on the mercy of others. As Van Nortwick (2015, p. 81) notes, this reversal of the typical tragic arc—where a proud hero is brought low—presents Oedipus already humbled, “broken by life,” seeking rest and recognition rather than redemption or power. His entrance, asking where he might be allowed to sit and die, is marked not by defiance but submission to divine will and the judgment of citizens:

“We have come as strangers to learn from citizens and do what they say” (*OC*, l. 13; Murray, 1911).

Oedipus’ decision to sit unknowingly in a sacred grove at Colonus triggers anxiety in the local citizens. A stranger orders him away:

“Before you inquire further, leave this seat! You occupy ground on which it is unholy to walk” (*OC*, ll. 33–34; Murray, 1911).

This early scene marks Oedipus’ liminal position: both present and unwelcome, human and sacred. Birge (1984, p. 12) emphasizes the sanctity of the grove of the Eumenides not merely as a setting, but as a theologically charged location where heroization occurs. Oedipus’ prayer to the goddesses, beginning with the solemn invocation “O dread Goddesses,” shows he understands his fate is bound to this land (*OC*, ll. 84–106; Murray, 1911).

The transformation of Oedipus from pollutant to prophet begins with this invocation. Van Nortwick (2015, pp. 84–85) interprets this moment as Oedipus aligning himself with the sacred geography of the grove, straddling both divine and human realms. He claims his final resting place by divine right:

“This place is the sign of my destiny... the final resting-place appointed me by the gods” (*OC*, ll. 46–90; Murray, 1911).

Unlike in *Medea*, where asylum is a precarious transaction negotiated through male intermediaries, in *Oedipus at Colonus* the gods themselves

guarantee Oedipus' protection. He brings with him not a plea for shelter, but a prophecy of benefit:

“I bring gain to them who give me shelter, ruin to those who cast me out” (*OC*, l. 92; Murray, 1911).

This assertion dramatizes the inversion of the refugee as liability into the refugee as sacred gift. Sophocles thus subverts the typical perception of the exile as threat. Theseus' subsequent actions validate this vision. When warned that Oedipus is a polluted figure, Theseus answers:

“I am one who was reared to reverence the gods and to help the afflicted” (*OC*, l. 568; Murray, 1911).

Theseus embodies what Ahrens Dorf (2008, p. 168) describes as Sophocles' “moderate political rationalism”: a model of governance that respects divine will while upholding civic ethics. Theseus does not act out of self-interest or fear but as a true representative of an ideal polis—a city that fulfills its obligations to the helpless.

Creon's attempt to forcibly remove Oedipus from Athens illustrates the political stakes of asylum. The Theban state, having expelled Oedipus, now desires to reclaim his body to secure its own future. Oedipus resists with dignity:

“You shall not take me with you—not though you set guards all around!” (*OC*, l. 848; Murray, 1911).

As Van Nortwick (2015, pp. 84–86) observes, Oedipus' body becomes a geopolitical object: a sacred corpse capable of granting protection. His physical immobility contrasts with his growing metaphysical power. He no longer wanders; he is the fixed axis around which others must negotiate. Eventually, Theseus alone is permitted to witness Oedipus' mysterious death. The stage direction and Chorus report that no one knows where he has gone, only that he vanished into the grove:

“Then a voice called him—terrible, not to be spoken of” (*OC*, l. 1655; Murray, 1911).

The disappearance confirms his sanctification. Billings (2013, p. 113) interprets this final moment as a “reconciliation,” an alternative tragic

ending where suffering culminates not in annihilation, but transcendence. Oedipus, the archetypal tragic exile, dies not as a figure of shame but as an agent of divine justice. Sophocles thus reconfigures the refugee not as a marginal figure, but as the litmus test for a city's ethics. The citizen-stranger relationship is dramatized through Oedipus' transformation. Whereas Creon seeks to use the exile for political gain, Theseus honors the foreigner with no expectation of return. As Ahrens Dorf (2004, pp. 774–775) argues, Sophocles critiques both blind religious fervor and cold political rationalism, suggesting that only through a synthesis—embodied in Theseus—can justice be done to the displaced.

The implications for modern refugee politics are profound. Oedipus' story reveals how easily the stranger can shift from scapegoat to savior. It also shows that asylum, properly understood, is not a favor but an ethical duty. The host society is judged not merely by its laws, but by its treatment of those who come in desperation, bearing suffering and dignity in equal measure.

In conclusion, *Oedipus at Colonus* dramatizes the redemptive potential of asylum and the sacred quality of the exiled body. The figure of Oedipus defies the passive refugee trope. He teaches that suffering, if met with hospitality and reverence, can generate protection not only for the exile but for the host community. Through Theseus, Athens becomes the city of justice—not in words but in deeds. In our world, where the politics of borders dominate headlines, Sophocles' vision of asylum as divine and civic duty retains all its urgency.

### ***Modern Impact and Interpretations***

Ancient Greek tragedy continues to reverberate in the modern world not only as cultural heritage but as a powerful lens for exploring contemporary political and ethical crises. The refugee figure in Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* has inspired numerous reinterpretations in the light of global displacement, asylum politics, and gendered experiences of exile, in modern performances, with particular attention to their resonance during the refugee and migration crises of the 21st century.



Greiner, A. (c. 1896) *Louis Bouwmeester as Oedipus in Oedipus at Colonus* [photograph].  
Public domain. Available at: Wikimedia Commons (Accessed: 20.7.2025).

Contemporary performances of *Medea* and *Oedipus at Colonus* often center the refugee experience as a political focal point. In *Refugee Medea Project* productions staged across Europe, Medea is presented not only as an exiled woman but as a figure displaced by war, colonial trauma, or systemic marginalization. These reinterpretations highlight the continuity between ancient xenophobia and modern nationalism, underscoring how foreign women, especially those racialized or coming from postcolonial regions, remain suspect and vulnerable. Bungard (2021, pp. 406–409) explores how *Medea* is transformed into a symbolic “Barbarosa,” a refugee who resists subjugation by asserting agency through vengeance.

This shift also reflects broader feminist and postcolonial readings. Zorn (2006, p. 129) identifies *Medea* as a rhetorical figure who challenges patriarchal authority through calculated speech, not mere emotionalism. These contemporary readings recast Medea’s defiance as both a critique of male-dominated civic space and a demand for recognition of displaced women’s voices. In this way, the myth transcends its archaic setting and speaks to modern struggles with asylum, gender-based violence, and the weaponization of “foreignness.”

Similarly, *Oedipus at Colonus* has been staged to emphasize the ethical responsibilities of host nations. Oedipus' journey and reception in Athens are often analogized with current asylum systems. In modern performances, Theseus' decision to accept the exiled king is interpreted as a radical act of hospitality. His statement "I am one who was reared to reverence the gods and to help the afflicted" (*OC*, l. 568; Murray, 1911) is presented as a moral imperative in contrast to today's securitized borders and detention regimes.

Van Nortwick (2015, p. 84) argues that the sacredness of Oedipus' body and the honor of his grave underscore the potential of the displaced to bring not threat, but blessing to the host nation. The final transcendence of Oedipus, disappearing into the grove in a mysterious divine gesture (*OC*, ll. 1655–1660), becomes a ritualized affirmation that the outcast contains spiritual power, a reading with profound implications for refugee narratives today.

Both tragedies retain critical value as tools of political reflection. Kasimis sees *Medea* as a form of "tragic political theory" that dramatizes the politics of exclusion. Euripides explores the making of a refugee, focusing on Medea's precariousness as a woman and a foreigner (Kasimis 2020, p. 409). Her displacement is tied to gender inequality and the hierarchical kinship system that governs political membership and protection.

The play forces the audience to confront the hypocrisy of states that proclaim universal justice while systematically denying protection to those who fall outside dominant categories—foreigners, women, racialized others. Similarly, *Oedipus at Colonus* presents a polis that passes a moral test: Athens, through Theseus, affirms the city's ethical core by offering unconditional asylum.

Ahrens Dorf (2008, pp. 283–284) suggests that Sophocles constructs a model of enlightened leadership through Theseus, who respects both divine law and civic responsibility. Theseus becomes a philosophical counter-model to authoritarian or utilitarian statecraft, offering an alternative grounded in virtue and the recognition of shared humanity. In today's context, where refugee issues are often politicized through fear and populism, Sophocles' political imagination offers an enduring ethical standard.

This perspective is echoed in the global refugee discourse. Benjamin (2008, p. 134), writing on Iraqi refugees in the United States, notes that institutional suspicion, bureaucratic inertia, and cultural stereotyping continue to erode the possibility of dignified asylum. Medea's rejection and Oedipus' acceptance thus encapsulate a spectrum of responses to

displacement: from coercive exclusion to transformative welcome.

Tragic figures like Medea and Oedipus allow audiences to access emotional and moral truths obscured in abstract policy discussions. Their experiences illustrate the human cost of forced migration. Dysart (2012, p. 10) emphasizes that contemporary responses to mass migration often ignore the narratives and memories of those displaced. Tragedy, by contrast, re-centers individual voices. In both plays, the refugee is not a faceless statistic but a character endowed with pain, agency, and vision. This is particularly evident in feminist readings of *Medea*, where her desperation and alienation are portrayed not merely as personal crises, but as structural consequences of a society that excludes the foreign woman from both legal protection and civic speech (Rabinowitz, 1993, p. 140). Zorn (2006, p. 129) reinforces this by reading Medea's speech as "rhetorical feminism"—a disruptive form of political speech that subverts male narrative authority.

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles provides a more hopeful model: the refugee as sacred guest, whose suffering generates moral clarity. Creon's attempt to use Oedipus for political gain is sharply contrasted with Theseus' ethics of care. This conflict remains hauntingly familiar. In contemporary politics, where refugees are often instrumentalized for geopolitical leverage or domestic populism, Sophocles' tragedy calls for a return to moral fundamentals.

The interpretative legacy of these plays demonstrates that ancient tragedy does more than reflect society—it offers an ethical blueprint. The tragedies of Medea and Oedipus remain intellectually and emotionally potent because they confront audiences with uncomfortable questions: Who is worthy of protection? What does justice require of us in the face of vulnerability? What happens when the state fails to uphold its ethical duties?

The ancient polis was not utopian in its refugee practices, yet through drama, it acknowledged its own contradictions. Tragedy made visible the gap between civic ideals and social realities. Today, that same gap persists in debates over borders, asylum laws, and human rights. By restaging these ancient dramas, we are reminded that these dilemmas are not new—and that they require not only policy solutions but profound ethical reorientations.

Contemporary Greek drama re-engages with these classical themes, particularly in the context of post-1990s migration. Playwrights such as Giannis Tsiros and Vassilis Katsikonouris examine the marginalization and objectification of immigrants. In *Unshaved Chins*, the story of a deceased Russian dancer becomes a lens through which issues of racism,

misogyny, and moral accountability are explored (Grigoriou, 2019 pp. 76–77). Similarly, *Milk* addresses identity fragmentation within a Georgian immigrant family navigating linguistic, cultural, and psychological dislocation (Grigoriou, 2019 pp. 78–79). In both ancient and modern texts, the figure of the foreigner becomes a critical site for negotiating ethical responsibility, social cohesion, and the politics of inclusion

### **Conclusion**

The concept of asylum in Greek tragedy reflects not only religious and moral norms but also political ideologies. In *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles and *Medea* by Euripides, asylum is invoked by characters marginalized by their respective societies—Oedipus, the polluted exile, and Medea, the betrayed foreigner. However, the treatment of asylum in these plays diverges significantly, shaped by the playwrights’ political climates and their portrayals of Athens. Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* elevates Athens as a sanctuary city that grants sacred asylum, reaffirming Athenian civic virtue. In contrast, Euripides’ *Medea* offers a cynical view of asylum, exposing its instrumental use in the diplomacy between Athens and Corinth during a turbulent historical moment. The contrasts between the plays reveal how asylum can reflect both idealized and pragmatic aspects of Athenian identity.

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, written in the twilight of Sophocles’ life and performed posthumously around 401 BCE, Athens is idealized as a place of justice and religious reverence. Oedipus, a blind and exiled figure carrying miasma (pollution), arrives at Colonus and pleads for protection. Initially resisted by the local citizens (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, lines 35–76), his status changes when he appeals to the sanctity of the place and his promise to bless the city in death (lines 576–628). Theseus, king of Athens, emerges as a paradigmatic figure of Athenian leadership—wise, pious, and generous. He offers asylum to Oedipus not for political gain, but out of respect for divine law: “Never would I, having welcomed you to my land, drive you away” (line 1062). Here, asylum is tied to a sacred civic duty, reflecting the Athenian self-image as a bastion of democracy and moral superiority.

