Introduction

The Urgency of Tragedy Now

HELENE P. FOLEY AND JEAN E. HOWARD

Tragedy—the word conjures up a multitude of associations, some clichéd. By calling something a tragedy, whether a literary work or an event in a person's or a society's experience, one may suggest suffering and trauma but also grandeur and endurance and nobility. A tragedy is something horrible and yet, paradoxically, edifying. For those who are morally inclined, it demonstrates the punishment that befalls the proud or the flawed; for those more fatalistic, it suggests humanity's unmerited but inevitable suffering in an indifferent universe. To some people, certainly, tragedy as a literary genre is old and boring, loved by the Greeks but of little relevance now.

We suggested a special issue of *PMLA* on tragedy because we think that, along with reevaluating the concept and the clichés that encrust it, it is important to explore how and if tragedy as a literary form can speak to present urgencies. The MLA convention of 2013 took "Vulnerable Times" as its theme, speaking not only to the precariousness of the profession of literary studies but also to a pressing sense that crucial social and political institutions are in danger, as is the planet itself. Daily the news media lay "tragedies" on our doorsteps: schoolhouse shootings, imploding states, global warming, the slow death of democratic structures. What, we must ask, does tragedy as a literary phenomenon have to do with any of these things? In everyday parlance, the term often seems emptied of meaning. If the word simply suggests something sad, banality is the consequence. Is the loss of a pet, even a beloved pet, a tragedy?

In some political situations, the term *tragedy* does the important work of concealing or revealing troubling realities. It can be evoked, for example, as a way to avoid blame or hide complicity. In her brilliant contribution to this volume, Anne McClintock asks what it means to talk about the extermination of Native Americans or the

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bombing of Hiroshima as "tragedies," understood as lamentable but inevitable events rather than as political acts for which particular agents bear responsibility. Conversely, the term can be evoked to reveal. David Scott suggestively asks what it would mean to speak of postcolonial situations in the register of tragedy rather than through teleological narratives with implicitly comic endings. In the first instance, the term is an alibi, obscuring something urgent; in the other, it challenges traditional thinking about particular historical transitions. Even the United States Constitution can reveal new vulnerabilities if read through a tragic lens, as Peter Lancelot Mallios provocatively asserts in this issue when he uses Hegel's, Aristotle's, and Nietzsche's theories of tragedy to expose what he perceives as the tragic potential embedded in the document's division of powers or in the ironic promotion of hamartia in those who are vested with the authority to interpret the law.

In everyday and more specialized contexts, then, *tragedy* is a powerful term that can serve as a veil concealing difficult truths or as a lever of critique. If we turn to the literary realm and bracket off general understandings of the tragic from a more focused discussion of tragedy as a dramatic form, what do we understand tragedy to be? What are its properties and conditions of possibility? For some critics, like George Steiner, tragedy is unthinkable in modernity. He argues that it cannot be meaningfully written now, its "death" heralded by modernity's loss of belief in the gods. Perhaps few now accept Steiner's views, but his work raises the question of whether tragedy is an invariant form and whether it requires certain conditions, like a belief in the transcendental, for its flourishing. Can tragedy exist in a postheroic age? in a secular age? in cultures that do not share the West's privileging of individuals and their agency? Even if one starts with Aristotle to outline tragedy's features, whose Aristotle is one reading? And how to explain the many forms of tragedy produced in ignorance of Aristotle's texts or in defiance of their strictures? Raymond Williams is among those who have argued that there are multiple histories of tragedy and multiple forms and moments of its emergence, and he has cast Steiner as someone whose nostalgia for a lost world of gods and heroes blinded him to the possibilities of the present (see also Hugh Grady, in this issue). Taken together, the essays in this issue neither share a single definition of tragedy nor speak with one voice about its efficacy now, but they do constitute a compelling archive of possible answers and remarkable instances of the persistence of works that show human beings attempting to make sense of mortality, suffering, and other forces that challenge human comprehension and control.[1]

At the MLA convention of 2013, we asked three scholars to think explicitly about the possibilities of tragedy in modernity. The result was instructive. From three quite different perspectives, Richard Halpern, Elin Diamond, and Moira Fradinger showed how tragedy lives in what could be considered the inhospitable environments of modernity and postmodernity. Two of them, Halpern and Diamond, engaged with key concepts in traditional theorizations of tragedy: *action* and *the human*. Focusing on Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, Halpern asked what kind of action is possible in a world of deprivation and dwindling resources (postapocalyptic? postcapitalist?). By stripping tragedy to simple elements (a single room, two characters, disappearing supplies of food and medicine in an offstage kitchen, terse dialogue, few possibilities for action, and none of them good ones), Beckett invites audience engagement with terrifyingly basic questions: Why are we suffering? Who caused this suffering? What does it mean? Halpern places these questions in a particular historical framework: the collapse of capitalism's frenzy of overproduction and hyperkinetic action. In this failure of plenitude, however one understands it,

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everything is limited: speech, action, sustenance. Here there are no gods and no grandeur, only an emptying pantry and the seeming impossibility of meaningful action coupled with the paradoxical longing for it. This is tragedy spawned by particular conditions of mid-twentieth-century life, tragedy at the endgame, at the end of games that are at once literary, economic, and philosophical—a resonant aesthetic rendering of the times.

