

READING GREEK TRAGEDY

This book is an advanced critical introduction to Greek tragedy. It is written specifically for the reader who does not know Greek and who may be unfamiliar with the context of the Athenian drama festival but who nevertheless wants to appreciate the plays in all their complexity. Simon Goldhill aims to combine the best contemporary scholarly criticism in classics with a wide knowledge of modern literary studies in other fields. He discusses the masterpieces of Athenian drama in the light of contemporary critical controversies in such a way as to enable the student or scholar not only to understand and appreciate the texts of the most read plays, but also to evaluate and utilize the range of approaches to the problems of ancient drama. This revised edition contains a substantial new introduction, which engages with critical and scholarly developments in Greek tragedy since the original publication.

SIMON GOLDHILL is a Professor of Greek at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of King's College, as well as the Foreign Secretary of the British Academy. He is one of the best-known classicists of his generation. He has lectured all over the world and has appeared on TV and radio from Canada to Australia. His books have been translated into twelve languages and have won three international prizes. His most recent book is *The Christian Invention of Time* (Cambridge, 2022).

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READING GREEK TRAGEDY

Second Edition

SIMON GOLDHILL

University of Cambridge



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*For Shoshana Shira,
my flower, my song*

A strong song tows
us, long earsick.
Blind, we follow
rain slant, spray flick
to fields we do not know.
BUNTING

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Preface

I would advise in addition the eschewal of overt and self-conscious discussion of the narrative process. I would advise in addition the eschewal of overt and self-conscious discussion of the narrative process.

JOHN BARTH

This book is designed as an advanced critical introduction to Greek tragedy, primarily for the reader who has little or no Greek. I aim to provide a combination of powerful readings of individual plays with an understanding of the complex difficulties involved in the analysis of the workings of Greek tragic texts, in the light of modern literary critical studies.

For Greek tragedy, the best available critical material – on which I have drawn liberally – is based on a close reading of the Greek text, and even where an attempt is made to help the Greekless reader by transliteration or translation, insufficient assistance is provided for the reader without an extensive knowledge of fifth-century Athenian culture. It is little help to translate *polis* as ‘city’ or ‘city-state’, or to leave it in a transliterated form, if the reader has no understanding of the nature of civic ideology in the fifth century and its importance for tragedy in particular.¹

There have been works attempting such a wider introduction, but they are in general pitched, often with schools in mind, far below the level of critical awareness or sophistication required by the modern reader who approaches these plays from disciplines other than classics.² This book is composed specifically for the reader who does not know Greek but who wishes to read Greek tragedy with some critical awareness, and to appreciate and discuss in all their complexities the problems raised by these texts.

¹ This is a common problem particularly with collections of essays by classicists, such as Segal ed. 1968, and especially Segal ed. 1983.

² E.g. Arnott 1959; Baldry 1981; and most recently Walton 1984.

The book is divided into four sections, each of two chapters: 1–2, language and the city; 4–5, people and the city; 7–8, knowledge and mind; 10–11, theatre as theatre. Each of these eight chapters has a similar form, and consists of a general introduction to the range of questions and material involved in a particular key topic in the study of Greek tragedy, together with a reading of certain plays in the light of the more general discussion. So, for example, Chapter 5, ‘Sexuality and Difference’, considers the various critical attitudes that have been taken in the discussion of sexual roles in Athenian culture and in particular in the tragic texts, and then develops a reading of the *Medea* and in far greater detail the *Hippolytus* specifically in terms of the questions of sexuality and difference. This allows the construction of detailed critical readings of the most commonly discussed individual plays with regard to a general and more widely relevant topic. Naturally, one cannot hope to give in a single chapter of such length an exhaustive treatment of a topic as complex as sexuality and difference, but this format not only offers access to the range and force of a modern critical debate and how it relates to particular plays, but also attempts to provide the means through which other plays of the tragic corpus may be approached and read.

The four sections are linked by three more general chapters (3, 6, 9), each of which deals with an essential element of background to the understanding of tragedy – the city and its ideology, Homer and his influence, the upheavals of the fifth-century enlightenment associated with the sophists. In these chapters, the social, literary and intellectual aspects of tragedy are put into a wider context.

I have called the book *Reading Greek Tragedy* not because I believe tragedy should not be performed, nor because most of us first approach these plays through the printed page, but because of certain contemporary critical associations with the term ‘reading’, which will become clear through the course of the book, and which will serve to distinguish this work from the major traditions of classical scholarship through which tragedy is most often approached. It is a somewhat polemical title for what is self-consciously a challenging book.

I have in general quoted from the Chicago Press series of translations under the editorship of David Grene and Richard Lattimore. Overall, it has seemed more convenient to keep to a single, justifiably popular translation, than to seek out what I regard as the best translation for each play or set of lines. However, I have also often needed to adapt the translation to make my points more clearly or directly. I have only rarely indicated in the text where I have made such alterations.

I have not included such standard information as the dating of the plays, the lives of the poets, the construction of the theatre, the number of the

Preface

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actors, etc., which is readily available elsewhere. It may be worth stating here, however, that all our extant plays were produced in public festivals in Athens and its territory Attica in the latter part of the fifth century B.C. Greek tragedy is Athenian tragedy, specifically Attic drama, from a remarkably brief span of years.

Although the book may be read with any translation, it is assumed that the plays in question have been read: there are no plot summaries or cribs. All Greek is, of course, transliterated, and to avoid confusion for readers unused to a highly inflected language, I have often given simply the base of the word quoted, when it is not in the nominative singular, for nouns and adjectives, or infinitive for verbs. So *philein* and *phil-* are normally used to cover all parts of the verb *philein*. Classicists may easily refer to the Greek text for any necessary clarification. The notes have been used almost exclusively for references, often to further reading on points of interest or further discussion of specific issues. They are not intended to be exhaustive, but helpful to the student or scholar wishing to continue the debates of this book into more detailed areas of scholarship.

It is a pleasure to be able to thank here the many friends and colleagues who have helped me on this book. Dr Robin Osborne and Dr Norman Bryson read chapters and offered extremely useful comments and encouragement for the project. Dr Robin Osborne, Dr Richard Hunter and Mrs Patricia Easterling kindly showed me work in progress of which I have made liberal use. Professor Froma Zeitlin's influence from shared conversations, ideas and work has been constant: her encouragement and support can be thanked properly only here and not in the many relevant places in my text. Professor Geoffrey Lloyd read many of the chapters and particularly on questions of social and intellectual background offered essential advice and the benefit of his great understanding. Pat Easterling read all the chapters in draft: her astute criticisms and careful scholarship on all matters have been invaluable. John Henderson read the whole book as it progressed with sustaining patience and humour, as well as encouragement and criticism. And a special word of thanks to Jon, Flora, Lizzie and Sho – who convinced me in the first place that it should be possible.

Thanks are also due to the officers of the Press, Pauline Hire and Susan Moore, for their skill and efficiency.

S.D.G.
Cambridge 1985

Preface to Second Printing

I wish to thank the many readers and reviewers, especially Paul Cartledge, who have helped with the revisions of this second printing.

S.D.G.
Cambridge 1988