This idealization corresponds with Athens’ self-fashioning during and after the Peloponnesian War. By the late fifth century BCE, Athens had suffered military and moral setbacks—most notoriously the Sicilian Expedition (415–413 BCE) and eventual defeat by Sparta in 404 BCE. Sophocles, writing in this context, invokes an image of Athens that contrasts

with its recent failures: a city that honors the gods, protects the weak, and upholds justice. Oedipus' acceptance reinforces a sense of Athenian exceptionalism, a nostalgia for the city's better self (Knox, 1957, p. 18). However, the reciprocal relationship that Medea had developed with Aegeus is also apparent in this circumstance: Oedipus benefits the city with his presence, and this certainly changes the dynamics of his plea and his acceptance in Athens. Oedipus offers a *charis*, a promise of delayed, non-monetary repayment to be made at a later date (Mueller 2001, pp. 481-482).

Euripides' *Medea*, first performed in 431 BCE—the very year the Peloponnesian War began—presents a bleaker, more politicized view of asylum. Medea, betrayed by Jason and facing exile from Corinth, secures asylum in Athens from King Aegeus. However, her plea is not grounded in innocence or religious sanctity, but in manipulation and pragmatism. She exploits Aegeus' desire for an heir (Euripides, *Medea*, lines 710–758), offering fertility help in exchange for protection. Aegeus agrees, but only if she comes to Athens herself and does not bring scandal upon him: “If you reach my house, I will receive you as a guest. But I will not take you from this land” (line 754).

Unlike Sophocles' portrayal, Euripides' Athens does not proactively offer asylum. Instead, Aegeus seeks to avoid diplomatic entanglements with Corinth, subtly acknowledging the delicate balance of inter-polis politics. During this period, relations between Athens and Corinth were deeply strained. Corinth, a leading Peloponnesian city allied with Sparta, clashed with Athens over control of trade routes and colonial interests—tensions that ultimately led to the Peloponnesian War (Kagan, 2003, p. 52). Euripides' play reflects this climate: asylum becomes a political tool rather than a moral obligation. Aegeus' hesitation to rescue Medea directly from Corinth avoids provoking Corinthian outrage, revealing how Athens' vaunted ideals could be bent by realpolitik.

Medea's abuse of asylum further complicates the concept. After securing safety in Athens, she commits the murder of her own children—an act that shocks both ancient and modern audiences. Her flight to Athens after such atrocities casts doubt on Athens' moral high ground. Far from being a haven of justice, it becomes complicit in harboring a criminal. Euripides thus challenges the audience to reconsider the ethical foundations of asylum. Is it a divine law, as Sophocles suggests, or a transactional contract, as in *Medea*? The ambiguous answer critiques Athenian hypocrisy and exposes the potential exploitation of its moral image.

The different treatments of asylum also mirror each protagonist's relationship with justice. Oedipus seeks redemption and rest. His plea is dignified, almost liturgical, and his death becomes a blessing to Athens. Medea, in contrast, invokes asylum as a cloak for vengeance. She openly acknowledges her manipulation: "Aegeus, I will go, not as a suppliant of your gods, but because I need you" (implied in lines 715–740). Her final act, flying away on the chariot of the sun god (lines 1317–1320), confirms that her appeal was never about justice—it was about power. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, asylum is tied to Athens' religious and civic ideals. As David Birge (1984) notes, "Colonus is a site where both the pollution and divinity of Oedipus converge, reinforcing Athens' identity as a city that sanctifies the outsider through ritual" (p. 369). This duality allows Oedipus to shift from pollutant to hero, protected not through legal edicts but through sacred tradition. The character of Theseus becomes emblematic of this Athenian piety. As Birge continues, "Theseus' readiness to grant protection without hesitation mirrors Athens' aspiration to be the protector of suppliants and upholder of divine law" (p. 372). In doing so, Sophocles reaffirms a vision of Athens grounded in nobility and divine justice during a time when that image was under political strain.

Further elaborating this theme, Bowman (2007) argues that "Oedipus' pollution becomes politically useful—a marker of transformation that Athens alone is worthy to host" (p. 22). Thus, asylum in *Oedipus at Colonus* is a convergence of redemption, political myth-making, and religious obligation. It is Athens not only as a sanctuary but as a moral actor in the larger Hellenic world.

In contrast, Euripides' *Medea* offers a far more transactional and morally ambiguous depiction of asylum. Medea does not appeal to sacred law or universal justice; instead, she leverages Aegeus' personal vulnerabilities to secure safe harbor. Anthony Tessitore (1991) asserts that "Medea is not granted asylum because of Athens' humanitarian values, but because Aegeus requires a son and she promises to give him one" (p. 590). The exchange resembles political bargaining, where protection is offered in anticipation of a private benefit rather than any civic or religious duty.

This undercuts the traditional image of Athens as an impartial moral authority. As Kavouras (1988) observes, "Athens here is less a city of ideals and more a pragmatic political player—its offer of asylum driven by demographic anxiety rather than philosophical principle" (p. 145). In this reading, Aegeus' role becomes ethically fraught, offering sanctuary to a woman about to commit infanticide.

Carrie (1983) goes further, stating that “the final image of Medea flying off to Athens with blood on her hands implicates the city in her crime before she even arrives” (p. 134). This undermines Athens’ moral high ground and complicates the ethical boundaries of asylum. While Sophocles’ Athens is purified through its act of reception, Euripides’ Athens is compromised by it.

The contrast in these portrayals is sharpened when seen against the historical backdrop of the Peloponnesian War. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles constructs a civic ideal at a time of crisis, while Medea, written at the war’s outset, reflects the uncertainties and emerging cynicisms of Athenian realpolitik

Moreover, the two plays reflect different attitudes toward foreignness. *Oedipus*, though cursed, is a Greek of royal blood. His integration into Athens reinforces the city’s claim as the guardian of Hellenic values. *Medea*, by contrast, is a barbarian woman from Colchis. Her foreignness is emphasized throughout the play and contributes to her social and legal marginalization in Corinth. That Athens, a city priding itself on openness, would shelter a woman so transgressive reveals a deep irony in Euripides’ critique. Rather than embracing universal justice, Athens selectively grants asylum—sometimes to monsters.

The issue of asylum in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Medea* is treated with markedly different emphases, shaped by the ideological and political landscapes of Sophocles’ and Euripides’ Athens. While Sophocles idealizes Athens as a sacred refuge grounded in divine justice, Euripides exposes the city’s susceptibility to political calculation and moral compromise. As such, these plays offer complementary perspectives on asylum—not only as a dramatic theme but as a mirror of Athenian identity during an age of war, crisis, and self-examination.

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# **EURIPIDES'S *BACCHAE*** AND HOW TO "TELL A GOOD LIE"

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**Abstract:** Most of the readings and performances of Euripides' *Bacchae* present Pentheus as a repressed pervert and an arrogant and violent tyrant, and take the side of Dionysus in whom they usually see sexual, social, and political liberation. However, a close reading of the Greek text does not really suggest that Euripides supports Dionysus, who is actually been presented as vindictive, obsessive and destructive. His cult brings neither peace nor bliss. The depiction of the possessed by Dionysus is scary, as is that of the raging Agave. When she kills her son, the Chorus rejoices: "Your victory is fair, fair the prize,/ this famous prize of grief, of tears!/ Glorious the game, to fold your child/ in your arms, streaming with his blood!" (1163-1164). Doubting that Euripides agrees with such cruelty and that he supports a savage cult, I propose a reading based on the words of Cadmus when he urges Pentheus to "Tell a good lie". I suggest that, in the *Bacchae*, Euripides warns against "good lies": against the power of deception, especially in social and political life. He describes how one can annihilate one's enemy without fighting, but, instead, with a psychological operation based on smearing, misinformation and calculated manipulation.

**Keywords:** Euripides, *Bacchae*, Pentheus, Dionysus, manipulation, deception.

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### **Introduction**

In the 1960s the *Bacchae* was interpreted as a drama with political, social and revolutionary messages, which were valid for the movement against the Vietnam war, the civil rights movement and that of sexual liberation. One landmark production was *Dionysus in 69* (1968) in New York City. The director Richard Schechner interpreted the play as a revolutionary drama that deals with sexuality, politics, and the American presidential elections in 1969. Another approach that also had a strong effect on the interpretations that followed was that of the Nigerian political activist Wole Soyinka (1973), who strongly criticized European colonialism and viewed Pentheus as the embodiment of the sense of cultural superiority. Through presenting him as a rigid militaristic dictator, he attacked the dictatorships of the newly formed African states. Dionysus was portrayed as a liberator and as the life force itself. Similarly, in 2002, eight years after apartheid, Roy Sargeant directed the *Bacchae* at Cape Town, drawing a parallel between Pentheus and his contemporary authoritarian politicians (Van Zyl Smit, 2016, p. 148, 151, 153).

Almost always the interpretations and performances of the *Bacchae* have been against Pentheus, who has been depicted with aversion as an authoritarian and brutal tyrant, and a repressed and perverse bully who represents dominance,

oppression, and the arrogance of power, while they favor Dionysus, in whom they see sensuality as well as sexual, personal, and political liberation.

In this paper, I will challenge this established reading of the *Bacchae* and argue that Euripides' main concern is not the depiction of the punishment of mortals when they dare to insult a god. In some of Euripides' plays, there is criticism and challenge of the gods, as it is in *Hippolytus* (1102-1110), in *Hecuba* (488-491), in *Heracles* (339-347), in the satiric drama *Cyclops* (350-355) and in *Bellerophon* (fr. 286.1-7).

Influenced by the sophistic thought of his time, Euripides criticizes the anthropomorphic perception of the gods of the traditional religion. He is skeptical about the ethos of the gods, who should neither have human passions nor be capricious, cruel, evil, wrathful, and corrupt. If they are gods indeed, they should not be like humans, as Cadmus says to Dionysus at the end of the *Bacchae* (1346-1348) and as Hercules tells Theseus in *Hercules* (1340-1346).

Many have interpreted the *Bacchae* as a play in which Euripides renounced his skepticism, agnosticism or atheism, due to the fact that, in Macedonia where he lived in his final years and most likely where he wrote the play, he was won over by the very popular there Dionysian cult. Professor Michalis Kopidakis claimed that it is a play of the humble remorse of the rationalist Euripides: "In his last years, the most tragic of the dramatists understood that, in order to make tough reality more bearable, humans need to resort, at least from time to time, to the comfort of the irrational, which is the cornerstone of every religious experience." (Kopidakis, 2007, p. 218).

According to such a reading of 'religious conversion', the up until then rationalist Euripides was transformed in Macedonia; he changed opinion, advocated the ecstatic cult of Dionysus and called people to worship the god, underlining how Dionysus mercilessly punishes the ones who resist him. Many stories in ancient Greek literature are about mortals who get punished when they insult a god. This might be the main theme in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, where Aphrodite punishes the main character as he refuses to worship her. In the *Bacchae*, Cadmus' words at the end of the play and after Pentheus' punishment may indicate that this is one more play about a god's punishment of the one who denies him or her:

"If there is still any mortal man  
who despises or defies divinity, let him look  
on this boy's death and believe in the gods." (1325-1327)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the English translation of the *Bacchae*, I use *Greek Tragedies 5*, David Green-Glenn W. Most (Eds.), University of Chicago 2013. In some cases, which I indicate in the footnotes, I also use *Euripides: Bacchae*, Ricard Seaford (Trans.), Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd, England 1997.

One, however, could wonder if Euripides indeed changed his mind, converted, and endorsed the Dionysian cult, since the *Bacchae* could also be understood the other way around: as a warning for the harm that the dionysian or any other orgiastic cult could bring, given that Dionysus appears as a resentful, obsessive, vindictive, and destructive god. According to the descriptions in the play, the cult does not bring redeeming serenity nor bliss. The description of the possessed women in their *imitatio Dei* is terrifying, as is that of the frenzied Agave. The Chorus of the women who followed the god from Asia are expressing their dreadful, violent, atrocious, and bloodthirsty drive. They speak to the women of Thebes in a sardonic, malicious, and sadistic manner, and they rejoice when Agave kills her son.

How possible is it that Euripides agrees with this brutality and supports the worship of such a destructive and appalling god? My judgement is that he does not, and that in his last years Euripides remained a rationalist and a sceptic.

My understanding is that this is not a drama about religion but about society and politics. My opinion is that, in the *Bacchae* Euripides describes the method by which one defeats and destroys one's --usually political-- enemy without a fight, but with the techniques of calculated manipulation, subversion and destabilization. He dramatizes a psychological assault and a warfare tactic that engages psychological abuse, mind control strategies, devious and perverse attacks, an orchestrated propaganda, smearing, distortion of facts, machinations, traps, and any behavior that defines what we today call moral harassment. The *Bacchae* can be read as a story of such an insidious assault. In this play Euripides also describes a 'perverse reversal', whereas truth and the perception of reality get distorted, so that lies appear true and truth appears as falsehood, where the offender is presumed to be the victim and the victim is blamed to be the aggressor. Dionysus applies this war technique against Pentheus, whom, not only he annihilates without a fight, but he has also arranged everything in such a way so that Pentheus himself contributes to his own destruction.

