Greek Drama

The art of drama developed in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens in the late sixth century BC. From the religious chants honoring Dionysus arose the first tragedies, which centered on the gods and Greece's mythical past. In the fifth century BC, Greek audiences enjoyed the works of four master playwrights; of these, three—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—were tragedians. The early works focused on the good and evil that exists simultaneously in the world as well as the contradictory forces of human nature and the outside world. All three tragic playwrights drew their material from Greek myths and legends; they each brought new developments to the art form. Aeschylus, whose Oresteia trilogy examines the common tragic themes of vengeance and justice, brought tragedy to the level of serious literature. Of the scores of plays Sophocles wrote, only seven survive into modern times, and of these, the greatest one is Oedipus the King. The last great tragedian, Euripides, questioned traditional values and the ultimate power of the gods. In his Medea, Euripides explores the choices that humans make under difficult situations. Both Sophocles and Euripides wrote plays about Antigone; the one by Sophocles survives; the one by Euripides survives only as a fragment. While the playwrights handled this mythical story differently, it provided both of them with a way to explore moral conflicts between loyalty to the state and loyalty to one's religious beliefs. C. M. Bowra pointed...
out in his book *Classical Greece* that “Greek tragedy provides no explicit answers for the sufferings of humanity, but it . . . shows how they happen and how they may be borne.” Indeed, Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* expresses the paradigmatic tragic course of a noble man who through impulse and pride commits evil acts, falls from high station, and exacts punishment on himself. The myth of Orestes, as seen in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* trilogy and Euripides’s *Orestes* introduces other major themes in Greek tragedy, namely justice (divine, personal, and communal) and vengeance.

Comedy most likely also developed out of the same religious rituals as tragedy. Aristophanes was the greatest writer of comedies in the early period known as Old Comedy. He used biting satire in plays such as *The Birds* and *Lysistrata* to ridicule prominent Athenian figures and current events. Later comedy relied less on satire and mythology and more on human relations among the Greek common people.

Greek drama created an entirely new art form, and over the centuries, the works of these ancient Greek writers influenced and inspired artists in various media, philosophers, psychologists, and other thinkers. Greek drama, with its universal themes and situations, continues to be relevant for modern audiences.

**REPRESENTATIVE AUTHORS**

**Aeschylus (c. 525 BC–c. 456 BC)**
Aeschylus was born about 525 BC, probably in Eleusis. He was the earliest of the best-known ancient Greek tragic dramatists. He lifted the dramatic presentations from a choral performance to a work of art. He also added a second actor on stage, allowing for dialogue, and reduced the number of the chorus from about fifty to about fifteen. With Aeschylus, tragic drama was presented through action, not through recitation. Aeschylus took part in the City Dionysia (a festival in Athens for the god Dionysus, involving a procession to the Acropolis, a sacrifice of bulls with an accompanying feast, and dramatic competitions), probably for the first time in 499 BC, and he won it for the first time fifteen years later. His masterpiece is the *Oresteia* trilogy, which was produced in 458 BC. Aeschylus’s work was affected by contemporary politics, especially the Greco-Persian Wars that raged through his homeland. Chad Turner notes how *The Suppliants*, probably Aeschylus’s second play, reflects the playwright’s increasing political awareness. Aeschylus’s plays are of lasting literary value because of their lyrical language, intricate plots, and universal themes. He wrote about ninety plays, of which seven have survived. Aeschylus died about 456 BC in Gela, Sicily.

**Aristophanes (c. 450 BC–c. 385 BC)**
Aristophanes was born about 450 BC, possibly on the island Aegina. His plays are the only examples of Old Comedy (comedy that focuses largely on political satire rather than human relations, the focus of New Comedy) that have survived in their complete form. Aristophanes’s themes and work generally reflects the social, literary, and philosophical life of Athens, and many of his plays were inspired by events of the Peloponnesian War. Eleven of his approximately forty plays survive. Among the most well-known are *The Birds* and *The Frogs*. His appeal comes from his witty dialogue, his satire, and the inventiveness of his comic scenes. Many
of his plays are still produced on the modern stage. Aristophanes died about 385 BC in Athens, Greece.

**Crates (c. 449 BC–424 BC)**
Flourishing in the mid-fifth century BC in Athens, Crates is considered the founder of Greek New Comedy. According to Aristotle, Crates abandoned traditional comedy—which centered on invective—and introduced more general stories that relied on well-developed plots. Crates was also the first to stop using iambic rhythm. Only fragments of his work survived to modern times, but he is known to have authored at least nine plays, including *Wild Beasts, Daring Deeds, and Neighbors.*

**Cratinus (c. 520 BC–423 BC)**
Cratinus was regarded in antiquity as one of the three great writers of the Old Comedy period. Only fragments of his twenty-seven known plays survive, but they are enough to show that his comedies, like those of Aristophanes, seem to have been a mixture of parodied mythology and reference to contemporary events. For example, Athenian leader Pericles was a frequent subject of Cratinus’s ridicule. Cratinus died about 423 BC.

**Epicharmus (c. 530 BC–c. 440 BC)**
Epicharmus was born about 530 BC. He is seen as the originator of Sicilian, or Doric, comedy. He is credited with more than fifty plays, but only a few lines survive. Thirty-five titles are known, including *Agrostinos and Marriage of Hebe to Hercules.* Many of his plays were mythological burlesques: He even satirized the gods. His lively style made his work more akin to New Comedy than the Old Comedy of his time. He died about 440 BC.

**Eupolis (c. 445 BC–c. 411 BC)**
Along with Cratinus and Aristophanes, Eupolis was regarded in antiquity as one of the three great writers of the Old Comedy period. His first play was produced in 429 BC, but only fragments of his plays survived to modern times. Eupolis focused his satire on Athenian demagogues, wealthy citizens, but also concerned himself with serious subjects, such as how Athens could dominate Sparta in the ongoing Peloponnesian War. He was friends with Aristophanes, but their relationship broke down as they each accused the other of plagiarism. Eupolis died about 411 BC while he was still a young man, likely fighting in the war.

**Euripides (c. 485 BC–406 BC)**
Euripides was born about 485 BC in Attica (the region of central Greece that has Athens as its capital). One of the three great tragedians, in 441 BC he won his first victory at the City Dionysia, in which he competed twenty-two times. Nineteen (including one play of disputed authorship) of his ninety-two plays survive. His most famous plays are *Medea,* produced in 431 BC; *Hippolytus* (428 BC); *Electra* (417 BC); *Trojan Women* (415 BC); *Ion* (c. 411 BC); and *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Bacchae* (both in 405 BC, posthumously).

Like his fellow tragedians, Euripides designed the tragic fate of his characters to stem from their own flawed natures. The gods look upon his characters’ suffering with apparent indifference. His plays are usually introduced by prologues and often end with the providential appearance of a god, an action known as *deus ex machina.* The prologue usually is a monologue that explains the situation and the characters with which the action begins; the *deus ex machina* includes a god’s epilogue that reveals the future fortunes of the characters. Euripides died in 406 BC in Macedonia.

**Menander (c. 342 BC–c. 292 BC)**
Menander was born about 342 BC. In modern times, he is considered to be the supreme dramatist of New Comedy (comedy that focuses on human relations), but, during his lifetime, he was less successful. Of his more than one hundred plays, only eight won prizes at Athens’ dramatic festivals. He produced his first play in 321 BC. The only play of his to survive intact is *Dyscolus,* which won a festival prize in 317. The Roman writers Plautus and Terence adapted many of Menander’s works; thus, like other great dramatists of Ancient Greece, he influenced the development of European drama from the Renaissance into modern times. Menander died about 292 BC.

**Phrynichus (c. 420 BC)**
Phrynichus was an Athenian poet of the Old Comedy period and a contemporary of Aristophanes and Eupolis. He began producing plays in 430 BC and won two victories in the City Dionysia. Those two plays are *Monotropos* and *Muses.*
Sophocles (c. 496 BC–c. 406 BC)
Sophocles was born about 496 BC in Colonus, near Athens. He is one of the three great tragic playwrights of Ancient Greece. He first won the City Dionysia in 468 BC, defeating Aeschylus. He went on to write a total of 123 tragedies for this annual festival, winning perhaps as many as 24 times and never receiving less than second prize. Of his seven extant plays, his most well-known is Oedipus the King, which was performed sometime between 430 BC and 426 BC. This play became a paradigm for Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex. It also provided the prototype for the family plots in countless literary works created across the centuries. Sophocles also made important dramatic innovations. He reduced the size of the chorus and added a third actor onstage. He is noted for his use of irony and his complicated web of puns, many of which cannot be conveyed in modern languages.

Sophocles was a prominent Athenian; he served as a treasurer in the Delian League (the confederation of Greek states with Athens as the leader that formed in 478 BC, soon after the defeat of the invading Persians under Xerxes in order to ensure continued freedom), was elected as one of ten military and naval commanders, and served as one of ten members of the advisory committee that organized the financial and domestic recovery of Athens after its defeat during the Peloponnesian War at Syracuse in 413 BC. Sophocles died in 406 BC in Athens.

Sophron (c. 430 BC)
Sophron of Syracuse lived and wrote in the early to mid 400s BC. He wrote rhythmical prose mimes in the Doric dialect that depict scenes from daily Sicilian life. Plato was fond of Sophron’s work and carried it with him. Sophron is believed to have influenced the work of Greek poets Theocritus and Herodas.

Representative Works

Antigone
Sophocles’s Antigone (441 BC) depicts the title character’s defiance of the king of Thebes and his edicts. Antigone’s brother has died in his rebellion against the king, Creon, who is also his uncle, and Creon has forbidden proper burial rites to be carried out for him. The play’s conflict is between Antigone and Creon, whose differences center on opposing beliefs about authority; Antigone affirms family loyalty and divine over civic law, whereas Creon asserts the power of the monarchy and the subordination of the individual to the authority of the state.

