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Title	<i>Defining Tragedy</i>
Description	First dialogue between Oliver Taplin and Joshua Billings on tragedy: they discuss what 'tragedy' means, from its origins in Greek culture to philosophical notions of what tragedy and tragic drama are.
Presenter(s)	Oliver Taplin and Joshua Billings
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Part of series	<i>What is Tragedy?</i>

Oliver Taplin In four 15 minute dialogues we're going to explore the question, what is tragedy? So this isn't some kind of encyclopaedic survey it's much more a kind of personal response to some key issues to do with tragedy which inevitably includes some pretty old chestnuts.

Now my name is Oliver Taplin. I'm Professor at Oxford University and for much of my career I've worked on Ancient Greek Tragedy.

Joshua Billings And my name is Joshua Billings I'm a Graduate Student in Classics at Oxford and I'm writing my dissertation on the history of ideas around tragedy and particularly about the 18th and 19th Century.

Oliver Taplin So it makes sense that we start with defining tragedy.

Defining tragedy can we give a definition, what does the word mean? Well the word is a very common one I mean we see it in the newspapers every day. Distressing stories especially stories involving death, whether they're accidents or whether they're natural disasters, whether people are to blame or not to blame are called tragedies. And you can see this in the news the whole time, this use of tragedy.

Or you get people's lives described as a tragedy, even as a Greek tragedy the career of Marlon Brando was a Greek tragedy. Bill Clinton was inevitably enacting a Greek tragedy. And that's quite interesting I think that journalistic use of Greek tragedy because it points to two things, it points to the centrality of drama, of theatre to the core notion of tragedy and it points to ancient Greece where this kind of theatre was developed, initially in Athens in the years, the decades following about 500 BCE or BC if you prefer and it remained an obsession with the Greeks and the Romans for the best part of a thousand years.

And the Greek plays remain a kind of touchstone or at least a point of comparison for all other discussions of tragedy and tragic theatre. And it makes the point that theatre is core to defining tragedy and that it was invented, tragedy was invented for performance in front of an audience. And just to remind you of some of the canonical names from Greek tragedy, the Oresteia of Aeschylus, the Oedipus, an antagony of Sophocles, the Medea and Bacchael,

Bacchant women of Euripides these are classics in more than one sense of the word and they're canonical.

Now that might make it sound as though tragic theatre's been continuous or stable ever since the Ancient Greeks. And it certainly went through the Roman Empire which left the plays of Seneca, the tragedies of Seneca which were hugely influential in the 16th and 17th Centuries and are still performed but it shouldn't obscure the fact for another thousand years between about 400 CE or AD as it's also known. Between 400 and 1,400 tragedy more or less died out and tragic theatre more or less died out. And then it was reborn in the renaissance which rediscovered Seneca and gradually rediscovered the Greeks.

Tragedy continues to be ever since the Renaissance an obsession so confronted with such a long history, one that goes back 2,500 years. The question obviously arises with so much variation, so much change has there any core definition remained. Is there anything that we can call the core of tragedy or a canon of tragedy.

Joshua Billings Well when we think about a canon of tragedy we think about a set of works that are immutable that have been played again and again over time. But the fact of the matter is that a canon changes over time as new works are written. As works fall out of taste and so the canon today looks very different than the canon a hundred years ago not only because we have one hundred years more literary history but because we're a hundred years different readers and viewers of tragedy.

So since the renaissance we could think not only of the English tragedies that we're most familiar with Shakespeare, Marlow, Johnson, Middleton and dozens of lesser tragedians but we could also think of French works, Racine, Corneille and through the 18th Century a flourishing and incredibly fruitful tradition of tragedies that are practically never performed with a couple of exceptions in English or even in French for the most part.

And we could also think of the Spanish Renaissance the works of Calderón and Lope de Vega which are similarly the fruits of an incredibly active tradition but a tradition that in Anglophone countries has largely died out. And is even pretty rare to see performed again in the Spanofone countries.

The renaissance also created opera. One of the maybe most lasting legacies of Greek tragedy from the time of the [[?? 0:05:38]] around 1600 we've had a genre of musical works that proximate some aspects of Greek tragedy much better than spoken drama because they are sung and danced just like Greek tragedies were.

Oliver Taplin I mean [[Origin 0:05:55]] and the time of Monte Verdi actually are a conscious attempt to reconstruct Greek churches.

Joshua Billings Absolutely and every couple of hundred years opera composers have to go back to the Greeks when they feel that operas become decadent. If you think of Glockner or Wagner that's a constant resort in opera to go back to the Greeks and look for tragedy.

And then since the renaissance we have a major change in simply who gets depicted in tragedies and in the 18th Century and from the 18th Century to today tragedies can depict relatively normal people, bourgeois tragedies and it can depict them speaking relatively normal speech. So a change from verse tragedy to prose tragedy. And that genre begins with Lillo, with Diderot with Lessing in the 18th Century and continues straight through Gibson, arguably Chekhov to Arthur Miller's tragedies, one of which just reopened on Broadway in a very popular

production.

