How Greek Tragedy Works is a journey through the hidden meanings and dual nature of Greek tragedy, drawing on its foremost dramatists to bring about a deeper understanding of how and why to engage with these enduring plays.

Brian Kulick dispels the trepidation that many readers feel with regard to classical texts by equipping them with ways in which they can unpack the hidden meanings of these plays. He focuses on three of the key texts of Greek theatre: Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, Euripides’ The Bacchae, and Sophocles’ Electra, and uses them to tease out the core principles of the theatre-making and storytelling impulses. By encouraging us to read between the lines like this, he also enables us to read these and other Greek tragedies as artists’ manifestos, equipping us not only to understand tragedy itself, but also to interpret what the great playwrights had to say about the nature of plays and drama.

This is an indispensable guide for anyone who finds themselves confronted with tackling the Greek classics, whether as a reader, scholar, student, or director.

Brian Kulick is chair of the Theatre Program at Columbia University’s School of the Arts. He has been an Associate Artist at The Public Theatre where his work on Shakespeare has been seen at The Delacorte in Central Park, and the Artistic Director of Classic Stage Company where he directed such world premieres as Anne Carson’s critically acclaimed An Oresteia.
HOW GREEK TRAGEDY WORKS

A Guide for Directors, Dramaturges, and Playwrights

Brian Kulick
In regards to Hesiod’s nine immortal muses, I would like to humbly offer up a tenth candidate: My wife Naomi, the muse and protector of easily disheartened authors. This book, actually all my books, are — secretly — for her.
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These acknowledgements need to wend their way back to my childhood in a sleepy little suburb of Los Alamitos, California. It was there that I would spend my summer days in the Owens family’s two car garage, watching with rapt amazement as Mark Owens would patiently take apart a lawnmower engine – piece by piece by piece – until all the pieces lay neatly arrayed about him. Then, without missing a beat, or consulting an instruction manual, or even breaking a sweat, he would put the engine back together – piece by piece by piece – until it was restored to full working order. Mark could basically take apart any mechanical thing and put it back together again, learning all its clockwork-like secrets, and somehow making it run better than it did before any of his zen-like tinkering. I grew up with Mark as a role model. What Mark did with engines, I wanted to do with classic texts.

I realize that this is basically what I’ve been doing throughout my adult life, only it hasn’t been in the Owens family’s two car garage, but in a classroom at Columbia University. There, with a remarkable stream of students, I’ve been ever so carefully disassembling the ancient texts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. I now realize that I am forever in Mark’s debt for teaching me how to do this with patience, fortitude, tenacity, and good humor. So Mark is the first person that I really need to thank.

With that done, we can quickly jump to adulthood and the great Robert Woodruff. It was Robert who had the singular vision to insist that every incoming class of Columbia theatre directors should “begin at the beginning” with staging the Greeks for an entire semester. There were no books, no lectures, just scene presentations and critiques. That was it. That was the class. And slowly, scene after scene and critique after critique, he and his directors started to figure out what the ancient Greeks and theatre were all about. Next, I have to thank Robert Brustein who, upon retiring from Harvard, asked Woodruff to take his place, thereby leaving an opening for someone to teach the Columbia Greek class. Enter the amazing
Anne Bogart, the head of the Columbia directing program, who believed (I still don’t know why) that I could somehow fill Robert Woodruff’s very big shoes. Next up, for much thanks, would be the subsequent 120 Columbia graduate directors who, over the past 20 years, have taught me just as much, if not more, than I taught them about how Greek theatre works. They did this by simply doing: showing me scene after scene, filled with much inspiration, ingenuity, and dynamism. This book simply would not exist without their inspiring investigations. Simultaneous with this was an invaluable set of encounters with the extraordinary Anne Carson. These took place while staging her luminous translations of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. My all too brief time spent with her and her words was a masterclass in all things Greek.

This brings me to the present and Ben Piggott, my editor at Routledge, who has been the presiding spirit over all three books that I have written. Everyone should be so lucky to have such a caring and benevolent force as Ben looking after them. On the heels of Ben’s beneficence was Zoe Forbes, his editorial assistant, who was always available to cheerfully answer even the most abstruse questions regarding the often arcane protocols of the publishing world. I would also like to thank the patient and attentive assistance of Charles Pletcher and my son Noah who both guided me through the labyrinthian intricacies of the ancient Greek language. Then there were dear friends and colleagues like Anne Bogart, Nancy Keystone, and Carey Perloff who all looked at early chapters of this book and kindly cajoled me to keep going to the end. Finally, just before reaching the finish line, I must thank the remarkably keen eyes and fierce intelligences of Mikhaela Devra Mahony and Jonathan Seinen who wrangled my ever wayward sentences and missing prepositions into some semblance of coherence so that you, kind reader, might be able to make your way through this little book that you now hold in your hands.
The 49 steps

I’m late again. Out of the subway, up the stairs, and onto the street. It’s another overcast Upper-West-Side morning in Manhattan. At the intersection, I run a stale yellow light and am met with a blare of horns from a fleet of impatient automobiles. They seem as eager as I am to get to their collective destinations. I cross the street, make my way through the glass doors of the Shapiro building, past the security guard, down the stairs, 49 steps in all, to the basement, across the hall, through a door, and into a tiny room that is already descending into darkness. I take the first available seat. As the light falls, a howl rises; half animal, half human. A subsequent pool of light reveals a woman. Her eyes gleam with madness. She triumphantly brandishes something in her hand, holding it high above her for all to see. Is it? Could it be? Yes, it is. A severed head.