Bacchae
Many critics regard the Bacchae (c. 405 BC) as Euripides’s masterpiece. In this play, the god Dionysus arrives in Thebes to introduce his cult. King Pentheus resists, so Dionysus causes the women, including Pentheus’s mother, to fall into a frenzied state. When the women come across Pentheus, they believe him to be a wild animal, and they kill and dismember him. Dionysus considers his terrible revenge justified, thus showing his own lack of morality. The play demonstrates how the ecstatic side of the Dionysiac religion needs reason and self-control for balance.

The Birds
Along with The Frogs, The Birds (414 BC) is widely considered to be one of Aristophanes’s masterpieces. It exemplifies the utopian theme in

Media Adaptations

- Oedipus Rex, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, came out in 1967. It stars Silvana Mangano and Franco Citti and is in Italian with English subtitles.
- George Tzavellas’s adaptation of Antigone, starring Irene Papas and Manos Katrakis, came out in 1962.
- The opera Oedipus Rex came out in 1992. It features music by Igor Stravinsky and a libretto by Jean Cocteau. It is available on videodisk.
Greek literature. The ruler of Athens, Peisthetaeus, wants to escape the war that has engulfed Greece, and he has persuaded the birds to join him in building a new city that will hang in the sky between human and divine dominions. Peisthetaeus comes to rule over even the gods. The Birds satirizes Athens’ imperial goals, and some critics believe that it foretells the city’s impending loss to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War and its subsequent decline. The Birds is longer than any other ancient Greek drama—comedy or tragedy—and demonstrates the prowess of Aristophanes.

Dyscolus
Dyscolus (The Grouch), Menander’s prize-winning play, was first produced in 317 B.C. While the play tells about a young man’s efforts to marry, it focuses on the curmudgeonly figure of the girl’s father, Knemon, whose misanthropy has led him to abandon his parental responsibility. This early play is relatively simple, but it is the only one of Menander’s plays for which a complete text exists in modern times, and it shows his ability to create surprise in the final act.

The Frogs
Many critics consider The Frogs to be one of Aristophanes’s masterpieces. It mixes humor and serious matters regarding contemporary politics, literary criticism, gods, and religion. It won first prize at the City Dionysia when it was first produced in 405 B.C. and was unusually honored by being given a repeat production. In The Frogs, Dionysus, the god of drama, goes to the underworld to bring Euripides back to Athens. In Hades, Dionysus witnesses a drama competition between Euripides and Aeschylus; Euripides represents the modern age, while Aeschylus represents the elite and the glory days of the past. As a result of the competition, Dionysus decides to take Aeschylus back to the land of the living with him instead of Euripides, believing that Aeschylus is better able to restore moral, political, and martial strength among Athenians.

Lysistrata
Aristophanes’s comedy Lysistrata was written in 411 B.C., a few years after the Athenian army was defeated in Sicily in the Peloponnesian War. Lysistrata depicts the women of Athens, in conjunction with the rest of the women in Greece—including the Spartan enemies—go on a domestic and sexual strike in order to force their husbands to stop fighting. Aristophanes thus used women, who historically took no part in political or military life, to attack the long-lasting war. This relevant play is frequently produced in modern times.

Medea
Medea (431 B.C) is one of Euripides’s best-known plays. It depicts Medea’s revenge on her unfaithful husband; she kills their sons. The play depicts her internal struggle between her sense of personal injury and her love for her children, and it enacts a popular theme of Greek tragedy, vengeance. Despite Medea’s horrible actions, Euripides evokes sympathies for Medea, who, for most of the play, has the support of the women of Corinth. Euripides leveraged the political strife between Sparta (of which Corinth was an ally) and Athens in writing this play. Critic Daniel Mendelsohn observes that the year Medea was first produced was also the year civil war broke out. Medea took third prize at that year’s dramatic competition.
Oedipus at Colonus

Oedipus at Colonus (produced c. 401 BC, posthumously), Sophocles’s final play, finds the old, blind Oedipus at the sacred grove at Colonus, a village near Athens. He has spent the past years in exile, rejected by his family with the exception of his two daughters. Now, however, his sons and his brother-in-law turn to him to help them protect the city of Thebes. The play is noted for its melancholy and lyricism. Sophocles also invests in Oedipus both spiritual and moral authority. Some critics have read the play biographically, as Sophocles’s poetic last will and testament.

Oedipus the King

Oedipus the King, first presented by Sophocles about 427 BC, is one of the most important tragedies in Western literature. It depicts the downfall of Oedipus, king of Thebes, who discovers that he unwittingly has killed his father and married his mother. When Oedipus realizes what he has done, he blinds himself, abandons his throne, and leaves Thebes. Oedipus has fulfilled his preordained fate, which he foolishly assumed he could avoid, and once he discovers the reality of his actions, he owns his guilt and pays for it with integrity and fortitude. Aristotle used this play as a model of tragedy in his work of literary criticism, The Poetics. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud made use of the story of Oedipus in coining the term Oedipal complex to express man’s usually suppressed desire to replace his father in order to marry his mother.

Oresteia

Aeschylus’s Oresteia is the only trilogy that survived from Ancient Greece into modern times. First performed in 458 BC, it consists of Agamemnon, Choephoroi (The Libation Bearers), and Eumenides (which refers to the “kindly ones,” the avenging furies who seek vengeance on Orestes). It tells the story of the cycle of murder, vengeance, punishment, and justice acted out within the royal house of Atreus. The Oresteia is widely considered to be one of the great works of Western literature. It is remarkable for its brilliant union of poetry, song, dance, and music as well as its depiction of the development of the Athenian democratic jury system.

Prometheus Bound

Prometheus Bound was presented as one part of a trilogy in 472 BC. In the play, Prometheus defies Zeus by stealing fire from the gods and giving it to mankind. Zeus chains Prometheus to a huge rock as punishment. The struggle of the play derives from the clash of wills between the powerful king of the gods, Zeus, and larger-than-life heroic Prometheus, who stubbornly refuses to share the secret knowledge concerning Zeus’s ability to hold onto his power. Prometheus came to be an archetypal figure of defiance against tyrannical power, one that was especially meaningful to the Romantic poet William Blake. Some scholars doubt Aeschylus’s authorship of Prometheus Bound.

THEMES

Tragedy

The first forms of Greek drama were tragedies. “The theme of all tragedy is the sadness of life and the universality of evil,” wrote noted scholar Paul Roche in The Orestes Plays of Aeschylus. “The inference the Greeks drew from this was not that life was not worth living, but that because it was worth living the obstacles to it were worth overcoming.” Through suffering, the tragic hero is able to learn and grow.

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the great Greek tragedians, brought distinctive themes and perspectives to their works. Aeschylus transformed tragic drama into great literature. His plays focused on the plights, decisions, and fates of individuals who were intrinsically intertwined with their community and their gods. In Aeschylus’s works, gods controlled the actions of mortal men and women. Self-pride caused humans to defy the will of the gods, which led to punishment. A Sophoclean tragedy generally revolved around characters whose “tragic”—or personal—flaws caused them to suffer. The tragedy climaxed as the main character recognized his or her errors and accepted responsibility and its accompanying punishment. Of the three tragedians, the characters of Sophocles are generally considered to best reflect the true state of human experience. Euripides differed from the earlier playwrights both in his belief that the world operates by chance rather than by the will of gods and in his treatment of his mythic characters as if they were people of his own time. These characters, subject to the same political and social pressures as fifth-century Athenians, were in charge of their
Greek Drama

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Read or review the masterpieces of Greek tragedy and Greek comedy. How are these plays alike? How are they different? Which do you think most represents Greek culture in the fifth century BC?
- Compare and contrast the features of Old Comedy and New Comedy. Which of these forms seems more relevant to modern drama? Explain your answer.
- Read Aristotle’s Poetics and apply his analysis of tragedy in evaluating a play of your choosing.
- Read Plato’s Republic, which discusses his ideas about tragedy and its place in society. Out of what philosophical ideas does Plato’s argument arise? How valid is his argument?
- Find out more about life in Ancient Greece in the fifth century BC. Based on your research, explain why and in what different ways Greek tragedies and comedies were meaningful to fifth-century audiences.
- Select a play by Shakespeare and explore how its form and subject matter demonstrates the influence of Greek playwrights.
- Find out more about the Peloponnesian War, which Aristophanes took as the backdrop for some of his plays. How do you think the ongoing strife might have affected Athenian society, and how are these social effects reflected in Aristophanes’s comedies?
- Find out more about the rise of Athenian democracy. Then study Sophocles’s Antigone, to see how these new ideas about government are handled in the play.

Comedy

Comedy was the other major form of Greek drama. Greek comedies often made fun of people, particularly politicians, military leaders, and other prominent figures. Victor Ehrenberg noted in The People of Aristophanes that “In no other place or age were men of all classes attacked and ridiculed in public and by name with such freedom.” Greek comedies were varied productions, ranging from the intellectual to the bawdy. Some comedies were satirical, some slapstick. They included such devices as verbal play, parody, metaphor, and allegory. Aristophanes, the most noted comic playwright, used satire to make fun of the leaders and institutions of his day. He often placed them in absurd situations, such as the one in The Birds, in which the heroes try to build “Cuckoo City,” a peaceful community in the sky.

Greek comedy is divided into three periods. Old Comedy—the first phase of ancient Greek comedy—emerged during the fifth century BC. Primarily known through the surviving work of Aristophanes, it is sometimes referred to as Aristophanic comedy. The high-spirited satire of public figures and events characterize these plays. Though they are filled with songs, dances, and buffoonery, they also include explicit political criticism as well as commentary on literary and philosophical topics. The plays of Aristophanes parody tragedy. Middle Comedy, dating from the closing years of the fifth century BC to nearly the middle of the fourth century BC, represents the transition from Old Comedy to New Comedy. Comedies from this period make good-humored attacks on classes or character types rather than individuals. The playwright Menander introduced the New Comedy in about 320 BC. Like Old Comedy, it satirized contemporary Athenian society, but the ridicule was far milder. New Comedy also differed from Old Comedy because it parodied average citizens—fictitious characters from ordinary life—rather than public figures, and it had no supernatural or heroic elements. The plays of New Comedy often focus on thwarted lovers and concealed identities and contained a host of stock characters, such as the cruel father, the clever slave, and the conceited cook.

