

Nicolai N. Petro

**The Tragedy of Ukraine**

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Nicolai N. Petro

# **The Tragedy of Ukraine**



What Classical Greek Tragedy Can Teach Us About  
Conflict Resolution

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Justice tilts the scale to give learning to those who suffer.

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 250.



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# Introduction

I have been following events in Ukraine since 2008, when I was invited to give a talk by the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, and participated in a panel chaired by former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma.<sup>1</sup> Since then, my wife and I have visited Ukraine almost every year. While there we traveled widely, fascinated by the country's rich history and regional diversity. In 2013 I was awarded a Fulbright research award to go to Ukraine for the entire academic year. It proved to be a fateful year, with the Maidan protests beginning just three months after our arrival. My original research agenda, which was to explore the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, quickly fell by the wayside as I struggled to understand what was taking place around me.

The most popular view then, as now, is that the country's post-Maidan crisis is entirely the result of Russian aggression. What makes this explanation less than complete, however, is that Ukraine's historical and cultural divisions are well established, and have been a prominent theme in scholarly writing about the country. It is hard to imagine how they could suddenly be divorced from current events. I therefore agree with Mykola Riabchuk (with whom I agree on little else) that, "the problem remains to find the essence of the Ukrainian discord that cannot be exclusively attributed to Russian subversion or even invasion."<sup>2</sup> To my mind, this means paying more, not less, attention to Ukraine's historical and cultural diversity.

I had no satisfactory framework for explaining the intensity and persistence of the country's internal discord, however, until I stumbled upon Richard Ned Lebow's book, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*.<sup>3</sup> In it, I recognized processes comparable to those I had witnessed in Ukraine – passionate nationalism and revolutionary zeal, followed by the repudiation of sound policy options and the rise of social tensions. Lebow's classic work focuses on international relations, but I felt confident that approaching Ukrainian society through the lens of classical Greek tragedy would reveal many of the same underlying social pathologies.

Further study of classical Greek tragedy led me to the conclusion that a tragic political cycle can manifest itself in a number of different ways. Social decline,

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1 "Security and Development Strategies in 21st Century," November 13–14, 2008 in Kiev, Ukraine, sponsored by the Ukrainian Forum and the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

2 Mykola Riabchuk, "Two Ukraines' Reconsidered: The End of Ukrainian Ambivalence?," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, April 22, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12120>.

3 Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

for example, is often foreshadowed by the increasing shrillness of domestic political discourse and the demonization of one's domestic opponents. Another prominent feature is the rise of nationalism, which can itself become a form of collective psychosis. But despite classical Greek tragedy's value for gaining insight into the emotional roots of conflict, modern political science seems to have entirely forgotten that its most important function was to heal society and to reconcile former enemies; in other words to assist in conflict resolution.

This provided me with the missing piece of the puzzle. The essence of the Ukrainian discord, to use Riabchuk's felicitous phrase, lay in the state's reluctance to recognize the Other Ukraine – the third of the population that regards its own Russian cultural identity as compatible with a Ukrainian civic identity – as a legitimate part of the Ukrainian nation. Today's tragic events thus form part of a much larger tragic cycle that has befuddled Ukrainian political elites for over a century. This cycle is fed by the destructive narratives that one side tells about the other, which then legitimize conflict in the name of achieving justice. Trapped by their insistence on correcting the injustices of the past *before* engaging in dialogue, both sides have unwittingly contributed to the perpetuation of their mutual tragedy.

My discussion of the role that tragedy has played in Ukraine's social discord, and the role that it can play in its healing, proceeds as follows. Chapter One reminds readers of the unique social and therapeutic impact of tragedy during the heyday of Athenian democracy – the fifth century BCE. After describing how tragedy sought to transform Athenians into better and more compassionate citizens, it explores why modern political science abandoned tragedy, and concludes by suggesting that a tragic vision of politics has untapped potential for healing Ukraine.

Chapter Two delves deeply into the recurring cycle of Ukrainian tragedy, showing how it is linked to nationalism. It describes several key historical narratives that divide eastern and western Ukraine, and how they are still being used today to manipulate political and social discourse in Ukraine.

Chapter Three explores the appeal of Far Right nationalism in Ukraine, which rests on its claim that only nationalism can guarantee national unity. I describe how the mainstreaming of the Far Right after 2014 has instead intensified the social conflict between eastern and western Ukraine, and suggest that republican patriotism, which has its origins in a very different sense of community from nationalism, might be more effective for achieving national unity.

