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| Title | <i>What does Tragedy do for People?</i> |
| Description | A discussion of what the use of tragedy is, and whether the emotional experience of tragic theatre is simply a passing thrill or a vital part of life. |
| Presenter(s) | Oliver Taplin and Joshua Billings |
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| Part of series | <i>What is Tragedy?</i> |

Oliver Taplin I'm Oliver Taplin I'm here in dialogue with Joshua Billings about tragedy with a capital 'T'. And in the second of our dialogues we're moving on to the question 'what does tragedy do for people'.

And the question was opened at the beginning of the first discussion because we came to thinking that tragedy essentially arouses powerful emotions. Now in real life emotions of course are a vital part of our experiences but we have a tendency perhaps to control them - at least most societies say you should keep your emotions in control. And perhaps in the theatre you're not being expected to keep your emotions in control but then the point about the emotions in the theatre is that they're felt vicariously they're not felt about real life, they're felt about the life of the person feeling them. The audience feels about things that are being enacted in front of them, things that are being imitated.

If you put it negatively you could say things that are being faked and the experience instead of being in the world is contained, contained within a special time and place, usually an auditorium as it was in Ancient Greece where the theatre was a fixed and indeed a sacred space, sacred to Dionysos and on the Spring days of his Festival. But that raises the question is the experience of tragedy only a matter of feeling. Now I certainly want to say quite unequivocally certainly not - it's not just a matter of feeling.

Now it's true that emotional response is incredibly fast and that sometimes our emotions are we would want to say totally unthinking, completely irrational but usually they involve thought, they involve cognition they involve some kind of processing of what's perceived. You perceive the situation and then you emotionally respond so it's kind of what one might call a cognitive approach to emotion. And here comes Aristotle again. He pioneered this though not in his poetics that we mentioned before but in his rhetoric discussing how to arouse emotions in the public. And it's obviously very relevant to political campaigning.

Aristotle takes anger as an example he says you feel anger if you believe yourself to have been unjustly underrated. If you think you've been unfairly undervalued. Now it's very deceptive he also protectively adds that we feel anger strongest with family and with friends because they're the people who of all people we expect not to underrate us unjustly. We expect our family and

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our friends to value us with fairness. And that's relevant to tragedy which is so often caught up with the stresses and strains of family.

But of course Aristotle then says also that you feel anger also on behalf of others. If you're persuaded that they've been unfairly undervalued, undeservedly undervalued. And this sense of fairness of what's deserved is fascinating to see how early that develops in children and it goes very deep. And it's perhaps especially, I think especially applicable to pity. Pity, you feel pity for suffering but you feel above all you feel pity most and most strongly for suffering that is undeserved, for suffering that is disproportionate that's unfair.

Joshua Billings And yet that's not enough to arouse the emotions of tragedy because what you feel pity for is not just awful things happening on stage and tragedy is more than a depiction of having terrible things happen to people. There must be more than disaster in tragedy but it's hard also to put your finger on what it is that distinguishes a character in a tragedy from someone who's just unlucky but truly there is something.

Oliver Taplin Yes I suppose it's to do with one might call narrative context. I mean the assessment that leads to the feeling is made interesting and is made thought provoking by the ethical context by the morals by the religion by the politics, the psychological setting. These are all built up in the play at least as I see it in a good play, a whole context and conceptual context is built up and within that the emotions are played.

Joshua Billings And you – how do you think that relates to tragedies of every day life.

Oliver Taplin Tragedies of every day life are not going to have the same kind of political context as a tragedy set in the past or a tragedy set among great heroes. They're not going to have the same religious context in different religious settings.

But I think one still gets this complexity of the human situation within so that you get both the thought and the emotion simultaneously meshing.

Joshua Billings And also in the final analysis you get a pleasure from tragedy and that's something that you don't get from watching horrible things happen.

Oliver Taplin I quite often get asked "Well what's the difference between watching a tragedy in which you see Gloucester's eyes put out or Titus Andronicus or you see Oedipus' eyes put out. What's the difference in watching that kind of a horrible atrocity and going to see a horror movie or going to the amphitheatre and watching Roman Gladiators chopping each other up.