Struggle and Rebellion

Greek tragedies depicted struggle and suffering deriving from conflict typically between the state and individuals, between human law and divine law, or between free will and fate. In many Greek tragedies, the hero is the person who rebels

own destinies. Their tragic fate arises from their own inability to deal with the difficulties that the gods placed upon them or from their own passions. The tragedies of Euripides often questioned traditional and widely accepted social values.
against the established order of things. Sophocles’s *Antigone* depicts some of these struggles. Antigone defies her uncle Creon, king of Thebes, when she performs burial rites for her brother. In doing so, Antigone obeys her religious beliefs and expresses her familial loyalty and disobeys the royal decree that her rebellious brother may not be buried. As punishment for her disobedience, her uncle sentences her to death. At the end of the play, Creon, who has placed his decree above the command of the gods, is himself punished through the suicides of his wife and son. Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* reports what happens when individuals think they can escape their divinely ordained fate. Oedipus’s parents—Laius and Jocasta—attempts to thwart the oracles that tell them their son will murder his father and marry his mother. As the myth and the play bear out, despite their efforts to circumvent fate, Oedipus fulfills this prophecy.

**The Common Man**

Both tragedies and comedies dignify the common man. Members of Greek royalty and upper classes create a world filled with adultery, incest, madness, and murder, and it is the shepherds, craftspeople, yeomen farmers, and nurses who provide a stable environment amidst this debauchery. Sophocles and Euripides endowed these secondary characters with common sense and sensitivity. In Sophocles’s *Antigone*, for example, the man serving in Creon’s guard offer their king advice and even disagree with him. Comedy uses the common man in a different way than tragedy does. Comic writers introduced stock characters, such as the orphan, the young lover, and the master of the house as protagonists instead of relying solely on imperial characters; their stories, too, were as worthy of being told. Menander’s plays particularly emphasized a civilized world in which the rules of humanity prevail.

**Mythology and the Gods**

Early Greek drama, both tragedy and comedy, drew from the stories of mythology and legend. These myths illuminated universal problems, ones that could pertain to situations plaguing fifth-century Greece as well as to past events. The ancient Greeks believed that tragedy should deal with illustrious figures and significant events, thus the pantheon of gods is ever-present and, often, omniscient. Aeschylus’s plays, for instance, show the justification of the gods’ ways in relation to humankind or the comprehension of the form of justice meted out by the gods. The gods might punish the characters, as Zeus punishes Prometheus in *Prometheus Bound*, or they might settle the seemingly insurmountable conflicts the characters face, as when Athena decrees that the Furies must give up their torment of Orestes in the *Oresteia*. The tragedians took the basic premise of their stories from mythology but transformed them for dramatic intent, infusing the heroes, both male and female, with human qualities and relating their themes to the present day. The religion of the Greeks, what in modern times is called mythology, provided drama with paradigmatic plots and universal subjects, allowing the dramatists to comment on topical events without limiting their scope to contemporary events and personalities.

The gods also played a prominent role in Old Comedy. Cratinus’s *Dionysalexandrus* is a mythological burlesque. It retells the story of the judgment of Paris (Alexander), with variations. Aristophanes’s work parodies tragedy. In all, the Greek gods and goddesses take a central role in the lives of dramatic characters. However, mythology in drama was on the wane. The defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War contributed to the sense of disillusionment that the ancient Greeks felt with their legendary heroes and gods, and with the rise of the New Comedy, writers moved away from mythological subjects toward common subjects of human relationships and family life.

**Love**

Love as a dramatic theme was first introduced in the comedic plays. The New Comedy plots emphasize romantic intrigue, such as a young man’s efforts to win the bride of his choice. Plays of the New Comedy often end in marriage. Menander’s plays might introduce perverse complications. In *The Arbitrators*, the problems arise when a newly married woman bears a child shortly after the wedding. The husband accuses her of being unfaithful; however, unbeknownst to him, her husband previously raped her at a festival. The play ends happily, with the husband’s remorseful speech.

**STYLE**

**Structure**

As set out by Aristotle in his *Poetics* in 350 BC, tragedy generally follows a set sequence of events. First, the *hamartia* takes place. This is the tragic error committed by the hero, and it usually is committed unwittingly. Oedipus’s act
of killing Laius and marrying Jocasta is the *hamartia* in *Oedipus the King*. The unexpected turn of events that brings this error to light is known as the *peripeteia*, and the hero’s recognition of this error is the *anagnorisis*. According to Aristotle, the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis* are most effective when they occur at the same time. They often come about when the true identity of one of the characters becomes known. This is the case for Oedipus, who discovers the identity of his biological father and recognizes then that his wife is his biological mother; thus his situation is reversed, moving swiftly from happiness to misery. Last comes the catharsis, the release of the emotions of fear and pity that the tragedy has aroused in the audience.

Old Comedy also had a distinct structure. The first part is the introduction or prelude, in which the plot is explained and developed. The play proper begins with the *parados*, the entry of the chorus, followed by the *agon*, or contest, which is a ritualized debate between two main characters, a character and the chorus, or two halves of the chorus. Next comes the *parabasis*, in which the chorus speaks to the audience about the political and social events of the day and also criticizes well-known Athenian citizens. Following a series of farcical scenes, the play concludes with a banquet or wedding. While Old Comedy followed a formal design, it had little conventional plot, instead presenting a series of episodes, which, when taken together, illustrated a serious political or social issue. New Comedy, however, articulated the plot much more clearly and featured characters who devised intrigues and tricks to achieve certain goals.

**Chorus**

The Greek chorus played a crucial role in Greek plays. Members of the chorus—twelve to fifteen actors—remained on stage throughout the entire play and periodically recited poetic songs in unison. Overall, the chorus observed and interpreted the actions of the play, reacted to characters and events, and even probed the characters with questions and gave advice. However, the chorus took on additional responsibilities in the hands of different playwrights. In some plays, the chorus helped advance the plot. In other plays, it introduced major themes. “The chorus complements, illustrates, universalizes, or dramatically justifies the course of events,” writes Michael Grant in *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*; “it comments or moralizes or mythologizes upon what happens, and opens up the spiritual dimension of the theme or displays the reaction of public opinion.”

However, the role of the chorus changed over time and in the hands of the three great tragedians. For Aeschylus, the chorus played a more central role. In the *Suppliants*, the chorus is actually the protagonist, while in *Agamemnon*, the play’s themes find clearest expression in statements recited by the chorus. In Sophoclean drama, the chorus could be interpreted as a group of characters with a distinct point of view. In some of Sophocles’s plays, as in *Ajax* and *Electra*, the chorus is most closely attached to the title character. In other plays, namely *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the chorus is made up of city elders who present their opinions on the events they are witnessing. By the time of Euripides, the chorus had taken on a far less central role. According to Rex Warner writing in *Three Great Plays of Euripides*, in the works of Euripides, “The chorus perform in the role of sympathetic listeners and commentators, or provide the audience with a kind of musical and poetic relief from the difficulties or horrors of the action.”

Comedy also made use of the chorus. In Old Comedy, the chorus might take on a slightly different role. For instance, members of the chorus often stirred up trouble among characters. By contrast, the New Comedy used the chorus primarily as a small band of performers who served to entertain the audience or provide musical interludes between scenes.

**Satyr Plays**

Satyr plays were a blend of tragedy and comedy. The underlying themes of the plays were usually of a serious nature, but their plots and tone were absurd and designed for humorous effect. They featured obscene visual and verbal humor as well as characters called satyrs, which are half-man, half-animal, and Silenus, a mythical horseman. Satyr plays were presented after the tragedies at the theatrical competitions and presented a humorous or farcical version of the tragedy that had just been witnessed. Satyr plays were shorter than tragedies, had their unique choral dance, and used more colloquial speech. Like tragedies, satyr plays drew their themes and subjects from mythology. Because Euripides’s *Cyclops* is the only satyr play that has survived in its entirety, little information is known about them, however.
**Deus Ex Machina**

Literally meaning “god from the machine,” *deus ex machina* was the entry of a god or gods at the end of the play to save the protagonist. The *machina*, a staging device, was a crane that flew in the gods or heroes at the end of the play. Euripides and Aristophanes both frequently employed a *deus ex machina* to facilitate the ending. Euripides’s gods would explain in an epilogue what happened next or would remove the protagonist. For example, the *deus ex machina* was used in *Medea* to bring Helios, the sun god, to save Medea from the wrath of Jason as well as to allow her to take the bodies of their sons, thus depriving her husband of even the solace of their proper burial.

**Unity**

Ancient Greek tragedies upheld what Aristotle later named the unities of time, place, and action. Unity of time required that the action of the play take place in twenty-four hours or less; unity of place required that the setting consist of only one location; and unity of action required each event cause the following event without extraneous action or subplots. However, some critics note that Aristotle’s rule regarding the unity of time was not strictly followed. For example, Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* opens on the morning that the Trojan War ends in Asia Minor, yet by the end of that day, Agamemnon has returned some five hundred miles from the conflict, to Greece, where he is murdered by his wife. Aristotle believed that observance of the unities contributed to the intensity of the audience’s experience in viewing the play, particularly the cathartic response.

**The Greek Theater and the Staging of Plays**

The ancient Greek theater was an outdoor area consisting of a large semi-circular dancing floor on which the action took place (called the orchestra); a “scene building” (*skene*, from which the modern word *scene* derives) facade behind the orchestra to which painted scenery could be attached; and a semicircular auditorium around the orchestra made of carved stone steps on which anywhere from ten to twenty thousand spectators could sit. People from all social classes attended the Greek plays.

