



Seven Greek tragedies, seven simple overviews

Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2018.12.27. "https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/seven-greek-tragedies-seven-simple-overviews/." Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

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Seven Greek tragedies, seven simple overviews

December 27, 2018 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2018.12.27 | By Gregory Nagy

I challenge myself here to write up seven elementary “plot outlines”—I call them overviews—for seven Greek tragedies: (1) Agamemnon and (2) Libation-Bearers and (3) Eumenides, by Aeschylus; (4) Oedipus at Colonus and (5) Oedipus Tyrannus, by Sophocles; (6) Hippolytus and (7) Bacchae (or Bacchic Women), by Euripides. In my overviews, I expect of the reader no previous knowledge of these seven tragedies.



Mask of Dionysus, found in Myrina (now in Turkey). Terracotta. 2nd–1st centuries BCE. Paris. Musée du Louvre. Department of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities (Myr. 347). Line drawing by Valerie Woelfel.

Three comments, before I start the overviews

—The word tragedy, as I use it here, refers to the most prestigious form of ancient Greek drama.

—In my overviews, I will be using the word drama interchangeably with the word tragedy. Here I give the basic historical facts about ancient Greek drama, in one sentence:

Drama in the polis or ‘city-state’ of Athens was originally developed by the State for the purpose of educating the Athenians to be good citizens.

—My seven overviews contain explanations for words that are out of the ordinary. For example, the ancient Greek word polis, as used above, is explained by way of the definition ‘city-state’. There will be only two terms that I explain not here in my overviews but elsewhere. Those two terms are hero cult and cult hero, explained in my book [The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours](#) 0§14.

Seven tragedies, seven overviews

I. Aeschylus: overviews of three of his tragedies—(1) Agamemnon, (2) Libation-Bearers, (3) Eumenides

This set of three tragedies traces the story of Agamemnon and his family, highlighting their dysfunctionality as a symptom of whatever was evil in the past era of heroes, to be contrasted with the functionality of

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society as it was figured by the State in the “present” era of Athens in 458 BCE, which was the original date of production.

(1) Agamemnon.

The story-line of this drama starts at the time when Agamemnon, over-king of prototypical Greeks known as the Achaeans, is returning to his home at Argos. He is coming from Troy, a sacred city that he and his army have just captured and burned. Meanwhile his wife, Clytemnestra, is plotting revenge for the killing of the couple’s daughter, Iphigeneia, by Agamemnon himself. That killing had been rationalized by the king as a human sacrifice made necessary by his burning desire for the Achaeans to sail off to Troy, propelled by winds blowing from west to east. Before the sacrifice, the Achaeans had been blocked by the winds, controlled by the goddess Artemis.

The chorus of singers-and-dancers in this drama, personified as the elders of Argos who had been left behind when their king Agamemnon went off to Troy, performs an introductory song-and-dance that retells not only the story about all the destruction and killing that followed Troy’s capture by Agamemnon and his army but also an earlier story about the killing of Iphigeneia by Agamemnon himself. The two stories are linked, since they both reveal the problematic morality of Agamemnon, whose cruelty in killing Iphigeneia is linked to his future cruelty in showing no mercy to the victims left behind after the capture of Troy by the Achaeans. Artemis, goddess of winds, had allowed the redirection of the winds, now blowing from west to east and thus propelling the Achaeans to Troy, but she had hated the killing that led to this redirection—and she had already hated prophetically the future killings and enslavements at Troy, even before those grim events had ever yet happened.

Once Agamemnon returns from the killings at Troy and arrives back home at Argos, he too gets violently killed. The slaughter there is committed by Clytemnestra, acting together with her new lover Aegisthus. Also slaughtered is an innocent victim, the princess Cassandra, whom Agamemnon had enslaved and brought back with him from Troy to Argos as his war-prize. The death of Cassandra is one of the most poignant moments in the tragedy. A wind comes from the west and blows into her face as she enters the palace where she will be killed by Clytemnestra. This wind once again signals the presence of Artemis, goddess of the winds. By implication, Artemis can once again feel hatred—this time, for what is happening to Cassandra.