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In her book *Le harcèlement moral: La violence perverse au quotidien*, Marie-France Hirigoyen defines moral harassment as the personal attack with the use of disguised and hard to discern forms of violence, in which the perpetrators psychologically harass the persons they have targeted, with the aim to cause uneasiness, distress, destabilization, to alter their mental state and to lead them to temporary or permanent moral and psychological exhaustion. In essence, they try indirectly and through a mental and psychological warfare to destroy their targets.

A prominent method is the undermining of the targets' identity and sense of self and the shattering of their self-confidence. To accomplish this, the perpetrators form an alliance and, with attacks hidden in ambiguous language and hints, with contemptuous and demeaning comments and humiliating manners, with intimidation, insults, criticism and blaming, they attack their targets' personalities and instill self-doubting. Together, aiming at their victims' degradation, they launch an organized propaganda against them, and by spreading rumors, with smearing and false accusations, especially about their character, they eventually damage their reputation. In almost all cases, they try to prove that their targets are mentally disturbed, deranged, and lunatics, achieving to socially isolate them and cut them off from any possible allies.

The perpetrators camouflage their intentions and present themselves as sensible, ethical, and trustworthy individuals (Carré, 2017, p. 121). They never openly act evil, but with cunning, deceit, and on the sly they skillfully lead their targets to self-destruction. The villains always act behind the scenes, quietly and in disguise; they never appear as thugs but always pretend to be nice. Actually, they pretend to be the victims, reversing reality and claiming that their targets are the ones who are harassing them (Hirigoyen, 2016, p. 139-140). With lies, manipulation and charm, they gain the sympathy of others and manage to persuade them that they are decent while their adversaries are evil and dangerous.

When, eventually, the targeted ones get frustrated and quit to tolerate, they usually react intensely and awkward. In their attempt to defend themselves, they get disconcerted, discomposed, and look neurotic (Hirigoyen, 2016, p. 110). Exasperated by the perpetrators' deliberate provocations, they act impulsively, ineptly and aggressively, giving their foes the opportunity to blame them more. These reactions justify the perpetrators, who will now harass them more blatantly.

Seduction is another tactic of manipulation, which aims at weakening the victims' will, at influencing their judgment and behavior and, ultimately, at their complete subjugation. The perpetrators seduce their targets in order to gain dominance and control, and eventually lead them to the path towards their own destruction. Seduction has its own techniques: the perpetrators appear as benevolent and helpful, pretend that they are supportive, and claim that they want the others' wellbeing. Promising specific services and benefits, exploiting vulnerabilities, and provoking fantasies that have to do with their targets' desires, they excite them and eventually lure them into making a decision and adopting a behavior that they would never have thought of before (Carré, 2017, pp. 175-6).

The seducers gradually impose themselves and manage to develop their victims' irresistible attraction to and dependence on them. The victims start to doubt their own judgment and lose the power to decide what is good for them.

They become excessively consensual and compromising, cancel themselves and, disillusioned, willfully accept the perpetrators' dictates and domination (Hirigoyen, 2016, p. 121). The seducers achieve to control and manipulate their targets' opinion, judgment and behavior, and the victims make decisions that are harmful to them (Carré, 2017, pp. 37-38, 40, 279). Yet, they do this without coercion or force, but by making the victims believe that they are acting at will. Their goal is to lead them to misjudging, to taking missteps and to self-destruction.

Other tactics involve threats, extortion, and the distortion of facts—deception always depends on false information.

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One can discern moral harassment and its techniques in the *Bacchae* and trace the systematic stigmatization of Pentheus, who is presented as the offender, not the victim. The attempt to humiliate Pentheus is obvious from the beginning, when Dionysus calls his thiasos of Asian women to encircle Pentheus' palace and drum loudly, so that the entire city will witness (60-61). The encircling of the palace will damage his prestige, and disgrace and humiliate him before his entire city. It also indicates the moral and mental besieging of Pentheus.

His adversaries aim at his psychological condition and mental capacities, and fabricate the view that he is mentally ill, that his thought is ailing, that he is crazy and unfit. The prophet Teiresias praises Dionysus but demeans Pentheus, accusing him of being immature, disrespectful, a bully, and a bad citizen who creates problems to his city. He scolds Pentheus not to boast about his power and not to trust his poor judgement:

“You are mad, grievously mad, beyond the power  
of any drugs to cure, for you are drugged  
with madness.” (326-327)

He advises him to abide by his words, for his own good, and worship Dionysus without any delay. Teiresias is trying to destabilize Pentheus and undermine his self-esteem by making him doubt about his own judgment and competency (310-312). He is trying to hold him back and deter him from any attempt to fight back and defend his authority and his city with his army, since, as he says, every attempt to fight against Dionysus is already doomed to failure. Pentheus owes to subjugate himself and follow the god.

The Stranger-Dionysus presents Pentheus as psychologically disturbed, too. When he describes the scene in which Pentheus runs to his burning palace

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and, supposedly, fights with mirages, he depicts him as in a delirium, disoriented, utterly crazy, and ridiculous. Very often, he advises him to calm down, laying emphasis on his bad temper, his mania and disorder from which he supposedly suffers. The Stranger-Dionysus describes himself as quiet, calm, and self-possessed (621-622, 636-637)--a sign that he is well balanced, sensible, and trustworthy, unlike Pentheus who,

“was panting desperately, biting his lips with his teeth,  
his whole body drenched with sweat.” (620-622)

Similarly, the Chorus describes him as an obsessed and evil maniac who rules with oppression and terror: “such men are mad, their counsels evil” (400-401).

The truth, however, is that, Pentheus’ uneasiness and anger have been provoked. At the beginning of the drama, he states:

“I happened to be away, out of this land,  
but I’ve heard of some strange mischief in the town,  
stories of our women leaving home to frisk  
in mock ecstasies among the thickets on the mountain,  
dancing in honor of the latest divinity,  
a certain Dionysus, whoever he may be!  
In their midst stand bowls brimming with wine.  
Then, one by one, the women wander off  
to hidden nooks where they serve the lusts of men.  
Priestesses of Bacchus they claim they are,  
but it’s really Aphrodite they adore.” (215-225)

Pentheus *heard* that the women of Thebes pretend to honor a god-Dionysus and that they drink wine and worship Aphrodite instead. He also *hears* that,

“a foreigner has come to Thebes  
from Lydia, one of those charlatan magicians,  
with long yellow curls smelling of perfumes,  
with flushed cheeks and the spells of Aphrodite  
in his eyes. His days and nights he spends  
with women and girls, dangling.” (233-238)

As the above remarks indicate, the stranger who seduces their young women is portrayed as irresistibly charming and longing for sensual encounters. Later, this

will be confirmed by the attendant who will bring the Stranger before Pentheus and who will report that, when the Stranger was caught, his face had the color of wine (438), aiming probably at alluding to his still present feverish excitement.

Why, one would wonder, there is no mention of who exactly are the sources of all this information? Who were those who saw the women wandering off “to hidden nooks where they served the lusts of men”? Is it possible that these are lies to deceive Pentheus?

Shortly after, the Chorus will express their wish to be at the island of Aphrodite and at Pieria where Passion lives (402-405, 410, 415). Why, one would wonder, does the Chorus mention love and desire, with allusions to sexuality, when this would confirm what Pentheus has *heard*--that the women on Cithaeron pretend to be worshiping maenads, but in reality they honor Aphrodite?.. Why say that, when Pentheus has been accused of not believing in the fact that the god's cult is solemn and decent?

What Pentheus *hears*, along with this discrepancy, increases the possibility that the description of the situation at the mountain and of the Stranger as a raving seducer may be deliberate and meant indeed to provoke Pentheus' worry and anger. If what he *hears* is true, as he seems to think, the insult and the threat for the city are enormous.

The Stranger-Dionysus insists that Pentheus, before he makes any decision, should listen to what a herdsman, who is coming from the mountain, has to say (657-658). Although there is no reference in the text if it was the herdsman's initiative to have a hearing before Pentheus, the Stranger-Dionysus' insistence makes it clear that it was him who brought the herdsman before the king; he is his set up witness. This herdsman claims that he saw the maenads and he came to the city to let Pentheus and Thebes know about their wondrous feats that cause only awe. However, how reliable is he and how true is his testimony? As it appears from the very beginning of his description, his intention is to praise the maenads and their rites, excite Pentheus' imagination and, possibly, aid in luring him into going to the mountain.

Due, therefore, to misinformation and deliberate provocation, Pentheus misjudges, reacts, makes mistakes, loses control, and acts in ways that will be used against him. He gradually falls into the trap that his adversaries have set, loses his temper and gives them the opportunity to accuse him of bad temper and ruthlessness. When he decides to defend himself and to counter the intimidations and threats, and orders his army to clash with the intruder and end the assault on his city, his reaction is been considered deplorable.

It should be noted that, regarding the accusation that Pentheus is ill-tempered, the fact is that he does not get angry with the herdsman, who claims

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that he is afraid to speak openly about what he saw at the mountain. Pentheus lets him speak freely and carefully listens without interrupting, a proof that he is not irritable as they blame him. Instead, the tyrannical one is the god, who declares that the city will learn what it means to deny his cult *no matter what*:

“Like it or not, this city must learn its lesson:  
it lacks initiation in my mysteries.” (39-40)

One can discern the harassment to which Pentheus is subject when Cadmus reminds him of Actaeon, who, having boasted that he was better as a hunter than Artemis, was punished by her as his own dogs pursued and killed him. Cadmus now warns Pentheus to be cautious not to have the same fate--a plain and direct threat:

“You see  
that dreadful death your cousin Actaeon died  
when those man-eating hounds he had raised himself  
savaged him and tore his body limb from limb  
because he boasted that his prowess in the hunt surpassed  
the skill of Artemis.  
Do not let his fate be yours”, (337-341)  
he says while placing leaves of ivy on Pentheus’ head.

When Pentheus is preparing to go to the mountain with his army, the Stranger-Dionysus makes fun of him and says that it is certain that they will all run off, defeated by unarmed women (798-799). He intimidates him with the possibility of such a debacle. If this really happens, as it has also happened earlier at the villages of Hysiae and Erythrae according to the herdsman’s account, what a shame and disgrace that will be indeed! (751-754). The herdsman’s description of the dismemberment by the maenads that they had hardly escaped and of the relentless god who punishes without mercy are also implicit threats (734-747).

Likewise, Teiresias praises Dionysus for his association with the god Ares and for his ability to cause his enemy’s defeat only by the fear his mania disperses even to a well-organized army:

“Besides,  
he has usurped even some functions of warlike Ares.  
Thus, at times, you see an army mustered under arms  
stricken with panic before it lifts a spear.  
This panic comes from Dionysus.” (302-305)

The threat is clear: *If you dare to go against the god with your army, he will crash you even without touching a lance.*

Moral pressure is also been employed in order to create feelings of guilt and to persuade Pentheus to accept the god of humanity's well-being who also provides the wine, sorrow's remedy. The herdsman begs Pentheus to accept the god who granted mortals,

“the gift of lovely wine by which our suffering is stopped. And if there is no god of wine, there is no love, no Aphrodite either, nor other pleasure left to men.” (770-774)

The Stranger-Dionysus advises Pentheus to restrain himself: “Stay your foot! And place a calm base under your temper” (647)<sup>2</sup>, he says, and makes his intention all too obvious: he strives to avert Pentheus from a military response because he has a different plan: Pentheus must be alone, without arms, exposed, unprotected, and vulnerable. This also explains why the Stranger-Dionysus never responds to some scornful comments made by Pentheus, since his aim is not to confront him but to immobilize him and prevent any military operation. Pentheus should not take action and fight off the intruder, but, instead, he must be persuaded to calm down. The Stranger-Dionysus warns Pentheus once again:

“Pentheus ... [...] do not take arms against a god. Stay quiet here.” (788-789)

Dionysus presents himself as quiet, calm, unperturbed, self-possessed, and composed, signs that he is sensible, healthy, and reliable (621-622, 636). By contrast, Pentheus is being described as agitated, disturbed, unsound, unwell and damaged. In order to refute these accusations and prove that he is healthy and reasonable, he must stay still. The war must remain psychological.

The Stranger-Dionysus' account that describes how Pentheus was deceived and humiliated when he went to the horse barn to bind him might also be fake. According to it, instead of the Stranger, Pentheus finds a loose bull and tries to tie its knees and hooves (616-618). Supposedly, it was Dionysus himself, or the god placed the bull there--an intervention to humiliate Pentheus and to protect the Stranger. But if this section is not read religiously and if this is not about divine intervention, it might be inferred, rationally thinking, that the person

<sup>2</sup> Seaford's translation.

