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Title	*Does Tragedy Teach?*
Description	Third dialogue on the nature of tragedy where they talk about whether tragic theatre teaches people, and if it does, how and what does it teach?
Presenter(s)	Oliver Taplin and Joshua Billings
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Part of series	*What is Tragedy?*

Oliver In the 3rd dialogue that I - that's Oliver Taplin - is having with Josh Billings today, we reach a pretty crucial question – does tragedy teach, or you might say, is tragedy good for you?

Now it's quite interesting that in Ancient Greek the word for what a tragic playwright did to his play, was not write it, they could say make it or teach it. The tragedian Sophocles taught his Oedipus. And in his comedy 'Frogs', the comic writer Aristophanes really in some ways makes the whole comedy rather plain between that meaning of teach and the ethical, political meaning of teach. And he actually says at one point, or one of his characters says rather, "As boys have school teachers, so grownups have poets."

So, in some sense it was thought of as teaching in Ancient Athens in its early days. Tragedy was certainly taken very seriously at Athens that they thought about it as a very serious part of political and cultural life and certainly not just something you went to for a thrill. Thousands of people, not hundreds, but thousands of people gathered in the theatre. They gathered there for three whole days each year and actually, I think many of them gathered for more than three days for the theatre because there were lots of other minor theatre festivals around the place that many people went to as well.

A point to bring it home is that the budget for theatre in Ancient Athens and in other Greek cities when it spread out from Athens was huge. It's been recently estimated that the budget for putting on the Tragic Festival in the Spring cost 10% of what was spent in the whole year on the Military, on their warships. Now, that in modern terms of course would be an astronomical sum to spend on theatre or even to spend on the Arts and even if it was only 5% it would still be astronomical.

Now in ancient Athens where these things first developed there was a democracy, with perhaps 30,000 free men, 30,000 free women. It wasn't secure, there were a lot of enemies, there was a lot of warfare. So you'd think that a major art form invented there and which had so much money spent on it, you'd think that it would be something socially cohesive, something civically reinforcing, something patriotic and I think it must in some senses have been socially cohesive but how?

I do believe, for a start, that actually for all those thousands of people to gather together to witness the same artistic event created a shared experience. There is a theatre company, isn't there called 'Shared Experience' I think, that's a wonderful title for a theatre company. That shared experience is an absolutely vital part of what the theatre was all about.

But the subject matter of the plays – that I think you can't possibly call unifying or secure because Greek tragedies are constantly showing the breakdown of securities and so is tragedy in general but this is one way in which the Greeks once again perhaps provide a kind of Touchstone. Tragedy shows the breakdown of securities, it shows things going wrong. Oedipus thinks that he knows his life story, as most of us think and hope we know our life story, but he doesn't, it all goes horribly wrong. Antigone or Medea showing the breakdown of society and the breakdown of the family and the breakdown of the bonds that hold us together and which we normally take for granted.

I mean, actually women, and the treatment of women in ancient Greek tragedies, is a particularly interesting example because ancient Greece, and ancient Athens, are notoriously repressive of women. Women are expected to keep indoors, bring up the family and not to say anything. And yet tragedy is absolutely full of women and full of women who talk.

So in real life, in stable society, they suppose the women were docile, were unquestioning, were domestic, were reliable and in tragedy on the contrary - they're articulate, they're intelligent, they're brave and very often they're dangerous, very often they're murderers. Think of Agamemnon – the greatest general of the greatest Greek expedition comes home at the end of 10 years to be murdered by his own wife. So, the treatment of women in tragedy gives you a good example of how something which in real life people hope is stable, is made destabilised by tragedy.

Josh And maybe the converse of that are the Gods in tragedy, who in Greek culture of Athens and of most Greek city states, were seen as generally beneficent. They were dangerous if you crossed them but if you acted rightly they weren't capricious or incomprehensible or cruel.