Chapter Four describes the concrete damage that nationalism has done in such areas of national policy as healthcare, economics, culture, and religion, while Chapter Five looks at the impact that nationalism has had on Ukraine's geopolitical and security interests. I argue that, while the territorial loss of Crimea

and parts of Donbass were due to Russia's military intervention, its psychological origins can be traced to three decades of nationalist policies that alienated the local population.

In the final chapter I review efforts to bring peace to Ukraine. These fall into two broad categories: external efforts, like the Minsk Accords, and internal efforts, like the National Platform for Reconciliation and Unity. Both failed to achieve peace because they did not include any mechanisms for fostering social healing among Ukrainians themselves. I suggest that a Ukrainian Truth and Reconciliation Commission could provide such mechanisms.

Russia's 2022 invasion began just as I was putting the finishing touches on the final chapter. It confirmed some parts of my analysis, while forcing me to re-evaluate others. Most importantly, it confirmed my view of politics as a tragic cycle propelled by mutual fear and the loss of the ability to communicate. This suggests to me that no matter how the military conflict is resolved, it will not bring an end to Ukraine's tragic cycle unless the country's elites also recognize how their own actions are contributing to its perpetuation.

Recurring conflict is as much a problem of the heart, as it is of institutions, and the enduring value of classical Greek tragedy is that it seeks to induce a change of heart, a *catharsis*. Oedipus was blinded by his anger long before he laid hands upon himself, and only began to see truly when he lost his outward sight, and was forced to look inward. It is my hope that by drawing attention to the tragic cycle that entangles them, more Ukrainians will be encouraged to look inward. That is where they will find the compassion and forgiveness needed for reconciliation.

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## A Note on Transliteration

The transliteration system used in this book is a simplified version of the one used for Russian and Ukrainian by the American Library Association and Library of Congress (ALA-LC), with the following exceptions. Both hard and soft signs have been omitted. When a soft sign appears in the middle of a word preceded by a vowel, it has been replaced by a “y.” The letters “ю” and “я” are transliterated as “yu” and “ya.” The letter “й” is transliterated as “i” in Russian, but “y” in Ukrainian (as in “Andrei” and “Andriy”).

In the transliteration of proper names, I have tried to use the form that currently predominates in English usage, as determined by the frequency of internet usage. I have therefore transliterated “ий” as “y” in Russian, but “ій” as “iy” in Ukrainian (as in “Volodymyr Zelensky” and “Andriy Parubiy”). For place names, I have given preference to the predominant local language. Thus Lviv, rather than Lwow or Lvov; Lugansk, rather than Luhansk; Odessa, rather than Odesa, and Kiev, rather than Kyiv.

When citing translations and quoting from them, I have preserved the original transliteration. My multilingual graduate assistant, Ekaterina Sylvester, was an invaluable help in checking my translations, transliterations, and references throughout the book. Any mistakes that remain are entirely my own.



# Chapter One

## What Does Athens Have to Do with Kiev?

Tragedy is born at the moment when myth starts to be seen from the viewpoint of the citizen and in relation to law and the city.

Simon Critchley, professor of philosophy<sup>1</sup>

This is not a “crisis.” This is something else, something much deeper and more fatal ... we are witnessing a drama of destruction; even worse of self-destruction. External factors, Russian and global, play only a minimal role. This is the national elite and, if truth be told, a large portion of the populace, determining its fate.

Dmitry Vydrin, advisor to four Ukrainian presidents, Rada MP (2006–2007)<sup>2</sup>

Since 2014, Ukraine has been in the news mostly because of its conflicts with Russia. Many in the West assume that these conflicts began in 2014, with the “Revolution of Dignity,” which led first to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and then to the conflict in the Donbass region of Eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian government responded to these events by launching an “anti-terrorist operation” (ATO) in April 2014. Four year later, it became a full-fledged military operation against Russia, designated “the aggressor-nation.”<sup>3</sup>

In fact, however, the current conflict is merely the latest in a series of conflicts that have bedeviled this area of the world for more than a century. These include: the great power rivalry between Russia and the West; the conflict between Russia and Ukraine; and finally, the conflict within Ukraine itself over its national identity, its relationship to Russia, and its role in the world. It is, in sum, a conflict about who gets to define Ukrainian identity.

For many in Western Ukraine, inspired by the historical example of Galicia, being Ukrainian means rejecting all things Russian – language, religion, trade, resources, science, music, books – everything. Only after Ukraine has thus “decolonized” itself, will the true Ukraine be able to emerge. During the 2014 Maidan this was referred to as a “civilizational choice.”