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who would tie the Stranger was distracted by the need to tame the bull first, which may have been placed there on purpose to facilitate the Stranger's escape. Besides wondering if Euripides truly believed in divine interventions, one might also question how true and how reliable this account is, since it is not expected of a king to go to the stables himself, even in the case he needs to imprison his worst enemy. It is more plausible that someone else had received the order to bind and imprison the Stranger, but he refrained from doing so. This also brings to mind the scene with the attendant earlier in the drama, who, as he said, when he was arresting the Stranger, he felt shame and told him that he did not like what he was doing but he had to follow his kings' orders (434-444).

There is indeed the possibility that in the text it is being hinted that those who had orders to imprison the Stranger lied to Pentheus that they had actually done so. This explains Pentheus' startle when he sees the Stranger before him:

“What! You? [...] How did you escape? Answer me.” (644-646)

It is being implied that Pentheus' servants and those whom he thinks are loyal to him have actually sided with his opponents. Pentheus has been deserted.

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When Pentheus commands the military forces to get ready for battle, the Stranger-Dionysus realizes that their tactic of intimidation has been ineffective, and applies a different technique, that of seduction and manipulation. A fake friendship will prove more effective at accomplishing his goal--to prevent Pentheus' military response to the situation, and to trap him when he is all alone, unarmed, and unprotected. The Stranger-Dionysus' eagerness to help Pentheus is not sincere but calculated. Wickedly, he gets nice and flattering, and offers to bring back the women himself:

“I undertake to lead the women back to Thebes. Without weapons”, (804) he says.

When Pentheus discerns that this is a trap (805), the Stranger-Dionysus, right away and before he is been turned down flat, makes another offer, one that Pentheus would hardly decline: to help Pentheus go to the mountain himself to see the women (811). Pentheus agrees without hesitation. Stirred by what he has heard and as expected, he is very curious and eager to go to the mountain to see

the women with his own eyes. He now succumbs and even says that he will behave and “crouch beneath the fir trees, quietly” (816). The more Pentheus seems to succumb, the more the Stranger-Dionysus tries to patronize him, and gives counsel as someone who cares for his wellbeing. He advises Pentheus to be careful because, if he tries to hide “quietly”, the maenads will trace him and kill him. For this reason, he is trying to convince him that he should dress like a woman.

The Stranger-Dionysus skillfully handles Pentheus’ weaknesses and fantasy. The decisions Pentheus makes, although they seem to be his own, in reality they are the result of the Stranger’s malicious manipulation. The descriptions of the women at the mountain that Pentheus has heard have formed his understanding and assessment of the situation. They have excited his imagination, curiosity and fury so much, that it would be very difficult for him to reject the idea to go to Cithaeron to watch them. Pentheus has been lured into a well-set-up trap, and everything seems to go according to plan. But he is not yet fully convinced and leaves the stage in order to withdraw in his chambers to decide:

“Either I shall march with my army to the mountain  
or act on your advice.” (845-846)

As soon as he is gone, the Stranger-Dionysus turns to the Chorus and discloses the machination, leaving no room for doubt:

“Women, our prey  
is walking into the net we threw.  
He shall see the Bacchae and pay the price with death.” (847-848)

The Stranger has completed his part and everything he had to carry out. He has prepared the ground with the set-up witnesses and the titillating descriptions of the women on the mountain; with the lies and distorted facts; with the provocation of Pentheus’ anger in order to destabilize him and make him look ill-tempered and senseless; with the smearing, the threats, and, lastly, the pretense of friendship. Now it is Dionysus’ turn to act, he says, and asks him to complete the plan, revealing its next phases. The Stranger asks the god to send Pentheus a mild mania and insanity and make him lose his wits, for as long as he is sane he will not accept to wear women’s clothes:

“O Dionysus,  
now action rests with you. And you are near.  
Punish this man. But first distract his wits;

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bewilder him with madness. For sane of mind  
this man would never wear a woman's dress;  
but obsess his soul and he will not refuse.  
After those threats with which he was so fierce,  
I want him made the laughingstock of Thebes,  
led through the town in woman's form.

But now

I shall go and costume Pentheus in the clothes  
which he will wear to Hades when he dies, butchered  
by the hands of his mother. He shall come to know  
Dionysus, son of Zeus, consummate god,  
most terrible, and yet most gentle, to humankind." (849-861)

His words prove that Pentheus' accusers did not truly think of him as a mad man, and that their accusations that he was insane were deliberate libels and smearing. Pentheus comes out in a woman's dress, but now he sees the world not as it is but distorted:

"I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens.  
And now two Thebes, two cities, and each  
with seven gates." (918-920)

His altered optical vision denotes his twisted cognitive perception and judgment. He has been transformed into a deranged, weak-willed other. Pentheus is now senseless indeed.

From now on, he will comply with anything the Stranger-Dionysus says. When the Stranger-Dionysus helps him appear like a maenad and fixes his curls (931-932), Pentheus declares his full surrender: "Arrange it. I am in your hands completely" (934). The Stranger-Dionysus even assures him that he will appreciate his help and consider him his best friend when he will see "how chaste the Bacchae are" (939-940). Pentheus now finds the Stranger's suggestions reasonable and agrees to give up the idea of going against the women with his army:

"You are right. In any case,  
women should not be mastered by brute strength.  
I will hide myself among the firs instead." (953-4)

The Stranger-Dionysus gives him advice, pretending that he cares about his wellbeing, and flatters him by saying that he is awesome and that his glory will raise high in the sky (971-972).

Whereas the Stranger-Dionysus encourages Pentheus to go to the mountain, the women of his Chorus are accusing him of going to spy on the women, and the justice they demand is a bloodthirsty, barbarous, and malicious revenge (997-1000). Having previously reversed reality, it is now plain that *they are* the ones overwhelmed with rage and with the vices for which they accuse Pentheus. They rejoice when Agave kills her son and when her triumph becomes lament and grief:

“Your victory is fair, fair the prize,  
 this famous prize of grief, of tears!  
 Glorious the game, to fold your child  
 in your arms, streaming with his blood!” (1163-1164)

How likely is it that Euripides agrees with this vindictiveness, viciousness, and strong desire to harm? Not very, I think.

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Cadmus’ reasoning is quite odd: even if Pentheus does not believe that this god exists and that he is the son of Semeli, he should say that he does. He even should do so persuasively, for, if everyone believes that his daughter gave birth to a god, their family will be honored. Besides his vanity, Cadmus reveals his dishonesty, deviousness, and corruption. His advice,

“Even if this Dionysus is no god,  
 as you assert, persuade yourself that he is»,<sup>3</sup>

that is, ‘*tell a lie in a convincing way*’, may summarize what Euripides intends to illustrate in the *Bacchae* (333-335). Euripides has a message and a warning against the powerful but harmful influence of the demagogues in the democratic state of Athens, those charismatic and articulated public men whose influence led people towards what benefited not the city but themselves.

In the reading of the *Bacchae* that I suggest here, Dionysus symbolizes the charming but corrupt intriguers who deceive the people and gain their support by treachery, schemes, fabrications, and wickedness. Euripides calls attention to the ill-intentioned and dangerous personalities, who distort reality, manipulate

<sup>3</sup> Seaford’s translation: “For even if, as you say, this is not the god, let him be called so in your eyes; and tell a lie in a good cause, that he is Semele’s son, so that it may seem that she bore a god, and there accrues honour to us, the whole clan.”

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the people, smear their rivals, and use sophisms and the power of deception, and who do not simply trivialize public life but destroy cities. In the *Bacchae* Euripides voices criticism and emits a social and political message referring to the failure and collapse of democracy due to the power and destructive influence of demagogues. The utter tragedy that resulted from the dreadful punishment of Thebes by Dionysus alludes to what led Athens to decadence--the dire moral, social, and political corruption. The real enemies of the city are not the Persians, the Spartans or the Sicilians; they are the charming but egotistic, dishonest, and even psychopathic demagogues, who, with their rhetorical skills, the ability to persuade, and the techniques of manipulation and deception manage to impress, deceive, and lure others into making decisions that favor only them, not the community. Spectators and readers also fell into Dionysus' trap. He charmed, deceived, manipulated, and lured many into believing that he is the victim. If there is a message in the *Bacchae*, perhaps this would be to,

“[Cadmus] Look directly at it ...  
... Look more closely still. Study it carefully.” (1279-1281)

Otherwise, there will be “[Agave] the greatest grief there is” (1282). If one is deceived and lured, then one will see a distorted reality.

### **Conclusion**

When Pentheus is away, someone who claims to be a god invades his city. Life gets destabilized. The women leave their homes and run to mountain Cithaeron to worship this new god, but they may actually worship Aphrodite, as Pentheus infers by the descriptions he hears, thinking that they have been wickedly lured into engaging in immoral acts. In an era of very strict morals for women, who were confined at home and always kept in check, their ruler worries about their conduct and considers it his duty to protect the honor of his city (778-780). The young king rushes back to his city right away, and tries to take charge of the situation. His city is in a dire situation, and, like any responsible ruler, he wants to defend it. There is nothing wrong with this. Pentheus responds appropriately and in accordance with the cultural and social standards of his time. He is not senseless, as Teiresias accuses him to be. Besides, he needs to establish himself as a capable ruler.

Pentheus, whose questions to the Stranger are precise and reasonable, unlike the answers he receives, considers the Stranger an impostor, since, as far as he knows, Semele's child was never born but burned along with his pregnant

mother by Zeus' thunderbolt. Maintaining his rational thinking, Pentheus does not believe in the 'miracle' that Zeus sewed him in his thigh and saved him (242-243). He considers this Stranger as blasphemous and he should be punished accordingly (246-247).

However, Pentheus does not possess enough dynamism. Although he presents himself as a strong ruler, his defenses are weak. He appears inexperienced, unskilled, and very naïve--he should not have trusted the Stranger, whose depth of wickedness he is unable to suspect. Pentheus tries to act as a mature adult male and resist the ecstatic worship, but he fails. He appears sane and rational up until the moment he succumbs to the Stranger. Line 812 ("I would pay a lot of gold to see that sight"--the women sitting on the mountain) indicates the decisive moment when he cancels himself, and line 934 ("Arrange it. I am in your hands completely") indicates his full surrender. As the Chorus attests at the end, the cause of his death is that, "He dressed in woman's dress; he took the lovely thyrsus" (1156-1159).

But what makes him succumb? Some readings of the play claim that he does so due to his voyeuristic desire to see the women in erotic acts. I suggest that, instead, we might trace the answer in Pentheus' words in lines 963-969, where Dionysus says to him,

"You and you alone will labor for your city . . .  
 ... I shall lead you safely there;  
 Someone else shall bring you back",

to which Pentheus replies, "Yes, my mother ... It is for that I go". Pentheus goes to the mountain due to his desire for his mother, to whom he is still emotionally attached--a dangerous regression.

When later Agave speaks about her son, she is contemptuous and she is rather rejecting him:

"Would that my child might be a good hunter, made like  
 the ways of his mother, whenever in among the Theban youths he  
 would go after wild animals; but fighting against deity is the only  
 thing *he* can do. He must be rebuked, father, by you." (1252-1258)<sup>4</sup>

In the play Agave appears to be a dismissive and domineering mother. Although Pentheus is 'successful'--he is a king after all--she does not seem to think

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<sup>4</sup> Seaford's translation.

so and to acknowledge his capabilities, nor does she seem to take him seriously. He is not loved for what he is, and this may be the reason he grieves--what his name 'Pentheus' indicates. Pentheus has feelings of guilt for not having met his mother's expectations and he still needs to please her, longing for her acknowledgment and recognition. With such an intimidating mother, it is very difficult not to be submissive to her, and it is very possible that his will has been crushed. This might be what made him vulnerable to manipulation and incapable to assert his own will. He is still a docile and submissive child, conforming and yielding. Consequently, in the *Bacchae*, one could also discern a familiar question: "Are we the only ones responsible for our actions?"

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# **SATYR PLAY AND ITS PARALLELS WITH JAPANESE KYŌGEN**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the structural and functional affinities between the ancient Greek satyr play and the Japanese comic tradition of Kyōgen. While originating in distinct cultural and historical contexts, both genres serve a crucial role as comic closures to sequences of serious drama—tragedy in the case of the satyr play, and Noh in the case of Kyōgen. The study focuses on the performative and thematic mechanisms through which these genres operate as theatrical epilogues, providing comic relief, narrative inversion, and emotional resolution. By examining their placement within performance cycles, their treatment of tragic motifs through satirical parody, and their ritual origins, this paper argues that Kyōgen offers a valuable comparative lens for re-evaluating the function and aesthetic of the largely fragmentary satyr play tradition. The analysis underscores how the recurring presence of comic interludes across different traditions suggests a transhistorical dramaturgical strategy aimed at sustaining audience engagement.

