

# Tragedy in the Crosshairs of the Present

Brooke Holmes

*Abstract: A number of developments in the study of Greek literature over the past few decades have broken down boundaries of canon and genre, opening up a wide range of texts once deemed degenerate or unavailable to literary analysis, expanding the networks within which literary texts are interpreted, and bringing renewed attention to the reception of ancient texts in later periods up to the present. The rise of reception studies, in particular, raises new questions about how our own position within specific present moments not only imposes constraints on the interpretation of ancient texts but also enables it. In this essay, I survey these developments using Greek tragedy, the most canonical of genres, as a case study. I argue that we need to develop strategies of interpretation more attuned to resonances between contemporary quandaries and our extant tragedies while remaining committed to forms of social and historical difference. I pay particular attention to the problems of agency that tragedy raises at the juncture of the human and the nonhuman worlds.*

BROOKE HOLMES is Professor of Classics in the Department of Classics at Princeton University. She is the author of *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (2010) and *Gender: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (2012). She is currently at work on her next book, *The Tissue of the World: Sympathy and the Nature of Nature in Greco-Roman Antiquity*.

The category of “Greek literature” has been nothing if not contestable for some decades now. The challenges have come largely from a cluster of approaches usually referred to as “cultural poetics” or “cultural history,” whose driving assumption is that determining the meaning of any ancient text requires that we embed it within a larger network of power and a broader field of signs (Athenian democracy, for example, or archaic song culture, or pan-Hellenic politics). The impact of cultural poetics has been enormous. As canonical “literary” texts have been released into a wider cultural stream, once-marginal texts have become newly privileged objects of attention. The study of texts produced after the fall of classical Athens in Ptolemaic Alexandria and under the Roman Empire, texts long dismissed as imitative and degenerate, has been booming since the mid-1990s. Decades of groundbreaking work on gender and sexuality have also helped to broaden the corpus of texts, encouraging a shift of attention toward medical and other tech-

---

© 2016 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences  
doi:10.1162/DAED\_a\_00372

nical texts, in particular. Alongside these developments we have witnessed the rapid ascent of a subfield usually called “reception studies,” roughly the study of classical antiquity in post-antique societies and the history of classical scholarship. The field of Greek literature, in short, has been blown open. Its boundaries – generic, geographical, chronological – are no longer easily locatable.

Yet if these trends have worked together to transform what gets studied under the heading of Greek literature, they also pull in different directions. The potential for tension is most evident in the relationship between approaches that locate texts in their social and cultural contexts and those that look to their many and varied afterlives. One strategy tries to figure out what the texts meant in their immediate contexts; the other looks to a series of encounters in a range of places and times, including some close to home. Reception studies is often practiced with a primarily historicist outlook. But reception studies by nature, tracking as it does antiquity’s long tail, raises questions about the trans-historical value of ancient texts and the meaning of these texts today. These kinds of questions can be tough for classicists.

Indeed, anxieties about presentism are virtually constitutive of modern classical scholarship, founded as the model science in the nineteenth century on techniques for accessing the historical truth of the past and reconstituting its texts.<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century, fascist appropriations of an idealized antiquity came to haunt uses of the classical past for present-day ends. Triumphalist classicism has been turned on its head by a political tide that has been in ascendancy since the late 1960s, and out of which the best strands of cultural poetics have emerged. Yet while the conservative attempt to turn back that tide is undoubtedly misguided, forms of anticlassicism always risk being constrained by what they

oppose. Historicism has its limits. For better or for worse, “the Greeks” still haunt the Western imagination, as they have for millennia. Though we did not need reception studies to tell us that, a flood of recent work has driven the point home. And like the humanities more generally, classics is always facing challenges to its relevance.