Plays began with the entrance of the actors and the chorus, accompanied by musicians, through the two entrances on either side of the orchestra. The performers moved and gestured in unison, only breaking formation when they reached their assigned places in the orchestra. Then the story began to unfold, and the members of the chorus moved from place to place or across the stage and back as they reacted to the play’s events and characters. The actors who were distinct from the chorus wore elaborate masks that depicted recognizable types, for example, old men or young women. These masks allowed the same actor to play multiple roles in different scenes and also let men play women’s parts. The theatrical costumes were brightly colored, which aided in character recognition as well. For example, royalty wore purple.

**MOVEMENT VARIATIONS**

**Other Forms of Tragedy**

Aside from the tragedy of the ancient Greeks, great tragedy in the West has been created notably in three other periods and places: England, from 1558 to 1625; seventeenth-century France; and Europe and the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Like Greek theater, Elizabethan drama arose out of religious ceremonies. *Gorboduc*, by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, the first formal tragedy in English, was performed in 1561, but Christopher Marlowe, who wrote in the late 1500s, was the first tragedian worthy of the Greek tradition. Shakespeare produced his five greatest tragedies in the first years of the 1600s. However, tragedy as a dramatic form began to decline after Shakespeare. During the 1600s, though, dramatists in France were also attempting to bring back the ancient form of Greek tragedy. Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine represent the best of the French neoclassical period. These playwrights closely followed the Greek models and Aristotelian unities and drew characters and situations from Ancient Greece. Modern tragedy began with Norway’s Henrik Ibsen, Sweden’s August Strindberg, and Russia’s Anton Chekhov. In the United States, however, few plays presented the full dimensions of tragedy. Some critics have called Eugene O’Neill the first American to write tragedy for the American theater; O’Neill sought to create true tragedy because he believed that the meaning of life—and its hope—lay in the tragic.
All the action took place in outdoor settings, either natural or urban ones.

**Opera**

Opera developed out of the Greek tragedies. This musical form was created in Florence, Italy, at the end of the sixteenth century when a group of scholars, poets, and musicians, called the Camerata, discovered the important role that music played in ancient tragedy. Members of the Camerata collaborated and performed two shows based on mythological stories of Daphne and Eurydice, in 1597 and 1600, respectively. Both performances combined drama, music, and spectacle into what they believed was a recreation of Greek tragedy. The operas were an immediate success, and, in the early 1600s, this new type of performance spread throughout Italy and to France, Austria, Germany, and England. By 1607, Claude Monteverdi’s masterpiece, *Orfeo*, established the fundamental form of the European opera that would remain virtually unchanged for the next three hundred years.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

**The City Dionysia**

Drama arose out of feasts held in honor of the Greek god Dionysus. By the eighth century BC, the Greeks had developed elaborate rituals in his honor, which included poetry recitations and a ceremony called the *dithyramb*. Over time, the *dithyramb*, which was a special form of verse about Dionysus that was accompanied by song and dance, became the highlight of the festival, and it developed to include tales of other gods and heroes. Beginning about 535 BC, Athens began to hold annual festivals known as City Dionysia. This festival included a dramatic competition of *dithyrambic* and *rhapsodia*—Homeric recitation contests. The poet Thespis was the first winner of this contest. His play included *dithyramb* and *rhapsodia*, but he expanded these traditional presentations to include a chorus as well. Thespis thus developed a new art form that later became known as theatrical plays.

The performance began with a procession made up of the playwrights, wealthy citizens who funded the festival, choruses, actors, and important public officials. This parade wended its way through the streets of Athens on the first day of the competition. The procession entered the theater, and then the public sacrifice of a bull to Dionysus took place. The competition opened with the *dithyrambic* contests, and the three tragedies were performed in the ensuing days, each followed by a satyr play. Magistrates responsible for theatrical productions during the City Dionysia were given the responsibility of producing comedies about 487 BC, though volunteers probably produced them there for some years before that. The comedies were presented at night, after the tragedies. A panel of ten judges selected the top winners.

The City Dionysia remained an integral part of Athens’ culture throughout the city’s Golden Age. Taking place at the end of March, it was a major holiday attraction. Greeks from other city-states were welcome to attend the competition or enter plays in it.

**The Age of Pericles**

Democracy was born in Athens in the late sixth century BC, after a long period of dictatorship. To prevent a dictatorship from taking shape once again, the populace developed a set of strong laws. Athenian males, excluding slaves, voted on the city’s political and economic affairs. The city’s assembly made all legislative and electoral decisions.

The defense of the city was managed by ten generals, elected on an annual basis; Pericles was frequently elected as one of these generals and held the post almost every year from 443 to his death in 429. He first came to prominence in 463 and dominated Athenian politics from 447 BC until his death in 429. Pericles sought to increase the Athenian empire and bolster the city’s power throughout Greece. His ambitions led Athens into the Peloponnesian War.

The rise of democracy plays prominent roles in the tragedies. The *Oresteia*, for example, reflects the transformation of Athens from the code of tribal vengeance to the rule of communal, or state, law. According to some critics, Creon, the king-tyrant of Thebes in *Antigone*, was modeled at least in part on Pericles and was intended to serve as a warning to Pericles and the Athenian people about the dangers of dictatorship and putting too much power in the hands of one person.

**The Peloponnesian War**

By the mid-fifth century BC, Athens had built an empire that included many of the Greek city-states. However, it did not rule its empire as
democratically as it did its own city-state. Other Greek cities within the Athenian Empire grew discontented and began to turn to Sparta, Athens' long-standing rival, for protection. In 431 BC, Sparta and its allies declared war on Athens, a war which came to involve most of the city-states. The war lasted for an entire generation, bringing great loss of life, including the death of Pericles. In 404 BC, Athens surrendered, and the ensuing years were ones of instability for Greece. Aristophanes used the backdrop of the Peloponnesian War in many of his plays. Though many of the scenes were very funny, he sought to convey the lesson of the absurdity of the war.

Greek Women
The Greek tragedies depict strong, independent women, but in ancient Athens, this was a rare role for women to play. Women were unable to participate in politics and government; they could not vote or hold office. They rarely were even seen outside the home, except at such events as festivals, marriages, and funerals. They could not marry without the sanction of their male guardian. Only men could initiate divorce, and this was relatively easy for them to accomplish.

However, the tragedians in their plays create women who defy such social standards and the laws that uphold them. Antigone is one such

Greek Drama

**COMPARE & CONTRAST**

- **500s BC:** During this century, Athens becomes the dominant power among the Greek city-states and achieves its greatest economic prosperity and cultural flowering. The Golden Age of Greece is that period in which Athens emerges as the center of the arts.

**Today:** Athens, the capital of Greece, dominates Greek political, cultural, and economic life. About four million people, some 40 percent of the population, live in the city's metropolitan area. Modern Athens contains many ruins, the most famous of which are located on the Acropolis, the high place in the middle of the city and the location of the famous temple of Athena, the Parthenon, and other famous structures, such as the Erechtheum with its Porch of the Maidens.

- **500s BC:** The Greeks believe in a pantheon of twelve gods who live atop Mount Olympus. The gods are seen as powerful beings who do not readily overlook any slights to their honor. Some actions that most offend the gods are a lack of hospitality, lack of proper burial for family members, human arrogance, and murderous violence.

**Today:** The ancient Greek religion held sway until about the fourth century AD, when Christianity spread to the region. Today, all but a small minority of Greeks are members of the Church of Greece, or the Greek Orthodox Church.

- **500s BC:** Around 508 BC, Cleisthenes overthrows the aristocrats who rule Athens and turns the city into a direct democracy. An assembly called the Council of Five Hundred—chosen from local government units—makes the laws, and a court system in which people are tried by a jury of citizens is implemented. In the mid-fifth century BC, Pericles opens public offices to all male citizens and provides that officeholders be paid, thus making it possible for non-wealthy men to serve in government.

**Today:** Greece is a parliamentary republic. Parliament consists of three hundred deputies, and its members are elected for four-year terms by direct, universal, and secret ballots. The prime minister holds considerable power but must be able to command the confidence of the parliament.
character, choosing to ignore the decree of the king when she decides to bury her brother. Antigone’s sister, Ismene, reminds her of their subordinate status—“We must remember, first, that we were born women, who should not strive with men”—but Antigone ignores this warning and follows her own conscience. Medea is another character who flouts contemporary standards. At the beginning of Medea, she openly speaks out against the unfairness of this system to the women of Corinth. Throughout the drama, she emerges as a completely dominating figure.

Greek drama has been very important for the ancient Greeks, later literary development, and modern audiences. Aeschylus, the earliest Greek tragedian, laid the foundation for an aesthetic of drama that would influence plays for well over two thousand years. As E. Christian Kopf stated in “Aeschylus” from The Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 176: Ancient Greek Authors, “In the twentieth century Aeschylus’s plays, especially his trilogy known as the Oresteia (458 BC), are widely considered to be

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Greek drama has been very important for the ancient Greeks, later literary development, and modern audiences. Aeschylus, the earliest Greek tragedian, laid the foundation for an aesthetic of drama that would influence plays for well over two thousand years. As E. Christian Kopf stated in “Aeschylus” from The Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 176: Ancient Greek Authors, “In the twentieth century Aeschylus’s plays, especially his trilogy known as the Oresteia (458 BC), are widely considered to be
masterpieces containing some of the greatest poetry ever composed for the stage.”

The artistic effects of Greek tragedy—the earliest form of drama created—were felt almost immediately. Aristophanes’s *The Frogs*, produced in 405 BC, compares the work of Aeschylus and Euripides. Athenian philosophers began to analyze Greek drama as its period of greatness drew to an end. Plato initiated the history of criticism of tragedy with his speculation on the role of censorship in *The Republic*, written about 380 BC. Fearing the power of tragedy’s language to excite emotions that might be harmful to social order, he recommended that tragedians submit their works to a philosopher ruler for approval. John J. Keaney summarizes Plato’s beliefs in *Ancient Writers*:

> Particularly repugnant to his own religious views are such literary statements as those stating that the gods are responsible for human evils, that they appear to men in various disguises, that they are untruthful.