**Keywords:** satyr play, Kyōgen, Ancient Greek tragedy, Noh theatre, comic relief, humorous drama.

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### **Introduction**

The satyr play—long overshadowed by the more celebrated genres of tragedy and comedy—occupied a distinctive position within the performance schedule of the City Dionysia in classical Athens. Staged as the fourth piece following a tragic trilogy, the satyr play offered spectators cathartic comic relief after the intense emotional and moral demands of tragedy. Mythological parody, humorous drama, choruses of satyrs, and a hybrid of music, dance, and farce created a liminal space between seriousness and laughter, ritual and entertainment. Yet the limited survival of complete texts has left modern scholarship with an incomplete picture of the genre’s original function and aesthetic.

To illuminate this elusive dramatic form, the present study turns to analogues that fulfil a comparable role elsewhere. Japanese *Kyōgen*, a comic theatrical mode traditionally paired with the solemn *Noh* drama, offers an especially revealing parallel. Like the satyr play, Kyōgen emerged from religious performance contexts, shares a structural dependence on preceding serious drama, and engages in thematic and tonal inversion. Through a cross-cultural analysis, this paper aims to illuminate how Kyōgen can enrich our understanding of the satyr play—not by imposing equivalence, but by revealing underlying dramaturgical parallels. This approach foregrounds the satyr play not merely as an appendage to tragedy, but as an essential component of ancient theatrical experience, with resonances that extend far beyond classical Athens.

### *The Structure and Function of the Satyr Play*

The satyr play (or *satyroi*) constitutes the third genre of performative drama which, together with tragedy and comedy, formed part of the competitive program of the City Dionysia in honor of the god Dionysus, during the 5th century BCE and the early 4th century BCE.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, it was the “humorous” drama that concluded the performances of the three tragedies presented by each competing playwright (Shaw, 2018, p. 2). The genre owes its name to the Chorus of Satyrs—primitive, mythical, anthropomorphic creatures with horse-like ears and tails, and a prominently exaggerated phallus. These Satyrs were typically accompanied by their father, Silenus, who held one of the principal roles in the play.

From the rich output of satyr plays, only *Cyclops* by Euripides has survived in its entirety, along with a substantial portion (approximately 420 lines) of *Ichneutae* (*Trackers*) by Sophocles (*P. Oxy.* 1174=*TrGF* 4, F 314, 314a-314b). Additionally, 90 lines of Sophocles’ *Inachus* have been preserved (*TrGF* 4, F 269a-e. 270-281, 281a, 282-295, 295a). From Aeschylus, two papyrus fragments of satyr plays survive: around 100 lines from *Diktyoulokoí* (*Net-Fishers*) (*TrGF* 3, F 46a-c, 47, 47a-c), 100 lines from *Theoroi* or *Isthmiastai* (*Sacred Delegates* or *Isthmian Contestants*) (*TrGF* 3, F 78a-d, 79-80), and 20 lines from *Prometheus Pyrkaeus* (*Prometheus the Fire-Kindler*) (*TrGF* 3, F 204a-d, 205-207, 207a). To these may be added other brief fragments found on papyri or cited in literary sources, bringing the total number of known satyr plays to approximately seventy-five.

Although fragmentary in transmission, literary sources offer important insight into the origins and evolution of the genre. The testimonies concerning the early development of the satyr play are ambiguous and frequently intertwined with those of tragedy itself. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, does not treat the satyr play as a distinct dramatic genre, yet he offers a particularly telling passage regarding the early development of tragedy:

“ἔτι δὲ τὸ μέγεθος· ἐκ μικρῶν μύθων καὶ λέξεως γελοίας διὰ τὸ ἐκ σατυρικοῦ μεταβαλεῖν ὄψῃ ἀπεσεμνύθη, τὸ τε μέτρον ἐκ τετραμέτρου ἰαμβεῖον ἐγένετο. τὸ μὲν γὰρ πρῶτον τετραμέτρῳ ἐχρῶντο διὰ τὸ σατυρικὴν καὶ ὀρχηστικώτεραν εἶναι τὴν ποίησιν, [...]” (*Poetics* 1449a 19–24)

1 Each year, during the classical period, the City Dionysia took place in the Attic month of Elaphebolion (late March), featuring competitions of twenty dithyrambs, three tragic tetralogies, and three to five comedies, all contested within a single day. However, each of the three competing tragedians presented, on a single day, three tragedies followed by a satyr play. For further details on the City Dionysia, see Pickard-Cambridge (1968, pp. 57-155).

“A further factor was grandeur: after a period of slight plots and laughable diction, owing to development from a satyric ethos, it was at a late stage that tragedy acquired dignity, and its metre became the iambic trimeter instead of the trochaic tetrameter”.  
(Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a19–24, trans. Halliwell, p. 42)

This statement suggests that tragedy, in its formative phase, evolved from a satyric and dance-heavy poetic form characterized by brief plots and comic diction. Its initial metric vehicle, the trochaic tetrameter—more suitable to movement and rhythm—was eventually supplanted by the iambic trimeter, reflecting the genre’s gradual adoption of a more serious tone. Earlier still, as Aristotle notes a few lines before, tragedy derived ἀπὸ τῶν ἐξαρχόντων τὸν διθύραμβον [: from those who led the dithyramb] (*Poetics* 1449a 11), thus tracing its origin to dithyrambic performances, often involving choral improvisation.

Further support for this genealogical association comes from the *Suda* lexicon (A 3886), which attributes to Arion of Methymna a formative role in the invention of the tragic mode:

[...] λέγεται καὶ τραγικοῦ τρόπου εὐρετῆς γενέσθαι καὶ πρῶτος χορὸν στήσαι καὶ διθύραμβον ἄσαι καὶ ὀνομάσαι τὸ ἀδόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ χοροῦ καὶ Σατύρους εἰσενεγκεῖν ἔμμετρα λέγοντας [...].

This passage identifies Arion as the first to formalize the dithyramb, to establish a chorus, to name the performed song, and crucially, to introduce Satyrs delivering metrically structured speech. From these testimonies, scholars have inferred that early dramatic performances likely featured a dynamic coexistence of serious and comic elements, ritual and farce, gravitas and play. As some have suggested, tragedy’s “goat-song” etymology may conceal, behind the image of the “τράγος”, the presence of Satyrs themselves. The satyr play thus preserves, in crystallized form, a trace of tragedy’s own comic and choral ancestry.

A particularly illuminating parallel to this satyric substratum of tragedy can be found in the origins of Japanese Noh theatre. According to Zeami Motokyo, Noh developed from Sarugaku, a performance tradition whose name—literally “monkey music”—connotes animal mimicry, comic movement, and rhythmic dance accompanied by musical instruments. Sarugaku, like the early dithyrambic performances described by Aristotle, emerged from popular ritual celebrations before evolving into stylized forms of serious theatre. The fact that the elevated and solemn aesthetics of Noh arose from such ludic and mimetic roots strongly resonates with the Greek trajectory from satyr Chorus to tragic tetralogy.

In both traditions, we observe a striking pattern: serious dramatic forms originate not from purely solemn ritual, but from hybrid performative spaces in which comic, physical, and animalistic elements played a foundational role. The satyrs in archaic drama and the mimetic “monkeys” of Sarugaku represent comparable figures of corporeal excess, fertility, and carnivalesque inversion. Later, as both traditions institutionalized their serious genres (Greek tragedy and Noh), they retained comic counterparts—satyr play and Kyōgen—to complement and counterbalance the tragic weight. These structural and historical affinities suggest a shared dramaturgical impulse: to embed within the tragic arc a moment of comic rupture that not only relieves emotional tension but recalls the genre’s performative beginnings.

Throughout the entirety of the 5th century BCE, the satyr play was traditionally performed fourth in the sequence, following three tragedies or a single cohesive trilogy. The reasons for this particular placement are closely related to the function of the satyr play itself. The first reason concerns the light-hearted and easily digestible nature of the genre, as well as its ability to express, with immediacy, the popular desire for amusement at the end of a taxing day (Sutton, 1980, p. 163). Through the satyr play, the tragic poet effectively rewards the audience with laughter and cheerfulness. Simultaneously, according to O’Sullivan, “satyr play in the Classical period –what can be considered its ‘heyday’- was crucial to the overall experience of theatre at the City Dionysia, since the last on stage images and sounds seen and heard by Athenian audiences at the end of a day watching four dramas were invariably the final moments of a satyr drama” (O’ Sullivan, 2013, p. 5).

The second reason is rooted in the inherent hilarity of the genre which provided spectators with relief from the intense emotions evoked by the tragedies. This view, first articulated by historians of Late Antiquity (Seaford, 1984, p. 26, and Antonopoulos, 2021, pp. 28-29), continued to prevail in modern scholarship, beginning notably with A.W. Schlegel’s observation that the purpose of the satyr play was, in his words “[t]he want of some relaxation for the mind, after the engrossing severity of tragedy” (Schlegel, 1965, p. 142). The cathartic and relieving function of the satyr play was especially significant in the context of tetralogical compositions, since tragic heroes were treated lightly, humorously, and with cleansing effect. Similar functions were fulfilled by theatrical genres in other periods, such as the Roman exodium, which followed serious plays in the form of Atellan farce or mime; the Elizabethan jig, which accompanied performances of tragedy and comedy; and the one-act kyōgen plays, performed after serious Noh theatre dramas which, along with their structural and thematic comparison to satyr drama, will be the focus of the following discussion.

*Kyōgen as a Cross-Cultural Analog*

Kyōgen belongs to the category of comic drama performed as an interlude following the presentations of serious theatre. From the inception of its theatrical history, Kyōgen was exclusively staged alongside Noh theatre and performed on the same stage. Both forms of theatre trace their origins to religious rituals and performances held in sacred temples, although they subsequently moved to enclosed theatre spaces. As already noted, both *Noh* and *Kyōgen* evolved from the earlier *Sarugaku* tradition—a performative mode that flourished between the 11th and 14th centuries. The etymology of the term *Sarugaku*, often rendered as “monkey entertainment,” is particularly intriguing, possibly alluding to vigorous mimetic and dance movements accompanied by music (Zobel, 2007, pp. 304-306). The animal-derived term for this performance genre echoes the word “tragedy”. The Kyōgen theatrical form was developed between the 14th and 18th centuries and from the outset took the shape of a brief interlude, performed within the context of serious Noh theatre, a format it continues to preserve.

A typical *Noh* theatrical performance lasts approximately six hours—roughly equivalent to the duration of the three tragedies and the satyr play presented within the competitive program of the City Dionysia. However, the key difference lies in the structure of the performance program and the function of each genre. The Noh repertoire, as established in the 16th century, traditionally includes five plays: the first concerning gods, the second a warrior, the third a woman, the fourth a madman, and the fifth a demon.<sup>2</sup> Interspersed among these five Noh plays, for purposes of comic relief and tension release, are Kyōgen farces that parody the themes of the preceding Noh dramas (Keene, 1955, pp. 51-52). Unlike satyr plays, Kyōgen consists of comic episodes embedded within the Noh performance, which provide subversive and parodic commentary. This alternation between serious and comic episodes continues throughout the performance program. Moreover, many Noh plays include a scene wherein a Kyōgen actor assumes a brief narrative role within the Noh drama; such roles are called *Sikyōgen*. Despite their differences, the inseparable theatrical relationship between these two forms of Japanese theatre closely parallels that between tragedy and satyr play.

The close interrelation of serious Noh and comic Kyōgen is further evidenced by their shared patronage system, modeled after the Athenian *choregia* (i.e., dramatic sponsorship). This shared sponsorship influenced the evolution of Kyōgen, particularly in the 17th century, when actors of the genre had to restrict parody and satire of Noh protagonists for fear of offending either fellow actors

2 The fifth play in the *Noh* theatre program occasionally bore a festive or celebratory character.

or patrons. Consequently, the writing style conformed to the aesthetic principles of Noh, resulting in the elimination of vulgarity, meticulous attention to detail, and “a desire to produce smiles rather than guffaws” (Moore, 2002-2003, p. 191). Generally, satire in *Kyōgen* conveys a spirit of acceptance, forgiveness, and the affirmation of life itself. Its comedic tone—restrained, refined, and devoid of obscenity or excessive noise—marks a significant departure from the exuberant, often bawdy character of satyr drama.