For many in Eastern, or Maloross Ukraine, however, being Ukrainian means having a regional identity that acknowledges the country’s historical and cultural ties to Russia. Most people in this Russophile half of Ukraine, therefore, saw

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1 Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (New York: Vintage Books, 2020), 40.

2 Konstantin Kevorkyan, “Vydrin: Vlast – eto kogda stranoi pravayat idei,” [Vydrin: Power Is When Ideas Rule the State] *Ukraina.ru*, February 3, 2020, <https://ukraina.ru/interview/20200203/1026505926.html>.

3 “ATO zavershilas,” [The ATO is Over] *TSN.ua*, April 30, 2018, <https://tsn.ua/ru/ato/ato-zavershilas-poroshenko-obyavil-nachalo-operacii-obedinennyh-sil-1147884.html>.

the call for a civilizational choice as unnecessary, divisive, and demeaning. This conflict of visions regarding Ukraine's past and future has erupted into armed conflict within Ukraine at least four times – during World War I, during World War II, after the 2014 Maidan, and now again in 2022.

Why does it persist? How did this bountiful country, whose political leaders promised that after independence it would quickly rival France in its standard of living, instead wind up declining by a third in population, and becoming the poorest country in Europe?<sup>4</sup> The answer to this question, which has bedeviled political analysts, is rooted in the long and difficult struggle to establish an independent Ukrainian nation. This struggle has given rise to civic engagement based on a common identity, but also to social pathologies that pit Ukrainians against one another. To understand the persistence of these pathologies requires an analytical approach that appreciates how deep-seated fears can still be evoked today by events that took place decades or even centuries ago.

The study of the classical Greek tragedy offers such an analytical approach. In contrast to modern political science, which treats all social actors as profit-maximizers, tragedy focuses particular attention on emotions such as rage, hatred, or love. An approach that combines the politics and classical Greek tragedy therefore allows us to better understand Ukrainian nationalism, and why it has been able to exert such extraordinary influence over the thinking of generations of Ukrainians.

The reason is that classical Greek tragedy played a key role in shaping the thinking of Athenian society on contemporary political events. It promoted social harmony and helped to foster peace with Athens's most bitter enemies. It can thus offer modern societies a form of conflict resolution that is particularly well suited to deeply divided societies, which can sometimes become so obsessed by fear that their own institutions fail them.

Before tackling the specific aspects of Ukraine's tragedy, therefore, it is important to recall tragedy's political significance and civic function in ancient Athens. I will then look at why, despite such a distinguished pedigree, modern political science turned its back on tragedy as an analytical tool, and conclude by arguing that a tragic approach to politics can be especially valuable for understanding and healing contemporary Ukraine.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrei Anoshin, "Skarshevskyy: 27 let Ukrainy – put is pustyni v boloto," [Skarshevskyy: 27 years of Ukraine – From the Desert to the Swamp] *Ukraina.ru*, August 24, 2018, <https://ukraina.ru/exclusive/20180824/1020917780.html>.

## 1.1 The *Dionysia*: Classical Greek Theater as a Political Institution

As a theatrical genre, tragedy has been with us for more than 2,500 years. In this span of time it has taken on a variety of forms: from pure theater, to philosophy, psychology (both individual and social), social protest, even burlesque.<sup>5</sup> This very richness has led some to conclude that “no definition of tragedy more elaborate than ‘very sad’ has ever worked.”<sup>6</sup> But this is an exaggeration. We know, for example, that in ancient Athens the performance of tragedy was an essential part of civic education, an institution of governance that taught citizens how to grapple with the political and social crises of the day. It was the beating heart of Athenian democracy on public display.

It is commonly assumed that tragedy emerged from the religious rituals performed in honor of the Greek god Dionysus. These were the main attraction at the *Dionysia*, the annual city festival of Athens. Each year, during these festivals, four plays were performed – three tragedies and one comedy or farce.<sup>7</sup> A special fund subsidized tickets for the poor, and even provided expensive meats to attract the masses – the *hoi polloi*. The largest arena, the theater of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis, can hold as many as 18,000 people, leading some scholars to conclude that the majority of Athenian citizens attended.<sup>8</sup>

Some idea of the importance of the *Dionysia* can be gleaned from the time and expense that went into these productions.<sup>9</sup> Preparations took more than half the year, and could involve over a thousand performers. Wealthy citizens often vied with each other to support the large choruses – as many as fifty singers – who were exempted from military service, even during the long and exhausting war with Sparta. Actors and writers were paid out of the city’s coffers,

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5 Mary-Kay Gamel, “The Postclassical Reception of Greek Tragedy,” in Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm, eds., *The Greek Plays* (New York: Modern Library, 2016), 816.