Welcome to a typical fall morning for myself and an ever-changing cast of dedicated young directors who have set aside the first three autumnal months of the year to investigate this strange world called Greek tragedy. I’ve been watching scenes like this for nearly two decades now, every Thursday from ten in the morning to one in the afternoon. It is part of a scene study class which I have been tasked to teach for all incoming directors who attend Columbia University’s School of the Arts Graduate Theatre Program. I’ve seen fathers sacrifice daughters, mothers murder sons, sons dispatch mothers, and an occasional god arrive to undo all of these deadly deeds. It is as if that staircase I descend every fall Thursday were some kind of secret time machine, each of those 49 steps taking me further backward into the dark abysm of time where I am enjoined to explain why such scenes are still somehow necessary to another generation of young theatre makers. This book has grown out of those weekly encounters.
The first order of business is always how to navigate one’s way through these ancient texts that go about their “work” in such a radically different manner than our own contemporary drama. For some, this has become an almost insurmountable obstacle. Such a feeling of absolute interpretative futility is perhaps best articulated by Pierre Klossowski, the painter/philosopher/and sometime author, who writes, “This humanity that has vanished to the point that the term ‘vanished’ no longer has any meaning – despite our ethnologies, all our museums, and everything else – how could such a humanity have even existed?” If such a world is indeed so profoundly remote from us, where does one begin? Klossowski believes we must start by looking within ourselves and within our language. He writes:

Forever remote: the exploded star of ancient Greeks now flashes inside us, in the darkness of our memory, in the great starry night we carry in our hearts but flee in our fallacious light of day. And there we trust ourselves to our living language. Yet at times between two everyday words a few syllables of dead languages will slip out, ghost-words that have the transparency of a flame at high noon or an azure sky. But for a moment as we shelter them in the penumbra of our spirit they become increasingly bright . . . And for an instant give hidden meaning back.

Take a simple little word like enthusiasm. Something all of us, hopefully, feel at various moments in our lives. Hiding in the center of this seemingly innocent, quotidian word is something entirely otherworldly. A word within the word: theos (god). There it sits, the secret beating heart of this signifier, giving life to its deepest etymological meaning. Enthusiasm enters our modern-day English from the Old French enthousiasme, which hails from the older Greek enthousiasmos, which goes even further back to a proto-Indo-European root word which is believed to be *dyew. In almost all Indo-European languages the word for God or gods is a descendant of this ancient sounding; from Zeus and Jupiter (via *dyēus-patēr) to the Hindu Dyaus Pita and the Norse *Teiwaz (Tyr). So when we speak about this sensation that we call enthusiasm, what we are really saying, according to exactitude of our etymologies, is that we have been momentarily filled with a god. The point of entry for such divine visitations was the thumos (what we now would call our solar plexus). This was the instrument placed within our chests so that we might receive the divine.

For most moderns, the days of Greek gods entering us have long since passed. The rush of the numinous seems to have gone into hiding, disappearing into everyday words like enthusiasm, or existing between the lines of plays – like those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides – which often remain “mum” to us in terms of their larger meanings. These plays behave like Aeschylus’ Watchman who informs the audience, “I speak to those who know. For all the rest: ox on my tongue.” The first big challenge facing us is this: how to remove that ox! Because if we can accomplish that, then we just might get these ancient texts to speak freely, to
divulge one or two of their many secrets. This is what Part I of this book endeavors to do: examine how we moderns can cultivate the necessary imaginative space to project ourselves into these works and move about within their various meanings; or, put another way:

**How to read a Greek tragedy: descending into an ancient text**

Such a practice is, for me, like heading down into the bowels of the Shapiro building every Thursday morning. It is a step-by-step affair, ever downward. When we do this in buildings, we call it taking the stairs. When we do it with texts, we call it hermeneutics – a rather off-putting word for a rather miraculous human process. Give the word a second chance and you just might catch a glimpse of divinity. Do you see him? There’s a god hiding out in that word: Hermes, the god of verticality. He’s the one who rushes back and forth between gods and mortals with all manner of messages. Up and down he goes, but then, after a while, mostly down. Though famous for having ushered the souls of the dead to Hades, he now spends most of his days and nights taking gentle readers, like you and me, into the weeds of words. Once upon a time, he guided Orpheus down into the underworld to retrieve his beloved Eurydice; now, he escorts mere mortals into the depths of ancient texts to wrest some meager scrap of meaning. This first chapter begins by taking a quick look at the history of the West’s particular penchant for these descents into the earth, words, texts, and our very selves. It wants to show how all of these various journeys ultimately lead to the same exact destination: the realm of our imagination.

The imagination is not only a space, but also something of a muscle: one that we seem to flex with less and less frequency. We are content to leave the heavy lifting to our modern-day entertainment industry, which is more than happy to step in and do all the imaginative work for us. Not sure what to focus on? Not to worry, the camera will point you in the right direction. Don’t know how to feel about a given scene? Don’t panic, the soundtrack will tell you whether or not to take what you see seriously. Not certain about the work’s ultimate message? Just wait, our hero is about to arrive with a tidy little moral in hand. Still not quite sure you got it all? Relax, they’ll be a sequel next summer. This sort of work is engineered to appeal directly to one’s day-to-day fantasy life, a realm our friendly French theorists call “the imaginary.” But there is another, much less traveled region of the imagination that Henry Corbin, the philosopher turned Islamist, has designated as “the imaginal.” This is a deeper strata of the imagination where a much older set of symbols resides, often smuggled into us without our knowledge and lodged deep within our unconscious. This domain is less and less frequented, leaving these older symbols to remain dormant in our minds, biding their time, waiting for a rhyme between our present and their past in order to reactivate them.