Aristotle was one of the earliest known critics of Greek drama. In his *Poetics*, written about 334 BC, Aristotle defined a perfect tragedy as imitating actions that excite “pity and fear,” which ends in bringing about a cathartic effect. Aristotle also emphasized plot over character. “Most important of all,” he said, “is the structure of the incidents. For tragedy is an imitation not of men but of an action and of life.” In several chapters of his *Poetics*, Aristotle analyzed Greek tragedies, finding commonalities in structure, characterization, and plot devices. He also found Euripides to be the “most tragic of dramatists.”

The Roman poet Horace discussed in his *Ars Poetica* (Art of Poetry) the Greek tradition of having dramatic and forbidding events, such as Medea’s murder of her two children, take place offstage instead of being performed onstage. He transformed this tendency into a dictum on decorum. Horace believed that tragedy was a genre with its own style. For example, a theme for comedy may not be expressed in a tragedy. Such stylistic distinction lasted throughout the century, as noted in Italian writer Dante’s “De Vulgari Eloquentia” (“Of Eloquence in the Vulgar”), written between 1304 and 1305.

Margarete Bieber wrote in *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* that Greek theater was “so rich and many-sided that each later period of European civilization has found some aspect of it to use as an inspiration or model for its own time.” Indeed, Greek plays enjoyed enormous popularity in the Roman Empire, and nearly all the plays performed there were imitations or loose translations of Greek dramas. In the second century BC, Plautus and Terence, the most important writers of Roman comedy, were influenced by the Greek New Comedy. When European writers returned to drama, after the medieval period ended, they, in turn, were influenced by Plautus and Terence. Thus the stock characters that were originally created by the Greek comedians continued to thrive.

In addition to experiencing a reawakening of an interest in Roman comedies, Renaissance audiences also began to stage Greek tragedies. From the 1500s on, plays by the three great tragedians were translated and performed in such countries as France, Italy, and Germany.

Contemporary drama is greatly influenced by Greek drama. Many playwrights, such as Eugene O’Neill, have reworked the ancient tragedies. Numerous tragedies as well as comedies continue to be presented on the modern stage. Jeffrey Henderson noted in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* that audiences throughout the world enjoy Aristophanes’s “memorable poetry, style, and fantasy.” He also pointed out that these comedies “remain highly useful to historians of classical Athens for their power to illuminate the political vitality and intellectual richness of that extraordinary era.”

Tragedies remain successful for different reasons, namely their universal themes, which render them relevant to audiences. Charles R. Walker stated in his 1966 study *Sophocles’ “Oedipus the King” and “Oedipus at Colonus”* that “Oedipus and other Greek plays have begun to speak to the modern world with the authority of living theater.” Toward the end of the twentieth century, Karelisa V. Hartigan, writing in *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage*, upheld this view:

> The theme or message of the plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides has consistently been deemed important, because the issues addressed by the writers of fifth-century BC Athens continue to be current, continue to have a relevance for twentieth-century America.

## CRITICISM

**Rena Korb**

Korb has a master’s degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide...
Aristotle’s *Poetics* is the first critical work focusing on tragedy as an art form. Written about 380 BC, the *Poetics* provides an extensive analysis of the genre.

Eugene O’Neill is considered to be one of the few modern American tragedians. His *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1932), a trilogy, is a reworking of the *Oresteia* trilogy. It is set in Puritan New England during the Civil War. O’Neill wanted to create a modern psychological tragedy that used the mythology and legends of Ancient Greece.

Several post–World War II French writers have attempted to revitalize the Greek tragedy through more contemporary plays. Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Flies* (1943) is based on *Eumenides*, the final play of the *Oresteia* trilogy. Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* (1942) is based on Sophocles’s play of the same name. In both plays, political ideals and rebellions are used instead of religious ideals and actions.

Opera arose out of ancient Greek tragedy. Many of the greatest operas, such as Claudio Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, are based on the plays and myths of Ancient Greece.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) argues that Greek tragedy arose out of a fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Apollonian elements represent measure, restraint, and harmony, and Dionysian elements represent unrestrained passion. Nietzsche also believes that Socratic rationalism and optimism brought about the end of Greek tragedy.

Greek tragedies all raise questions about humankind’s existence and its suffering. One of their most insistent concerns was the elusive nature of justice, particularly divine justice, and the intrinsically linked concept of the validity of revenge. The ancient Greeks believed that the gods begrudged human greatness and caused people who were too successful to make poor choices of action. Often, these actions revolved around excessive pride, or hubris. Thus the terrible undoings that befell these proud people could be seen as just punishment. Each of the three great tragedians raised such issues, but as they held unique perceptions of the world and the way they wanted to portray it, they were also unique in the depiction of justice.

Euripides presents a very different picture of justice than his predecessors in the Greek tragic tradition. Justice is no longer a motivating theme but an ironic one.”
In other plays, Aeschylus uses more complex relationships and events to investigate the theme of justice. The ancient Greeks believed in the idea of hereditary guilt, and Aeschylus’s plays evince this theory. Often it is not the unjust who are punished, but their descendants. The Oresteia is an ideal play to study the themes of revenge and justice; in this trilogy, these themes are intrinsically linked together. The human desire for vengeance is what drives the need for a prevailing justice.

In the first play of the trilogy, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra murders her husband upon his return from the Trojan War. She kills Agamemnon in revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter at the beginning of the expedition against Troy, as well as to punish him for taking a mistress. After the deed is done, she stands over the body and insists to the chorus that justice has been accomplished. However, Apollo orders Orestes, the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, to avenge his father’s death and murder his mother. After he does so, the chorus sings a song of thanksgiving, celebrating the victory of justice. However, the third play of the trilogy finds Orestes pursued by the Furies, underworld avenging powers whom Clytemnestra has cursed upon him. Eventually, Orestes is brought to trial at the court of Athens, attended by the goddess Athena, who, when the vote of the jury is evenly split, votes to acquit him and provides a sanctuary where the furies may rest. Only then is the cycle of bloodshed and vengeance in the house of Atreus brought to an end. So, justice can now be found in the courts, aided by the intervention of Athena, rather than through the actions of family and tribal members seeking vengeance.

Sophocles was the next great tragedian. Charles Segal wrote of Sophocles in Ancient Writers, “While retaining Aeschylus’ mood of deep religious seriousness, Sophocles deals with the question of divine justice and the problem of suffering in a more naturalistic way.” Because his focus remains on the human world rather than the world of the gods, the issues of justice are more human-centered. Many critics and scholars believe that Sophocles most closely relates the truest state of human experience, thus the decisions made by Sophocles’ characters rest more upon their mortal shoulders, not upon the shoulders of the gods.

Electra condenses the plot of the Oresteia into one play, which focuses on the daughter’s desire for justice and vengeance for the death of Agamemnon. Isolated in the palace after her father’s murder, Electra remains the sole voice raised against allowing the crime to go unpunished and unnoticed. She lives for only one thing—the return of Orestes so he can avenge the murder. When she learns the (false) news of his death, she attempts to enlist the help of her sister in the murder of Clytemnestra, but when her sister refuses, she resolves to carry out the matricide by herself. Although Orestes shows up at the last moment and carries out the murder while Electra waits outside the house with the chorus, Electra’s single-minded purpose shows the consuming power of the desire for vengeance and a form—albeit a criminal one—of justice.

Sophocles’s masterpiece, Oedipus the King, shows a different way that justice can be attained—through self-punishment. In this play, Oedipus has unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus—left to die as a baby by his real father, rescued by a shepherd from a nearby kingdom, and adopted into the royal family of that kingdom—committed these crimes against the laws of nature without realizing what he was doing. Despite his lack of moral culpability, when Oedipus discovers what he has done, he blinds himself. While the play ends on a note of despair, Oedipus’s action can be construed in a positive light, since he has administered punishment to himself and brought about justice for ill deeds. Instead of committing suicide, as his wife/mother does, Oedipus chooses a more extreme form of self-punishment, “For no one else of mortals except me can bear my sufferings.”

Euripides presents a very different picture of justice than his predecessors in the Greek tragic tradition. Justice is no longer a motivating theme but an ironic one. In Hippolytus, the goddess Aphrodite takes revenge on Hippolytus because he refuses to worship her. She is not acting out of a respect for justice but out of spite. In the Bacchae, Dionysus, scorned by Pentheus, causes a group of women, including Pentheus’s mother, to murder and dismember him, while they were in a state of frenzy. Unlike the gods in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the gods in Euripides’s plays cannot be appealed to for justice, nor will they help promote it, as Athena did in the Eumenides. Instead, in these two plays, Euripides shows their personal injustice, which has been
seen earlier but never caused by such pettiness and self-indulgence.

In Euripides’s play *Medea*, justice and vengeance take a shocking form. To punish her husband for forsaking her, Medea raises the idea of murdering their children. Her passion for revenge is so strong that, despite a long monologue in which she questions this choice, Medea decides this is the right action to take. Medea’s inner conflict is what raises her to the status of tragic heroine. She closes her inner debate with these words: “Though I understand what sort of evil I am going / to do, still, heart is stronger than what I have / thought out, this heart that causes humankind’s / greatest evils.” Medea thus recognizes that the action she is taking is governed by the need for human vengeance, not by the desire to correct injustice. Also interesting is that, though the children suffer for the wrongdoings of their parents, it is not because of inherent guilt, so Medea reverses the idea of hereditary guilt that was such a crucial part of the *Oresteia*.

Euripides also has his own rendition of the *Oresteia*, the play *Orestes*. Orestes’s revenge is of a dual nature: it is sanctioned by Apollo, who commanded the murder of Clytemnestra, thus it represents divine vengeance; it is also vengeance of a personal and heroic nature, because he also kills Clytemnestra to recover his birthright. However, because Euripides places greater emphasis on the individual’s own choice of action than on his or her preordained fate laid out by the gods, Orestes’s actions are viewed more as revenge than as justice. As the play begins, it is Orestes who must face the demands of justice, the justice of the city. As Christian Wolff wrote in *Ancient Writers*, “It is as though the heroic and divinely sanctioned mode of revenge were being put on trial by the human community.”