Caryl Churchill, Diamond argues, is equally but differently obsessed with how tragedy speaks to the changed historical conditions of late-twentieth-century life. Among these conditions are, for Churchill, a loss of faith in the volitional, self-present subject and an awareness (in sane quarters) of an endangered planet. How does one write a planetary tragedy that does not assume the centrality of the human? Churchill's answer is *The Skriker*, a play produced the same year, 1994, as her translation of Seneca's *Thyestes*. That Churchill was working on these two plays at the same time suggests an interest in thinking about classical revenge drama and perhaps about the kind of revenge that the earth might take against its violators. In *The Skriker*, nature, embodied by goblins, sprites, and fairies, is dying. Dominating the play is the malevolent figure of the Skriker, which drinks the blood of human babies to renew its waning energies and speaks a punning, nearly incomprehensible language that signals the breakdown of culture's sense-making structures and makes the everyday world alien and strange, an effect Paul Hammond sees as a signature of tragedy. The play's few humans are helpless, lacking agency, before the fury of the Skriker. Pulled repeatedly into its world of death, they become part of a shared material realm that is poisoned and dying but beyond their control. There are humans in this play, but it is not anthropocentric. Instead, the focus is on the rage of a natural world violated, dying, and slowly killing humans, whose fates are entwined with its own.

In both of these cases, twentieth-century playwrights torque the structures and conventions of tragedy to invent new configurations of it. Fradinger explores something different: the repurposing of a classical tragedy in new circumstances—in this instance, postdictatorship Uruguay. Across the globe, classical tragedy remains popular. It is remade, rewritten, and reimagined in enormously varied social and political circumstances. In Latin America, it has been resurgent in the wake of the dictatorships that dominated parts of the continent in the second half of the twentieth century. These regimes—in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and elsewhere—used torture, mass disappearances, and sexual violence to control terrorized civilian populations. It is not surprising, perhaps, that in the aftermath of these regimes *Antigone* has often been staged in early-twenty-first-century Latin American theater. Antigone's defiance of the state power of Creon has long served as an imitable example of heroic resistance. What may be surprising is the number of productions in which Antigone is played not by one actor but by a number, turning Antigone into a collective, rather than an individual, figure. Fradinger's moving essay examines the effects of this choice and the way in which in Marianella Morena's 2012 *Antígona oriental* a collective protagonist and the use of ritualized action avoid testimonial theater's risk of reliving the trauma of torture, while still making possible a denunciation of the guilty. In this instance, an old tragedy, a classical text, is a powerful resource for the present and for a political activism in which the theater is directly engaged.

The coming together of these three essays allows for the answering of some questions and the posing of others. It suggests, first, that tragedy is not dead. Old forms of it are repurposed for new occasions, and new forms of it are constantly invented under the pressure of historical circumstance. Second,

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it suggests that key concepts—action, the individual protagonist, the human—are not invariant features of tragedy. They can be displaced, reduced in importance, interrogated. Third, the essays all speak to tragedy's implication in history. It has meaning in particular contexts of production and reception, and its meaning will change as the contexts change, as we saw with Morena's rendition of *Antigone*. What these essays hint at, without fully theorizing it, is the difference between tragedy as performance and tragedy as text, a difference that Rebecca Bushnell and others consider elsewhere in this issue. In Fradinger's vivid descriptions of how Morena's actresses moved, dressed, and spoke, one feels the challenges that embodiment poses to criticism of tragedy. What does it mean to see suffering enacted, as opposed to reading scripts of suffering? What are the ethics of watching others' pain? And how does the performance of a play in cultures and times other than those of its first production affect how it is experienced? What difference does it make when familiar roles are personated by actors who differ in race, nationality, and gender from those who first performed the piece? Criticism of tragedy divides along the fault line of performance; some of the participants in this issue are primarily concerned with tragedy in the theater and others with tragedy as a written discourse. We will return to these problems and questions in the sections that follow, but first we want to turn to Aristotle and a rethinking of his contribution to the discourse on tragedy.

The Poetics of Tragedy

Aristotle's *Poetics* undoubtedly offers a skewed view of the plays produced in classical Greek theater. In any case, since then, except for a brief period in the eighteenth century when *Poetics* was treated as a prescriptive text, plays performed as tragedies have not been defined by the presence of verse, masks, choruses, elite protagonists, and other aspects central to the Greek originals. Yet *Poetics* remains the fundamental study of tragedy as a literary form even in the twenty-first century. Some of the questions that it raises remain relevant and provocative in entirely different historical contexts, a number of which are addressed in this issue. In *Poetics* Aristotle indirectly defends tragedy against Plato's philosophical attack on the genre. Perhaps for this reason, unlike Plato and later, especially German, philosophers of "the tragic," Aristotle does not address the metaphysical aspects of tragedy—gods, fate, chance (Gk., *tychē*), ritual, cult, and sacrifice (Goldhill). While ignored by Aristotle in *Poetics*, these issues remain central to Greek tragedy and have played a role in later struggles to define the genre and in proclamations of its premature death. Aristotle's focus on plot (*muthos*), action (*praxis*), and suffering (*pathos*), however, has the advantage of drawing attention to aspects of tragic *poetics* that many artists and audiences still find relevant to discussions of tragedy today.

Written at a time in the fourth century BCE when tragedy had rapidly become an international form popular in many political contexts (including the Macedonian court, where Aristotle had served as tutor to Alexander), *Poetics* expresses no explicit interest in the polis: the democratic society that developed tragedy and engaged in the powerful debates that pervaded Attic law courts, assemblies, and dramas (Hall). As is true of tragedy at many later periods, Greek tragedy's relation to contemporary politics remains challenging to pin down and has sometimes allowed it to circumvent censorship under tyrannical regimes or to bolster claims to its "universality." Margherita Laera recently argued that revivals of Greek drama have served the goals of the European Union by consolidating a transnational identity for (especially western) Europe. Yet the cultivated distance from current issues in some respects correctly attributed to Greek tragedy

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can be deceptive. Greek tragedy does speak, however indirectly, to the polis (Goldhill and Osborne). Stathis Gourgouris's essay in this issue, for example, argues for a fundamental relation between Athenian radical democracy as a political form and Greek tragedy.

