

Sites of Disruption: Actions and Consequences in Greek Tragedy

Introduction | Outline of Greek Tragedy

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The National Law School of India University, Bengaluru hosted an online lecture series on select texts from Greek tragedy by Amlan Das Gupta, retired Professor of English at Jadavpur University and noted scholar of classical studies and English renaissance literature. The series, titled 'Sites of Disruption: Actions and Consequences in Greek Tragedy', discussed Sophocles' Antigone, Aristotle's Poetics, and Euripides' Medea. The four-part series was transcribed and edited for The NLS Blog.

Below is the introductory note to the series, which provides an overview of the form of Greek tragedy, the texts available to us today, and its most celebrated poets.

Edited by: Sandeep Banerjee, Associate Professor of Literature, McGill University.

The form of tragedy was invented in ancient Greece. Having its origins in the cultic worship of the god Dionysus, it evolved into a highly sophisticated artistic form, combining text, performance, music, and spectacle. It drew upon the ancient myths of Greece to foreground the struggle between individuals and the forces they find themselves in conflict with, both human and divine. It appears to have originated sometime in the sixth century BCE, but came to true greatness in fifth century BCE Athens. In the Athenian city-state (*polis*), tragedy was a civic event, deeply integrated into the festivals of Dionysus, the god of wine and fruitfulness. Attendance was a civic duty, and the plays were funded both by the state and wealthy citizens (*choregoi*), who received the honour of being allowed to fund the training and outfitting of the chorus. It is estimated that something like 1,000 or even 1,500 plays were produced and acted in the course of the century by more than 50 poets. Of these, only 32 or 33 have survived in full, written by Aeschylus (525–456 BCE), Sophocles (495–406 BCE), and Euripides (480–406 BCE). However, as some records of dramatic production have survived, we know the names of other playwrights and the works they produced. Dramatists were invited by the state city authorities to participate, and their plays were ranked by a panel of judges. The victor received an ivy wreath, and his name was inscribed in the official records.

The two major festivals at which plays were produced were the springtime City Dionysia and the winter festival of the Lenaia. The festivals may have lasted for a number of days, but scholars believe that tragedies (and comedies) were performed at least on three days, on each of which three tragedies, a satyr-play, and a comedy would be produced. The satyr play was a unique form of ancient Athenian theatre that blended elements of both tragedy and comedy. They were written by tragic playwrights and adopted mythological themes (unlike comedy). In the early fifth century BCE, it was customary to produce trilogies, three interconnected plays on the same mythological theme followed by a satyr play on a related theme. By the time of Sophocles, it was customary to present three standalone tragedies that explored distinct themes or myths.

Greek tragedies depended on a very limited cast of actors: just one to three male actors who utilised masks to portray multiple characters and drive the main plot forward through dialogue. They were supported by a chorus of 12 to 15 performers who remained in a circular space called the *orchestra*. Behind the orchestra was a structure, out of which characters emerged and into which they returned. This was called the *skene*, which has given us the modern dramatic term 'scene'. The action of the play was conducted on a narrow platform constructed in front of the skene, termed the *proskenion* (which gives us the modern term 'proscenium'). Rather than advancing the plot directly, the chorus used chanting, singing, and dancing to provide historical context, and offer commentary on the characters' choices. They typically represented a collective community—such as Theban elders in *Antigone* and the women of Corinth in *Medea*.

The form of tragedy evolved through the fifth century, but its principal parts were:

Prologue (*prologos*)

Episodes (*epeisodia*)

Choral parts

Exode (*exodos*)

The prologue is the section that precedes the entrance of the chorus: the exode is the section at the end of the play that is not followed by a choral section. The episode is the section that lies between two complete choral sections. Choral parts include the

parodos, the first complete utterance of the chorus, and *stasima* (singular, *stasimon*), which are sections that are delivered in metres other than the anapaest and the trochee (which suggest that the metre appropriate to the *stasimon* is a slow and stately one). These choral parts are found in all tragedies. Some have songs and a shared lament between actors and chorus called the *kommos*.

Only a small fragment of the great corpus of ancient Greek literature has survived, and the tragedy of the Greeks has shared its fate. Plays were produced at unique civic events, and we know of no practice of re-staging tragedies in the fifth century BCE. However, the texts were copied for wealthy patrons and circulated widely: in the fourth century BCE, after the decline of Athenian political power, there seems to have been a practice of reviving old plays at the festivals. The manuscript tradition seems to have lasted into the Roman period, but evidently the more well-reputed dramatists were copied more frequently. That explains why we still have a few plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, who by all accounts, were regarded as the greatest practitioners of their craft. The practice of copying old literary manuscripts declined with the rise of Christianity and the erosion of Roman power. From the end of the second century CE, tragedies seem to have been copied mostly for pedagogic use, and only a small selection seems to have received attention. In the centuries that followed, even these were imperilled by lack of interest and competing aesthetic and cultural norms. It is only after the setting up of printing presses in early modern Europe that the transmission of Greek tragedy stabilised and prospered.*

* **Note:** Please check the References document for a full reference list, along with suggestions for further reading.

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