

Preface

Volume 13 of *Animus* is dedicated to studies of Greek tragedy.

One of the most striking things about the extant works of Greek tragedy is their broad accessibility and ongoing popular appeal, both as literary texts and theatrical art; *Antigone*, for example, is a staple of high school literature classes, while *Medea* remains a coveted acting role for seasoned professionals. Perhaps no works of imaginative literature from the ancient world, with the possible exception of Homer, have sustained such a powerful reputation for universality, relevance, and ‘modernity.’ There is a widespread conviction that these works express trans-cultural, trans-historical insights about the cosmos and the human condition. Indeed, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and, perhaps most of all, Euripides – ‘public intellectuals’ in their own time – remain ever-fascinating contemporaries. In the long and fruitful engagement between philosophy and tragedy, for example, the focus on universal form and content in tragedy is persistent, and many compelling insights about the continuity of the tragic tradition, the tragic spirit, the tragic vision, and the tragic sense of life have emerged in philosophical reflection on fifth-century tragedy.

Nevertheless, the hunt for universal themes can be an interpretive dead-end, causing us to read reductively by ignoring the stubborn historical and cultural particularity of the texts. These dramas bear the marks of their originary contexts in manifold ways, not least in their civic and religious functions *vis-à-vis* the City Dionysia. Written during the tumultuous period between c. 472 and 404 BCE, the extant plays are the product of a trio of dramatists from a single Greek polis; in fact, they represent only a small fraction of fifth-century tragedy as a whole, indeed only a small portion of the dramatic output of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Furthermore, these writers do not merely differ significantly from one another, but their own works are remarkably diverse. In other words, generalization, though inevitable, is always a perilous business because we know so much less than we want to know. And yet, even if possessed of such comprehensive knowledge, we, as historically-situated readers, could not pretend to read or watch the plays with fifth-century Athenian eyes, innocent of the epistemological revolutions of the intervening millennia or the moderating effects of a rich history of interpretation, production, and appropriation.

From what standpoint, then, ought we to read Greek tragedy? Certainly, philosophy has a kind of pride of place among the theoretical and critical discourses the plays have generated, a conversation that includes Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Kitto, Jaspers, Lukacs, de Unamuno, Santayana, Burke, Frye, Steiner, and Krieger, to name just a few. In particular, the *Poetics* has retained an astounding currency down to the present day; despite innumerable attempts to unseat him, Aristotle remains the one indispensable tragic theorist, supplying a critical terminology – peripeteia, anagnorisis, hamartia, catastrophe, katharsis – that continues to illuminate

tragic structure and effect. Yet the *Poetics* itself, despite its considerable explanatory power, is itself in need of elucidation, as illustrated by several of the essays in this volume. Nor is Aristotle infallible in his judgments, even on his own ground; unlike the neoclassical theorists, we generally recognize today that the *Poetics* constitutes not the last word on tragedy but the first. Tragic poetry, as Aristotle remarked, may be more universal than history, but Greek tragedy itself cannot be reduced to philosophy by other means. Such is the rich complexity of the material that even the most powerful and authoritative readings leave behind an unexamined remainder, and the only reasonable response to the plays is a glorious hermeneutic pluralism. We believe that this is amply demonstrated in the variety of standpoints and approaches evinced by the authors in this volume of *Animus*.

C. Michael Sampson, in “Universals, Plot and Form in Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” re-examines Aristotle’s conception of plot, clarifying the famous comment that poetry speaks of universals (τὰ καθόλου) as opposed to particulars. He contends that the universals of which Aristotle writes are not general or metaphorical principles, but rather plot itself, understood as the universal form in a poetic substance and essential to tragedy’s *telos* and self-realization – the arousal of pity and fear. Thus, instead of treating the *Poetics* as a key to the interpretation of the genre, the argument resituates it within the framework of Aristotelian ontology and teleology.

