

Tragic Agency in Classical Drama from Aeschylus to Voltaire

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Tragic Agency in Classical Drama from Aeschylus to Voltaire

By

Paul Hammond



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To Richard Maber



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Preface

When Aristotle in his *Poetics* says that the tragic protagonist makes an error, *hamartia*, which generates his fall, he does not address the way in which such a decision comes to be made. And yet tragedy repeatedly directs our attention to the mystery of such a choice. How does it come about that a decent man or woman – and Aristotle makes it clear that his preferred protagonist is a reasonably moral character, neither pre-eminent in virtue nor notorious for wickedness – makes a decision that will turn out to be catastrophic, and will bring about their own downfall, often their own annihilation? Classical tragedy seems to reflect on this problem in two ways. Firstly, it asks whether the human agent was acting under the influence of some supernatural force, and, if so, whether this might in some way change our understanding of the character's moral responsibility, and, indeed, prompt us to question whether some degree of responsibility should be attributed to the gods, or fate, or fortune, or whatever other term might be proposed to explain the world which lies beyond the human. Tragedy thus broaches a problem in human autonomy which is also a problem in theodicy. Secondly, tragedy seeks to understand the workings of the mind which can bring itself to make such an error, and shows us the contending elements within the psyche which lead a character to do what in other circumstances they would recoil from doing. Tragedy thus broaches a problem in human psychology. In both respects, tragedy asks about agency. Who acts?

The present book seeks to explore some aspects of these two interlocking problems as they manifest themselves in plays from the Greek and Roman worlds, and then in dramas from the French neo-classical period which rework these stories. The case studies form two sections. In the first group of essays the stories of Agamemnon, Oedipus, Medea, and Phaedra are traced as they are handed down from the Greek dramatists to Seneca and then on to the French neo-classicists. In these essays close attention is paid to the language of the plays, to the specific terms used by these playwrights as they seek to chart man's relations with the supernatural, and the individual's own psychology. Often the discussion will worry away at problems of translation in order to recover some of the strangeness of these poets' language, for the dramatists write with a precision which is often imaginative rather than philosophical; and yet this use of language does constitute its own form of philosophy, and its precision is all too easily smudged by approximate translation. The final part of the book offers essays on three more plays by Corneille and three by Racine in which these dramatists explore other aspects of the great problems of human

liberty and autonomy in classical or quasi-classical settings. Lear's cry, 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' is the anxiety of tragedy across the ages.

This book consists of three sections. Part 1, 'Modes of Tragic Agency', maps the conceptual structures of Greek, Senecan, and neo-classical French tragedies through an examination of the key words which they use for the supernatural agents and for the psychological components of the human agents in tragedy. Part 2, 'Metamorphoses of Tragic Myth', explores the deployment of these crucial concepts in the dramatic versions of four myths – Agamemnon, Oedipus, Medea, and Phaedra – by the Greeks, Seneca, and the neo-classical French. These comparative studies seek to illuminate the similarities and differences in the philosophical assumptions about human agency and autonomy which underpin these retellings of elemental myths. Other myths, such as that of Antigone, might also have been selected, but I have chosen the four stories which permit a comparison with Seneca. Finally, Part 3 turns to six plays by Corneille and Racine in which these dramatists – schooled in the classics but following their own philosophical, theological, and political concerns – address questions of liberty and autonomy which repeatedly make reference to the ancient world while also being foundational texts of early modernity.

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The three concluding essays on Racine are revised versions of articles which originally appeared as follows:

'Tragic Time in Racine's *Andromaque*', *The Seventeenth Century*, 32 (2017), 51–62

'La Liberté romaine dans le *Britannicus* de Racine', *Early Modern French Studies*, 41 (2019), 158–69

'The Rhetoric of Space and Self in Racine's *Bérénice*', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 36 (2014), 141–55

I am grateful to the respective editors and publishers for permission to reuse this material.

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In writing this book I was reminded at many points of how much I owe to Dr Theodore Redpath, who supervised my work for the Tragedy paper in the Cambridge English Tripos. Student of Wittgenstein, editor of Shakespeare and Donne, and translator of Sophocles, he never published any work on tragedy,

but I have smuggled in a reference to one of his philosophical papers as a small tribute.

I am grateful to the School of English at the University of Leeds for granting me a semester of study leave to work on this book, and to the members of the Society for Early Modern French Studies who have been generous in their comments on some portions of this work which were originally presented as conference papers. The publisher's readers have provided me with scrupulous reports on the manuscript, and I greatly appreciate their comments.

The book is dedicated to Professor Richard Maber. I owe much of my education in seventeenth-century culture to the conferences which he organized for many years at the University of Durham; out of these came his journal *The Seventeenth Century*, of which I have been proud to be an editor ever since its inception in 1986. Richard also encouraged me to pursue my interest in French literature. His genial friendship and his enthusiasm for the weird and wonderful culture of early modern Europe have been a continual pleasure and inspiration.

As with everything that I write, this book owes most to Nick. He has provided the illustration for the cover, and so much more.

Glossary of Principal Greek Terms

αἰδώς	aidōs	shame, sense of honour, respect and self-respect
ἁμαρτία	hamartia	error, sin, crime
ἀνάγκη	anankē	necessity
ἄρα	ara	prayer, oath, curse
ἄτη	atē	anger, infatuation, folly
δίκη	dikē	justice
δαίμων	daimon	unidentified divinity, spirit, demon (not necessarily evil)
Ἐρινύς	Erinyes	Fury
θυμός	thumos	soul, mind
μανία	mania	madness
μίasma	miasma	pollution
μοῖρα	moira	fate
νέμεσις	nemesis	retribution, especially divine retribution for <i>hubris</i>
πότμος	potmos	destiny
σωφροσύνη	sophrosyne	wisdom, self-control, temperance
τύχη	tuchē	fortune
ὑβρις	hubris	arrogance, pride, especially pride which goes beyond what is appropriate for mortals
φρήν	phrēn	mind, heart
ψυχή	psyche	mind

Abbreviations

<i>Académie</i>	<i>Le Dictionnaire de L'Académie française</i> (Paris: La veuve de Jean Baptiste Coignard, 1694)
Beekes	Robert Beekes, <i>Etymological Dictionary of Greek</i> , 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2016)
Brill	Franco Montanari, <i>The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek</i> (Leiden: Brill, 2015). {Unless otherwise stated, all glosses to Greek words are taken from this source.}
Chantraine	Pierre Chantraine, <i>Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque</i> (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968; second edition 1999)
Furetière	Antoine Furetière, <i>Dictionnaire Universel, Contenant generalement tous les mots français tant vieux que modernes</i> , 3 vols, second edition (The Hague: Arnoud et Reinier Leers, 1701)
<i>LSJ</i>	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, revised by Sir Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940, revised edition with supplement 1996)
<i>OLD</i>	<i>The Oxford Latin Dictionary</i> , edited by P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, corrected reprint 1996)
<i>Robert</i>	<i>Le Grand Robert de la langue française</i> , edited by Alain Rey, 6 vols (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2001)
<i>ST</i>	Paul Hammond, <i>The Strangeness of Tragedy</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)