In *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage*, Karelisa V. Hartigan noted that part of the appeal of the plays *Medea* and *Electra* is the theme of revenge. “The theme of Euripides’s text has not seemed to trouble either those onstage or those in the audience overly much,” she wrote. Indeed, modern audiences bring their own points of view to these plays, and looking through the eyes of feminism, some critics see Medea’s act of revenge as stemming from Jason’s “victimization” of her. A play such as Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, according to Hartigan, is less attractive to modern audiences because the title character takes no personal revenge against those who cause his suffering. Greek
tragedy continues to be relevant to modern audiences because the themes it presents are universal, crossing boundaries of time and place.


**Chad Turner**

In this essay, Turner argues that the *Supplices*, in contrast to Aeschylus’s earlier play *The Persae*, blurs ethnic and ethical distinctions between Greeks and non-Greeks through its inversions of the roles various groups portray.

Scholars have described suppliant dramas as typically comprising three essential agents: a persecutor, a victim, and a protector. Malcolm Heath suggests that suppliant dramas use this structure to prompt their audiences toward “moral judgments and guiding reactions of sympathy and antipathy.” In the *Supplices* of Aeschylus, the Danaids suggest to Pelasgus that the roles of persecutor, victim, and protector in their suppliancy belong to the Aegyptids, the Danaids and the Argives, respectively. I will argue, however, that a number of clues in the *Supplices* suggest that over the course of the Danaid trilogy, the participants in the suppliant drama act in ways that resist and ultimately reject these initial categorizations. The persecutor-victim-protector schema finally translates into Danaids-Argives-Aegyptids. This perversion of supplication’s usual schema is symptomatic of other inversions found in the play. If in the *Persae* Aeschylus constructs an ethnic and, more importantly, an ethical polarity between Greek and Barbarian, then the Danaid trilogy might be read as a palinode of sorts to that earlier play. For while many of the *Supplices*’ characters assert just such a rigid contrast between Greek and non-Greek, the text repeatedly undermines this reading, and instead blurs the ethnic and ethical distinctions between the two.

The Danaids’ claim of victimization axiomatically depends upon the justness of their suppliant cause. The suppliant may be in the right by virtue of striving toward a socially accepted goal (e.g., burial of the dead, as in Eur. *Supp.*, or ritual purification, as in Aesch. *Eum*.), or, more vaguely, by simply suffering hardship from a position of weakness (e.g., as in Soph. *OC*: Eur. *Held*). The Danaids fail to meet either of these criteria. Consequently, their assumption of the suppliant’s role is invalid. Critics have essentially proposed two alternatives for the basis of the Danaids’ plea for asylum. Many have argued that they specifically flee marriage with their cousins—perhaps motivated by a fear of incest, or of marriage with violent barbarians, or else fearing for their father’s life. Others argue that the Danaids flee marriage as an institution. The evidence, however, suggests that they harbor an absolute aversion against marriage, instilled in them by their father, who had learned from an oracle that he would be murdered by one of his sons-in-law. A handful of passages virtually demand that the Danaids reject marriage as an institution. This much seems clear from the exchange that begins at 996–1009. Danaus entreats his daughters to beware of young men who would take advantage of their maidenhood:

[…]

I beg you, do not shame me, having the bloom that is to be admired by men. Delicate fruit is not at all easily guarded. Both beasts and men ravage them, both winged beasts and those on foot. Why indeed? Thus Cypris heralds fruit dripping with love, and against the fair-formed charms of maidens everyone approaching shoots a charmed arrow from the eye, vanquished by desire. Let us not suffer those things for which there has been great labor, for which the great sea was plowed by oar, let us do no shame for us, pleasure for our enemies …

He concludes his speech: […] (“Only keep this command of your father, honor modesty more than life.”). The Danaids respond at 1015–17:

[…]

Be confident in our youth, father. For unless the gods plan something new, we will not turn the course of our former intent.

PITTED AGAINST THE VERY DEFINITION OF BARBARISM, THE DANAIDS AND THEIR ARGIVE HOSTS SEEM TO CEMENT THE GREEK-BARBARIAN POLARITY BY INVOKING THAT VERY HELLENIC INSTITUTION, SUPPLICATION.”
Danaus' warning and his daughters' response are telling in that they directly follow the Argives' repeated assurances of protection. As the threat of an Aegyptid marriage is suspended, Danaus must fear the possibility of any marriage whatsoever. The Danaids respond by confirming that their virginal convictions remain intact: they will not sway from their "former intent." In their commentary H. F. Johansen and E. W. Whittle assert that here the Danaids merely assure their father that they will continue to resist an Aegyptid marriage—"it need not apply to a respectable marriage" with Argive men. Such an interpretation is unconvincing. The most natural implication of this passage is that the Danaids' avoidance of all marriage was a prior constant [...] previously challenged by the Aegyptids, and presently in no danger of wavering in the presence of potential Argive suitors. Johansen and Whittle are correct to note that Danaus does seem suspicious that his daughters might yet succumb to the temptations of marriage. One should not, however, assume that his fear of their sexual activity necessarily indicates a pro-marriage stance on their part.

The exchange between the Danaids and the secondary chorus in the exodos also strongly suggests that the Danaids harbor an absolute rejection of marriage. At 1030–3 the chorus sing:

[...]
May chaste Artemis look upon this band with compassion, and may wedlock not come through constraint of Cytherea. May that prize be my enemies'.

At 1034–42 the secondary chorus counters this stance, extolling the reverence due to marriage:

[...]
Yet this well-intended song does not neglect Cypris, for with Hera she is almost as powerful as Zeus, the god of varied wiles is honored with solemn rites. Accompanying their dear mother are Longing, and Persuasion, to which enchantress nothing is denied. A portion of Aphrodite is also given to Harmony, whispering paths of the Loves...

The secondary chorus concludes with the pronouncement "The ending of marriage has accompanied many women before" [...]. These generalized statements defending marriage as such would be completely superfluous were the issue for the Danaids limited simply to an Aegyptid marriage. Similarly, the secondary chorus later calls for moderation at 1059 and 1061 would suggest that the Danaids hold a correspondingly extreme antipathy toward all marriage. As a suppliant cause, this absolute rejection of marriage and all that goes with it—family, fertility, the underpinnings of the oikos and ultimately the polis—is hardly on a par with burying the dead or seeking protection from tyranny. The latter two were values deeply entrenched in Athenian society, whereas perpetual virginity on a massive scale was antithetical to it.

The Danaids, then, enlist Pelasgus' aid in a dubious cause, and their exchange at 340–44 suggests that Pelasgus knows it:

[...]
King: How can I be pious toward you?
Chor.: Do not give us back to the demanding sons of Aegyptus.
King: You say heavy things, to undertake a new war.
Chor.: But Justice protects her allies.
King: If indeed she shared in the business from the start.

Pelasgus, then, doubts the validity of the Danaids' suppliant status. Are they, as suppliants by definition must be, victims clinging to a just cause? Repeatedly, the Danaids argue affirmatively. They characterize their request with a form of the word [dike] or [themis] fifteen times. And yet, the Danaids never argue the strictly legal merits of their abstinence from marriage. Pelasgus requests that they do just that, but they resort instead to strident histrionics:

[...]
King: If the sons of Aegyptus rule over you by the laws of your city, claiming to be the closest of kin, who would wish to oppose them? It is necessary to flee according to your own laws at home, how they have no authority over you.
Chor.: May I never become subject to the powers of men!

The legality of the entire matter has prompted extensive debate. Johansen and Whittle offer the most sensible analysis:

The Egyptian law assumed by Pelasgus corresponds closely enough to Athenian law and practice respecting girls' control and marriage by their male next of kin for the legal position outlined in Supplices to have been easily understandable by Aeschylus' audience... Danaus is not represented in Supplices as being legally...
next of kin and [kyrios] of his own daughters. It
is assumed . . . that these rights are already
enjoyed by the Aegyptiads; that they do not
depend on the contingency of Danaus’ death
is further suggested by his twice mentioning
that contingency without any reference to the
legal position.

As tragic suppliants, then, the Danaids are
atypical in their embodiment of a dubious cause.
Moreover, they fail to act the part of helpless
victims in their relationship with their would-be
protectors at Argos. J. Gould notes that supplica-
tion is “symbolically aggressive, yet unhurt-
ful.” By speaking from an avowed position of
powerlessness, Gould suggests, the suppliant
appeals to the [aídos] of the would-be protector.
The condition of aídos implies a “reciprocity of
behavior and attitude.” In the Supp., we find the
Danaids have reversed the usual power dynamic
between suppliant and protector, and all recip-
rocity is lacking. While there is often an implicit
warning of divine sanction should a suppliant be
refused, the Danaids amazingly threaten to be
their own agents of retribution if the Argives
disregard their supplication. On its own merits,
the Danaids’ cause fails to persuade Pelasgus to
help; as late as line 452, he demurs from assum-
ing the role of protector to the self-proclaimed
suppliant victims: [...] (“Indeed, I shrink from
this quarrel.”) For the first half of the drama, the
Danaids’ improper suppliant cause fails to
arouse a feeling of [aídos] in Pelasgus. Why,
then, does the king finally relent? This reversal,
as so many have noted, comes as the result of
threatened suicide at 455–67. Faced with a “pol-
lution beyond exaggeration” [...] brought on by
the Danaids’ mass suicide, Pelasgus agrees to
champion their cause.