For those who hail from the West, much of this symbolic flotsam and jetsam turns out to be related back to the myths of the ancient Greeks, prompting critics
like George Steiner to ask, “What are we to make of the fact that, when you get right down to it, our psychological and cultural condition finds its origin in a ‘handful of antique stories’?” Steiner, in such statements, seems to be rummaging about in Corbin’s imaginal neck of the woods. We will use one of Steiner’s most beloved examples of this, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, as a vehicle to help us arrive at this imaginal destination. But before we begin such an analysis, we must make an important distinction between the Antigone of myth and the Antigone of tragedy. The latter Antigone, the one we are interested in, speaks to us in the very distinct dialect of the dramatic, employing a range of storytelling inflections that differs markedly from the mother tongue of myth. Even though drama grows out of myth, often finding itself retelling the same story, it does so in a very different register. Drama foregrounds radically different aspects of how things unfold and, perhaps most importantly, how they resolve.

The bulk of Chapter 2 is a purposely cautious journey through Sophocles’ *Antigone*, practicing what Nietzsche called the art of “slow reading.” This is a practice that is becoming harder and harder to maintain in our hyper-accelerated age. If anything, this section wants to give readers permission to rediscover what it means to take one’s time, allowing them to cultivate an interrogative frame of mind where all questions are indulged and no answers are immediately required. The only surety necessary is a singular belief in the power of the interrogative. For it is the question – whether sublime, ridiculous, or quite impossible – that keeps readers moving deeper and deeper into the underworld of the text, leading them to that magical moment when the words on the page become images in their minds. Once these images can be summoned at will, independent of contact with the text, we know we have found our way back to the hidden realm of the imaginal. It is at this point that these images can speak to us. With this in place, we can move to:

When a play can be read as a meta-theatrical manifesto

The following three chapters make up the heart of this book. They each center around a rather straightforward question: Could one read certain of the Greek tragedian’s plays not just as plays, but also as secret (or not so secret) meta-theatrical manifestos on the poetics of tragedy? And if one were to embark on such an investigation, what plays might one choose to develop a set of theories on just what these tragedians thought they were doing when they created this thing called theatre? I have chosen three such plays, one from each of our three major Greek tragedians. These are: Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Sophocles’ *Electra*, and Euripides’ *The Bacchae*. Each of these works are believed to have been written late in the lives of their respective authors and each has a certain summa-like feel; as if they were written, in part, as a definitive statement on their work and the “work” of tragedy itself.

I have turned to these specific texts to tease out an alternative poetics, one which would supplement and complicate Aristotle’s ever-influential musings on the tragic form. Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* begins this investigation. He is the master when it
comes to the first principles of tragedy. This chapter looks at the centrality of the event in his work, the development of what I call “The Tragic Equation,” and how both of these two essential elements flow into Aeschylus’ haunting notion of pathei mathos (“learning through suffering”). From Aeschylus we move to Sophocles and his Electra to try to better understand the unique role of dialectics in his thinking on tragedy. Sophocles uses the clash of binary oppositions found in myth as the very foundation of his theatre, but his refusal to resolve these opposites creates an intriguing rift between the mythic and tragic. Finally, we arrive at Euripides and his Bacchae. Here we look at the act of recognition (i.e., of seeing) and how it can lead to a fundamental re-cognition (i.e., in thinking), not only for Euripides’ characters, but for his audiences as well. Throughout all this, my primary focus is on what these plays can tell us about the nature and function of theatrical representation.

In doing so, we will also look at how each of these authors uses one or more of their characters as a kind of personification of theatre itself. Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra becomes the first, and perhaps, grandest stand-in for the theatrical practice; she takes on the roles of principal player, author, director, and even scenographer in the impromptu tragedy of her husband Agamemnon. Following on the heels of Aeschylus, Sophocles shows how Clytemnestra’s children, Orestes and Electra, can be seen as the dialectical offspring of their mother’s form of theatre: Orestes representing a “Theatre of Deceit” and Electra a “Theatre of Truth.” Finally, Euripides rounds out this way of looking at these plays with the most natural (and perhaps flamboyant) stand-in for all things theatrical: Dionysus, who is, after all, the god of theatre! It is he who cast Pentheus, the reluctant audience member, as the unwitting principal player in what will become Pentheus’ own ensuing tragedy. Each of these personifications reveals their authors’ understanding of the way tragic theatre goes about its unique work, granting us a rich and varied view of the many modalities and strategies of tragedy. Having descended into the weeds of these texts, Part III of the book attempts to leads us:

**Back toward an aerial view of Greek tragedy**

The final two chapters grant us a more expansive view of the tragic form as a whole (or as whole as we can make it, given we are dealing with a body of work that is even less intact than Rilke’s archaic torso of Apollo). This section begins with a look at the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin’s thoughts on the nature of ancient Greek tragedy. Although these notes are immensely hermetic in nature, they are, to my mind, some of the most insightful observations on the telos of ancient Greek tragedy that have been bequeathed to us. Hölderlin, unlike the rest of us mere mortals, brings an acute poet’s understanding to the work of these kindred poetic souls hailing from another time and place. Somewhere between 1789 and 1800, he jots down his now famous observation that tragedy is: “The metaphor of an intellectual intuition” (“Über den Unterschied der Dichtarten”). This chapter attempts to tease out what Hölderlin might mean by this cryptic remark. It also attempts to unpack other evocative conceptual nuggets as “the quick grasping” of a work of
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art, the “poetic logic” of tragedy, its “calculable law” and “ungovernable thought” which brings us to “the extreme edge of suffering,” and “the eccentric orbit of the dead.” It is here, Hölderlin tells us, that we realize the tragic hero is made up of “nothing but time.” These mad and cryptic notes are meant more for our imagination than our intellect; they somehow bring us closer to the secret beating heart of these plays than any “rational” argument that I have encountered.