And then in the 20th Century we have even further transformations. The political works of Brecht, Artose Theatre of Cruelty and may be most importantly Samuel Beckett's plays which mix tragedy and comedy in quite fascinating unusual but I would say still tragic ways. So the canon, what you think of as a tragic canon depends on a definition of tragedy but at the same time a definition of tragedy depends on what we consider a tragic canon.

Oliver Taplin Yes and I suppose we're going to have to face the fact that may be we're not going to find any way of defining tragedy in such ways to include all this extraordinary variety and this richness and difference. And yet it's a fact isn't it that there's been a persistent desire to try and find a core, to try and find a definition. And some ages have found it in one way and others in another.

I mean some ages have seen the essence of tragedy in the shape of the plot in its form, in the tragic fall and the ending in death. And have tended to combine that with following formal constraints. At this point we have to introduce Aristotle's poetics. The most influential work of criticism of drama ever written. One might say it's overly influential but its importance just can't be underestimated.

Aristotle's the most amazing mind he studied everything and among the things he studies were how does poetry work, how does drama work, how do you do it best. And we have his poetics as the foundation takes in the theory and practice of theatre. And that comes through above all in the unities with a big 'U' which are I think probably in origin an over rigid interpretation in renaissance of Aristotle. That these unities would lay down that there must be a unity of time, that this all happen within 24 hours, that it must all be set in a single place and that there must be a unity of action although quite what that is, is not so clear.

This one seems rather remote to us now but am I not right that that was at one time regarded as the core essential.

Joshua Billings For a couple of hundred years that was the way people tried to define tragedy. And it led to lots of debate about whether the unity of time could be stretched to more than 24 hours or whether the unity of action could include a sub plot or two sub plots and just how far those unities went.

It led to a huge amount of debate in France particularly but also in England and in Germany and yet there was something unsatisfying about it as people looked to works of tragedy that did not obey the unities but were nevertheless incredibly powerful, moving and in some sense tragic. Shakespeare most of all.

Oliver Tapping Yes I suppose Shakespeare's the – in some ways the key here – I mean it's certainly an interesting question isn't it to what extent was Shakespeare aware of the neo aristotian unities.

I always think of the thing in the Prologue of Henry V when the Prologue says "We're going to scatter things all in time and place and asks the audience to give it their thoughts and carry." The characters carry them here and there jumping all the times. And that seems to be Shakespeare for actually saying "Look I'm not going to obey the unities of time and place." At any rate the fading out of unities as a central motion does synchronise with the great rediscovery of Shakespeare at the beginning of the 19th Century/end of the 18th Century. Perhaps not so much as a discovery as kind of promoting him from being this kind of a wild barbarian genius into being the central figure in the history of tragic theatre.

Joshua Billings And that's also the time that people start thinking about tragedy in different terms because if it's...if tragedy it does not mean following a set of rules there must be something that connects Shakespeare in tragedies and Greek tragedies. And one of the ways to understand that and to describe it was by saying that Shakespearean tragedies create some kind of effect that Greek tragedies also create.

And we might think of the same thing today that watching Gibson's [[Headed Gowler 0:11:44]] makes us feel in some way not so differently from Shakespeare himself. And if we're going to describe tragedy and define tragedy we could think of doing it based on tragedies effect rather than on tragedies form.

Oliver Taplin And I suppose the audience then becomes the central defining feature, the experience of the audience confronted with the tragedy rather than the form of the tragedy itself. And I think, I mean I don't know for me that still makes sense. It's an approach, the approach through the audience and what the tragedy means to the audience is something that I think many of us would still want to maintain that tragic theatre's somehow quintessentially to do with the emotions aroused in the audience.

If it doesn't make you cry then it's not going to be good tragedy. And that goes right back to the Greeks who did put a lot of emphasis on weeping. And to return as one has to whether one likes it or not to Aristotle there's the pity and fear which are picked out Aristotle in his poetry as central emotions in the audience.

I think this – I mean I would take a step further back and say there's something essential to humanity, to being human in the ability to feel for, to feel with fellow humans. It's said, I'd love to know whether this is really true it's said that weeping and laughing are activities only done by humans. I mean one can see analogies in animals but actually laughing and weeping and laughing and weeping with are specific to humans.

Well I mean I certainly want to say that the range of emotions in the audience goes well beyond pity and fear. There's a huge range of anger and indignation and nostalgia and desire and anticipation. I would want to say that tragedy arouses a complicated mixture of emotions and a complicated sequence of emotions. But it does lead to us to the question does this make tragedy a purely emotional experience?

I mean is that what tragedy's all about just the feelings, the emotions of the audience. And is it a kind of a bath of emotions, is it a total immersion experience. And that I think actually is a question that will lead us nicely into our second dialogue which is to do with what does tragedy do for people. So we'll end this first one on that note of is tragedy essentially to do with the emotional experience of the audience, is it only an emotional experience?

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