It is easy enough to let the sheer impact of “the Greeks” or “the ancients” on Western civilization legitimate by default the study of whatever fits under the big tent of Greek literature. The strategy is at some level unavoidable under current conditions. But I do worry that it feeds off a certain defensiveness about the field in an age of budget cuts and STEM-envy, and I worry even more that it falls back uncritically on standard classicizing presumptions of value. The harder task is a serious reckoning with the legacies of classicism and anticlassicism as the conditions under which anyone comes to the Greeks as if they do and should matter. This reckoning would start by taking up the inherited category of “Greek literature” and its canon not only as a historical construct but also as the dynamic terrain for the staging of arguments about the value of ancient Greek texts and demands that we attend to them. In the rest of this essay, I flesh out these more general arguments by looking at the specific case of that most canonical of genres, Greek tragedy.

There may be no other genre in which the tensions I have just sketched are so evident, precisely because of tragedy’s tenacious prestige value. Tragedy already exuded power and status during its efflorescence in fifth-century BCE Athens. But from our vantage point, the genre’s power is unthinkable without its reimagination as the philosophy of the tragic most closely associated with the German idealists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Reborn in a philosophical mode and

buoyed by highly influential readings of a handful of plays (*Antigone*, *The Bacchae*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*) by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud, tragedy has remained central to twentieth- and twenty-first-century continental philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, feminism, and literary theory, while also enjoying a robust performance tradition. There is arguably no tragedy in modernity without a philosophy of the tragic.

Unsurprisingly, in light of my remarks above about historicist trends in the field, the modern legacy of the tragic has been a problem for scholars of Greek tragedy over the past four decades. Much effort has gone into making sense of what tragedy meant not as an idea but as a genre in the context of fifth-century Athenian politics, culture, and performance traditions. Most scholars would in fact deny that anything like a “tragic” outlook on life or worldview is embodied by tragedy in its prime, cordoning off Aristotle as well as Hegel from the phenomenon of lived performance. The commitment to a historicist program can be explained not only by the discipline’s own formation as a “science of antiquity” (*Altertumswissenschaft*), which I mentioned above, but also by the wide-ranging influence of the French Hellenist Jean-Pierre Vernant, who critiqued the universalizing claims of psychoanalysis and structuralism in order to situate Greek tragedy more firmly within the coordinates of democratic Athens. In this critical climate, the pressures of modernity’s impassioned appropriation of tragedy have been seen as amplifying the pressures of the present more broadly construed. If we are going to rescue Greek tragedy from the tragic, the thinking goes, we need to cut through the interference.

But pendulums swing. Approaches that were once dynamic ossify. The turn away from the democratic context of our extant tragedies understood as the key to their

meaning has produced a renewed interest in the plays’ formal elements, without jettisoning the hope of observing tragedy as a thoroughly political genre in its original habitat.<sup>2</sup> Even more energy has been channeled into approaching tragedy via reception studies. Greek tragedy has given rise to a substantial and thriving subfield devoted to the study of reperformance and adaptation not only in all corners of the modern world but in antiquity as well. Although less attention has been paid, at least under the auspices of reception studies, to philosophical constructions of the tragic, the past couple years have welcomed a trio of smart new books published by classicists on the history of tragedy and the tragic in continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, and political theory.<sup>3</sup> The idealist tradition is fast becoming less of a threat and more an object of study in its own right within the disciplinary parameters of classics, parameters already expanded by reception’s generous outlook on the temporal and geographical scope of Greek tragedy itself.

It will not escape readers that reception studies thus described looks like historicism by other means. They will not be mistaken. Rather than being trained on the fifth century, the historian’s gaze is now focused on key moments in the nineteenth or the twentieth. The twist is that, taken to its logical outcome, the work of historicizing interpretation – indeed, of historicizing the very dominance of historicism in recent waves of scholarship on tragedy – poses with renewed urgency the question of what it means to read, stage, or watch Greek tragedy now. The methodological implications of reception studies can be spun out in at least two ways.