The book ends with a chapter on the vast corpus of Greek fragments. This includes the dramatic detritus of not only our three extant tragedians, but also scraps from other fellow dramatists such as Achaeus, Aristarchus, Critias, Diogenes of Athens, Ion, Neophon, and Theognis. It also looks at what the fragments can tell us about the shift in the dramaturgical organization of tragic trilogies. We know that the desire for linked trilogies (think Aeschylus’ Oresteia) shifts during the careers of Sophocles and Euripides; as a result, there no longer needs to be any seeming connection between plays. We have enough material from Euripides’ last posthumous work to begin to have a cautious understanding of how such late trilogies might have functioned: how they might have still rhymed in intriguing ways across what, on the surface, seemed like radically different stories with nothing overtly in common with one another. Examining these fragments gives us a tentative sense of how such late trilogies were organized and suggests that these seemingly unrelated works still created a kind of associational meaning that accrued from one work to the next. It is my hope that this last chapter might inspire more readers and theatre makers to further investigate these shards of lost tragedies in order to gain a fuller picture of this remarkable moment when Western drama was born.

Finally, these last chapters attempt to make a case to our increasingly distracted age that, as the poet Zbigniew Herbert writes, “lingering in the past need not represent a flight from the present, a kind of disappointment. For if we embark on a trip into time while not yet frozen, with all the baggage of our experience, if we inspect the myths, symbols, and legends, to extract from them what is valid, then no one can deny that this effort will be active and productive.”

In full disclosure

I do not subscribe to any one school of interpretation. I came of age between the demise of New Criticism and the rise of Post-Structuralism and was never a true believer in either literary cause. I, like many of my generation, developed an allergic reaction to any critical “ism” in general. The best I can do is look at this vast legacy of critical theory not as a series of fallen gods, but as tools for an interpretational toolbox. I don’t particularly care where these tools come from, or if they are mutually exclusive, as long as they can help me with a provisional understanding of a given artwork. So I am more than happy to use a hammer from Heidegger, a wrench from Lacan, and even a chainsaw from Derrida. I’m open to any approach as long as it helps me build a temporary house of understanding. It is this theoretical eclecticism that, for better or for worse, I end up bringing to the world of tragedy.
When I was in college, the stunning works of Jean Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Nicole Loraux, and Marcel Detienne were finally being translated into English. This was a revelation to me. I was enraptured with these writers, especially the great Vernant who grounded his work on the Greeks in a deep and dynamic understanding of how tragedy rhymes with democracy. I felt and still feel that this is an accurate and timely argument (I will use much of it to discuss the inner workings of *Agamemnon*). On the American side there was the remarkable Martha Nussbaum with her magnificent and similarly inclined work, *The Fragility of Goodness*. Much of this thinking has, justifiably, won the day; although, in lesser hands, it has become somewhat lazy and axiomatic. Recently I’ve begun to feel that, when it comes to tragedy, everywhere I turn, all I hear about is: tragedy and democracy, tragedy and democracy, tragedy and democracy. This beautiful argument has been so watered down that it becomes a kind of de facto utilitarian reading of the form, as if tragedy were only necessary if it is thought of in terms of a kind of glorified civics lesson. Yes, that is a big part of tragedy – I get it. I teach it. I believe it. But . . . but . . . this reductive version of the democracy/tragedy argument often feels at the expense of other, equally rich aspects of Greek tragedy.

Certainly there is an ongoing generation of extraordinary scholars who have broken ground in so many fertile areas of rich and rewarding research; but I cannot help, at times, to be lured by the Siren call of earlier critical eras, strains of thinking that refer back to the Romantics or – God forbid – even the Structuralists! Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for the new ideas – just not always at the expense of old ones.

I also worry that in our current and overzealous desire to make the Ancient Greeks accessible to ourselves, we miss out on their initial strangeness, wonder, majesty, and – perhaps most importantly – mystery. They are so very like us and then not. It is these moments of not to which I want to be sensitive to when we approach this rare creature called Greek tragedy. In this respect my inclination is more philosophical than, say, political, psychological, or historicist. I believe all of these readings to be equally valid, just not what necessarily draws me, personally, to these ancient works. It is somewhat unnerving to realize that these plays can take on so many multiple and even conflicting meanings. This too is part of the tragedy’s perennial mystery. Auden reminds us: “There could be no stronger proof of the riches and depths of Greek culture than its powers of appeal to every kind of person.” This is as true of Greek culture as it is for its most precocious offspring: tragedy. But just what, exactly, is this word and form that we have been bandying about so off-handedly throughout this Introduction?

What we talk about when we talk about tragedy; or, Greek tragedy in a nutshell

Tragedy literally means “goat song.” It is from the Greek *tragos* (goat) and *ôidê* (song). Why the art form bears such a name is, as with many aspects of tragedy, open to interpretation. When I was a student, the etymological roots of this word
suggested: “to sing of the goat.” This, according to some scholars, pointed to the archaic ritual of scapegoating: the yearly practice of selecting an individual who was then either banished or sacrificed to expiate the sins of their whole community. Viewed from this vantage point, tragedy was the aesthetic revision of this rite. Here, a fictive character, like Oedipus, became the theatrical representation of the ritual scapegoat. Nowadays, the generally accepted theory behind the etymological meaning of tragedy has shifted from “song of the goat,” to “song for a goat.” This new line of thinking argues that the goat was basically just a reward for the winner of some ancient choral competition. Such a seismic shift in the understanding of the word tragedy is a good example of the wide array of other competing speculations that are engendered by this most elliptical of art forms.