On the other hand, *Poetics*'s emphasis on the relation between tragedy and history continues to be broadly relevant for the study of tragedy on a global scale. Is tragedy more philosophical than history, as *Poetics* argues? Has our sense of history in the twentieth century become more philosophical than tragedy, because of the scale of tragic events such as the Holocaust? (See Grady, in this issue.) Or can defining history as tragic dangerously permit obscuring and naturalizing political violence and historical complexity, as McClintock suggests?

Despite a professed lack of extensive engagement with performance in defining tragedy, Aristotle developed his ideas from detailed observation of the Greek plays and is far more aware of the importance of the visual and rhetorical elements that promote the audience's dramatic involvement than theorists of "the tragic." Unlike that of many later tragic theorists, Aristotle's work is also not confined to a limited range of plays, despite its focus on *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a prime example. Aristotle firmly defines as tragedies plays that later periods would exclude from the genre as "tragicomic" or romantic, like Euripides's *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, a work that provides Aristotle's second-favored example of tragic structure. Most Euripidean plays with fortunate reversals and arguably comic elements were not canonized by later classical and postclassical tradition and survived by accident, perhaps because they served as the basis for New Comic plots that developed in the late fourth century BCE and redefined the relation of the genres. Nevertheless, Aristotle's focus on plot reversals in either direction, rather than on death as the defining tragic event, leaves ample space for the blurring of generic boundaries that has become a fundamental part of plays that locate themselves in tragic territory, from Renaissance tragicomedies to the eighteenth-century she-tragedies discussed by Felicity Nussbaum in this issue to twentieth-century works that ignore traditional generic boundaries in serious drama. Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Eugène Ionesco, for example, insisted that comedy and tragedy are the same thing and that tragicomedy has "subsumed tragedy. " From this modern perspective, tragedy even needs the protection of comedy to appeal to modern audiences (Foster 31; see also Foley, "Generic Ambiguity").

Aristotle's focus on tragic action as the goal (*telos*) and soul (*psyche*) of tragedy remains central, especially, as discussed below, in relation to non-Western tragedies that continue to privilege it. Although a dramatic plot addressed to suffering and disaster without a relentless (necessary and probable) sequence of events can be compelling in twentieth-century plays like those of Ionesco, Luigi Pirandello, or Beckett (see Halpern, in this issue), this kind of plot still depends on the challenge it implicitly makes to a more traditionally tragic organization of events. In addition, plot remains critical to defining the difference between real-life tragedies and those represented in drama. The other terms central to Aristotle's exploration of plot, recognition (*anagnorisis*) and tragic error (*hamartia*), also provoke continuing interest, including when they are pointedly absent. Many scholars have noted that tragic characters at all periods often fail, unlike Oedipus, to achieve recognition in a narrower sense (a basic reversal from ignorance to knowledge) or a broader sense, yet tragedies still invite audiences to confront, and depart with a changed or enlarged perspective on, human suffering and the human ability to understand, control, and make predictions about the world.

Most controversial, perhaps, remains Aristotle's view of the reaction that tragedy produces in its audience. Tragic catharsis

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generated by pity or fear (whether in the characters, the audience, or both) is hard to define partly because we are not sure what Aristotle meant by it. If tragedy purges pity and fear or equilibrates psychic health, does it, as Bertolt Brecht would have it, suppress the intellectual questions serious plays seem to have been designed to ask and divert an audience from thinking and, more important, from taking action? Aristotle was addressing audience response to tragic action or plot and suffering without reference to contemporary politics. Yet Thucydides and extant tragedy represent pity and fear as collective emotions that generate both reflection and action (Visvardi), and Aristotle in *Rhetoric* asserts that fear makes men deliberate (sec. 1383a, lines 8–9). Many recent performances of tragedy, Western and non-Western (see Miyagi Satoshi, Ellen McLaughlin, and Fradinger, in this issue), see no need to rely on Brechtian forms of dramatic alienation to challenge audiences to mobilize a thoughtful and empathetic communal reaction through performance. Moreover, just as Bushnell argues in this issue that tragedy engages time in multiple ways, we might also consider audience response as occurring in multiple temporal frameworks: during the performance, when the curtain comes down, and then over a longer duration. An audience's movement between empathy and analytic understanding may vary at different points along that path, and thought and emotion may lead to action only in an unspecifiable future.

Tragic Closure

Post-Hegelian theorists have argued for many versions of tragic closure and, as Simon Goldhill points out in this issue, have misread and Christianized the endings of Sophoclean tragedy (as have many directors). Carey Perloff's discussion of staging the problematic ending of Sophocles's *Electra* and Jonathan Kent's of staging the departure of Euripides's Medea, both in this issue, show why closure remains a critical question in performance and in criticism. For Aristotle recognition and reversal can ideally serve as a pivot that completes the action of a well-made tragedy. Yet even if a deus ex machina can in his view undermine an organic dramatic structure, the device can be appropriately employed to announce past and future events known only to those outside the action, like gods (*Poetics* 80–81; ch. 15). The competitive Greco-Roman theatrical tradition itself, by repeatedly restaging and revising the same myths, often calls attention to lack of closure. Euripides's *Electra*, Iphigeneia plays, and *Orestes*, for example, all more or less directly reject the ending of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* while using the deus ex machina to emphasize the failure of the poet's plots to resolve the dramatic issues that they raise. These Euripidean plays offer a future that privileges exile and endurance, which, again, play a central role in serious twentieth-century drama. Although Euripides in principle challenged tragic closure by drawing attention to events and plays *exo tou dramatos*, no extant earlier Greek tragedy offers a firm sense of closure, despite the fact that, as Goldhill argues, the poets make closure an explicit issue in their dramas. Goldhill's discussion of Sophoclean endings could also be extended to Aeschylus, whose *Oresteia*, for example, turns on a divine intervention by Athena that depends on human justice for its continued viability. Moreover, once the Western tradition had encountered the full range of earlier tragedies, all plays defined as tragedies potentially became too palimpsestic for an easily definable resolution and closure. (For a study of similar issues in performance, see Carlson.)