On the one hand, we can frame historical self-consciousness as a necessary attempt to know thyself. As such, it entails becoming aware of the spectral presence of past readings, judgments, and critical tools that inform your own interpretations. The

process is necessarily aporetic or, to put it more constructively, recursive. You have to stop historicizing at some point and trust whatever tools you have (philology, say, or critical theory) to interpret what a text means. Nevertheless, by trying to understand why we ask the questions we do of a text and perhaps why we find the answers we do, we free ourselves up to ask different questions and arrive at unexpected answers. Such an outcome, anyways, is the hope of any method that aspires to what Michel Foucault called “genealogy.”

On the other hand, the work of engaging the rich tradition of modern and contemporary readings of tragedy can be seen as license and inspiration for strategies of interpretation that invest tragedy with the power to shed light on the human condition, or some historically inflected version of it (modern, postmodern, post-postmodern). An approach of this kind hardly precludes critical self-awareness of one’s place in an interpretive tradition. It may actually be a precondition of enabling Greek tragedy to tell us something we do not already know. But this second approach frames the payoff of historical self-consciousness differently. The reader’s larger commitments and interests within the present function not so much as a distorting lens to be somehow corrected; rather, they are now seen as the very condition of saying something meaningful about ancient tragedy, precisely because they shape a conviction that antiquity matters to us at all.

The shift marked by the second perspective may seem minor. But it has significant implications for how classicists negotiate their relationship to the present more generally. For it asks them to reflect more openly on – and thereby take responsibility for – the values that motivate their readings and the worlds that they hope these readings will sustain or help to create. Taking responsibility in this sense means refusing the default mode that the

value of “the classical” is at once obvious and guaranteed by centuries of prior validation.

But this reflective mode also means not rejecting out of hand the logic of classicization in order to insist on the *otherness* of the Greeks and the particularity of their world. Although the latter approach may seem to sidestep questions of value or to locate value in cultural difference alone, the situation is more complex. For an attachment to the strangeness and the distance of the Greeks shapes the contours of classical antiquity in the modern period as much as figures of intimacy and continuity do. The case of tragedy is exemplary here insofar as one of the fundamental questions posed by philosophies of the tragic is whether ancient tragedy is even still possible in the modern world. We can speculate, then, that classicists are attached to historicizing antiquity not just because they objectively recognize a rupture between past and present. The recognition of rupture, rather, is a precondition of the operation to heal rupture by making the ancients available to the present *in their difference*, a desire often motivated by the implicit belief that antiquity is no ordinary anthropological other, but occupies a privileged position as a distant parent or lost model. In its reparative mode, historicism comes full circle to meet forms of universalism that see ancient tragedy as valuable because it taps into timeless truths – in other words, the ancients are available to the present *in their sameness* – without always being explicit about its own logic of value.

I am suggesting, then, that classical value is still too often assumed as an inheritance easily mistaken for an elite birthright. In challenges to conventional classicism, value is either suppressed or defined via an ethics of alterity broadly understood. Neither option feels adequate to the complexity of contemporary encounters with tragedy. What if instead Greek

tragedy were actively imagined as an object of what we might call, after the Stoics, *elective sympathy*? The aim of changing our terms would be to force a greater recognition of the ways in which tragedy provokes a sense, at once historically conditioned and deeply embodied, of the tensions involved in being human (being mortal, being assigned a gender, being in a family, being in a city, being embedded in a field of nonhuman powers) while, in its impossible strangeness, resisting appropriation. The language of elective sympathy invites us to think harder about how sameness and difference work together in specific ratios to make Greek tragedy matter to us now, where both “us” and “now” refer to diverse communities living out temporalities irreducible to the present alone. It offers a way of seeing modernity’s philosophies of the tragic as constitutive of the vocabularies we use to locate ourselves in relationship to Greek tragedy without determining the sense that we make of the texts.

With the term elective sympathy, then, I am trying to foreground our agency in establishing the terms of our investment in tragedy alongside the power that these texts still exercise over us. Agency, on this account, is not radical freedom, whatever that means. It is, rather, the thoughtful and creative negotiation of legacies ancient and modern, in the interest of living more fully in this world by not being fully of this world. Under these conditions, what might be the claims of Greek tragedy on our attention now?