(2) Libation-Bearers.

Another daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Electra, is angry over the killing of her father by her mother. It is unclear whether she is also angry over the killing of her sister, Iphigeneia, by her father, Agamemnon. At the beginning of the story told in this drama, Clytemnestra makes the gesture of sending Electra on a ritual mission to honor Agamemnon: the daughter is supposed to pour libations—that is, ritual pourings—into the earth that covers the buried body of her father. Electra considers this gesture by her mother to be hypocritical, and she asks the chorus of handmaidens to help her learn how to perform the libation at the tomb of Agamemnon. She says she does not know what the right kind of libation might be.

At the tomb, Electra is reunited with her brother, Orestes, who is likewise the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. The sister joins with the brother in seeking vengeance against their mother for the killing of their father. They plot to kill their mother and her lover, Aegisthus. In their wording, they picture this planned killing as a libation of human blood. But that is not the right kind of libation to be poured for an ancestor—or for a cult hero in the making, since the rules of hero cult prescribe libations of the blood of sacrificed animals, not of murdered humans.

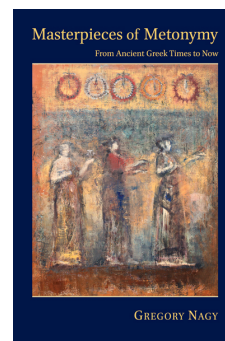
Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are now murdered by Orestes, with the help of Electra. Thus the son is afflicted with the pollution of blood-guilt for the killing of his own mother.

(3) Eumenides.

The story told in this drama centers on the transformation of malignant Erinyes or ‘furies’ into benign Eumenides, which means euphemistically ‘those who have a good disposition’. The Erinyes, as personified ‘Furies’, are a collective female embodiment of anger felt by dead heroes whose restless spirits pursue their “unfinished business” of seeking vengeance for blood-guilt. At the beginning of the drama, the Erinyes are already seeking vengeance against Orestes. This vengeance centers on the son’s blood-guilt for murdering his mother in order to avenge her own blood-guilt for murdering his father. The Erinyes are chasing after Orestes, tracking him down like bloodhounds.

Orestes seeks refuge in the city of Athens, where Athena, who is the goddess of the citadel and of the whole city and its environs, arranges for the first trial by jury that has ever happened in the prehistory of humanity. In terms of myth, this moment marks a transition from the dysfunctional age of heroes to the functional age of civilization, starting from this moment in the distant past and extending all the way to the notional present, 458 BCE (as we date it), which is the year when the drama was produced in the city of Athens. Again in terms of myth, this same moment extends further, notionally, from the present all the way into a hoped-for future eternity for Athens.

At this primordial trial, the god Apollo defends Orestes against the plaintiffs, who are the Erinyes. The male divinity is claiming that fatherhood is more important than motherhood. Apollo’s reasoning is based on an old ideology, which claims that human reproduction is caused by male ‘seed’, and that there exists no corresponding female ‘seed’. In terms of such a claim, the uterus of a mother is merely a receptacle into which the father plants, as it were, his ‘seed’. This ideology corresponds to an old Athenian law that granted Athenian citizenship to a male whose father was a native Athenian, whether or not the mother was



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a native Athenian. But the “present time” of 458 BCE is a new time when a new Athenian law was being introduced. This new law granted citizenship to a male only if both his father and his mother were native Athenians. This new law, which served the purpose of blocking arrangements of dynastic marriages of Athenian male elites with non-Athenian female elites, was characteristic of a newer ideology that can best be described as democracy. Such an ideology was relevant to a newer version of the myth that was taking shape in the drama of Aeschylus, who was a prominent State Poet of State Theater. In the era of Aeschylus, the State was being transformed into a more pronounced form of democracy.