Tragic closure, then, rather than a tragic plot, is apparently alien to the tragic form from our earliest examples, and closure has remained a fraught issue. Revenge tragedies at every period, of course, make such closure particularly questionable. Violence unleashed cannot readily be terminated with deaths and

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departures. Unlike many Greek tragedies, which often end by eliminating non-Athenian leaders without filling the gap with a stabilizing new authority, Shakespearean plays like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* frequently end with the naming of a new king or other leader to fill a political vacuum, but many of these conclusions are fragile and hint at continuing cycles of violence and structural instability. In this issue, David Kornhaber's focus on the forward-looking epilogue to *Angels in America* and Nussbaum's discussion of the de rigueur metatheatrical appearances of actors to defuse emotion at the end of eighteenth-century tragedies also suggest ways that tragic closure can be suspended. Nature itself stands in the way in Churchill's *The Skriker* (Diamond, in this issue), as does the seemingly postapocalyptic world of Beckett's *Endgame* (Halpern, in this issue). The tragic knowledge of the Greek prophet Cassandra depends on a simultaneous awareness of past, present, and future, but in Greek plays no one believes her. Nor does Creon at the close of Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* believe the insistence of the now Tiresias-like Oedipus that he knows why his self-mutilation was right and what must now be done. Tragic recognition and reversal (the termination of the play's *praxis*) here fail to implement tragic closure in Aristotle's exemplary tragedy because Oedipus, like Cassandra, has moved beyond the internal and even the external audience's understanding. Tragedy for Aristotle may be more philosophical than history because of its "universalizing" action, but a lurking historical awareness, even when it derives strictly from a literary tradition, as in the case of poets like Euripides, cannot be easily suspended since the audience recognizes that the story exceeds any specific conclusion.

After Aristotle

In this introduction and in this issue, we cannot provide a comprehensive view of tragedy in all the historical forms of its appearance or in all the places and times of its enactment. Partly we were limited by what was submitted for consideration (no essays, for example, on French neoclassical tragedy, Spanish Golden Age tragedy, modern Canadian tragedy, or indigenous forms of tragedy survived *PMLA*'s vetting process). Partly, however, we recognize that comprehensiveness is both impossible and beside the point. Instead, we want to focus on several examples of tragedy's different post-Aristotle instantiations, starting with what is arguably the second great era of tragedy in the Western tradition—the early modern period that in England produced the theater of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson. We will argue that in this drama one can see how tragedy's formal features and circumstances of production differ from age to age, how the protagonist's agon can extend to the social body, and how, while tragedies are historically implicated, new potentialities can be revealed in later times and other places as classic texts are remobilized to address emergent problems.

Later tragedies in the Western tradition and in other cultures often bear little resemblance to classical tragedy or to Aristotelian dicta. It is an old canard, for example, that the early modern period in Europe represented a renaissance, a rebirth of classical learning and a reinvention of classical literary and dramatic forms. Yet when applied to the playwrights of early modern England, this story quickly reveals its limitations. These dramatists knew Seneca, but they imitated him with great freedom and put his closet drama onto the stage (Braden), and they hardly knew Greek theater at all. Very few early modern tragedies had a chorus, actors did not use masks, and plays were not produced in competitive festivals; rather, after 1576 tragedies in England were overwhelmingly produced for a commercial stage, employed a supple blank verse and vigorous prose, sometimes contained clowns, featured multiple actions

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if not multiple plots, and used boy actors to play women's parts. Few English writers, among them Philip Sidney and Thomas Heywood, wrote theoretically about public stage plays, and Sidney had an aversion to them. In short, this tragic theater was largely produced without reference to formal prescriptions and drew promiscuously from medieval morality drama, popular entertainments, and classical precedent (Weimann). Ironically, the most vigorous writing about the stage was contained in the period's numerous antitheatrical tracts, which railed against the theater's capacity to move the passions and transform the spectator. That English Renaissance tragedy differed so extensively from Greek tragedy suggests how crucially historical and social conditions affect the particular features of the genre in any era.

Terry Eagleton and others have argued that tragedy flourishes in periods of historical transition or crisis. The England that produced early modern tragedy was indeed undergoing profound and simultaneous religious, economic, and political transitions (the Reformation, emergent capitalism, and state consolidation and the decline of baronial power). The tragedy produced during this period strikingly shows how the genre's typical focus on the heroic protagonist can coincide with its dramatization of struggles in the social body (Dollimore). The influential Edwardian critic A. C. Bradley saw Shakespearean tragedy entirely through the prism of the psychic life of its protagonists and through the supposed self-divisions that destroyed them. Certainly, the technical inventions of the early modern stage—including the blank verse line, which could carry sustained thought; the soliloquy; and a rhetorical sophistication that could convey a mind at war with itself—created effects of inwardness and individuality that led to the spectator's deep involvement with the tragic protagonist. And yet that protagonist was inseparable from the social, partly because he or she was first defined by the offices of king, queen, thane, warrior, prince, triumvir (with their attendant duties and social ties), through which the early modern period built its sense of personhood (Condren); moreover, the plays as a whole surround the protagonist with a density of varying social types and languages in a way that makes it impossible not to feel the ebb and flow of larger social forces through and around that figure.