6 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 3.

7 Daniel Mendelsohn, “‘Saving the City,’ Tragedy in Its Civic Context,” in Lefkowitz and Romm, *The Greek Plays*, 793; Simon Goldhill, “The Audience of Athenian Tragedy,” in P.E. Easterling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 54–68.

8 Rush Rehm, *Understanding Greek Tragic Theater* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 19, 31; John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1972), 13.

9 Jacob Burckhardt speaks of the “quite incalculable wealth and variety of festivals.” Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Tragedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 44–45, 52–56.

and productions so meticulously supervised, that Plato once contemptuously referred to Athens as a *theatrokratia*, a city ruled by its theater.<sup>10</sup>

The very word for theater in Greek, *theaomai*, refers to a place where all issues and all people are visible and exposed.<sup>11</sup> Performances often dealt with controversial topics and could serve as a safety valve for those outside the political process – women, slaves, and resident foreigners. In the theater they had a voice that Athenian citizens were forced to listen to. We should think of classical Greek theater performances not as the silent places of detached observation we are familiar with today, but rather as having the rambunctious atmosphere of a political convention. “Politics for this audience,” writes John Ferguson, “was not a remote professionalism, but their breath of life, and we are right to seek the political context of any play, whether tragedy or comedy.”<sup>12</sup>

It seems that the performance of tragedy was first adapted for political use at the cusp of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. At that time Athens was flush with pride at its victory over Persia, but also in turmoil because of Cleisthenes’s democratic reforms. Plato complained that the laws were shifting so rapidly that anyone who had been away from the city for three months would not be able to find their way around.<sup>13</sup>

Tragedy provided an anchor in this storm in three ways. First, it offered a venue for political discussion. Euripides’s *The Trojan Women*, for example, is a heart-rending account of the fate of women captured in war, produced a year after the Athenians had themselves voted to enslave the women and children of Melos. In *The Suppliants*, Aeschylus has the chorus comment on the injustice of this.

Second, tragedy brought up controversial issues that could not be addressed in other civic venues. In *Phoenician Women*, Euripides’s characters discuss the circumstances under which one might betray and even attack one’s own country.<sup>14</sup> In *Antigone*, the central dilemma is whether a citizen’s responsibility should be to the family, the *polis*, or the gods. Such moral conflicts were com-

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10 Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*, 42.

11 Silvia Zappulla, “Reading *Antigone* through Hannah Arendt’s Political Philosophy,” prepared for the 5th Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics, 2011. <https://www.um.es/vmca/proceedings/docs/11.Silvia-Zappulla.pdf>.

12 John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 12.

13 Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 10, 34.

14 Simon Goldhill, “Greek Drama and Political Theory,” in Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield, eds., *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 74.

monly debated in classical Greek tragedy, where they could be set in the distant past, and the gods used to restore proper social order.

Finally, it provided a model of proper social behavior. Thus, in *The Persians*, Aeschylus provides both a political and a theological explanation for the Greek victory over the Persians. In Homer's *Iliad*, Sarpedon and Glaucus reason that a country should honor warriors not for their military skill, but for choosing to sacrifice their lives for the good of the *polis*.<sup>15</sup> In *Ajax*, Sophocles suggests that even kings must be subject to divine justice. When Agamemnon rejects this, he pays a heavy price for his defiance.<sup>16</sup>

More realism on the stage meant more political realism as well. According to Simon Goldhill, the tragic playwright is always trying to persuade the audience of the correct civic and moral stance to take, be it on the nature of citizenship, the treatment of enemies, or the justness of war.<sup>17</sup> Through such interaction Athenians were taught to recognize situations they might have to confront as citizens, and how to respond to them.

Of course, Athenian democracy was far from perfect. In fact, neither democracy nor classical tragedy survived the century. Nevertheless, over the course of this remarkable century, the theater became an essential institution of Athenian democracy, and attending plays was regarded as much a civic duty as attending the assembly, or serving on a jury.

## 1.2 How Tragedy Created Better Citizens

Athenians believed that their volatile democracy could be managed better with the help of the evocative narratives of the theater, a place where dissonant voices could be molded into something resembling a civic culture. Aristophanes says quite explicitly, in his depiction of the competition between Aeschylus and Euripides in Hades, that the better writer must be considered the one who can make “people into better citizens.”<sup>18</sup>

These plays conveyed the precise meaning of good citizenship by reiterating a consistent social message. Since just 3 percent of plays have survived to this day, we may never know if they reflected the whole tragic corpus. Nevertheless,

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<sup>15</sup> Emily Katz Anhalt, *Enraged: Why Violent Times Need Ancient Greek Myths* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017) 74.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 172, 166.