In the myth of this drama, the goddess Athena is the Decider, and she is a perfect example, mythologically, of a new political reality: she was conceived in the uterus of Mētis, the goddess of intelligence, who was impregnated by Zeus, over-king of all divinities. Athena is a genetic result of both the female parent and the male parent. But there is a catch to it: Zeus had felt threatened by the pregnancy of Mētis. It was foretold that the god’s son, carried in the uterus of the goddess Mētis, would overthrow his father once he was born. So, Zeus swallows the pregnant goddess, and Athena is born out of his head, not out of the uterus of Mētis. The result of this divine episiotomy is that the gender of Athena is in the end female, not male. But this female will never have sex, will never reproduce.

Accordingly, Athena is not only pro-mother but also pro-father. She is not only feminine but also masculine. How will this identity affect the first trial ever tried? When the jury votes, their vote is a tie. But Athena breaks the tie, freeing Orestes from the penalty of death for killing his mother in order to avenge her killing of his father. This is not to say that Orestes is not guilty. It is simply that he will not be punished further for his blood-guilt, beyond the infernal torments that he had already experienced in being pursued by the Erinyes. And what happens to the Erinyes? When they hear the verdict that purifies Orestes of his pollution, they scream bloody murder, but Athena assuages them by offering to cooperate with them in all future management of crime and punishment in the New Order of Civilization. The Erinyes now get to share a condominium, as it were, with Athena in Athens, since the primitive mentality of blood-vengeance—a most telling word for which is vendetta—has now been replaced by the civilized social order of the polis or ‘city-state’. The Furies are no longer the furious Erinyes. They have become the tempered Eumenides, and this name, as already noted, is a euphemism of wishful thinking, since it means ‘they who have a good disposition’.

II. Sophocles: overviews of two of his dramas—(4) Oedipus at Colonus, (5) Oedipus Tyrannus

These two dramas of Sophocles are not a set—unlike the three dramas of Aeschylus as overviewed above. The Oedipus at Colonus was composed by Sophocles toward the very end of the life—he died in 406 BCE—and its première took place only posthumously, in 401 BCE. By contrast, the Oedipus Tyrannus had its première over a quarter of a century earlier, though the precise date is not known for certain. First to be overviewed here is the later drama, Oedipus at Colonus, for a simple reason: it is relatively easier, I think, to understand the overall myth of Oedipus by reading the Oedipus Tyrannus only after reading the Oedipus at Colonus.

(4) Oedipus at Colonus.

Oedipus, king of Thebes, had blinded himself in despair over his skewed identity after discovering that he had unwittingly killed his own father, the former king Laios, and had married his own mother, Jocasta, the widow of Laios. Exiling himself from the city of Thebes, Oedipus now seeks refuge in the city of Athens, arriving at a deme or ‘district’ that is located at some distance from the center of this city. The name of the deme is Colonus, and this naming is marked by a stylized white rock, which is a tumulus or mound coated with plaster, pictured as shining from afar. The name of Colonus refers not only to this landmark but also, by extension, to the whole deme; by further extension, Colonus is even the name of a primordial cult hero whose corpse is located somewhere within the ‘mother earth’ of the deme.

This land of Colonus, this deme, is pictured as a sacred space teeming with fertile vegetation. The space is a stylized grove, sacred not only to the cult hero Colonus but also to a constellation of gods, the most prominent of whom is Poseidon. The presence of this powerful god in Colonus is pictured as a sexual domination of Mother Earth. It is in this land of Colonus, in this grove, that Oedipus, wretched and repellent, seeks refuge.

By seeking refuge in Colonus, Oedipus is by extension seeking refuge in the city of Athens. The mother earth that is Colonus is also by extension the mother earth that is Athens. And it is no accident, as we will see, that Colonus is the birthplace of Sophocles himself, favorite son of Athens.

To be granted refuge in Colonus and, by extension, in Athens, the wretched Oedipus needs the support of the hero Theseus, who rules as king over Athens and over all the demes of the city, including the deme of Colonus. So, Oedipus makes a formal request to Theseus, who is high priest of the Athenians by virtue of being their king: specifically, Oedipus asks Theseus to purify him of the pollution of killing his father and having sex with his mother. In return, Oedipus promises to Theseus that he will donate his own body, now that he is ready for death, to the deme of Colonus. That is, Oedipus promises to become a new cult hero for the deme named Colonus, supplementing the earlier hero cult of that earlier cult hero named Colonus.