For example, *King Lear* not only records Lear's self-destructive egotism and the failure of his dream of absolute monarchical authority, but it also captures the clash between emergent social values as embodied in the acquisitive energy of Edmund and Lear's two evil daughters and the feudal values of Kent, Cordelia, and the Fool, who cling to older ideas of duty, reciprocity, and loyalty. In *Hamlet*, by contrast, the social struggles of the text seem partly religious. Hamlet is haunted by a ghost that seems to represent a past at once heroic and arguably Catholic, which sits oddly with the more skeptical and uncertain present Hamlet inhabits (Greenblatt). In the struggles of young Hamlet to come to terms with the commands of what he believes to be his father's ghost, the play superimposes a young man's psychic struggles on a larger historical transition. In this issue Don Hedrick shows how *Othello* records the pressures of the time by staging a dialectic between supernatural magic and the magic of the theater and the marketplace, the magic Iago is so good at performing and Othello so unsuited to pierce. Yet none of these tragedies is locked in its historical moment; all have proved mobile in their power to speak to later ages and audiences.

The effective representation of social as well as personal struggle in English Renaissance tragedy depends on the rhetorical and dialogic structures through which the competing energies of a transitional social world were embodied (Altman). Instead of exhibiting the clean and spare lines of Greek tragedy, early modern tragedy sprawls. It contains

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multitudes but is held together through tense dialectical juxtapositions, mirroring structures, and rhetorical contests. Faustus conjures devils, but so do his clownish servants. Hamlet mourns the death of a father, but so do Laertes and Pyrrhus. Such juxtapositions tease the mind. What is it to honor a dead father? What role does revenge play in such honoring? Why so many answers to that question? The Duchess of Malfi speaks for a woman ruler's right to choose her husband; her twin brother, Ferdinand, speaks of the shamefulness of women's appetites. Coriolanus is denounced as an enemy of the people and lionized as the savior of Rome. *Antony and Cleopatra* enacts a prolonged and inconclusive debate about whether he is a Mars or a fool and whether she is a whore or (gorgeous phrase) a "lass unparalleled." The plays' fundamental structures of debate and juxtaposition often create open-ended effects, as in Greek tragedy, even when they reach technical closure in the death of the hero or heroine (Berry). Repeatedly, early modern tragedy opens questions for which it provides no answers and enacts struggles among social groups that fail to reach resolution in a Hegelian grand synthesis.

Even Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, a play that, unlike most early modern tragedy, does attempt to imitate classical forms, still reveals an underlying and unresolved dialectical tension if read, as Linda Gregerson reads it in this issue, both against the background of Milton's involvement in a failed national project and against the urgent geopolitical questions of our own moment. For Gregerson the play invites recognition of two competing claims to a homeland, to a national space, and, consequently, two claims to heroism. If Dalila is a hero to her people for destroying the power of her Israelite husband, Samson is claimed as hero by his people for destroying the Philistine temple of Dagon. Gregerson's essay suggests both the dislocations of perspective and the political challenges that tragedy can pose to naturalized ways of thinking and feeling, not only at the original moment of production but also when a play is reengaged at a later time. What is it, finally, to consider the existence of others when nationalism and religious enmity render the other and the other's claims invisible? It is hard to imagine a more urgent and current political question, and Gregerson finds in *Samson* a complex articulation of it, making the play both of its time and of ours.

More than early modern tragedy, eighteenth-century versions of the form played up its affective potential. As Nussbaum argues in this issue, much eighteenth-century tragedy spoke directly to a new world of high-risk financial undertakings, where the thrill of risking everything was combined with fear of its tragic consequences. Women actresses, never before on the English public stage, provided the vehicles for bravura performance practices meant to draw the audience into tragedies of marketplace seduction and gaming. And, as Edith Hall outlines in her essay in the issue, one strand of nineteenth- and twentieth-century tragedies, from Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* to Edward Bond's *Saved*, has focused on working-class protagonists and the tragedy of the ordinary person. In a genre never free from class politics, tragedy in these instantiations brings to the surface the specific struggles of people trapped on the lower rungs of the social order. In what follows, we want to turn from the particulars of the Western tradition of tragedy to look at what happens when tragedy is written in different cultural contexts and when Western plays are reproduced in challengingly different times and places.

Tragedy Travels

The Western tragic tradition is an artificial construction. As noted earlier, Raymond Williams has argued that tragedy should

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be historically defined rather than viewed as an invariant, transhistorical genre. Now, moreover, tragedy no longer belongs to the West. Nigerian playwrights such as Wole Soyinka invoke without later Western intermediaries the parallels between Yoruban tragic tradition and that of ancient Greece. Consequently, tracing the multiple ways that non-Western cultures have redefined, reappropriated, and reinvigorated the genre has become central to scholarship on tragedy.

Except under circumstances of dictatorship and heavy censorship (see the interview with Sulayman Al-Bassam in this issue), most non-Western tragedies respond directly to recent or current historical, political, or social problems and crises. The distancing of tragic plots from an immediate local context has become a thing of the past. In these new contexts, tragedy often functions as a form of history. Moreover, while Western theater has largely disrupted the relation between gods, nature, and community central to classical drama, new African versions of tragedy and reimaginings of classical drama often restore it. Many twentieth-century African plays also deploy the device of the communal scapegoat to reestablish through violence the underlying unity of the community and to display the overlap between binary oppositions that only appear to govern and divide human social reality. In Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*, for example, Agave returns to Thebes with the head of her son, Pentheus, and, as in Euripides, nails it to the front of the palace. Yet the play concludes with a sudden downpour of what at first appears to be blood from the young king's head but is in fact wine. While Euripides's play closes with the exile of the suffering characters and no immediate rejuvenation of the city of Thebes, Soyinka's finale stages a festal celebration that includes the characters and dissolves communal hierarchies. The Oedipus figure, Odewale, in the Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* completes, accompanied by his incestuous family, the departure into exile that Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* denies the hero. Odewale is in certain respects identified with the Yoruban god Ogun, and his redemptive suffering occurs with divine blessing. As in Seneca's Roman tragedies, cosmic and royal disaster are here intimately intertwined as past, present, and future merge in single pivotal moments. The restoration of morality creates harmony in the universe. The Arab director Sulayman Al-Bassam, in his interview in this issue, similarly sees self-sacrifice for a noble cause as central to a proto-tragic Islamic tradition.