<sup>17</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 144.

<sup>18</sup> Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 160.

even this remnant displays an astonishing consistency of themes, in plays as diverse as *Prometheus Bound*, *Ajax*, *Antigone*, and the *Oresteia* trilogy.<sup>19</sup>

### 1.2.1 *Prometheus Bound*: Pity Leads to Wisdom

In *Prometheus Bound* (457 BCE), Aeschylus shows us that victory over one's adversary is not sufficient, in and of itself, to end the cycle of tragedy. Justice demands reconciliation with the defeated, and even Zeus himself must learn this lesson.

Aeschylus portrays Zeus as a tyrant, someone who thinks that absolute power will allow him to get away with anything. Along the way, however, Zeus is forced to learn that the proper order of the universe demands moderation and reconciliation. It is Zeus's half-human son, Herakles, who reveals this to him by freeing Prometheus against his father's wishes.

In Aeschylus's retelling of this ancient Greek myth, Prometheus's greatest gift to humanity is not fire, but his own Christ-like suffering, through which mankind learns pity. Moved by Prometheus's example, Zeus's arrogance gives way to pity, and he is able to mature from a tyrant into a wise leader.

### 1.2.2 *Ajax*: Compassion Is Needed to End the Cycle of Tragedy

In *Ajax* (442 BCE), Sophocles takes up another familiar theme: the danger of arrogance and conceit in victory. The play revolves around the conflict between duty to state and duty to family, which is expressed in the family's desire to honor someone who, from the state's perspective, died dishonorably. The conflict is resolved when Odysseus insists that there is a higher obligation than loyalty to the state – loyalty to the Greek community as a whole.

Odysseus, Ajax's mortal enemy in life, insists that after death all enmity must cease; the common frailty that binds mankind (death) must be above po-

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<sup>19</sup> John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 238, 244, 243, 463. Euripides too fits this pattern, although I have not included any of his plays. While some have argued that Euripides was more interested in theater for theater's sake, Ferguson sees in his plays a determined pacifism, hatred for the subjugation of women, and anti-imperialism. He highlights the connections between the thinking of Euripides and Thucydides, and points to a tradition that says that Thucydides wrote the poet's epitaph.

litical expediency.<sup>20</sup> By transcending his personal enmity, and becoming Ajax's spokesman in death, Odysseus removes any motive for future revenge, and prevents the tragic cycle from being repeated. Odysseus's "true wisdom" (*sophein skopein*) has given him insight into the divine laws that set out the proper conduct for mankind.<sup>21</sup>

Sophocles gives added poignancy to his message by showing that, when Agamemnon reluctantly yields to Odysseus's argument, he does so for the wrong reasons. Unlike Odysseus, who places the common good above personal advantage, Agamemnon seeks to create an obligation on Odysseus's part, for which he can extract future payment. He has not learned the meaning of true justice, and is therefore destined to suffer further tragedy – he is later murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra.

### 1.2.3 *Antigone*: True Justice Requires the Triumph of the Whole

*Antigone* (442 BCE) is likewise steeped in politics. The play was staged at the time of Pericles's decree elevating allegiance to Athens above all other allegiances, even those to one's own family. This becomes the very issue at the heart of *Antigone*, which Sophocles sets in the rival city of Thebes. The local tyrant, Creon, insists that Antigone's brother, Polyneices, who attacked Thebes to resolve a dynastic dispute, cannot be buried with honor because "once an enemy, never a friend, not even after death!"<sup>22</sup>

Antigone disobeys this decree, so Creon has her walled up alive for defying his authority. Creon's defense is that he is only pursuing the best interests of the *polis*. His absolute devotion to *raison d'état*, however, prevents him from seeing that true justice is about the triumph of the whole, rather than the triumph of his own, partial, view of justice. This leads to his downfall.

Sophocles's genius lies in showing that Antigone herself suffers from the same tragic flaw. No less than Creon, she too is trying to manipulate justice for the fulfillment of her own wishes, misleading officials about who actually buried Polyneices. Creon is wrong for disobeying the laws of the gods, but Antigone is wrong for acting as if she were as "a law [un]to herself" (Sophocles, *Antigone*, line 875). The obstinate refusal to see any other point of view but one's

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<sup>20</sup> Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 177. As Meier notes, the words that Sophocles uses are the same ones that Athens used when referring to its vassal-states, making the political implications crystal clear to his audience.