The request is granted, and the promise is kept. Theseus as high priest purifies the wretched Oedipus of his pollution, and Oedipus, by way of a mystical death, is absorbed as a new cult hero into the Mother Earth of Colonus. The new hero cult of Oedipus, anchored not only in Colonus but also, more generally, in Athens, is seen as a moral victory for this city and as a defeat for the city of Thebes, which at the time of this drama’s production was a mortal enemy of Athens.

(5) Oedipus Tyrannus.

The people of Thebes, where Oedipus is king, are suffering from the pollution of a plague that afflicts all vegetal and animal life, not only the lives of humans. They approach Oedipus and pray to him: you must save us. If you can save us, then you will be our savior once again. You have already saved us before.

This is a bad start for the story of the drama. The people are approaching Oedipus here as if he were already a cult hero. But he is not. You cannot become a cult hero until after you die, and Oedipus is still very much alive.

The people of Thebes have approached Oedipus here because they are relying on what they know about a past deed of his: Oedipus had been their savior before, when he had solved the Riddle of the Sphinx. That solution saved the people of Thebes from an earlier plague. So, save us now again, they implore him. Oedipus responds by expressing his resolve to solve the riddle of the plague. But the solution for this new riddle will become, tragically, the dissolution of his own identity as king. And this dissolution will be formalized by his self-blinding.

Anthropologists tell us that a generic king, in any given society, is ordinarily viewed as the embodiment of that society. Accordingly, any pain for the 'body politic' of society will be a pain primarily for the king himself. And, as Oedipus himself confesses at the very beginning of the story told in this drama, he is now feeling a pain greater than all the pains felt by each and every one of his own people. But that pain is the pain of pollution, and the ultimate cause of the pollution is in this case the king himself. And this pollution caused by the king can be healed only if the king undoes his own kingship by undoing his own identity. That is what I meant when I spoke a moment ago about a dissolution that will be formalized by self-blinding.

It is an irony, then, that the people pray to Oedipus as their savior, knowing as they already know that this hero had healed them of an earlier plague—healing them by way of his intelligence when he solved the Riddle of the Sphinx. But now we see why the story had gone bad from the very start. The ultimate savior here is not Oedipus but the god Apollo himself, whose primary role in the universe is the healing of life—and whose ultimate characteristic is the luminous intelligence that comes from the light of the sun itself. So, when the people of Thebes pray to Oedipus to heal them as their savior, by way of his intelligence, their prayer drags this hero into an antagonistic relationship with the divinity that he most resembles. That divinity is evidently Apollo, who is actually invoked as a savior in the same drama. The antagonism leads to a disqualification of Oedipus as king of Thebes. The luminous intelligence of Apollo has occluded the inferior intelligence of Oedipus, who now shuts off the lights of his own eyes by blinding himself, thus mutilating his outward signs of kingship.

The generic hero, while alive, is doomed by such an antagonistic relationship with a divinity. After death, however, the same hero will be blessed by the same relationship, which can now undergo a radical transformation: the old antagonism that we see in the myths about the life of the hero will be transformed, after death, into a new symbiosis that we see in the corresponding rituals of hero cult, where the generic cult hero gets to be worshipped alongside the divinity whom he or she most closely resembles. In the two Oedipus dramas of Sophocles, however, the story of Oedipus as a cult hero becomes a reality only in Athens, not in Thebes. And that story is told in the Oedipus at Colonus, not in the Oedipus Tyrannus.