Anitra Laycock argues in “Poetry & Polity: Tragic Perspectives on the Nature of Political Association” that the decline of the Athenian polis – from an ideal harmony of reason and feeling expressed in justice and friendship to an unstable, disorderly, fatally divided “heap” – is discernible in fifth-century tragedy, specifically in a comparative reading of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, and Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Collectively, these plays question the essential nature of political association in a manner that anticipates and informs the like explorations of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Dana LaCourse Munteanu proposes, in “Timing Recognition: From Aristotle’s Comments on the *Iphigenia in Tauris* to Gluck’s Opera,” to illuminate Aristotle’s references in the *Poetics* to the shadowy figure of Polyidus, whose version of the Iphigenia myth is presented as an alternative to Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris*. In particular, Aristotle praises Polyidus’ handling of the recognition scene as an alternative to Euripides’ method. The author argues that Aristotle’s interest in Polyidus signals an implicit recognition of the importance of dramatic timing, which is not formally broached in the *Poetics*. The author supports this contention with a brief reading of the recognition seen in Gluck’s eighteenth-century opera, *Iphigenie en Tauride*, whose librettist appropriated Polyidus’ recognition scene.

Julen Etxabe, in “Antigone’s Nomos,” offers a solution to the crux contained in lines 904-15 of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in which the heroine, defending before her fellow citizens her burial of her brother Polyneices, claims she would not have disobeyed Creon’s edict in the case of a husband or child, and refers to her defense twice as a *nomos*. He contends that Antigone’s speech deserves to be taken seriously as a legal argument promulgating a socially validated norm. The justification for Antigone’s

disobedience, he argues, is rooted in ancient Greek conceptions of the family; the death of Polyneices, the last male in the Labdacid line, constitutes the extinction of Antigone's family and therefore demands the ritual of burial. The argument aims at re-framing Antigone's gesture – often understood as explicable in terms of necessity, heroism, or equity – as the conscientious act of a citizen attempting to redefine the normative boundaries of the polis.

Sarah Nooter makes the case, in “Uncontainable Consciousness in Sophocles' *Ajax*,” that the heroes in Sophocles' plays, notably Ajax, can be illuminated through Mikhail Bakhtin's study of characterization in Dostoevsky's novels. Specifically, the writer challenges the commonplaces about the provenance of dramatic irony in Sophoclean tragedy, proposing in its place dramatic indeterminacy *vis-à-vis* the protagonist's consciousness. The much-maligned and objectified Ajax, she argues, always exceeds the audience's comprehension and is thus granted autonomy of consciousness, as confirmed by Odysseus at the end of the play.

Paul Epstein, in “Aristophanes on Tragedy,” contends that the comedies *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs* constitute both serious explorations of the nature of tragedy and the fullest development of Aristophanes' comic art. In both plays, the protagonist – Euripides and Dionysus respectively – discovers the *telos* of tragedy, which is the education of the spectators in their civic duties. Epstein argues that, while all Aristophanic plays portray the comic hero's alienation and eventual reconciliation to Athens and its institutions, the two comedies in question – with protagonists who directly represent the spectators and whose activity is grounded in the divine-human relation of religious festivals – succeed to a greater degree than the other plays in radically unifying the elements of spectator, comic hero, polis-institutions, and the gods. Because Dionysus is the main character of *Frogs*, the latter play unifies these elements even more thoroughly than *Thesmophoriazusae*.

Aryeh Kosman, in “The Divine in Aristotle's *Ethics*,” argues that the divine in Aristotelian ethical reflection is a regulative principle of human good; it does not legislate the nature of the good, underwrite morality, or otherwise abrogate the naturalism and human agency which inform Aristotle's ethical thought. In the *Ethics*, god is figured as both the principle of reason (which permits humans to attain virtue and, subsequently, happiness) and that which governs the realm of moral luck and thus the site of the distinction between happiness and blessedness. He goes on to consider the *Poetics* as a complementary sequel to the *Ethics*, one which explores the uncertainty and frailty of virtuous action as the realization of proper deliberation and the achievement of happiness. Tragedy, he contends, explores the pathology of action, in which the deliberations and choices of vulnerable human agents are frustrated by a world outside their control. Finally, he characterizes the divine as thought itself, the good of human awareness.

We hope you find these essays as challenging and stimulating as we did. Enjoy.