<sup>21</sup> Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 183.

<sup>22</sup> Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 190.

own leads each one, in his own way, to stand in opposition to the *polis*, a condition that Sophocles refers to as madness (*dysboulia*).<sup>23</sup>

The ability to sacrifice personal gain for the common good is the very foundation upon which the wellbeing of the *polis* rests. Creon's demand for total authority in order to maintain order and save the city – a typical “national security” argument – fails because no lasting order can be achieved without constant dialogue. In Thebes there is no shared space (tyranny annihilates it), and no shared community (people are isolated from each other). It can therefore no longer be considered a true *polis*.<sup>24</sup>

#### 1.2.4 *Oresteia*: Compassion Leads to True Justice and Prosperity

Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy (458 BCE) deserves special mention because it is the only complete trilogy that has survived to our times. Its plot illuminates the dilemmas of injustice and inequality, of conflicting loyalties and civil strife, that followed the destruction of Troy. It teaches that crimes that remain unforgiven will always spawn new crimes, to the eternal misery of mankind.

In the first play, *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, murders her husband after his triumphant return from Troy, for having sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia in order to obtain his victory. In the sequel, *The Libation Bearers*, this blood curse passes to their offspring, Orestes and Elektra. As Orestes vows to kill his mother to avenge his father, he refers to himself as “wearing the stain of victory,” as Agamemnon did for sanctioning the killing of Iphigenia.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, in *The Kindly Ones* (*Eumenides*), the goddess Athena herself intervenes. When Orestes is charged with his mother's murder, she convenes a jury to hear both sides. When the jury acquits Orestes, the Furies, the spirits of righteousness, are at first outraged, but when Athena offers them a place of honor in exchange for showing compassion to Orestes, they are transformed.

Because true justice has triumphed over vengeance, rich blessings are conferred upon Athens: blight shall not infect bud and blossom, women shall find husbands, children shall prosper, civil war fade, and concord reign.<sup>26</sup> The conclusion of the trilogy thus fulfills the promise made by Zeus in *Agamemnon*

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23 Silvia Zappulla, “Reading *Antigone* through Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy.”

24 Silvia Zappulla, “Reading *Antigone* through Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy.”

25 Rush Rehm, *Understanding Greek Tragic Theatre*, 112.

26 John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 106.

that the ultimate victory will go to those who promote reconciliation and restore proper order to the *polis*.<sup>27</sup>

From this brief summary of six plays (out of a total of thirty-three extant) we see that they shared a common purpose: to teach the citizenry how to end chaos and restore order. To this end, tragedies promulgated a consistent set of values. Pride and vengeance were values to be avoided at all costs. Pride led to disaster because men, and sometimes even gods, often failed to grasp the full scope of true justice, and thus sought vengeance instead. William Arrowsmith paints this bleak picture of Apollo's vengeance on Argos for Orestes's crime: "the burning palace, the dead girl, the screaming mob, and the degenerate heirs dying in the arson of their own hatred."<sup>28</sup> Each new cycle of tragedy is watered by the blood of those seeking revenge for past offenses.

But Zeus has revealed another path, which can lead to wisdom, if men choose to take it. By witnessing onstage the horrors that result from the unyielding pursuit of vengeance, audiences can choose *catharsis*, a purging of emotions so powerful that it allows new emotions, such as pity (*eleos*) and compassion (*oiktos*), to enter the soul and take the place of rage. Our pity tends to be reserved for those whom we know well, but tragedy evokes pity for those whom we know not at all, in order to achieve a deeper and more lasting *catharsis*. Euripides uses this technique in *Andromache* by initially focusing only on Sparta's wickedness, but then gradually expanding his attention to all of Greece.<sup>29</sup> Pity and compassion allow us to forge the bonds of identity that sustain community. "Uneducated men are pitiless," Orestes tells his sister Elektra, "but we who are educated pity much" (Euripides, *Elektra*, 295).

By combining the performance of plays with public debate, the Dionysian festivals promoted a novel form of civic engagement – direct democracy. Tragedies assisted in the formation of a citizenry prepared to rule by setting up an artificial contest, or *agon*, that mimicked the conflicts in society. As the play unfolds the hero must explain the reasoning behind his or her actions to the audience, as if speaking to an assembly of jurors. After that, the opposing party responds, thus establishing a dialogue for the audience to evaluate. Sometimes, as in Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, Euripides's *Suppliant Women*, and Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, trials were made a part of the actual plot.