According to perhaps the most quoted passage of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, tragedy is:

An imitation of an action that is of stature and complete, with magnitude, that, by means of sweetened speech, but with each of its kind separate in its proper parts, is of people acting and not through report, and accomplishes through pity and fear the cleansing of experiences of this sort.\(^7\)

Setting aside the last 11 words, which has been the cause of whole oceans of scholarly ink to be spilt,\(^8\) this is not a bad working definition of the form. Upon closer inspection, one might be inclined to think of Greek tragedy as something akin to Frankenstein’s monster, stitched together by so many disparate and conflicting Greek pastimes: singing, dancing, Homer, and the love of a good rhetorical debate. Every Greek tragedy can be broken down into the following elements:

1. **Prologos** – the beginning of a Greek tragedy which usually starts with a speech from a figure who directly addresses the audience. This figure is usually either quite prominent, like a god (think Aphrodite in *Hippolytus*); or rather minor, like a servant (think the Maid in *Medea* or the Watchman in *Agamemnon*). Rarely are these openings given over to the central character of the tragedy, although we do have a few have examples of this as well (think the opening scene in *Antigone* where Antigone immediately appears looking for her sister).

2. **Parodos** – which means entry song. It is sung by the chorus when it enters. In the early tragedies this was usually made up of anapestic meters (de-de-Dum) which are slightly martial in feel. Later tragedies might involve *amoibaion*, a lyric dialogue between the chorus and a major actor.

3. **Epeisodia** – there are usually five or so episodes interspersed between choral *stasimon* (songs) throughout the arc of a given tragedy. These dramatic scenes all contain an event which will, in some way, change the situation of scene, pushing the tragedy forward to the next event/episode. These episodes usually contain one of the following six dramatic devices:

- **Agôn Logôn**. This is a rhetorical battle of wits. The Greeks loved a good argument, whether it was histrionic in Aeschylus, dialectic in Sophocles,
or sophistic in Euripides. This is one of the most popular ingredients of a Greek tragedy.

- **Amoibaion.** This is a lyric dialogue between two characters or a character and the chorus.

- **Kommos.** This literally means “striking” and is associated with the action of a grief-stricken person beating their breast in mourning. In tragedy, this becomes a form of lyrical lamentation.

- **Rhêsis.** This is an extended speech, usually in tetrameters. These set speeches run the gamut of human expression. In such moments a tragic figure might justify, lament, critique, review his or her life, or simply bid the world ado.

- **A Messenger Rhêsis.** This is a speech, given by an aforesaid messenger, relating to some off-stage, often violent, event. The Messenger relays this event in vivid detail. This is the closest Greek tragedy comes to harkening back to its Homeric/bardic roots. In short: It is a really good story told well.

- **Stichomythia.** This is a rapid exchange of short single lines between two or more characters. One could paraphrase such an exchange in the following manner: “Don’t.” “I will.” “You won’t.” “You’ll see.” “You’ll be sorry.” “Says who?” “Says me.” The Greeks couldn’t get enough of this sort of pithy exchange.

4  **Stasimon** – between each episode we will find a different kind of stasimon (song) from the chorus commenting or elaborating on what has just transpired. This is almost always in the form of strophe and antistrophe. These are the two major elements that make up a choral ode. They literally mean “turn” (strophe) and “counter turn” (antistrophe). These two terms grew out of the choreography of the chorus where the strophe was a turn from east to west and antistrophe was a counter turn from west to east. This becomes one of the essential organizing principles for the development of a given chorus.

5  **Exodos** – this is the scene following the final choral stasimon. In Euripides, this often results in some sort of divine intervention or revelation.9

That’s it. It’s that straightforward. Every tragedy has to have these five basic structural blocks: a prologos, a parodos, multiple epeisodia, interspersed with stasima, and resolving in an exodus. Each of these episodes is made up of either an agôn logôn, an amoibaion, kommos, rhêsis, messenger rhêsis, stichomythia, or some sort of interesting recombination of these elements. Just as the audience would come in already knowing the plot of the story (which was most usually based on a few select myths), they would also be familiar with the structural elements that supported the unfolding of the story. This is not so different from an ice skating routine where one expects to see the skater perform a lutz, triple axle, or quadruple leap. Remember, these tragedians were also competing; they were being judged not only on the merits of the story, but also on how they handled the story within the demands of these very specific structural expectations. This is also not that
dissimilar from our modern-day genre expectations. We know that if we go to see a thriller, there is every likelihood that we will see a car chase. This is to be expected, but what is unexpected – and eagerly anticipated – is how each director will realize their particular car chase, how will it be different from all the other car chases we’ve already seen. The Greek audience might have felt the same way about an ensuing ἀγῶν λόγων.

Now these limited structural principles are supported by an equally limited palette of story patterns. Peter H. Burian tells us, try as he might, he can only discern five basic story lines in the canon of extant Greek tragedy. These are plots of:

1. Retribution: The punishment of past offenses (think *Agamemnon*)
2. Supplication: The seeking of asylum by those who are dispossessed (think *Suppliant Women*)
3. Sacrifice: The giving up of one’s life for the greater good (think *Iphigenia in Aulis*)
4. Rescue: The saving of a life by another (think *Iphigenia in Taurus*)
5. Recognition: The return and discovery of one thought lost (think *Helen*)

There can also be combinations of these five patterns to create a series of intricate variations. For instance: take a little retribution, add a touch recognition, and you have *Electra*. Take a little retribution, add some supplication, throw in a dash of sacrifice, and you get *Medea*. Take a little sacrifice, add a healthy dose of supplication, mix in just a hint of rescue, and finish it off with a dollop of retribution, and you end up with *Trojan Women*. Burian concludes this review of the limited repertory of plot types in the extant Greek tragic canon with the following observation:

> These story patterns function as a system whose signifiers are closely aligned to the central values and conflicts of a culture . . . staging in ever new guises the immemorial conflicts of male and female, parent and child, rival siblings, individuals versus community, of mortals versus gods.¹⁰

All of this, Burian tells us, points to “tragedy going about its cultural work.” In other words, tragedy is “working through” the problems which face 5th-century Athenian audiences. It does so by employing a certain set of mythic stories; although, where myth has a tendency to validate, tragedy begins to cultivate a tendency toward critique. This fundamental difference between the mythic and tragic register will become a major leitmotif of the ensuing pages. But we’re getting a bit ahead of ourselves; for now it is enough to bear in mind that this immensely complex and contradictory creature called Greek tragedy grows out of a very fixed set of structural expectations and an even narrower palette of story patterns. This is just one of the many paradoxes that we will encounter as we work our way through this ever elliptical mode of dramatic expression.

Well, this pretty much constitutes what would pass for the first day of class with my students. Speaking of whom, if you’d permit me, I’d like to return to them for
a moment, and take those 49 steps back down to the bowels of the Shapiro building on 115th Street between Broadway and Riverside Drive.

Notes from the underground; or exercise #1: the dreaded Greek chorus

As I mentioned, it was here, in a little black box theatre, where many of the questions that this book attempts to address were first articulated. It was also here that the vertigo-inducing abilities of the ancient Greek tragedians first made themselves known to me in all their majesty and terror. In this case, the majesty was in the words of these writers, and the terror was in the eyes of the assembled directing students as I informed them that their first assignment would be to stage a Greek chorus.

“I’m sorry, did you say: a Greek chorus?” asks one student.
“‘Yes.’
“A whole Greek chorus?”
“Yes.”
“From beginning to end?”
“Yes.”
“How?”
“How, what?”
“Should we go about making it?”
“I don’t know.”
“You don’t know?”
“Well, truth to tell: no one really knows.”
“They don’t?”
“No. But –”
“What?”
“In this case, not knowing can be a good thing.”
“It can?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Well, you’ve got carte blanche.”
“To do?”
“Whatever you want.”

This does not necessarily allay my students’ trepidations, but it does make them feel a little less panic stricken to know that our understanding of Greek tragedy is not at the same in-depth level of, say, Japan’s understanding of Noh Theatre. This extraordinary form of theatrical expression has an unbroken tradition, handed down from master to disciple since its inception in the 16th century. Our tradition in relation to Greek tragedy is, like so many other of our Western traditions, a broken one. Our knowledge of the form and its theatrical practices exists somewhere between
a well-informed conjecture based upon certain limited historical/archeological evi-
dence and a your-guess-is-as-good-as-mine leap of creative and scholarly faith.

Nowhere is this perhaps more true than with the Greek Chorus. In the begin-
ning, long before there was tragedy, there was the chorus. Tragedy, we are told,
slowly evolves out of seasonal festivals where choral competitions were held.
Legend has it that one day the actor Thespis stepped forth from one such chorus,
changed a pronoun or two, and low and behold tragedy was born. Although this
new form could never quite shake its choral origin, tragedy would remain a reso-
lutely plural affair. This unique dramatic device is, in many ways, the most alien
aspect of Greek tragedy. Yes, we have choruses in opera and in our American
musicals, but they don’t quite function in the same exact fashion. The relentless
presence of the Greek chorus remains something of a mystery. Why are they
almost always there? Why are they so necessary? And just who are they? Some-
times they are the status quo, sometimes soldiers, sometimes suppliants, and even,
on occasion, “barbarians.” Sometimes they seem to speak the mind of the author,
sometimes the mind of the audience, and – on rare occasions – the mind of a
god. No matter what role they seem to assume, they always ensure that whatever
may want to be private must remain resolutely public. This simple brute fact changes
everything. The chorus, in many ways, becomes for tragedy what the observer
is to one of physicist Werner Heisenberg’s subatomic experiments. Both outside
presences seem to secretly change the outcome of what is being observed just by
the act of observation itself! And so, the chorus’s presence seems to forever alter
the very nature of the dramatis personae, forcing these characters to super-size
their language and their behavior for all those now assembled. As a result, every-
thing these principal players do is, consciously or unconsciously, mediated in
response to the ever watchful eyes of these on-stage interlocutors. This forces yet
another layer of opacity between these already enigmatic tragic heroes and our
understanding of them.

In many ways, the chorus is an immensely multifaceted dramatic device, allow-
ing tragedy a certain amount of narrative dexterity. It enables these authors to
expand and contract the various thematics of their stories at will. A simple scene
between two agonists can become the subsequent source of a much larger meta-
physical rumination on the part of the chorus (think the Sophocles’ famous cho-
ral ode on humankind in Antigone), or the grand historical sweep of the Trojan
War can be distilled to its most intimately personal register with an ensuing cho-
ral lament (think of any number of stasima in Trojan Women). Finally, the chorus
becomes a kind of mirror reflection of ourselves as audience. We watch these other
watchers and find ourselves taking our cues from them, modeling our reactions
after theirs, and being quietly trained in the fine art of spectatorship. And when
the principal players leave the stage, the chorus is still there. Silent no more, they sing,
they dance, they tell us what they think, what they feel, and what they fear. Soon
their thoughts are our thoughts; we become them and they become us. Before we
know it, we are one theatrical consciousness.
In these moments, when they explode into song and dance, what did they sound like? Look like? How did they move? This is just the first in a series of unknowables that come between us and Greek tragedy. For me, this limitation of knowledge should not be a source of despair, but rather an open invitation for further investigation and reinvention of the form. This is what we've been trying to do in the basement of Columbia's Shapiro building for all these years, looking for those moments where what seemed distant and dead could, on occasion, come vividly and miraculously back to life. Our point of departure for this investigation becomes the staging Greek chorus, which is the directors first assignment. The basic pedagogical rationale behind starting with the chorus is that, after this, everything else about Greek tragedy should seem easy (Ha! Ha!). Low and behold, there are always one or two of these forays into the Greek chorus where one can feel the sudden and profound power that these ancient works still possess. Often this is thanks to the intentional or unintentional intersection between our present and the play's past, where, for a brief instant, these two tenses rhyme. If you will indulge me, I'd like to recount one such moment when the past and present aligned. This was with a chorus from Euripides' *The Bacchae*, staged by the extraordinary young director, Pavol Liska. It went something like this:

The lights fade. In the darkness we hear music. A solo piano. Is it a piece by Saint Saens? Satie? Faure? Hard to say. It is delicate though and somehow sad, very sad. Lights slowly rise. The music continues. Before us is a line of people, four in all, equally spread out horizontally across the stage. They are all dressed in contemporary winter wear. One has a crumbled newspaper under his arm; another is carefully sipping coffee from a styrofoam cup; a third has headphones on – bobbing to a seemingly relentless beat that only he can hear; the fourth is reading a text on her cellphone. They exude a kind collective affectlessness. The atmosphere is one of infinite boredom; a low frequency ennui permeates the space. The music continues. Every so often, one of the four will look at their watch, then lean forward, then crane their neck, then look off to the left. It is clear they are waiting for something in the distance. Whatever it is, it does not arrive. Nothing to be done but go back to their paper, or coffee, or music, or texting. Where are they? What are they waiting for? Through these slow repetitive gestures it dawns on us: We are at some subway stop, waiting for a train that never comes. As we make this realization, one of the awaiting passengers speaks Reginald Gibbons' luminous translation of the following chorus in a completely affectless voice:

Will I ever celebrate
All night with white foot
Flashing in the bacchic dance?

Will I ever fling back
My head and let the air
Of heaven touch my throat
With dew, like a fawn at play
In the green meadows?¹¹

No one seems to hear him. No one seems to care. Another looks at her watch, leans forward, cranes her neck, looks to the left, sees nothing, and returns to her default pose of sipping coffee. Then, she too speaks, in an equally affectless manner, sharing the following off-hand observation:

```
What is wise? What gift from the gods
Do mortals judge more beautiful
Than to hold our outstretched
Strong hand over an enemy's head?
```

This too seems to fall on deaf ears. The woman calmly returns to sipping her coffee. The young man with headphones continues to bob to the throbbing music that only he can hear. He begins to hum and then sing with growing intensity:

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The unremitting power
Of the divine begins only
Slowly to move, but
Always moves.
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The person next to him, who has been texting joins in, singing as well:

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It brings
To reckoning those mortals
Who honor senseless
Arrogance and who with mad
Beliefs do not give
The gods their due.
```

And then the man with the crumpled newspaper and the woman who has been sipping her coffee join in as well, the song now building in bacchic intensity:

```
Whatever the divine may be,
Whatever over long ages of time
Is accepted as lawful, always,
And comes to be through nature.
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Then as suddenly as they started, all stop; restrain themselves, returning to their collective affectless state. One says:

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Happy is he who escapes
A storm at sea and finds safe harbor.
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Another says:

Happy is he who has risen above
Great toils.

A third says:

And hopes are as many as those who hope –
Some will end in rich reward, others in nothing.

Finally all four say:

But those whose lives are happy
Day by day – those
I call the blessed.

And with that the four go back to their default waiting poses. The music continues as they wait . . . and wait . . . and . . . wait. A brief eternity seemed to transpire, long enough for us to ask, “What was it they were waiting for, again? A train? A god? A god as train?” In the end, it didn’t seem to matter anymore. None came. And as the lights began to fade, one sensed that none would ever come. This scene by Pavol remains one of the most wonderful and evocative collisions between the present and the past that I’ve experienced in class. In a way, I could imagine everyone in that initial audience feeling quite at home in this world, from the first three lines of the scene:

Will I ever celebrate
All night with white foot
Flashing in the bacchic dance?

The problem extends beyond the chorus and into the audience itself, articulating a secret desire that so many of us unconsciously long for. In a fallen secular world, we all find ourselves on a kind of existential subway platform waiting for a god in the form of a train to take us away. Transport us elsewhere. Anywhere but here, which has become this terribly quotidian world of ours. Let’s imagine that Pavol’s train did, indeed, arrive. Shall we board? Its next stop: the underground of the ancient text. Quickly now, the doors of the subway car are about to shut.

Notes
1 Pierre Klossowski, Diana at Her Bath, translated by Stephen Sartarelli (Hygiene, CO: The Eridanos Library; 1990), 3.
2 Ibid.
3 George Steiner, Antigones (New Haven: Yale University Press; 1996), 110.

5 In England there remains a vibrant, dynamic, and level-headed tradition of remarkable scholars that includes the legendary Oliver Taplin and his seminal, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London: Routledge; 1978); Alan H. Sommerstein, *The Tangled Ways of Zeus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2010); Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2010); Simon Goldhall whose book, *How to Stage a Greek Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2007) has become one of the essential companions for all my students who work on the Greeks. In America there is the great Helena Foley whose *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2001) is another masterpiece in her long and distinguished career. There is also the remarkable and hugely prolific Gregory Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 2013) and one would not want to forget the extraordinary Froma Zeitlin, *Playing the Other* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1996). This is just the tip of the iceberg! As one can see, there is a veritable Renaissance of Anglo-American Classical Scholarship.