The significance of this threat has never, I
think, been fully appreciated. Gould correctly
recognizes that in Greek literature “The first
and most obvious thing to note about the behav-
ior of the suppliant is that he goes through a
series of gestures and procedures that together
constitute total self-abasement.” The suppliant
in literature, Gould goes on to suggest, assumes
the position of a slave in relation to the suppli-
cated. By threatening to inflict a terrible pol-
lution on Argos, however, the Danaids instead
effectively assume the role of vengeful deities in
relation to the supplicated; rather than profess-
ing to be in a position of weakness below Pelas-
gus, they threaten to take a position of power
over him. This arrangement cannot be termed a
reciprocal demonstration of [aídos]. Rather,
because the Danaids cannot reasonably expect
that Pelasgus be [aídoios] toward their stance
against marriage, they extort his aid and rely
upon his feelings of [aídos] toward the Argive
people. Unable to persuade Pelasgus as power-
less victims of Aegyptid persecution, they
assume the role of potential persecutors against
the victimized city of Argos; the usual power
structure between the suppliant and the suppli-
cated has been reversed. While the Danaids’
transformation from victim to persecutor is
clearly begun in the Supplices, the victimization
of Argos was likely only fully realized in the
remainder of the trilogy. Peter Burian has cited
the axiom that in Greek tragedy, a city granting
refuge to a suppliant receives some benefit. We
find this dramatic rule adhered to in Sophocles’
OC, Euripides’ Hæld. and Supp., and Aeschylus’
own Eum. At lines 625–709, the Danaids invoke
at length blessings for their Argive protectors.
For some time scholars have recognized the
ironic foreshadowing in this ode. As a result of
granting the Danaids asylum, Argos will not
receive joyous blessings, but rather suffer tre-
mendous anguish. For example, we know that
at some point later in the trilogy, the Danaids
muster their cousins. As the audience doubt-
lessly knew to expect this, they could not but
see the irony in the Danaids’ prayer, “May no
manslaying ruin come upon this city, rending it
asunder” [...] Also fairly certain is the advent of
a war between the Argives and Aegyptids,
despite the Danaids’ repeated prayers to the
contrary.

On the basis of these fairly certain examples
of ironic foreshadowing, we may extrapolate
two more. I follow Alan Sommerstein and others
in assuming that after the forecast Argive-
Aegyptid war, Danaus succeeds the fallen Pelas-
gus to the throne specifically as a tyrant, rather
than a king. This difference in their modes of
leadership prefigures their contrasting attitudes
toward their Argive subjects. As many have
remarked, Pelasgus demonstrates a concern for
the Argive demos beyond even his constitutional
requirements as king. I would argue that two
excerpts from the Argive benediction ironically
foreshadow the abuses of Danaus’ future tyr-
anny. In the second antistrophe, the Danaids
foreshadow the murder of the Aegyptids specif-
ically as a function of the bad governmental
policy by which Danaus will soon rule Argos:
May the state be regulated well, the state of those who honor great Zeus, most of all as the guardian of the guest-right . . .

Then in the fourth strophe the Danaids go on to pray:

May the people who rule the polis guard without fear its honors, a prudent government taking common counsel. And may they give honest justice to strangers— before arming Ares— without pains.

The opposite likely takes place: whereas King Pelasgus emphatically ruled by means of a “prudent government taking common counsels,” the tyrant Danaus will not; whereas King Pelasgus championed the Danaid xenoi to save his people from the pollution of fifty suicides, the tyrant Danaus will not hesitate to bring pollution upon Argos by ordering the homicide of fifty Aegyptid xenoi. In this ode we find compelling allusions to the further victimization of Argos.

Thus far I have examined the Danaids’ and the Argives’ shifting roles within the persecutor-victim-protector schema of the drama. It remains to examine how the Aegyptids might complete the transformation of this dramatic form by evolving from the role of persecutors to that of protectors. This transformation would emerge almost entirely within the character of Lynceus, the only Aegyptid to survive his wedding night. Certainly, in his apparently happy union with Hypermestra, Lynceus would seem to have abandoned the role of persecutor. If I am correct to suggest that Danaus and his daughters have usurped the role of persecutor against the victimized people of Argos, might we not expect Lynceus to occupy the vacant role of protector?

Again, the uncertainties of reconstructing the trilogy make any remarks extremely tentative, but Aeschylus’ tendency toward foreshadowing will render them at least plausible. We have already noted the likely tyranny of Danaus in the remainder of the trilogy. His tyranny, I have followed others in arguing, reaches full bloom when he orders the murder of the Aegyptids, inflicting a terrible pollution upon Argos. D. J. Conacher has suggested an ironic forecast of this pollution and its eventual expiation at lines 260–7. When introducing himself to the Danaids, Pelasgus embarks upon a digression about the name of his kingdom:

The plain of this land was named Apian long ago, for a mortal surgeon. For Apis, coming from the ends of Naupactus, the seer and healer son of Apollo cleansed this land of manslaying monsters, that the earth sent up, defiled by pollution of ancient blood . . . a hostile co-habitation of teeming serpents.

Conacher writes of the passage, “[We] should ask, perhaps, whether the King’s reference to ancient ‘blood pollution . . . surgeries and deliverances’ . . . performed on this land may not be an ironic anticipation of similar events to come.”

I agree with Conacher that Pelasgus’ digression does foreshadow the eventual purification of the Aegyptid murders. I would only add that the agent of the original purification, Apis, suggests Lynceus as the agent of the purification to come. Though Apis here is a Greek, there was also a mythic tradition that made Apis an Egyptian physician who came to Greece or else an Argive king who settled in Memphis. Although they detect no foreshadowing in the passage, Johansen and Whittle suggest Aeschylus here “perhaps establishes a link between [Greece and Egypt] from the mere identity of name.” The duality of Apis in myth is suggestive of Lynceus, an Aegyptid who is Greek through his descent from Io, and who in the mythic tradition founds a royal line at Argos with Hypermestra. Who better to save Argos from pollution than its new king? By deposing the tyrant Danaus and rescuing Argos from this second pollution, Lynceus discards the role of persecutor for that of protector; in so doing, he completes the trilogy’s reassignment of roles in the persecutor-victim-protector schema initially suggested by the Danaids’ supplication.

Francis M. Dunn writes, “When a play begins with a suppliants scene, it usually does so in order to present a moral or political crisis in clear, unambiguous terms.” The Supplices of Aeschylus evinces no such agenda. Instead, we find an unsympathetic, menacing group of victims; we see the beginnings of a victimized would-be protector city; and we have reason to suspect a reformed persecutor who, with a heroic flourish, saves the day. Why? To what end might Aeschylus have decided to so thoroughly confuse the usual structure of tragic supplication? The typical supplicant plot would seem to be an ideal narrative vehicle for clearly differentiating
heroes from villains, right from wrong. It is therefore not surprising that the Athenians would employ the suppliant plot in its furtherance of the Greek-versus-Barbarian ideals during and after the Persian Wars. A united Greece led by Athens upheld the distinctly Hellenic values of dike, eusebeia, and sophrosyne against the barbaric Persian forces of bia, asebeia, and anomia. Greek artisans imputed a timelessness to this polarity by the employment of metaphors featuring mythical Amazons, Giants, and Centaurs. As part and parcel of their protection of Hellenic values, the Athenians prided themselves as the defenders of Heracles’ suppliant children against Eurystheus, as well as the advocates for the burial of the Argive dead at Thebes on behalf of their suppliant mothers. These were among the mythic exploits recounted in epitaphioi logoi to delineate the righteousness of Athens in contrast with the barbaric East and even with the rest of Greece.

On the very basic level of plot, the conflict of Aeschylus’ Supplices seems to mirror that of his Persae: invaders from the barbaric East threaten the values of the Hellenic West. The Danaids themselves impute this structure by asserting their Greek identity early in the drama, and castigating the barbarity of the Aegyptids frequently thereafter. The menacing threats of the Egyptian herald near the end of the play seem to confirm the Danaids’ aspersions, especially when contrasted with the democratic monarchy of Pelasgus. Pitted against the very definition of barbarism, the Danaids and their Argive hosts seem to cement the Greek-Barbarian polarity by invoking that very Hellenic institution, supplication. Edith Hall has demonstrated that in the Persae, Aeschylus constructs a polarized schema whereby Greek is systematically differentiated from Persian both ethnically and ethically. In the Supplices, various characters impute a similar polarity between the Danaid fugitives and their Aegyptid pursuers. Employing an ethical vocabulary very much evocative of language in the Persae, the Danaids present themselves as agents of sophrosyne, themis and dikê, harried by perpetrators of asebeia, bia, and hubris. Inasmuch as Hellenic and Athenian virtues are found to be identical in tragedy, the Danaids’ sponsorship by the emphatically democratic monarch Pelasgus furthers their identification with Hellenic ethê, while the threats of the Aegyptid herald at the close of the Supplices would seem to confirm the Danaids’ claims of Aegyptid barbarity. Indeed, at 914–5 Pelasgus himself characterizes the conflict as one between Greeks and barbarians: “Being a barbarian, you toy too much with Greek women, and erring greatly you’ve got nothing straight in your mind” […]

In the Persae, Aeschylus articulates the polarity between Greek and barbarian in absolute terms, imputing both complete heterogeneity between the two cultures, as well as complete homogeneity within each. The complexity with which Aeschylus treats the suppliant plot adumbrates a larger pattern of confusion that disrupts the popularly held dichotomy between Greeks and barbarians in the fifth century B.C.E. Instead of the Persae’s stark dichotomies, the Supplices confounds the divide between East and West. Ethically and ethnically, the Supplices confuses the criteria by which the Persae had differentiated right from wrong. Although the barbarian status of the Aegyptids is not for them the central issue—marriage is—the Danaids construe the question of marriage into a question of Greek versus Barbarian. Ironically, framing the conflict in these terms casts further doubt onto the righteousness of the Danaid cause. Though the Persae is set at Susa, the dominant geography of the drama comprises the cities and territories that made up the Delian League by 472. In the Supplices Aeschylus offers a similar vision of Greece’s mythic past. The Argos that serves as the setting of the Supplices is not the same Argos that we find in the Oresteia. At 254–59, Pelasgus describes the boundaries of Argos:

[...] Over the entire land through which the hallowed Strymon courses, toward the setting of the sun, I am ruler. I mark as my borders the land of the Perraebi, west of Pindus, near the Paioni, and the Dodonian mountains. The boundary of the running sea is their border. I also rule over those lands near them.