Achieving compassion for one's enemy was an essential part of the civics lesson, for without it the tragic cycle could never be broken. In *Women of*

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<sup>27</sup> Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 135.

<sup>28</sup> John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 566.

<sup>29</sup> John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 333.

Troy, Euripides allows that justice was on the side of the Greeks, not the Trojans, but he is more concerned with drawing tears from his audience, so that Athenians would see in their victory “not glory at all, but shame, and blindness, and a world swallowed up in night.”<sup>30</sup> Classical Greek tragedy was not just about suffering; it was a civic celebration of suffering.<sup>31</sup> According to J. Peter Euben, citizens were expected to “undergo a transformation of character such that their anger toward others becomes gentleness and a self-directed sense of shame.”<sup>32</sup>

Onstage behavior that was prudent and selfless was self-evidently noble (*arete*), and classical Greek playwrights took great care to show how such behavior benefited society as a whole. *Hubris* and *hamartia* (the word that the Septuagint often uses for “sin”) were not so much moral flaws, but category errors that could endanger the *polis*. Overconfidence, or blind hatred caused leaders to take unnecessary risks, whereas tragedy trained citizens to recognize and avoid policies that could lead to disaster. The citizenry was to be systematically led away from *hubris* toward compassion and *catharsis*, which Aristotle describes as the introduction of order into “otherwise disorderly or incoherent souls.”<sup>33</sup> By replacing irrational emotions with proper reasoning, *catharsis* could liberate individuals and societies from the endless repetition of a tragic script.

One of the most enduring tragic scripts, in ancient as well as modern times, is the presumed imperative for war. In Euripides’s *The Suppliant Women*, the herald deflates Theseus’s pompous call to arms by sardonically remarking, “If death stood before our eyes as we gave our votes, Greece would not now be perishing of war-madness.”<sup>34</sup>

It didn’t always work. Athens’s appetite for empire and conquest was ultimately its undoing. That some Athenians understood this is shown in Thucydides’s account of the speech the Athenian envoys gave to the Spartan assembly on their reasons for declaring war: “And at last, when almost all hated us, when some had already revolted and had been subdued, when you had ceased to be the friends that you once were, and had become objects of suspicion and dislike,

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30 John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 48, 336.

31 “Greek tragedy is a celebration of the willingness and ability of the citizens of Athens to share each other’s pain. Pericles transforms pain-sharing into an act of civic virtue.” C. Fred Alford, “Greek Tragedy and Civilization: The Cultivation of Pity,” *Political Science Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (June 1993): 266.

32 J. Peter Euben, ed., *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 282–283.

33 J. Peter Euben, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, 283–284, 287.

34 John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 312.

it appeared no longer safe to give up our empire; especially as all who left us would fall to you.”<sup>35</sup>

But before we dismiss the civic use of tragedy as a failure for not eradicating baser human instincts, we should consider its success in inculcating pity and compassion during the remarkable century in which it thrived. According to Herodotus, theater audiences burst into tears during the performance of Phrynichus’s *Capture of Miletus*. At one point, the play was banned because it reminded people too intensely of their suffering.<sup>36</sup> Athenian prisoners of war returning from the Sicilian expedition reported being released because they could recite the plays of Euripides.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore quite possible, as Emily Anhalt Katz suggests, that the tragic plays that focused on the conflict between civic and moral obligations caused Athenians to have second thoughts about the trade-offs between democracy and empire, and to be a bit less arrogant about their capacity to shape human events.<sup>38</sup>

It has also been suggested that audiences brought lessons from the theater into their deliberations in the assembly or the law courts. There is, for example, an account of the priestess Theano disobeying a public decree requiring all priests to publicly curse the Athenian general Alcibiades. In her famous refusal she makes the same case as Antigone, saying that her function in the *polis* is not to curse, but to pray.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.3 How Modern Politics Lost Sight of Tragedy

In the centuries since the fall of Athens, Greek tragedy has continued to be a source of inspiration for theater, philosophy, psychology, literature, art, indeed all the humanities, but its most important function – that of sparking dialogue among citizens on civic values and behavior – has been all but forgotten.

There are many reasons for this. The most obvious is the passage of time, which has left us with less than 3 percent of the texts of the classical Greek tragedies, and perhaps 10 percent of the titles.<sup>40</sup> Another is the downfall of Athenian democracy. Having been a major part of democracy’s rise, it should come as no

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35 Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 269.

36 Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 61–63, 219.

37 John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 245, 163.

38 Emily Katz Anhalt, *Enraged*, Introduction.

39 Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 201.