8 I must confess that I have added to this scholarly ocean of ink; see Brian Kulick, *The Secret Life of Theatre* (London: Routledge; 2019), 134–150.

9 For more on this subject see Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth; 1987).


References

2 It should be noted that Corbin insists, out of deep respect for his sources, that the imaginal must not be thought of as some sort of metaphor for a mental process, but rather, as an actual metaphysical space which a mystic can inhabit. Corbin would repeatedly express his dismay when his concept of the imaginal was robbed of this mystical cast. Unfortunately, the concept is so attractive that such nonbelievers as myself cannot resist employing it to help explain how the imagination translates the metaphysical/mythical into the material and the material into the metaphysical/mythic.
3 Yulia Ustinova, Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2009), 33.
5 Ibid., 124.
9 For a deep dive into the philology of Sophocles, Antigone, see R.D. Dawe, Studies on the Text of Sophocles (Leiden: Brill; 1979), 99–120.
11 Sophocles, Antigone, 13.
12 Jebb, Antigone, 9.
13 Ibid.
15 Other helpful commentaries can be found in The Cambridge Greek and Latin Classic Series, not to be confused with the equally impressive and comprehensive Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries Series. There are also the immensely helpful commentaries in Oxford’s Clarendon Series and for individual studies of the plays see The Companion to Greek and Roman Tragedy Series published by Bristol Classical Press. In terms of issues regarding Greek tragedy in general there is Wiley-Blackwell’s wonderfully exhaustive three-volume, Hanna M. Roisman, Encyclopedia of Greek Tragedy (Hoboken: Wiley).
16 In addition to Anne Carson, I also turn to the equally masterful translations of Richard Emil Braun and his muscular translation of Antigone and Reginald Gibbons for his inspired rendering of The Bacchae. Both of these translations can be found in Oxford’s The Greek Tragedy in New Translation Series, under the general editorial supervision of Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro.
19 Lucian, Satirical Sketches, 102.
21 Ibid., 366.
22 Ibid., 375.
23 Lucian, Satirical Sketches, 102.
22 Ibid., 40–42.
28 Ibid., 357.
31 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 205.
2018). Also, in the spirit of this critique is Augusto Boal’s famous essay, “Aristotle’s Coercive System of Tragedy,” which can be found in his seminal, Theatre of the Oppressed (New York: Theater Communications Group; 1993).


5 Hans Thies Lehman, Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre, translated by Eric Butler (London: Routledge; 2018), 27.

6 Anne Carson, An Oresteia (New York: Faber and Faber; 2009), 11.

7 Ibid., 12.


9 Carson, An Oresteia, 12.


12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 17.

14 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, Myth and Tragedy, 57.

15 Homer, The Iliad, translated by Peter Green (Berkeley: University of California Press; 2018), 358.


17 Carson, An Oresteia, 18.

18 Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Aeschylus the Oresteia (Berkeley: University of California Press; 1979), 46.


21 Ibid., 44.

22 Ibid., 61.

23 Ibid., 64.

24 Ibid., 70.

25 Ibid., 109.


4 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics (Stanford: Stanford University Press; 1990), 60.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.


10 A slightly more literal reading might go something like, “Indeed, I think no utterance (*rhēma*) bad/evil (*kakon*) if it’s spoken profitably (syn kerdei, ‘with gain’).” *Kakos* can be tricky to translate into English because it spans the semantic territory of both “bad” and “evil.”


12 Ibid., 92.

13 Ibid., 94.


15 Carson, *An Oresteia*.

16 Ibid., 98–99.

17 Ibid., 109.


20 Ibid., 124.

21 Ibid., 127.


24 Ibid., 128.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 130.

28 Ibid., 138.

29 Ibid., 144.


31 Ibid., 115.


36 Ibid., 171.


38 For what it’s worth, Socrates intriguingly says of his own *sophia* (wisdom) that it is *amphisbētēsimos hōsper onar* (as equivocal as a dream). See Plato, *Symposium* (Indianapolis: Hackett), 175e3.


40 For a wonderful gloss on this infinitely intriguing passage by Hesoid, see Coulter H. George, *How Dead Languages Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2020), 152–153.


2 Ibid., 52.

3 Ibid., 60.

4 Ibid., 62.
There are several immensely helpful glosses on Hölderlin and his theories of Sophocles and tragedy. Perhaps the best and clearest introduction to this writer and his thought can be found in Dennis J. Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks; Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 2001). There is also George Steiner’s helpful commentary in his *Antigones* (New Haven: Yale University Press; 1996), and, for those with a penchant for French theory, there is a wonderful chapter in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1989).


Steiner, *Antigones*, 97.


Ibid.

Ibid., 42.


Ibid., 328.


Ibid., 275–276.


3 Euripides, *Fragments, Volume One*, 399–400.


5 Sophocles, *Fragments*, 17.

6 Euripides, *Fragments, Volume One*, 155.

7 Sophocles, *Fragments*, 309.


9 Ibid., 231.

10 Ibid., 208.

11 Ibid., 213.

12 Ibid., 241.

13 Ibid., 223.

14 Ibid.


19 Euripides, *Fragments, Volume One*, 45.

20 Ibid., 47.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 53.

23 Ibid., 55.

24 Ibid., 63.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 37.

28 Euripides, *Fragments, Volume Two*, 55.

29 Ibid., 53.

30 Ibid., 59.


32 Ibid., 216.

33 Ibid., 220.

34 Ibid., 221.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 233.


40 Ibid., 96.


42 Ibid., 367.