Thus the Argos of Pelasgus comprises virtually all of mainland Greece. As in the Persae, we moreover find this Panhellenic representation substantially reconfigured specifically to resemble Athens. The speech wherein Danaus recounts the Argive vote to honor the Danaids’ supplication makes a number of allusions to the procedures of the Athenian assembly: to the language of decrees, to voting by a show of hands, to the punishment of atimia; Danaus even makes
punishing references to Athenian *demokratia*. In the *Supplices*, all of Greece is Argos and Argos, Athens. Although the Danaids try to insinuate themselves in this Hellenic world while portraying the Aegyptids as the barbarian Other, various textual markers below, however, suggest that the distinction is not so steadfast.

Because they honor the Danaids’ supplicant status, Pelasgus and the Argive people find themselves at odds with the Aegyptids. The confrontation between Pelasgus and the Egyptian herald has all the trappings of the Greek-Barbarian dichotomy found in the *Persae*. When Danaus first sees the Egyptian flotilla approaching, he remarks on the Aegyptids’ black skin. His daughters wonder at the Aegyptids’ “great, black army.” Next, in the space of some eighty lines, Danaus and his daughters alternately call the Aegyptids crazed, impious, murderous; monstrous, oppressive and hubristic. In Aeschylus’ hands, it appears the Aegyptids might as well be Xerxes’ Persians.

Such a conflict might well be expected from the author of the *Persae*, with issues of right and wrong clearly defined along a convenient West-East axis. As in his treatment of supplication, however, Aeschylus here, too, injects difficulty into a formerly simple ideology. One element of that difficulty lies in the mixed heritage of the Danaids. Upon their entrance, the Danaids identify themselves as the Other:

[...]

May Zeus Protector willingly grant our ship this journey, seized from the finely sanded mouths of the Nile.

Yet this Otherness is not absolute. They claim ultimately Greek parentage:

[...]

[Danaus ... achieved] landing at the land of Argos, whence our race boasts to descend, from Zeus’ touching and breathing upon a cow driven mad by the gadfly.

Nevertheless, the Danaids to all outward appearances are barbarians. The maidens themselves speak of their barbarous speech, and Pelasgus is immediately struck by their foreign appearance upon meeting them:

[...]

Whence comes this foreign company we address, luxuriant in barbarous robes and veils? Not the Argive clothing of women, nor from the other places of Greece.

Ethically, then, the Danaids appear to be Egyptian despite their Argive ancestry. Hence, Pelasgus goes on to liken their appearance to Libyans, Ethiopians, and Amazons. In the *Persae* one mark of barbarian Otherness is language. Here, too, the Danaids often appear a group of ‘Them’ Egyptians rather than ‘Us’ Greeks. They are keenly aware of this, characterizing themselves as “foreign-sounding.” We find in the Danaids’ speech all the markers of barbarian speech found in the *Persae*: repetition and alliteration, anaphora, and exotic cries. Even in noting their foreign speech, the Danaids sound foreign: “[...][...][...][...][...].” According to *LSJ*, Karbanos is a foreign loan-word equivalent to barbaros. The overt ethnicity of the Danaids therefore mitigates Pelasgus’ summary of the conflict as one pitting barbarian men versus Greek women.

The actions of the Danaids and Aegyptids alike further baffle any attempt to schematize the moral landscape of the drama’s conflict. Let us grant for a moment the essential Greekness of the Danaids, all appearances to the contrary. It is on the basis of this premise that they fled to Argos, and on which Pelasgus allows them to plead their supplicant cause. Given their eagerness to take refuge in the Greek world, it is remarkable the extent to which Danaus and his daughters will assume the ethics of the barbarian culture from which they flee. Above we saw many ethnically barbarian markers attributed to the Aegyptids: *asebeia*, *hubris*, *bia*, and *anomia*. Despite their claims to a Hellenic identity, the Danaids and their father also exhibit many qualities that, at least, are antithetical to the Hellenic culture, and at worst, are associated with the barbarian. We have already examined the evidence for the Danaids’ general aversion to marriage, noting moreover its opposition toward the contemporary Greek culture. The Danaids’ eventual violation of *xenia* in murdering their cousins is an especially un-Greek act with strong connotations of violent barbarism. Notable examples of barbarous violations of *xenia* in myth include the Odyssey’s Laestrygonians and Cyclopes; the Thracian king Diomedes, who fed his guests to his flesh-eating horses; Procrustes, who maimed travellers who lay in his bed; and another Thracian king, Polymestor, who murders the son of Priam and Hecuba. These actions of the Danaids greatly muddle the familiar polarity between
Greek West and barbarian East. Whereas the Persæ exalted Greek values shared by all, the Supplices dramatizes Greek values suddenly in question.

One of the less obvious manifestations of the Danaids’ barbarian nature lies in their manipulation of supplication. As we have already determined, the Danaids’ assumption of supplicant status involves a fair amount of manipulation: they are less than forthcoming about the legality of their cause; and they virtually extort the aid of Pelasgus through threats of mass suicide. Edith Hall argues that Danaus is responsible for most of this manipulation: “In Aeschylus’ Supplices the length and detail of Danaus’ prescription to his daughters for their appeal to the Argives [176–203] indicates that the audience is supposed to take note of his calculated ‘stage management’ of the scene.” Hall does well to point out that Danaus’ coaching typifies what would become the characterization of the wily Egyptians in later comedy and oratory. Also salutary is her quotation of an Aeschylean fragment (fr. 373 N2): […] (“Egyptians are terribly good at weaving wiles”). The suggestion that the fragment belongs to the Danaid trilogy is attractive. The basic sequence of action in the Danaids’ supplication runs thus: a manipulative assumption of the supplicant role forces a ruler to grant asylum; this protection of the supplicant’s rights results in great harm for that ruler and/or others. We find the same pattern of action in those tragedies where a more overtly barbarian character claims the role of supplicant, only to effect great violence. In Euripides’ Medea, the eponymous barbarian persuades a wary Creon to honor her supplication, with dire results for the king and his family. Hecuba in her name-play likewise assumes the role of a supplicant to facilitate an act of violence against Polymestor. In Aeschylus’ Supplices, the Danaids’ supplication has similar consequences.

Logically, our reevaluation of the Danaids within the Greek-Barbarian polarity would demand the same for the Aegyptids. On the face of it, they seem very much to reprise Xerxes’ armies in the Persæ: described in uniformly barbarian terms, they invade the shores of Greece, demanding submission under threat of war. The Danaids suggest that their struggle against the Aegyptids is one of dike versus hubris […] Yet just as there is much that is barbaric about the Danaids, there is much that is Hellenic in these barbarians. Although never represented as Greek, the Aegyptids alone pursue a marriage that a contemporary audience would have regarded as quite proper. Moreover, we have seen how Pelasgus’ historical digression at 260–7 seems to predict the ascension of the Aegyptid Lynceus as a sort of inverted Gigantomachy, wherein a civilized hero travels from East to West, defeating the violent monsters born in Greece. The likely ascension of King Lynceus at trilogy’s end would signal the demise of Danaus’ tyranny and a return to Pelasgus’ brand of “democratic” monarchy, as I intend to argue elsewhere. The story of Harmodius and Aristogiton could not claim to be more representative of what it meant to be Greek in the fifth century BCE.

On the surface, the Supplices presents the conflict between the Danaids and Aegyptids as the structural equivalent of that between Greeks and Persians in Aeschylus’ Persæ. To conclude, I would like to suggest briefly why the historical developments between 472 and 463 might have thwarted a mere reprisal of the earlier play’s Panhellenic chauvinism. The subjugation of Naxos and Thasos c. the mid-460’s represented a blurring of the Delian League’s original ideology, constructed along a clear West-versus-East axis. From 479 to 476 the sequence Marathon-Salamis-Plataea-Mycale-Eion connoted an unwavering Athenian righteousness and the koinonia of Panhellenic freedom. Conversely, the later sequence Naxos-Eurymedon-Thasos revealed Greek fragmentation and an Athenian sense of righteousness that tailored itself according to circumstance. Athens and the League now preferred the reduction of weak Hellenic poleis over their liberation from Persian mastery. A mere two years after the production of the Danaid trilogy, Athens would secure an alliance with Argos, a former Medizer; such a move would have been unthinkable in 472. The Supplices likewise imparts ambiguity on formerly certain Hellenic values and institutions. Although they try to assume the position of helpless Greeks under assault by barbarous Egyptians, Danaus and his daughters nonetheless exhibit a number of troubling barbaric attitudes. Instead of celebrating the spread of Hellenic power from West to East, evidence suggests that this trilogy details a dynastic power-struggle moving from East to West: the Greek king Pelasgus gives way to the putatively Greek tyrant Danaus, who in turn gives way to the barbarian Lynceus. Paradoxically, however, it is this outward movement toward barbarism that
will secure the Hellenic values so grievously compromised in the Supplices. Marriage wins out over extreme virginity, and guests find their proper limits, and thinly disguised democratic values triumph over Persian-styled despotism. The Danaid trilogy, it seems, completely reverses the Greek-Barbarian polarity found in the Persae. It would be odd, indeed, if the political changes between 472 and 463 did not have some bearing on Aeschylus’ transformation as a political thinker during those same years.


**Sources**


**Further Reading**


This book is useful in understanding the basic themes of Greek tragedy as well as the individual plays and playwrights.


Hanson provides a thorough and readable examination of the fifth-century conflict’s causes, the ways in which battles were fought, and what the war did to this small peninsular country after 27 years of strife. Sparta ultimately won and overthrow the Athenian government.


This narrative history provides a solid overview of Ancient Greece, focusing on the fifth and fourth centuries BC.


Nardo compiles excerpts from salient texts about Greek drama, including articles that cover the development of Greek drama, the tragedies, the comedies, and Greek drama in the modern world.


This comprehensive narrative, written by four leading classical scholars, emphasizes the creativity of ancient Greek culture.


This book explores the cultural elements that went into the creation of Greek tragedies.