Well in tragedy, they are. They are inscrutable; they can do terrible things to humans for little reason, for bad reasons or even just for no reason. And they can save them from disaster as in the notorious 'deus ex machina' that ends a lot of later tragedies, they step in to turn events suddenly from terrible to just fine and there's no clear motive for, except that this is the will of the Gods. So that can often lead to the belief that ancient tragedy's characters are somehow controlled by an external force.

And it often seems that way, as you mentioned in Oedipus the King. Oedipus, no matter what he does, seems trapped in a kind of plan or a set of prophecies that no matter what he does, he can't escape. So there is that element of what you might call fate or predetermination, but at the same time, that doesn't actually tell you very much about what is compelling about the character or what really makes him tick - why we would go to see Oedipus on stage.

Oliver Yes, this is worthy of exploring because people do, I think, associate tragedy with fate as the old tragedy – that's as Cocteau put it in 'The Infernal Machine'. You wind it up and then you just go to the tragedy to watch fate unwinding and I think you're right to suggest that actually it isn't really like that. That tragedy shows people struggling to make good decisions, struggling to choose their life.

Josh Yes, and even when tragedy seem the most faded when the Gods seem the most powerful and humans seem the most powerless, what is important in tragedy is not simply to tell us that the Gods are in power, or that they can do terrible things to us, it's to show the spectrum of responses to it. It's really much more to show us someone's free will.

Oliver It seems to me that it is interesting also that, you know, we talk about the - obviously with Greek tragedy we're talking about the Gods which gives some kind of level of understanding but one that the humans don't understand as they enact the tragedies.

In the modern world there are equivalents of that and there are people who would want to say that everything in our life is determined by our genetics. Or everything in our life is determined by how our parents treat us when we're children. Or that everything is determined by our socioeconomic situation.

Whereas in fact I think what tragedy says is these things are important, these things are powerful, but they're not the final explanation and above all they don't release us from responsibility for living our lives.

Josh No, and that's one of the things you see so well in Greek tragedy is that no matter how much the Gods seem to be pulling the strings, it's the characters who take the responsibility. And the characters who understand what happens to them as a reflection on themselves and who understand it as an opportunity or as a challenge that they have to face. And that is, I think, a much more real picture of action in our world than a deterministic or a faded notion of how we're created.

Oliver Christianity has always struggled with pre-determination and in many Christian doctrines would seem to say that our lives are somehow not our own but are predetermined by God.

Josh And in tragedy there's the further problem of divine injustice. Can tragedy in a Christian world view, can it represent the Gods doing terrible things to humans which it certainly seems to. If you believe that the Gods are in control, tragedy has to be difficult to stomach in some way.

And one of the ways to get out of that problem when you're interpreting Greek works or even in the writing of modern works, is to reduce or to refer the downfall of the character or the terrible events that happen in the work, to a kind of tragic flaw. And once again there's an Aristotle passage that people point to where he talks about "hamartia", a missing of the mark, an error of some sort.

Oliver I mean hamartia - you've got to hand it to Aristotle - that is a Greek word that's made its way into English vocabulary. People who have never heard of Aristotle, never seen a Greek tragedy, might use the word hamartia.

Josh And they might use the word catharsis also, as Aristotle has so much influenced our notions, but here in a malign way because looking for a tragic flaw in tragedy doesn't tell us anything very interesting about it. If tragedy were reducible to a tragic flaw, if Oedipus were only that he'd been angry at the crossroads, or if Othello's tragedy was only about jealousy we could very easily avoid these things in our own lives.

But what tragedy teaches us - if it teaches us something - is that the flaws are not the last word. I suppose on our actions, it's how we deal with imperfections with things that we can't control both in ourselves and in other people.

Oliver Yes and I suppose, I mean actually, a fatal flaw as a key - as an alleged key to tragedy and as a meaning for hamartia, is actually perhaps the neo-Aristotelian renaissance interpretation of hamartia, rather than Aristotle himself. And so that's within a very strongly Christian world where perhaps the notion of the crime otherwise tragedy doesn't make sense unless there's a crime that God or the tragic universe can punish.