Kyōgen performers undergo intensive, long-term training in specialized academies that are entirely separate from the institutions responsible for educating actors in the more solemn Noh tradition. This institutional separation accentuates the genre’s distance from Greek satyr drama, in which the Chorus and actors were typically drawn from the ranks of tragic performers. During the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), three rival lineages—Okura, Sagi, and Izumi—were formally established to safeguard the art; each school was controlled by a hereditary master (*iemoto*), whose authority structured the strict internal hierarchy. All three institutions were dissolved amid the political turbulence surrounding the Meiji Restoration of 1868, but two later resumed activity: the Izumi school in 1940 and the Okura school in 1941 (Kobayashi and Kagoya, 2007, pp. 144, 146). Kyōgen plays are generally mounted by ensembles of two or three male relatives, with the craft transmitted through patrilineal apprenticeship—a system that, even today, renders specialized directors, producers, or playwrights in the Western sense unnecessary. (Morley, 1987, p. 3). The canon comprises roughly 260 anonymous texts compiled in the seventeenth century; while new scripts are occasionally composed, they rarely enter the official repertoire, the notable exception being *Susugigawa* (*The Washing River*), which the Okura school formally adopted in the modern era.<sup>3</sup>

Kyōgen plays, like satyr dramas and other short interlude plays (such as Roman *exodia* and English *jigs*), are notably brief, rarely exceeding two or three scenes and “many are little more than an extended joke” (Moore, 2002-2003, p. 194). Characteristics shared with satyr drama include the use of spoken language combined with music, singing, and dance, although Kyōgen is predominantly a mimetic spoken theatre relying mainly on verbal delivery and gesture-based codes. Indeed, the primacy of speech in Kyōgen is such that it is considered the only traditional form of Japanese theatre comparable to the Western, word-centered theatrical tradition (Berberich, 1989, p. 31). The very name Kyōgen, composed

<sup>3</sup> The play, an adaptation of the French medieval farce *Le Cuvier* written by Jizawa Tadasu, was first performed in England during the reign of Emperor Shōwa, 25 December 1926 – 7 January 1989 (Lezzi and Salz, 2007, pp. 87-104).

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of the characters for “mad” or “crazy” and “words”, points to the genre’s comedic and humorous language.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the dialogue-driven Kyōgen employs less singing and dancing than Noh, Kabuki, or Bunraku. Its brief songs, called *koutai*—to distinguish them from the *utai* of Noh—feature simple, playful rhythms and are accompanied by flute, drums, and gong. These songs derive from 16th- and 17th-century song collections and are danced as well. The songs require actors to control their voices by projecting from the abdomen rather than the chest or throat (Morley, 1987, p. 7). Kyōgen actors are meticulously trained to produce voices that are both clear and strong. The dances (*komai*) are performed with highly mimetic gestures, strictly codified, as actors are taught precision in every movement and gesture. Costumes worn in Kyōgen roles, however, are not standardized or emblematic as in satyr drama; rather, they replicate the authentic clothing worn by people at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Kyōgen plays were first written. Moreover, Kyōgen employs limited use of masks, in contrast to satyr drama. Masks are worn only by female elder roles and demons. Notably, roles in Kyōgen do not bear names but instead represent types of people and broader social groups.

Thematically, Kyōgen plays are divided into two groups: cheerful and satirical works. In reality, both themes coexist within all texts to varying degrees. Kyōgen also categorizes plays according to the central protagonist, the *Shite* (Morley, 1987, p.p. 13-15). The largest satirical category focuses on the protagonist duo of the servant Tarō Kaya and his companion Jirō Kaya, who are portrayed in awkward situations that effectively ridicule their masters. These plots and characters resonate with the typical theme of servitude, which recurs as a motif in satyr drama. Another major thematic category centers on female roles, though as noted, these roles are never played by women. This recalls ancient Greek theatre overall, in which women are numerous but male actors always perform female parts (Moore, 2002-2003, p. 194). Additionally, a significant category of Kyōgen dramas satirizes Buddhism, especially in the form of mocking Buddhist priests as depicted in popular medieval folk narratives.<sup>5</sup> The presence of gods in comic roles is common in satyr drama as well, as exemplified by Apollo and Hermes in Sophocles’ *Ichneutae*.<sup>6</sup>

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4 The first component of the compound originates from the Chinese character *kyō*, which denotes “to go mad” or “to lose one’s reason,” while the second element, *gen*, signifies “words” or “speech.”

5 According to Sutton, Kyōgen was the first form of Japanese social protest drama and paved the way for Kabuki (Sutton, 1979, p. 56).

6 In the approximately four hundred extant lines of the play, the narrative follows the Satyrs on a quest assigned to them by the god Apollo: to track down the cattle stolen from him by the infant god Hermes. Though only six days old, Hermes is portrayed as astonishingly self-sufficient and resourceful. Not only does he execute the theft with remarkable cunning, but he also slays a tortoise and constructs from its

The close thematic relationship between Kyōgen and the preceding Noh play resembles the thematic interplay between a satyr play and the tragedy it follows. Dana Sutton, a prominent scholar of satyr drama (Sutton, 1979, pp. 53-64), analyzes the thematic affinity between the parodic Kyōgen *Esashi Jūō* (*The Birdcatcher in Hell*) and the serious Noh play *Ukai* by Enami no Sayemon (ca. 1400), as well as the analogous treatment of revenge found between Euripides' *Hecuba* (427 BCE) and the satyr play *Cyclops*.<sup>7</sup> The thematic similarity between *Hecuba* and *Cyclops* lies in the act of vengeful punishment by blinding that occurs in both dramas: Hecuba avenges Polymestor for killing the son she entrusted to him, and Odysseus punishes the Cyclops Polyphemus, the threatening man-eating monster who is comically undermined by the ironic “discovery” of wine. Additionally, Sutton proposes an early date for the composition of the satyr play,<sup>8</sup> placing *Cyclops* in 424 BCE—the same year traditionally assigned to *Hecuba* (Sutton, 1980, pp. 108-120). This chronological proximity lends further weight to the thematic parallel between the two plays, particularly with regard to the motif of retaliatory blinding, which features prominently in both narratives.

In the case of the Japanese dramas, *Ukai* depicts two wandering Buddhist monks meeting a sinful fisherman, as Buddhism considers the taking of animal life a sin. One monk recognizes that the fisherman once gave him shelter. Later, it is revealed that the fisherman is actually the ghost of himself, killed by angry neighbors and condemned to eternal wandering. At the conclusion, Yama, the demon king of the Underworld, declares the fisherman's soul freed because he once offered hospitality to the wandering priest. In the satirical Kyōgen *Esashi Jūō*, this theme takes the form of parody and ridicule: Yama confronts a newly dead fowl hunter, Kiyoyori, whom he condemns to hell as a sinner. However, the clever Kiyoyori offers Yama a bite of cooked bird. Delighted, Yama sends him back to

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shell the first lyre—a gesture that signals his divine ingenuity and disruptive creativity. The simultaneous presence of Apollo and Hermes onstage introduces a dynamic interplay between divine authority and trickster inventiveness, reinforcing the mythological richness and theatrical vitality of the satyric form.

7 In *Hecuba*, the action unfolds in the aftermath of the Trojan War, where the former queen of Troy mourns the sacrificial death of her daughter Polyxena and soon after discovers the murder of her youngest son, Polydorus, by the Thracian king Polymestor, to whom he had been entrusted. Upon luring Polymestor into a false sense of security, Hecuba executes a plan of violent retribution: his children are slain and he himself is blinded by her hand and that of her fellow captive women. In *Cyclops*, Odysseus and his men, shipwrecked on the island of the Cyclopes, are captured by Polyphemus, a monstrous being who devours several of them and openly scorns the gods. With the help of the Satyrs, Odysseus offers him unmixed wine, causing the Cyclops to fall into a stupor, at which point Odysseus blinds him with a sharpened, fire-hardened stake. In both plays, the act of blinding is carried out in response to a prior offense and functions as a pivotal moment within the narrative structure.

8 The date of composition and first performance of *Cyclops* remains uncertain. Most scholars appear to accept Richard Seaford's argument in favor of a late dating of the play, placing it around 410 BCE, with a margin of three to four years, based primarily on metrical and formal considerations (Seaford, 1982, pp. 161-172; O'Sullivan, 2013, pp. 39-41; Hunter and Laemme, 2020, pp. 38-47).

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Earth to hunt more (Sutton, 1979, p. 57). Thus, comparative study demonstrates that despite significant differences between satyr drama and Japanese Kyōgen, both share a lighthearted tone and comedic inversion as central aims. Both forms relieve tragic tension while thematically drawing from the serious dramas that preceded them.

### **Conclusion**

Although separated by time, geography, and theatrical tradition, the ancient Greek satyr play and the Japanese Kyōgen share a striking functional and structural affinity. Both serve as post-serious dramatic forms that offer comic counterpoints to the weightiness of tragedy and Noh respectively. Through parody, inversion, and carefully modulated humor, they provide audiences with emotional release and narrative closure, reinforcing the cyclical rhythm of theatrical performance. The comparison with Kyōgen underscores the satyr play's unique contribution to the tragic tetralogy—not as a dispensable comic afterthought, but as a necessary component in the emotional architecture of ancient theater in classical times.

By analyzing Kyōgen as a living tradition that preserves the function of comic interlude in a highly stylized and codified form, we gain fresh insight into the potential richness of the satyr play tradition, despite its fragmentary survival. These parallels invite us to reconsider the satyr play's role not only within the framework of Greek drama, but also within the broader spectrum of global performative practices that interweave comic relief with tragedy.

### **Abbreviations:**

1. *TrGF*: Snell, B., and Kannicht, R. (eds), *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, Vols. I and V. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

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# MYTH – MEMORY – METHOD: TERZOPOULOS' JOURNEY INTO THE NIGHTMARE OF HISTORY

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**Abstract:** Myth, Memory and Method constitute the three fundamental elements of Terzopoulos' work on Ancient Greek Tragedy. In the following text we will explore the inner world of these elements and the way they formulate the theatrical universe of Terzopoulos, while, at the same time, how they transmit inspiration and knowledge to artists of younger generations so as to pave their own way into the adventurous territory of theatrical creation.

**Keywords:** Terzopoulos, tragedy, myth, memory, method, performer, bodymind tempo-rhythm, laboratory.

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"History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."  
*James Joyce*

### **Introduction**

For over four decades, Theodoros Terzopoulos has returned to the roots of Ancient Greek Tragedy, uncovering in its mythical core a profound and enduring source of theatrical power. His work resists superficial storytelling and instead plunges into the ontological depths of human existence, where myth is not merely narrative, but a primal, chthonic force that challenges both performer and audience. This article explores the radical theatrical philosophy and methodology developed by Terzopoulos; a process rooted in myth, memory, and a body-centered practice. Specifically, it examines how his performances, from *The Bacchae* (1985) to *Oresteia* (2024), dismantle conventional theatrical form and reconstruct it from within the performer's bodymind. Through a dynamic interplay of breath, rhythm, and transformation, Terzopoulos redefines the theatre as a living organism that does not avoid the monstrous and the unbearable, but confronts them as a path to both social and existential emancipation. In a time of theatrical homogenization, Terzopoulos' method serves not only as a tool for the performer's psychophysical training but as a philosophical stance: an insistence on theatre as a space for personal and collective awakening.



*Oresteia* by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2024 – *The Chorus*  
 © Jobanna Weber  
 Source: [https://www.n-t.gr/el/events/oresteia\\_25](https://www.n-t.gr/el/events/oresteia_25)

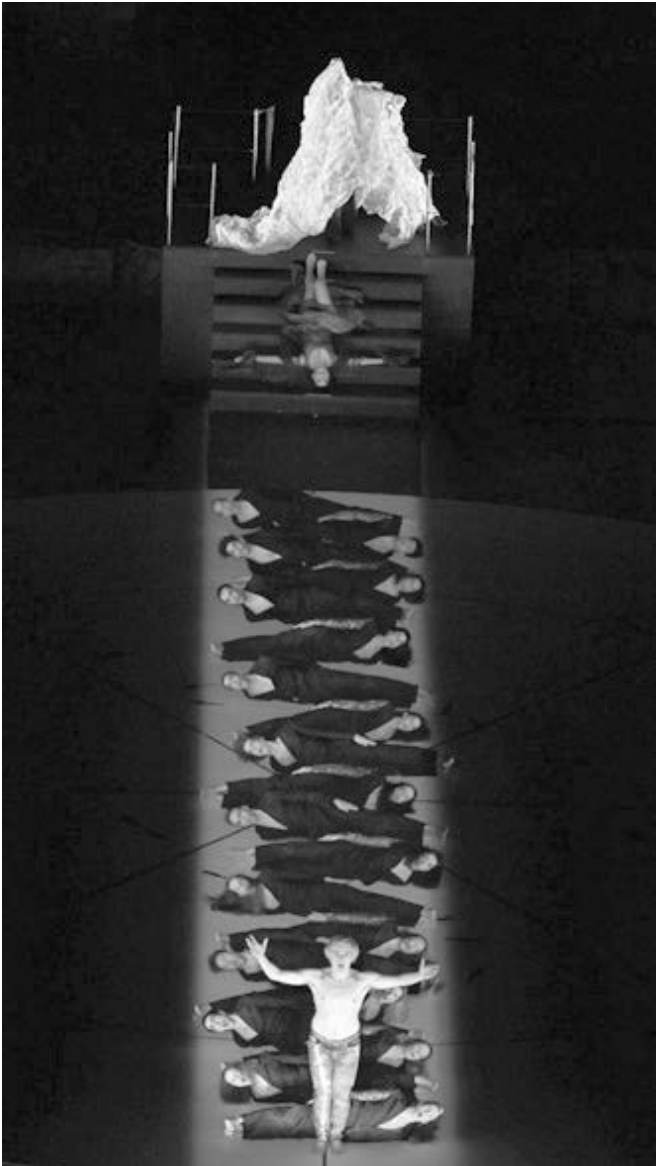
## **Myth**

Theodoros Terzopoulos, through his assiduous work on Ancient Greek Tragedy for more than forty years, keeps insisting: **“In order to approach the tragic material we should return back to the myth”** (Terzopoulos, 2023, p.108). In his performances, from the *Bacchae* by Euripides (1985) till *Oresteia* by Aeschylus (2024), the structure of the performance has been created out of a direct confrontation and contact with the mythical core of each play. This process engraves deeply the *bodymind* of the performer and the *tempo-rhythm* of the performance, creating a landscape of mania, awe and transcendence, which challenges the spectator to accomplish a mental and emotional journey through the profoundly sensorial experience of watching a world taking shape on stage.