40 Rush Rehm, *Understanding Greek Tragic Theater*, 26.

surprise that tragedy's social influence declined with democracy's demise. By the time modern democracies emerged, most audiences either no longer grasped tragedy's social significance, or simply found cathartic introspection too burdensome.<sup>41</sup> Some scholars have argued that tragedy is especially unappealing to Americans because of their tendency to view their own political culture as "almost innocent of irony and tragedy."<sup>42</sup>

But, we have Plato to thank most of all for the current rift between tragedy and politics. His arguments against tragedy align closely with his influential critique of democracy in *The Republic*. Democracy's greatest flaw, as Plato saw it, was that it empowered the lowly and the ignorant. This encouraged "a dangerous, wild and lawless form of desire" that inevitably led to chaos, civil war, and tyranny. Censoring public functions that aroused excess passions, like tragedy, was therefore essential to preventing civil war within the soul.<sup>43</sup>

In modern times, calls to restrain public passions to avoid chaos sound positively undemocratic. Indeed, it is sometimes suggested that in authoritarian societies a certain amount of chaos ought to be welcomed as a harbinger of democracy.<sup>44</sup> Such a complete role reversal has led some to conclude that any political wisdom that tragedy might once have had clearly no longer applies today. With the attention of modern social science firmly fixed on data-gathering and modeling, fate has become something that good social planning should be able to avoid. The belief in scientific progress has thus effectively erased tragedy from our social awareness, and along with it any understanding of how it once shaped our political behavior. In this context, the idea that the study of tragedy could be a valuable part of the democratic process, a bulwark against chaos, seems quaint.

In truth, however, we need tragedy today as much as ever, for the same reasons the Greeks did. First, because, like the ancient Greeks, we continue to search for meaning and order in a world engulfed by chaos. One vital function of tragedy was to set down deep anchors, rooted in history and tradition, that societies in turmoil could rely on to restore order.<sup>45</sup> Second, because tragedy re-

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41 George Steiner, "'Tragedy,' Reconsidered," in Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 29–44.

42 Harvey Mansfield, "The Tragedy of Weber," *Washington Examiner*, December 9, 1996, <https://perma.cc/7SYG-A2LV>.

43 Derek W.M. Barker and David W. McIvor, "Tragedy and Politics," *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (Wiley Online Library), July 18, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118474396.wbept1009>.

44 Anne Applebaum, "Nationalism Is Exactly What Ukraine Needs," *The New Republic*, May 13, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/117505/ukraines-only-hope-nationalism>.

45 Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), 29, 46.

lies on storytelling, a most effective mechanism for giving meaning and structure to the world. “The idea of fate,” as Terry Eagleton puts it, is “the idea of a narrative which adds up.”<sup>46</sup> There is no reason to think that if tragic stories were told today they could not serve the same purpose they served two thousand years ago – to force us to confront directly the sources of our discontent.

It is sometimes said, in rebuttal, that tragedy can hardly be expected to play such a socially significant role today because the underlying assumptions of modernity are “non-tragic.” Raymond Williams, however, stands this argument on its head. He suggests that modern ideologies, which depict mankind as torn asunder by internal contradictions, are actually cries for help to escape quintessentially tragic circumstances. If tragedy stems from contradictions that are inherent in the human condition, then perhaps modernity itself, he suggests, is a classical tragedy?<sup>47</sup>

The horrific cruelty, loss of life, and cataclysmic upheavals of the twentieth century led many political thinkers to conclude that something vital had been lost in the quest for modernity. Appalled at how easily politicians lost sight of order, meaning, and values in political discourse, they turned to classical Greek tragedy for remedies, spawning an approach to politics known as political realism. Notable proponents of political realism, like Hannah Arendt, Hans J. Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Richard Ned Lebow, relied so heavily on classical Greek tragedy, that they might well be called modern tragic realists. In the final analysis, however, I believe that their appreciation for the role of tragedy in politics did not go far enough.

### 1.3.1 Hannah Arendt: The Importance of Tragic Narratives

According to her biographer, Robert C. Pirro, Arendt considered Greek tragedy “the political art par excellence,” because it enabled “the cultivation of citizen’s capacity to see things from the points of view of their fellow citizens.”<sup>48</sup> Most evil in the world, she concluded, is done by people who never make up their minds to do good. Such people need an intellectual basis for resisting evil, an internal

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<sup>46</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 129.

<sup>47</sup> Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 189.

<sup>48</sup> Robert C. Pirro, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Tragedy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001), 139.