In Greek tragedy, not being fully of the world in which one finds oneself most commonly leads to living it more fully through pain. The majority of surviving plays are about the suffering of outsized human beings: trauma, violence, carnage, grief. Fragments from others suggest that the texts we have are not unusual in this

respect. The extant plays’ speeds and rhythms are structured by the eruption and modulation of pain. This highly formal and complex scripting of tragic suffering is largely unfamiliar to contemporary American and Western European culture, making it one of the least assimilable aspects of the genre for audiences and readers (and a perennial challenge for performers). This is not to say that performances of Greek tragedy cannot be raw and intense. But its very unrelenting intensity, together with the absence of contemporary reference points for its form, can obscure the fine-grained workings of the law that Aeschylus calls “the learning through suffering.”

Pain in Greek tragedy *always* demands the work of making sense. This is true despite the fact that sense-making always falls short, leaving a remainder of senseless harm that, depending on your theories or your experience of the genre’s therapeutic effects, may or may not be metabolized through spectatorship itself. Like other remainders, the kernel of senseless harm testifies to the failure of a peculiarly human capacity to understand and, through understanding, to master the unknown. It testifies, too, to the very doggedness of the drive toward epistemic mastery. The famous “Ode to Man” in Sophocles’s *Antigone* names this kernel “death.” Many of the surviving tragedies suggest there are even worse things that can happen to you.

There are a range of different ways that characters in a given play come to knowledge or the limits of knowledge in the face of pain, their own and that of others. These manifold ways of knowing explain a good deal of the formal complexity of tragedy (variations of meter and syntax; changes from solo speech to choral song to variants of dialogue, including the rapid-fire back-and-forth called “stichomythia”; matched odes; and the combative quasi-legal speeches of the contest or “agon”). We sometimes see characters in the grip

of intense pain: consider Heracles writhing under a cloak doused with flesh-eating poison at the end of the *Trachiniae* or Philoctetes being seized by spasms of agony when his festering snakebite flares up in Sophocles's *Philoctetes*. Sometimes we see them coming to know the terrible things they have done in a state of madness (Heracles and Ajax in the eponymous plays by Euripides and Sophocles, respectively, or Agave at the end of *The Bacchae*). We see other characters trying to figure out why someone is suffering or else situating a fresh trauma within an intergenerational narrative of misfortune (Euripides's Hippolytus and Orestes in *Orestes*; Prometheus in the *Prometheus Bound*, probably written by Aeschylus). The role of explaining suffering is often taken up by the chorus, who spend a lot of time cycling through myths like a lawyer "searching for a precedent," as Anne Carson's chorus puts it in *Antigonick*.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes gods show up *ex machina* to give an explanation whose very neatness magnifies the gulf between the arid logic of immortals and the lived experience of mortals (that gulf is one of the great challenges of staging the *Medea* for modern audiences).

The intimate relationship between tragic suffering and the work of making sense can be clarified by thinking about the sort of violence tragedy shows. It is a generic convention that direct, human-on-human violence happens offstage and gets reported in speech, typically by messengers. What we see onstage is god-on-human violence: characters struck by diseases, especially madness, that manifest themselves via symptoms, or running into disaster (*atē*) with a recklessness that provokes more sober observers to diagnose the interference of daemoniac agents. But who can be sure? What distinguishes god-on-human violence is the open-ended status of a symptom when compared, say, to a corpse whose murderer accompanies it onstage.

A symptom requires an interpretation of what is happening, what will happen, and who or what is causing it. Those who witness or experience it usually want to know, in particular, which god is responsible.