Josh Yes, and if you look at Shakespeare's works and compare them to Greek works you might say that Shakespeare writes more guilty characters than the Greeks do. One of the things that modern tragedy often shows us is a character descending through their own mistakes, through their own bad decisions, through their own flaws further and further into disaster.

And you could think of Macbeth there, or Othello, or Marlowe's 'Tamburlaine' or the 'Doctor Faustus' of Marlowe, or Goethe. Characters who may not begin as evil, but yet are led further and further into evil, into tragedy and thereby create their own bad ends. And that's something that I think is particular to tragedy of the renaissance and post-renaissance where our understanding of people's choices and subjectivity may be less based on external fate, may have less to do with the Gods and more to do with decisions, with moral actions and choices that we make in our lives.

Oliver Does this apply to Ibsen's 'Brand' do you think for example? I mean there is a man who is driven by what he believes to be good, but he gets further and further into decisions that lead to worse and worse disaster.

Josh Absolutely, Ibsen's a great example; you can see similar characters in Arthur Milner. Willy Loman's tragedy is a tragedy of a man just digging himself deeper and deeper into debt and into unhappiness and those kinds of characters you generally don't find in Greek tragedy where maybe in the post-renaissance era and particularly since 1800 or so, the post-romantic era, were much more focused on tragedies of individuals and the role of the Gods, the role of the divine design is much, much less.

Oliver Yes, there's another Greek work that often comes up in this context. I think this time Aristotle isn't to blame - but that's 'hubris'. Hubris is again a term which you might well find in the daily newspapers. It's often claimed that tragedy shows people 'committing hubris' and that they by doing that would mean that they're proud, that they behave as if they're Gods. They behave arrogantly, and they set themselves up to be struck down by nemesis - another Greek word that's got its way into English. Actually, those two words in ancient Greek don't mean the same as hubris and nemesis mean in modern English at all, but that's not the point.

The point is that hubris, this emphasis on hubris, was again an attempt to impose a crime and punishment model on tragedy which I don't think does justice to Greek tragedy and doesn't do justice to Shakespeare or to modern tragedy either. But it's not a matter of a simple - that a bad person is punished or the person makes a bad mistake and is punished; it's not a punishment model. Tragedy doesn't say, oh well, King Lear committed hubris – well that's alright then he deserved what he got. It's simply put like that you can see that the hubris and nemesis models simply doesn't do justice to the indefiniteness and to the variegation of the ethical situations of tragedy.

Josh Tragedy's figures even when they commit crimes, even when they do terrible things, are caught up in much larger structures than just personal guilt. And that's part of why the genre is so applicable still 2500 years after Greek tragedies were first written - is that the forces that act on humans are not that different now from what they were in ancient Athens and the ways that life is in and out of our control are pretty constant.

Oliver But then is it just a mistake to think that tragedy is somehow good for us, that tragedy improves people. The idea that I saw back in ancient Greece of tragedy teaching grownups like school teachers teach children because people so often say to me what's the message of this play? What is the moral of this play? Clearly the assumption behind that is if it doesn't somehow convey a moral message to tell you how to live your life better then it doesn't deserve all the attention that it gets.

Josh Well, if you were to take a message away from Othello it would be don't be jealous. If you were to take a message away from 'Phaedra' or 'Hippolytus' it would be don't fall in love with your stepson - don't fall in love with the wrong person.

Oliver And that doesn't need 3 hours.

Josh It doesn't need 3 hours and it doesn't make for a very interesting play. So the message about tragedy - what it tells you about, what it prescribes to you is not very interesting and is not the reason that we go to tragedy. I think we go to tragedy much more to see how people react to these terrible things happening and to come ourselves into contact with a central fact of existence. That bad things happen, that we can't control every aspect of our lives and that life is not always a mechanism of crime and punishment.

Oliver So if it has some kind of message, some kind of improving factor to it then that lies in the whole experience.

Josh Yes, it doesn't lie in a sentence that you could take away. You can't reduce tragedy to a `[[maximit 0:16:58]]`, it's some part of what we observe that makes us – that gives us something as you said to take away into our own lives.