III. Euripides: overviews of two of his dramas—(6) Hippolytus, (7) Bacchae (or Bacchic Women)

These two dramas of Euripides are chronologically far apart from each other, separated by over a quarter of a century. The earlier of the two is the Hippolytus, produced in 428 BCE. This drama is already a far cry from what we saw in considering the three dramas of Aeschylus, which had been produced thirty years earlier, in 458 BCE. There we saw drama as State Theater, reflecting the prevailing ideologies of the Athenian State as it existed in the era of Aeschylus. In the Hippolytus, by contrast, produced in 428 BCE, we see drama as theater for the sake of theater. The differences between the dramas of Aeschylus and Euripides become even more pronounced in the later work of the second poet. A salient example is the Bacchae of Euripides, the première of which took place in 405 BCE, sometime after the poet's death. Here the very idea of Theater is questioned. So, what exactly is the role of Dionysus himself as god of theater? There is no easy answer. That is because, though the dramas of Euripides still depend on sponsorship by the State, the civic agenda of the State can no longer be detected. Such differences between the dramas of Aeschylus and Euripides are playfully highlighted by Aristophanes in his comedy Frogs, produced in 405 BCE. Imagined there is an otherworldly poetic contest between the two poets, and it is the civic-minded Aeschylus who wins the contest, not the experimental Euripides. The effect is ironically comic.

(6) Hippolytus.

In the myth that is retold in this drama, the youthful hero Hippolytus worships only the goddess Artemis, neglecting altogether the goddess Aphrodite. He cares only for hunting and athletics. This predilection of his mirrors his neglect of Aphrodite, and here is why: both hunting and athletics, which were ritualized activities in ancient Greek society, required temporary abstinence from sexual activity, which was of course the primary domain of Aphrodite, goddess of sexuality and love.

Aphrodite, in her anger over being neglected by Hippolytus, devises a plan for punishing him. Her divine scenario will in the end doom not only Hippolytus but also the woman whom the goddess chooses as the instrument for the punishment. What happens is that Aphrodite causes Phaedra, the young wife of Theseus, king of Athens, to fall madly in love with Hippolytus, her stepson, whom Theseus had fathered in an earlier liaison—with an Amazon. The tragic aftermath of unrequited love results in not one death but two. Not only Hippolytus but also the young queen Phaedra must die.

After Hippolytus rejects an offer of Phaedra's love, conveyed indirectly by her life-long attendant or 'nurse', the young queen writes a letter in which she falsely accuses her stepson of making sexual advances at her, and she makes the accusation irrevocable by committing suicide. When Theseus reads the letter, he believes the accusation despite the protestations of Hippolytus, and the father now utters an irrevocable curse against the son. The curse takes effect as Hippolytus drives off in his chariot, speeding along the seashore: suddenly, a monster is unleashed by the curse. It is a raging bull that emerges from the sea. The vision of this monster panics the galloping horses that draw the speeding chariot of Hippolytus. He is killed in the spectacular crash that ensues.

As we know from written sources external to the drama, not only Hippolytus but also Phaedra were worshipped as cult heroes in the city of Troizen, which is pictured by Euripides as the dramatic setting for the story. In the context of these hero cults, there were rituals of initiation that corresponded to the myths about the deaths of these two cult heroes. And the functionality of these rituals in the present, that is, in the era when the drama was produced, corresponded to the dysfunctionality of the two heroes in the myth being retold. In other words, young people in the present had the chance to be fortunate in love after they were initiated into adulthood by way of re-enacting, in song and dance, the unfortunate love story of two doomed heroes of the distant past, Phaedra and Hippolytus.

(7) Bacchae (or Bacchic Women).