Yaël Farber created her South African version of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (primarily *Libation Bearers*), *Molora*, to respond to the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. The native Ngqoko female chorus, symbolically representing above all the mothers who regularly attended the trials, defied the director's script by refusing to allow Orestes to kill his mother and by dramatically taming the avenging rage of his sister Elektra. This play's Klytemnestra simply departs to exile. The chorus chose this ending as a form of resistance to conventional tragic endings. The American playwright Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* (see the interview with her in this issue), set in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, similarly concludes in a fragile moment of hope.

Non-Western tragedies, including new versions of Western tragedies, are regularly defined, for example, as Yoruban, Caribbean, South American, Japanese, or Indian plays, rather than as mere imitations of Western originals, and performed in part through native theatrical traditions (Fischer-Lichte). As a result, new choral forms, long a rarity in Western tragedy, emerge. In the Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni*, an African and a new version of Sophocles's heroine meet, but the story belongs to Tegonni, who is throughout supported and joined by her vital singing and dancing chorus of local women. The dangerously complicit chorus of the kind

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that appeared in Brecht's *Antigone,* by contrast, reemerges in new tragedies directed at corrupt political regimes. A well-known example is the Argentine playwright Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona furiosa*. The relation between body, text, and theatrical space in new tragedies can be radically reconfigured through different theatrical traditions as well. The Japanese director Miyagi Satoshi often relies on a split between narrating voices, which recite a text, and actors' performances (see the interview with him in this issue). The Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi, on the other hand, has attempted to restore to the stage and to his new versions of Western tragedies a unified, expressive human body, inspired by Noh theater tradition that keeps in touch with the earth.

Dialogues with the West in Japanese versions of Western tragedy by Suzuki, Miyagi, and Ninagawa Yukio tend to stress the fragility of post–World War II intercultural communication. A number of Suzuki's versions of Greek tragedy have been performed by a combination of English- and Japanese-speaking actors. In one version of his *Bacchae*, for example, a Japanese-speaking female Dionysus confronted an American English–speaking Pentheus (McDonald 59–74; Fischer-Lichte 159–85). As we mentioned earlier, Fradinger and Scott also discuss how a turn to tragedy can facilitate coming to terms with corrupt historical pasts and problematic futures in South America as well as in a range of postcolonial societies.

The urgent response to history and social reality in many non-Western plays can also transform the relation between audience and performance and the emotions that tragic plots are thought to produce. As Timothy Reiss notes, Western and African tragedies often provoke African audiences to laugh because tragic acts absurdly falsify the cosmic unity thought to underlie visible reality (533). Japanese and Afro-Caribbean tragedies often attempt to arouse their audiences to a changed engagement with history, but without aiming at Brechtian alienation. Many Japanese versions of Greek tragedy, including Miyagi's *Medea*, discussed in this issue, are self-consciously feminist. They invite tragic recognition in the audience even where it fails to occur in characters. In addition, non-Western versions of tragedy, unlike many modern Western versions, often remain deeply engaged with structured plots that resonate with local views of the relation between cosmic reality and human action.

Tragedy, Women, Vulnerability

As a literary form, tragedy was created and enacted by men for a primarily male audience; it came to fruition in classical Athens, where the political system marginalized women to the domestic and religious spheres. In Western theater, women did not enact tragic roles until the seventeenth century and over the centuries have rarely composed works defined as tragedy. Is tragedy, then, a male genre?

From one perspective, the answer is no. Attic tragedy is peopled by many vocal and even active women characters: virgin daughters, wives, mothers of all ages, priestesses, Greek and barbarian women, even slaves (in choruses). These women speak persuasively outside the house, where ordinary women spent most of their lives, and often dominate offstage interior spaces. They take action, often dangerously, in the absence of their male guardians. Although earlier Greek poetry included memorable female figures, tragic women are far more visible and assertive. Moreover, although they often address issues relating to their provinces in real life—family, marriage, ritual and other religious matters—they voluntarily sacrifice themselves for larger causes and are eloquent on the subjects of political life and justice. Jocasta in Euripides's *Phoenician Women* gives the longest speech in Greek tragedy on the subject of equality. Women like Euripides's Medea

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can control a tragic plot. As the fifth century wore on, female choruses seemed to become increasingly popular and deeply engaged with female protagonists.