We cannot avoid posing the question: What is the myth? Ancient Greek Tragedy is based on myths, not just on stories, or fairytales. So, the myth cannot really be restricted to this or that story, which can only constitute its surface. Underneath the surface many agonizing questions are being posed concerning

the human condition. What is the human being, this ontologically unknown creature? In tragedy we meet the ambiguous word *δεινός* (*deinos*) which at the same time means *terrible* and *terrific*. This word concentrates the contradictory nature of the human being, which bears inside it the potential of a monster. Ancient Greek Tragedy does not want to hide the monster, does not want to present an idealized image of it, or even to pretend that such a thing as the human being/monster does not exist. This is exactly the locus of the myth: the monstrous dimension of the human being, with its wide range of instincts and nightmares; the form of the unbearable, this which we cannot stand, which is difficult for a single human being even to accept it for itself. Ancient Greek Tragedy wants to reveal this unbearable locus of human existence, challenges us to confront with it, without suppressing not even an inch of it.

The territory of this process is twofold; both the human history and existence. *War* (Πόλεμος) and *Eros* constitute the two main points of reference for almost every play of Ancient Greek Tragedy. The tragic landscape is a permanent battlefield consisting of both the human body, but also of history as a body. There is no exit from the nightmare of history, there is no exit from the nightmare of the body. We are condemned to live and die with this fact. But, this is not a mere pessimistic process and it has nothing to do with a passive fatalism. On the contrary, it can constitute a laboratory of social and existential emancipation, under the prerequisite that we cultivate the courage to confront and communicate with this dark and unknown side of our being, to open a dialogue with the monstrously unknown inside us, no matter how fearful it might be. Suppressing, idealizing or ignoring the monster, pretending to serve a political and religious morality, suppressing the locus of myth within the human being, what it really remains is a mechanized and frustrated being, hateful toward the others, with a void instead of an identity, eventually an anthropological type which resembles to what fascism would like to create.



*Oresteia* by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2024.  
*Agamemnon* – Savvas Stroumpos. © *Johanna Weber*  
Source: [https://www.n-t.gr/el/events/oresteia\\_25](https://www.n-t.gr/el/events/oresteia_25)

We cannot forget that Ancient Greek Tragedy has been born by the Athenian Democracy and Philosophy. The actual deepening of the democratic social bonds in artistic/poetic terms was the main task of Tragedy. Although, this process could not really be accomplished without social and political critic, without doubting about everything and everyone, even reaching the point of transgressing a law when that was not serving the needs of the city-and-the-people. At the same time, the process of deepening the democratic social bonds and standing critically to the laws and the institutions of the city was not enough. This active gaze to the society and history should also be directly connected to the agonizing function of casting a glance within one's self, of posing all the possible and impossible questions concerning the human being, not in a safe territory, but in the extreme conditions concerning nature, history and existence.

Having gone through these thoughts concerning the notion of the myth, we need to return back to the work of Terzopoulos. His quest of the mythical material takes place within the bodymind of the performer. He does not start the work through various ideas. Collaborating with the performer, listening carefully the person who is in front of him on stage, they gradually co-create a field of mutual acceptance, where the performer is encouraged to let behind different social or psychological defences and dive into the tumultuous waters of the creative material, while the director follows step by step this process in silence, giving the necessary feedback, trying to shed a bit more of light into the process. Through time and through the reliable participation of the director, a weird relationship is being created which helps the performer reveal the most valuable and rare sides of its potential.

Shedding light into darkness is not a static process. It does not resemble the image of our daily life when somebody steps into a dark room, just turns the lights on and gets acquainted with the room. On the contrary, we have to have the sense that we enter vigilantly into a dark room, where we turn on our small flashlight and we shed a bit of light into the darkness; through time we get a bit acquainted with the space we are able to see, later on we make some steps into the room, but the dark part of the room expands more and more... This image is an example of the infinite character of the creative process and of the dynamic relationship between director and performer in Terzopoulos' work.

There is not a specific end to the process, the quest for a ready-made result is eliminated, while new questions and new issues keep coming forth, new unexplored possibilities arise, while the research of this which does not yet exist keeps opening new, unexpected and unknown fields of creation. It is not by chance that Terzopoulos for more than 40 years mainly works with his ensemble of Attis Theatre performers in the context of a laboratory, negating the canonical

ways of doing theatre. The space-time of the laboratory is an open territory full of questions and doubts, occupied by the desire to search the unlimited potential of the human being and, eventually, to create a performance out of this process.

### ***Memory***

During the laboratory process Terzopoulos works according to his ideal, that the performance should be engraved in the memory of the spectator. This process can be accomplished not in mere aesthetic terms, but through the dilation of time on stage. The dynamic performative space-time breaks the social, ordinary and linear flow of clockwork time and becomes a living organism; it breathes, senses, expands and contracts, accelerates and retards, moves through unexpected jumps, creates ruptures in the dramatic flow of the performance, challenging the spectator to accomplish a sensorial and emotional journey in numerous unexplored landscapes of its perception.

**“The performer’s body gives birth to time, time gives birth to space”** (Terzopoulos, 2020, p. 66), utters Terzopoulos so as to stimulate the creativity of his performers into the process. As we have already mentioned, the bodymind of the performer is the main field of creation. Time cannot be a separated element which is suddenly imposed from the outside. On the contrary, it is born during the process of research out of the performer’s activated being on stage. The performer needs to concentrate, to gather all the mental, sensorial and physical powers so as to accomplish each given task. This process lies far away from dramatic and representational processes on stage. The performer does not try to imitate a social behaviour, to interpret a character, or to reproduce a feeling from daily life.

In Ancient Greek Tragedy the persons are closer to living structures or to archetypes than to characters. During the rehearsals period, the bodymind of the performer becomes a womb of multiple other hidden bodies; it is transformed from within into a territory of multiple psychophysical functions, which transcends the notion of daily life behaviour, within the restrictions of a socially orientated bodymind. Terzopoulos’ point of reference is Dionysus, whom we cannot perceive solely as the god of theatre, or of wine, according to mythology. Dionysus symbolizes nature’s power of permanent transformation. That is why we cannot really tell if we have a male or female deity; that is why Dionysus is able to transform itself from a god into an animal, from an animal into a human being etc. For Terzopoulos this is the main paradigm of the performer’s bodymind, which optimally becomes a wide open channel of energy flowing in all the unpredictable ways, as the performer gets into the state of permanent psychophysical transformation.



*The Persians* by Aeschylus, director Savvas Stroumpos, 2023  
*The messenger* – Anna Marka Bonisel. © Giannis Chatziantoniou  
 Source: <https://simeiomiden.gr/shows/aischyloy-perses/>

There is an image we often use during the working process: We have a glass of water. We normally know that the water takes the form of the glass. During the psychophysical work, things happen the other way round; the glass should take the form of water. It means that through the process the bodymind becomes an open channel, totally flexible, able to assume all the possible forms which stem from within the performer's material.

The landscape where the performer's material is being cultivated and eventually emerges, or else the locus of myth within the human being, sets the discourse of memory not in the canonical daily life way, where we need to remember this or that incident, but in a much more profound level. While the performer's material stems from the deepest layers of its existence, which have

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been unknown till the special moment of creation, the process of psychophysical research opens up the sources of collective memory. This process constitutes the way of releasing the performer's unlimited and hidden potential, which has nothing to do with a kind of choreographical way of moving, or with a way of mere singing, uttering a text etc. On the contrary it is an act of revealing one's chthonic substrate of creativity, showing the unique way that the performer's bodymind wants to speak, sing or move, following special and unique corporal and vocal axes of energy.

### **Method**

Theatre is praxis. Theorising or philosophising about theatre might mean nothing if the flesh-and-bones of the performer, of the living human being, do not really participate in the actual process. We could also claim that the only possible way to give birth to theory out of the theatrical phenomenon would be through a close connection to praxis, through a dynamic and inspiring dialogue which would be able to stimulate both the artist and the theoretician to search for new ways of being involved into the strange world which we call theatre.

Starting from the *Bacchae* (1985) Terzopoulos was engaged in the process of creating a working method. The main question he and his group were confronting with was how the bodymind of the performer could incorporate the bacchic state in psychophysical terms. This question was the starting point of what we call the "Method of Theodoros Terzopoulos", which we keep developing till nowadays.

Before we focus on the fundamentals of Terzopoulos' method, it would be interesting to open our discourse to the notion of the method itself in theatrical terms: Why do we really need a working method? Is it possible for a method to give answers to all of our questions and even to solve all of our problems in the creative process? Working through a specific method does it mean that we are engaged in a specific aesthetical language?



*The Persians* by Aeschylus, director Savvas Stroumpos, 2023  
 Atossa – Evelyn Assouad. © Giannis Chatziantoniou  
 Source: <https://simeiomiden.gr/shows/aischyloy-perses/>

The art of doing theatre gives us the chance to experience the mysterious world of the stage, full of questions and unresolved enigmas. At the same time it is common place that being on stage demands an extra daily form of activating the powers of one's own organism. Starting from the first theatrical laboratories back to end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we see that the practitioners of previous epochs were posing simple but very important questions: how can the performer stand, walk, listen, speak, breathe, watch, communicate etc. on stage. We believe that these questions remain open even nowadays, but they also reveal something fundamental: the performer's being on stage constitutes a whole new world in comparison to the analogous daily life functions of a human being. So, the first and very important reason why we need a working method is this: we need to re – formulate our organism so as to exist on stage in a creative way. This is the first step, we need to continue.

When we come in contact with the material of the great poetical texts of Ancient Greek Tragedy we sense that the tragic persons experience unfamiliar and hyperbolic states of mania, fear, awe, mourning, lament, rage etc, which we cannot really assimilate and express through a *one*-dimensional process of imitation, or in a mere sentimental way which stems from our daily life experience. What it is really at stake is the issue of the performer's psychophysical transformation. This is the next step. A working method should be able to open possible paths for the practitioner to *re*-consider practically how can one approach the extreme states of the tragic persons without violating itself physically, mentally, psychologically etc.; it should also stimulate the performer's perception to *re*-discover what it means to incorporate a role beyond a mere representational level. From the performer's perspective, speaking about the possible ways of approaching a role, we should not ignore the main tasks of psychophysical activation and concentration which are demanded so as for the whole being of the artist to participate organically in the process. Speaking of which, *the material of Ancient Greek Tragedy is the basis of the theatrical craft*; that is why the contact with these issues is considered fundamental for the performers' training and education worldwide.

Following this train of thoughts we need to examine **the fundamental principles of Terzopoulos's method**. The core of the method is the breath or rather vital energy. From the first day of work the performer starts getting acquainted with the basic elements of diaphragmatic breathing, which are gradually being developed into more advanced functions within multiple tempo-rhythms. Through time the performer experiences the sense of activated softness, where the bodymind is freed from unnecessary tensions (muscular, mental or psychological) and starts becoming an open channel of unhindered circulation of energy. The body and the voice of the performer are trained though this process: each movement and each sound are the result of a special use of the air either of inhalation or of exhalation. Later on, during the process of deconstruction, where the pelvic region (the "triangle" in the language of the method) is being released and vibrates till the whole body starts vibrating, new corporal and vocal axes are revealed within the performer's bodymind. The process of infinite improvisation challenges the performer to discover the unlimited potential of the bodymind. Having gone through all the previous steps of the method, the performer is ready to step into the territory of creativity. The work on energy continues. The performer focuses on a rhythm created by a physical point, keeps working on it and, step by step, the work on the point-and-the-rhythm becomes a whole world of rhythmical gestures and vocal axes. The bodymind dances on the traces of its deep memories, opens up unexplored territories of research, the whole organism as a dynamic unity participates in the accomplishment of each gesture and the performer experiences in a profound way the sense of creative freedom where all the possibilities are wide open.