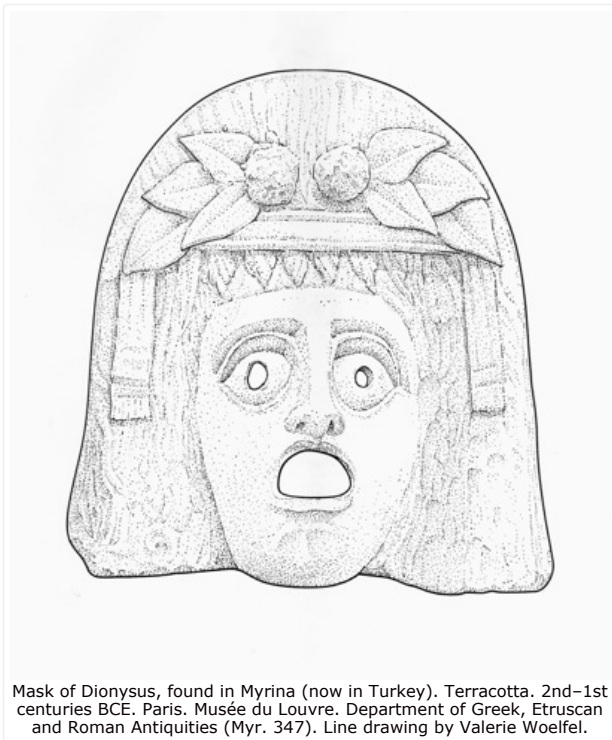
This drama is chronologically the latest Greek tragedy—and, by accident, the last to survive (actually, the actual ending of the text has not survived, either). Paradoxically, this last tragedy is the only surviving drama that speaks directly about the Birth of Tragedy—in using this expression, I am borrowing from the formulation of Friedrich Nietzsche.

At a time when the very form of tragedy was getting more and more destabilized, the story of this drama reaches back to the origins of tragedy. According to Athenian traditions, the very first tragedy ever produced was called Pentheus, named after a hero who had persecuted Dionysus and had been punished for his impiety. The punishment was the dismemberment of Pentheus at the hands of his own mother and aunts, who had been driven mad by the mental power of Dionysus. And this same Pentheus is also the main hero in the Bacchae of Euripides. Here too, as in the earliest forms of the relevant myth, Pentheus persecutes Dionysus, who arrives in Thebes to shake things up—that is the way the god actually describes what he intends to do.

For Pentheus, Dionysus is an alien and, as an alien, he is a threat to the social order of the city of Thebes. But Pentheus does not understand that Dionysus, although he looks alien on the outside, is on the inside a native son of the city. Like Pentheus himself, Dionysus too is a grandson of Cadmus, the original founder of Thebes.

Further, Pentheus does not understand that Dionysus is a god. Failing to understand, Pentheus proceeds to persecute the god, abusing him as if Dionysus were not really divine. The god in turn does not reveal fully his divinity to Pentheus until it is too late for that hero to repent. Instead, Dionysus acts as a devotee of the god, and the word for such a devotee is bakkhos. But the irony is, an alternative name for Dionysus himself is Bakkhos, generally spelled today in its latinized form, Bacchus. In the rituals of worship for Dionysus, any devotee of the god can become one with the god, and that is why both god and devotee can be called Bakkhos/bakkhos. Thus, by acting the part of a devotee of the god, Dionysus is in fact acting the part of the god himself.

When the god acts, he is not an actor but the real actant of the totalizing myth of Dionysus. That is why the mask of Dionysus is his face, and his face is his mask. After all, he is the god of Theater.



Mask of Dionysus, found in Myrina (now in Turkey). Terracotta. 2nd–1st centuries BCE. Paris. Musée du Louvre. Department of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities (Myr. 347). Line drawing by Valerie Woelfel.

Those who are possessed by Dionysus in ritual are moderate, but those who are possessed by the god in myth are immoderate—they are driven mad. That is why the mother and the aunts of Perseus, as characters in myth who failed to revere the god Dionysus, will be driven mad and will ultimately dismember Pentheus. By contrast, the women who are the followers of the god, as represented by the chorus of the drama, are moderate in their worship—and they are authorized by Theater to sing and dance the myth of Dionysus, thus reintegrating the body politic.

Tags: [Aeschylus](#), [Agamemnon](#), [Bacchae](#), [drama](#), [Eumenides](#), [Euripides](#), [Hippolytus](#), [Libation-Bearers](#), [Oedipus at Colonus](#), [Oedipus Tyrannus](#), [Sophocles](#), [tragedy](#)

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