Why tragic women play these roles and how the roles speak to Attic democracy remain pressing topics. The female protagonists of tragedy are royal women, and as such they are located in spaces that blur the distinction between public and private worlds. Froma Zeitlin has argued that men's "playing the other" served the interests of men by permitting a fuller model for the masculine self (341–74). Others have asserted that female characters voice and enact important public as well as private positions that could not be easily allowed in the same terms to males. Lamentation is a case in point, one with crucial political significance. Lament for the dead, especially lament that voices personal loss caused by war and other political conflict, was even in Homer a female province. The male role in burial ritual seems over time to have grown more emotionally restrained. Attic democracy restricted public female lament; lamentation for individuals was largely confined to the home. Women could collectively lament the bones of the war dead at public funerals in Attic democracy, but the occasion was dominated by a public oration celebrating the city and its heroic citizen dead. Tragic choruses and female characters thus gave to male actors a traditionally female voice of lamentation that was in many respects proscribed in Athenian public life. Nicole Loraux (*Invention* and *Mourning Voice*) and, recently, Olga Taxidou have argued that the discourse of female lament represents a challenge to Attic democracy. As Taxidou puts it, mourning serves as "a discursive *topos* that examines the function of the law, the citizen, gender and the power over the dead and the past in the new democratic *polis*. It becomes the site where the subject-in-the-making is confronted with the *polis*-in-the-making" (187; see also Foley, *Female Acts* 19–55, and Holst-Warhaft). To put this in another way, historically state formation has tended to suppress or transform previous traditional roles of women and families (Gailey, "Evolutionary Perspectives" and *Kinship*). From this perspective, through the voice of female lament Greek tragedy refuses to marginalize or treat as easily separable the relation between public and private worlds, the collective and the individual, that the public demands of a developing democracy could require. Arguably, through tragedy Greek democracy generated a public dialogue that required dramatizing "female" voices for social, political, and psychological reasons. This does not deny the fact of women's physical exclusion from Greek stages, but it does speak to the complexity of debates about the role of gender in tragic forms.

What is true for Greek theater is partly true for early modern theater, as well, in that women were not allowed to perform on public stages until after the Restoration. However, women were nonetheless strikingly present as characters and as acknowledged or unacknowledged forces in the tragic drama (Adelman). Sometimes elite women shared primary billing with male counterparts, as in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, or figure as sole protagonists, in works such as John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Miriam* (Liebler). More commonly, women characters, like Lady Macbeth, Volumnia, and King Lear's evil daughters, were implicated as sources of male tragedy, or they were positioned as victims who enhance the tragic pathos of unnecessary suffering, as we see with the lyrical death of Ophelia, the hanging of Cordelia, and the onstage murder of Desdemona. There are, then, significant female characters in early modern tragedy, though they skew toward the opposing ends of the predictable villain-victim spectrum. Moreover, as feminist theorists have suggested, the politics of representation are complicated. Merely staging women guarantees nothing about a drama's gender politics, any

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more than staging a black figure promises an antiracist point of view or makes "black experience" legible (Callaghan). In much early modern tragedy, the focus of attention is the male protagonist, and women's representations, while sometimes moving or significant, are constructed in the terms of an asymmetrical gender system in which men dominated the positions of rule or public prominence from which tragic protagonists were drawn.

Post-Restoration English theater somewhat altered the terms of tragic theater, partly because the material conditions of the stage changed, as did the cultural position of women. The indoor theaters of the Restoration made theatergoing an easier proposition for middling and aristocratic women, and when they went to the theater it was in part to see women actors, who were fast becoming part of a culture of celebrity (Nussbaum). As Nussbaum argues in this issue, actresses helped broaden the affective registers of Restoration and eighteenth-century tragedy, encouraging, in particular, empathetic weeping by spectators and expanding the roles that women played. It is interesting that Steiner located the death of tragedy at roughly this historical juncture, as the centrality to the genre of gods and of elite men was slowly eroded. Nicholas Rowe's *The Tragedy of Jane Shore*, one of the most popular eighteenth-century tragedies, tells the story of a middling sort of woman who, as the unwilling mistress of Edward IV, became an emblem of patient suffering and endurance in adversity. In later centuries even-more-ordinary women assumed tragic roles: Brecht's Mother Courage, George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan, and Tennessee Williams's Blanche DuBois.

In many tragedies, women as the victims of male or state violence are a recurring trope, but with wildly variant implications. Antigone, suffering at the hands of Creon, has become an enduring symbol of political resistance, while Desdemona, strangled in her bed by her black husband, has been historically read both as a victim to be pitied and as the locus of anxiety about miscegenation and sexualized black violence. These examples, however, provoke broader questions that remain central to discussions of tragedy, especially tragedy in performance: what are the aesthetic and ethical implications of watching the pain of others enacted on the stage? In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson famously found the ending of *King Lear* too distressing to read, much less see, and for years Nahum Tate's rewriting of the play with a happy ending held the stage. Do acts of tragic spectatorship increase empathy with others through recognition of a shared vulnerability? Do they shock spectators into numbed withdrawal, especially when the suffering includes explicit violation of the body, such as rape or torture? Can they even solicit voyeuristic or sadistic pleasure?

In attempting to manage audience responses, directors and playwrights make choices about what to stage and how to stage it, always with aesthetic and political consequences. Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is an apt instance. Modeled loosely on Senecan revenge drama, it shows spectacular stage violence: the heroine is raped offstage and her hands and tongue cut off; the Roman general, Titus, cuts off his hand onstage in a futile attempt to save two of his sons; he later slaughters two sons of his enemy, Tamora, queen of the Goths, and carves up their bodies and bakes them in a pie that he serves to their mother. Directors differ in the goriness of the onstage violence the script demands, and the greatest divergences have been in the treatment of the raped body of Lavinia (Howard). Peter Brooks stylized Lavinia's suffering, having her appear onstage after the rape fully dressed in flowing robes and with red streamers cascading from her wrists to indicate blood. Spectators described the effect as "beautiful" (Aebischer 39). Lavinia became a decorative background to Titus's center-stage physical and emotional suffering. By contrast,

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many recent productions of the play, under pressure from a generation of late-twentieth-century feminist directors, have more graphically depicted the consequences of Lavinia's rape and mutilation. Xavier Leret's Kaos Company production of 2001 lay at one extreme. When Lavinia dragged herself onto the stage after her rape in this production, she left a long smear of blood on the white back wall of the stage, and when she turned to face the audience, her ripped dress revealed blood running down both legs from her wounded genitals. Despite being tongueless, this Lavinia strove to communicate, emitting the cries of a wounded animal. Onstage for several more acts and actively, physically commanding the stage during that period, this Lavinia did not allow an audience to see the tragedy as Titus's alone. Many audience members were so shocked by the extremity of her physical suffering that they left the theater partway through the play or reported feeling physically sick. In Brooks's production, stylization created so much aesthetic distance from Lavinia's suffering that audience empathy was attenuated; in the Kaos production, the audience was brought so close to extreme suffering that it was almost impossible to have distance on the action or to contemplate any action but flight.