*Oresteia* by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2024.  
Photo during the rehearsals in Epidavros. © *Johanna Weber*

### ***Conclusion***

Terzopoulos' method constitutes a fertile subsoil of performer's training where the practitioner through time formulates its whole organism so as to acquire a generous being on stage. The method does not want to become a doctrine of ready-made solutions for each and every issue we face during the creative process. On the contrary, from the moment the practitioner goes through the intensive psychophysical training suggested by the method, the window to creative freedom opens up and the performer comes face to face with the unfamiliar, this which did not exist till that moment. New questions are being posed out of this process, new issues arise and the answers can only be given by the bodymind of the performer who is engaged into the process. Nevertheless, these answers are temporary, since the attempt to handle an issue which occurs, the act of answering a question through the performer's flesh-and-bones, permanently opens up new, even more challenging tasks for the bodymind to handle.

We claim that Terzopoulos' method prepares the performer to step into the adventurous field of doing theatre with the boldness and the sensitivity, the activation and the softness, the discipline and the fragility, the openness and the

rigour the theatrical craft demands, without any restriction concerning this or that aesthetic category, this or that way of doing theatre. Ultimately, the artist remains free to reveal and develop its own, deeply personal world, opening unexplored ways of creation, facing unknown territories of the theatrical art.

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*Oresteia* by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2025.  
 Photo during the rehearsals in Delphi. © Panos Pragiannis  
 n.ed.: on the right actor, instructor, and director Savvas Stroumpos.

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*Oresteia* by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2024  
*The ghost of Clytemnestra* – Sophia Hill. © *Johanna Weber*  
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**Despina Kosmopoulou** has graduated from the Faculty of Letters at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. She holds a PhD from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Theatre Studies at the University of Athens and at the Department of Philology at the University of Peloponnese. She teaches at the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of Peloponnese, and at the Hellenic Open University in the Master's Program of Performing Arts. Dr. Kosmopoulou's main field of study is theatre, with sub-fields as universal theatre, modern European theatre, comparative drama and the reception of ancient drama. She is a research member of the Laboratory of Ancient Rhetoric and Dramatic Art of the Department of Philology of the University of Peloponnese, a member of the Greek and International Semiotics Society, also collaborating with universities and research centers abroad. She published four books on topics focusing on European and modern Greek theatre: *Pirandello and Genet: A 'Meeting' in the Tragic and the Absurd* (2017, Athens: Dromon); *The Dialectics of Space and Confinement in the*

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*Theatre* (2018, Athens: Dromon); *Theatrical Writing and Theory of Semiotics* (2020, Athens: Dromon); *The Reception of Ancient Drama on the Modern Stage: The Case of Wajdi Mouawad* (forthcoming, Athens: Herodotus). Her articles were published in Greek and international journals and conference proceedings.

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**Asterios Peltekis** is the Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Northern Greece since March 2022, actor, director, theatrologist and PhD candidate in cultural management at the Ionian University. He graduated from the Drama School of the National Theatre of Northern Greece and holds an Integrated Master's degree in Theatre from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He has attended seminars in Greece and abroad led by Peter Brook, Bruce Mayers and Sotigui Kouyate on a scholarship he won. As an actor and director, he has collaborated in more than fifty performances with the National Theatre of Northern Greece, the National Theatre of Greece, the Cyprus Theatre Organisation, the Pallas Theatre, the Onassis Stegi, and independent theatres. He has participated in many films and television series with remarkable leading and supporting roles and has directed many productions in Greece and abroad. He teaches acting, improvisation and elements of directing in theatre workshops and drama schools in Athens, Thessaloniki and Nicosia. He is co-founder and director of the "Anefroigoumenou" art company, and also founder, president, producer and director of the "Ano Throsko" art company, Nicosia.

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**Katerina Arvaniti** is Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Studies at the University of Patras. She holds a degree in Philology from the University of Ioannina, an M.A. in Classics from the University of London, an M.Phil. in Classics from the University of Reading, and a PhD in Theatre Studies from the University of Kent. Her doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Representation of Women*

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in *Contemporary Productions of Ancient Greek Tragedy with Special Reference to the Theme of Matricide*, explores gender portrayals in modern stagings of classical drama. Her research and teaching interests focus on contemporary performance approaches to ancient Greek drama in modern times. She is the author of the two-volume work *Ancient Greek Tragedy at the National Theatre, Vols. I and II* (Papazisis Editions, 2020), as well as the forthcoming book *Satyr Play on the Modern Stage* (Papazisis Editions, 2025, ISBN: 978-960-02-4482-3).

**Savvas Stroumpos** was born in 1979 in Athens. He graduated from the Drama school of the National Theatre of Greece (2002). He has an MA with Merit from the department of Theatre Practice, University of Exeter, UK, where he studied with Phillip Zarrilli (2003). Since 2003 he has been collaborating permanently with “Attis Theatre” and Theodoros Terzopoulos. Nowadays he collaborates as actor, associate director and main teacher of the Method of Theodoros Terzopoulos. As an actor of “Attis Theatre”, he participated in the following performances: Boris Pasternak, *Hamlet a lesson* (2003), Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (2003), Aeschylus, *Epigone* (2004), Samuel Beckett, *Ohio Impromptu* (2004), *Ajax – the madness* (2004), Costas Logaras, *The Last Mask* (2006), Aeschylus, *The Persians* (2006), Marios Pontikas, *Cassandra* (2007), Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (2010), Euripides, *The Trojan Women* (2018), Aeschylus *Oresteia* (2024).

In 2008 he founded “Zero Point Theatre”, where he directed: Franz Kafka, *In the Penal Colony* (2009), Albert Camus, *The Justs – Honoured by the Greek Theatre Critics Association with the New Creator Award* (2011), Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis* (2012), Georg Buchner, *Woyzeck* (2013), Franz Kafka, *In the Penal Colony* (2014), Yevgeny Zamiatin, *We* (2015), Dimitris Dimitriadis, *Troas* (2017), Gyorgy Kurtag, *Kafka Fragments* (2018), Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (2018), Sophocles, *Antigone – Honoured by the Greek Theatre Critics Association with the Ancient Drama Award 2020-2021*, Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (2020), Franz Kafka, *Report to an Academy* (2021), Aeschylus, *The Persians* (2022), Samuel Beckett, *Not I* (2023), Felix Guattari, *To Finish with the Massacre of the Body* (2023), A.P. Chekhov, *The Seagull – Honoured by the Association of Theatre and Performing Arts Critics with the Best Performance Award (2022-2023) & the New Actress Award for Anna Marka Bonisel* (2023), Jean Genet, *The Maids* (2025), etc.

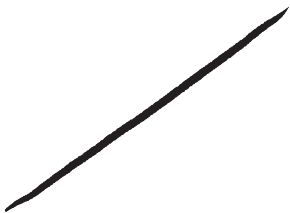
**Mihaela Bețiu** is Associate Professor PhD at the Faculty of Theatre of I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film (UNATC) Bucharest, Romania; she also teaches the *Game and Improvisation* course at the PED-ArtE interdisciplinary Master (offered jointly by UNATC and University of Bucharest). She is theatre, improvisation and NET (Narrative exposure therapy) trainer,

theatre, film and television actress, collaborator of the “Marin Sorescu” National Theatre of Craiova, “C.I. Nottara” and “Ion Creangă” theatres in Bucharest, expert contributor for the Ministry of National Education (The National Center for Curriculum and Evaluation), member of the National Commission for the Attestation of University Titles, Diplomas and Certificates (CNATDCU), scientific supervisor for first grade in pre-university education. Mihaela Bețiu is the translator of the latest edition of *Improvisation for the Theater* by Viola Spolin (eds. 2025, 2014, 2008 UNATC Press), founder and editor-in-chief of UNATC’s *CONCEPT* academic journal ([concept.unatcpress.ro](http://concept.unatcpress.ro); 15 years of publication in 2025, 30 volumes), academic books editor (she edited more than 25 volumes; see the most recent at [editurauniversitaria.ro/ro/collections](http://editurauniversitaria.ro/ro/collections)). She was Director of the Research Department and Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Theatre (UNATC), trainer and long-term expert for the European Project “Communication Skills. Performance in Education” (2010–2013). Published books: *The Actor between Norm and Deviation* (2020, UNATC Press), *Elements of Stage Process Analysis. Three Key Moments in Acting Pedagogy: Andreea Perrucci, K.S. Stanislavski, Viola Spolin* (2025, 2019 UNATC Press) *The Acting Candidate’s Guide* (2025, 2016 UNATC Press); co-author of *Drama Teaching through Shakespeare* (2017, UNATC Press) and *Artistic Research: artă – eveniment – publicații universitare* (Artes Iași, 2024). In 2025, she co-edited *Contemporary Perspectives on Greek Theatre* (UNATC PRESS), together with Prof. PhD Andreas Markantonatos and PhD Despina Kosmoupoulou, volume launched at the conference held in Thessaloniki: “Creation of an Inter-Balkan Network in Performing Arts. Terms and Conditions”, edited English translations of relevant books for current artistic research and theatrical pedagogy (Cojar, I., *Poetics of the Actor’s Art*; Darie, B., *A Course on the Art of the Actor. Improvisation*; Dobrea, A.G., *Applied Theatre in the Integration of Refugee Children and Teenagers*; Lucaci, L., *The Becoming of the Actor*; Jicman, A., *Theatre as a Social Inclusion Mechanism*; Stanciu D., *Traditional and Classical Puppet Theatre. Origins and Influences. A Romanian Perspective*) and initiated the *Dramaturgy* Collection of UNATC PRESS.



**The ancient theatre of Epidauros**

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This volume brings together eight original studies on Greek theatre of which only four have been previously published in the thematic chapter of the 1(30)/2025 issue of the *CONCEPT* academic journal (edited by the Research, Development and Innovation Department of the I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest; ISSN 2248-3756, <https://concept.unatcpres.ro>). The original texts have been double-blind peer-reviewed and can be accessed through the following digital identifiers:

- Markantonatos, A. (2025) “Surviving Death: Euripides’ *Alcestis* and Mystery Cult”, *Concept* 1(30), pp. 122-132. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37130/00fzdd31>
- Kosmopoulou, D. (2025) “Looking at Some Striking Transformations of Clytemnestra in Greece and France”, *Concept* 1(30), pp. 133-146. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37130/9qzznr25>
- Peltekis, A. (2025), “Ancient Drama and Homeric Epics: A Return to Sources”, *Concept* 1(30), pp. 147-164. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37130/mf7tg495>
- Stroumpos, S. (2025) “Myth – Memory – Method: Terzopoulos’ Journey into the Nightmare of History”, *Concept* 1(30), pp. 165-179. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37130/tcz69167>

The endurance of Ancient Greek drama across centuries is one of the most striking and profound phenomena in the history of human culture. Conceived in the civic, ritual, and aesthetic world of Classical Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the tragedies and comedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Menander were in their origin tied intimately to the life of the polis. [...]

What is most striking about this phenomenon is that the modern reception of Greek drama is never simply an act of preservation. It is always also an act of reinvention. The plays reach us through a process of transmission that is itself selective, fragmentary, and mediated. [...] The plays have been used to debate questions of democracy, freedom, gender, migration, and violence. Their universality lies not in timeless messages but in their extraordinary openness to reinterpretation, their ability to be appropriated for new struggles and new visions of justice. The study of this process has itself become an academic field. Once subsumed under the broader notion of the “classical tradition,” reception studies has emerged in recent decades as a distinct area of inquiry.

At stake in all of this is a larger question: why do these plays matter today? The answer, I suggest, lies not in the illusion that they provide, eternal truths, nor in the claim that they belong to us unaltered across time. Instead, their importance lies in their inexhaustible capacity to be remade. Each age finds in them a mirror of its own concerns, a vocabulary for its own struggles, a stage on which to dramatise its own conflicts. They remind us that the human condition, though shaped by history, is also bound together by shared experiences of suffering, laughter, love, loss, and hope. In engaging with them, we are not only looking back to antiquity; we are also looking at ourselves, negotiating who we are and who we might become.

**ANDREAS MARKANTONATOS**

**With contributions by Andreas Markantonatos, Despina Kosmopoulou, Varvara Georgopoulou, Asterios Peltekis, Spyros Syropoulos, Eleni Boliaki, Katerina Arvaniti, Savvas Stroumpos.**

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