And I think one has to say well actually a horror show could be tragic if it has a complicated and thought provoking enough context. The horror is not in itself anti tragic at all.

Joshua Billings And tragedies can sometimes show real grotesque and horrifying actions on stage if you think of the Bacchae.

Oliver Taplin Yes, yes. But I think [[one then 0:05:54]] also wants to say the atrocity is not for atrocities sake it's some – part of something larger. And I would want to say that the context created by the narrative is essential to the whole business. If the issues and questions raised aren't thought provoking then it's not tragedy it's something else. And they're not going to be thought provoking, they're not going to have tragic depth without the emotions as well. People sometimes say "Well is tragedy merely entertainment." And I say "Well yes I don't think I agree with them merely but tragedy is entertainment. It's not somehow above entertainment, its not somehow transcending or superior to entertainment." Audiences and readers go to it for as you

said a certain kind of pleasure.

There's even a compulsion. I always remember Keats' ode on sitting down to read King Lear again. He says "For once again, for once again the fierce dispute betwixt our nation and in passion clay must I burn through." And this 'must I burn through' it's the compulsion he has to, he can't keep away from it. He's kind of addicted to it and he must burn through it.

So there is a kind of pleasure in the distress.

Joshua Billings There certainly is but it's hard then to quite define where that pleasure comes from and one of the ways it's been defined and a word that you hear again and again and again in which ultimately goes back to Aristotle poetics is the word 'catharsis' some kind of purgation. And it's – but it's hard to say what is purge. What we lose at the end of a tragedy or how it is, is it an emotional response, a cognitive response and then how could that, that loss be some kind of pleasure.

Oliver Taplin Yes, yes. I mean it's one thing everybody seems to agree about that tragedy is something to do with catharsis. You know I went to this tragedy I had a really good catharsis. But I don't really like it. I'm not sure it is the right concept at all. It's too purgative. As you say I mean people argue endlessly over exactly what Aristotle meant by it but what's agreed is it's getting rid of something bad. It's a purgation, it's a purification, it's a cleansing. And I'm not sure that does really a justice to the experience of tragedy. I think medical metaphors are pretty unavoidable but I'd prefer metaphors of taking in rather than getting rid, of ingesting of taking on board.

Sometimes I think it's more like homeopathy, you know the way you take a dose of the poison in order to cure the poison. I think better than that, vaccination or inoculation. Now they're processed from the actual virus or whatever something that is put into the system in order to strengthen the system against the full dose, against the unbearable and possible fatal illness. And as I see it tragedy perhaps – or at least I'd like to explore the idea that tragedy strengthens its viewers for life outside the theatre. It's not going to ward off suffering none of us are immune to unpredictable suffering.

It might give the illusion, it might give us the feeling that somehow helping us to ward off the disease but it can't do that but it can increase our understanding, it can increase our insight, it can inform our life outside the theatre. And if that's right, if tragedy's a kind of inoculation which enables you to cope better with life then it's not something that you leave behind like a catharsis. It's not something that goes down the sewer it's something that you take with you out of the theatre.

Joshua Billings So it's the way you feel after a good work out – tragedy?

Oliver Taplin I wouldn't know about that.

Joshua Billings It's a work out of emotions and feelings of the ways that we understand our place in the world tragedy.

Oliver Taplin Yes and that's why I don't really think that a purification of the kind of getting rid of is quite right. Feeling and thinking through this incredibly intense experience in the theatre that I think it was a kind of crucible perhaps that's because the Greek theatre is the shape of a kind of a half of a crucible. You know you're subjected to these huge heats which would be unbearable in reality but by getting this kind of controlled dose we are then better able to – you're strengthened for the understanding of life.

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Joshua Billing And the control of it I think is also crucial and it's one of the things that Aristotle understands particularly well is that in tragedy we're in an artistically shaped world so the things that might - if we were to witness them in real life - be too terrible to derive any benefit from in a theatre where they're controlled, where they're meted out with care and with intelligence in their execution.

Oliver Taplin And with technique and mastery as well.

Joshua Billing And with beauty that in that kind of controlled dose, that vicarious living through disaster that the disaster at second removed may be, that makes us more able to cope with the real disasters.

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