There is no right way to adjudicate the question of how to depict, on the page or on the stage, the suffering at the core of tragedy, but these issues remain important to discussions of how plays affect audiences, and to what end. To put the raped woman at the center rather than on the periphery of the tragic action is to invite the audience to recognize her as a "grievable subject" (Butler), even as it risks audience alienation. In this issue, several authors wrestle with similar questions. Ellen McLaughlin discusses the collective process by which she created a play on the Iraq War, realizing at some point that the irrational and violent actions the war stimulated, such as "berserking" and female rape by fellow soldiers, could best be represented if they were thought of alongside *Ajax*, the classical play that for her most powerfully embodied the irrationality of war. The result, a play called *Ajax in Iraq*, mingled events from the classical text and contemporary material about the Iraq War to create a theater piece that used creative juxtapositions and the mingling of past and present temporalities to bring the war's effects home to an audience and to allow them the distance to reflect on its significance.

Often, extremely painful material is handled by similar acts of displacement, stylization, or creative juxtaposition. Fradinger's essay, on the use of *Antigone* to reckon with the experience of torture, offers a rich meditation on the strategies by which an inventive writer and director made a powerful but not paralyzing theatrical event from the most difficult of materials. Conjoining a professional actress with actual victims of the oppressive regime, using collective speech to convey the enormity and scope of that regime's atrocities, and yet allowing each victim to accuse individuals who had tortured her, this *Antigone* found ways to let victims speak without reliving the trauma of their torture and reclaim agency both in the act of accusation and in the joyous release of an exuberant dance at the play's conclusion. Like other contemporary tragedies, this one experimented with the mixed genre of tragicomedy in rewriting *Antigone* to imply the possibility of the characters' posttrauma lives.

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* offers a final way to think about how difficult contemporary matter can be handled in conversation with the tragic tradition. AIDS in the late 1980s ravaged communities, a disease without a known origin or cure that struck fatally and often. That many in the first tranche of victims were gay men quickly revealed an ugly undercurrent of homophobia in the medical establishment and in society at large. Kushner responded to the AIDS crisis not by writing a tragedy per se, though he was dealing with

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events that were generally acknowledged as tragic. Instead, he wrote a "gay fantasia on national themes," a fantasia being a mixed form and national themes indicating the scope of Kushner's ambitions for his two-part play. In both parts, the valiant protagonist, Prior Walter, kissed with the angel of death's wine-red cancer spots, struggles to have a life amid the ruins of his known world. His personal struggles are located in larger frameworks, however: the grand sweep of American history, in which Mormons, communists, and American presidents figure prominently; a divine comedy in which a comically rendered hell awaits the Roy Cohns of the world and a fearful, backward-looking heaven that God has abandoned hovers above; and a contemporary New York landscape in which blacks, gays, Jews, and Mormons all strive to find community and a home. Owing a debt to Brecht, Kushner gives his play an epic feel and repeatedly draws the audience into empathy with Prior's struggles only to draw it back into contemplation of these larger contexts. The drama as a whole plays with tragic expectations but brushes tragedy against the grain by its mordantly funny dialogue.

In this issue, David Kornhaber explores how a knowledge of the tragic tradition can help us make sense of what has most puzzled and annoyed critics about the play: its "liberal" ending. At the conclusion of the second part of *Angels in America*, Prior is still alive, though lame, partly blind, and very sick. Before the Bethseda Fountain in Central Park, he speaks the last words of the play's epilogue. Against a backdrop of his constructed family (Jew, Mormon, black and white, straight and gay), Prior evokes a time when all of them will be "citizens." By reading this ending against the ending of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Kornhaber's powerful essay invites us to think again about the stakes of such a claim in particular times and places and for particular people. As we have seen, not all classical tragedies end with the death of the protagonist, including *Oedipus Rex*. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, what the still-living protagonist most wants is inclusion in a polis and to have the rights of one who is so included. To be without a state, without rights and duties in a state, is part of Oedipus's unendurable suffering. A constructed family is not a state, and friendship is not citizenship. Prior Walter at the end of *Angels in America* has a family and friendship; like Oedipus he is "accompanied." But what puts *Angels in America* most deeply in conversation with the tragic tradition is that Prior's claim to citizenship must be expressed as a hope and not a fact, and so, Kushner implies, his protagonist inhabits a tragic universe not unlike that inhabited by the blind Oedipus on the outskirts of Colonus.

Taken together, the essays in this issue of *PMLA* will, we hope, stimulate readers to think in new and creative ways about the uses of the ancient but infinitely malleable genre of tragedy. The subject of endless commentary, tragedy is perhaps most vibrantly alive when treated irreverently, as a resource with which to think, feel, and perform the urgencies of the times.

Note

1. For other important recent general studies on tragedy, see Brown and Silverstone; Bushnell; Eagleton; Felski; Poole; and Wallace.

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