The recourse to the gods as explanatory principles, however, is never clear-cut. Even if you know which god is behind the suffering, you need to know why he or she is angry. At times in Euripides, characters wonder in desperation what kind of creatures would dream up such horrors. Moreover, the very fact that gods wreak havoc in and through human beings always implicates the vehicles of divine and daemoniac power in the harm that they and others suffer. Even the case of the red-handed killer turns out to be murky. When Clytemnestra stands at last over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, after many scenes of subterfuge, she boldly claims the murders as her own acts. But she also claims to be an avenging daemon. A corpse, too, can thus be a tragic symptom. It, too, marks incontrovertible evidence of damage to human life together with an impetus to make sense that always overshoots the mark (too many agents: god, human, ancestral) and always falls short (no account can translate pain completely into meaning).

Tragedy is about suffering, then, but it is also, over and over again, about the mysteries and the fallout of agency, understood as the ambiguous power to act in the world as well as the ambiguous openness to the world that under extraordinary circumstances impels one to act in ways that are difficult to own. The standard definition of *hamartia* as "fatal flaw" fails to get at the force and the complexity of what is going on here. It is too complacent about the boundaries of the individual to whom the flaw is thought to belong. It is too caught up in Christian notions of original sin, with its attendant certainty about guilt. It is just too blunt an instrument. It can be downright maddening to watch scholars

argue about whether Oedipus in Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* is guilty or innocent of killing his father and sleeping with his mother. But there is also a risk of discounting the problem of agency as a belated philosophical imposition, at the hands of either Aristotle or the German idealists. The problem of agency matters a lot in the tragedies themselves.

It is of course the case that the convergence of philosophy and politics makes the question of agency newly urgent in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century. But it is precisely by recognizing the creative force of the idealists' urgency that we can be more strategic about drawing out the resonances of tragic agency in the early twenty-first century. For once again philosophy and politics are converging on the conundrum of agency, and in many spaces at once. The examples can be multiplied: thinking about and through the scope, limits, and uneven distribution of human agency on scales both cosmic and local in the era of the Anthropocene; the implications of research in cognitive science and medicine for taxonomies of mind, intention, and responsibility; concerns about the capacity of courts to do the political and emotional work of defining harm and blame and assigning damages; the rapid growth of technological expansions of agency that magnify the power to harm and the power to help, thereby shifting our thinking about mortality and our control over life; the tenacity of forces of oppression that continue to work through individuals and communities and institutions with devastating consequences; the ever-fuzzier boundary between human and nonhuman actants in the various new materialisms and the causal traffic between human and nonhuman communities and networks; wars that inflict violence by drone but still send home soldiers damaged by the awful intimacy of combat. The list goes on. Suffice to say that we

are not done with tragic agency. Not even close.

What tragedy does not do is provide easy answers to the darkest puzzles of agency. But its refusal to do so does not mean it necessarily yields what Bonnie Honig has recently diagnosed as "mortalist humanism," that is, a quiescent politics bred out of the indulgence of lament and the positing of a universal community stitched together by finitude.<sup>5</sup> Rather, Greek tragedy carves out spaces for dwelling with vulnerability and damage via a rich spectrum of epistemic and emotional modalities. We need aesthetic and communal spaces to work through the suffering we undergo and witness that cannot be made sense of by the poles of guilt and innocence alone – the moral, ethical, political, and emotional complexity that surrounds damage to human life. Rather than inducing paralysis, the experience of tragedy may condition more discerning, nimble, and compassionate forms of thought and action in the world beyond its boundaries. The possibility that it might do so does not exhaust its value. But nor can such potential be written off as instrumentalization.

In contemporary American culture, we have a deep and desperate need not to see suffering: to fix it with technology or laws, to ignore it or blame it on someone else. Tragedy does not replace medicine or law or politics. But it does have the capacity to flesh out the human sciences by transposing them into worlds where their mechanisms get jammed. Its provocation is to ask whether and how suffering itself can be creative. If tragedy seen in these terms bears the residues of the idealist tradition, idealism's traces bear witness to the urgency and power of its readings of the texts themselves. We court narcissism in believing that sophisticated problems of subjects and objects, of necessity and what is "up to us," of the human and nonhuman are uniquely modern. I want to close by look-

ing very briefly at three versions of these problems, loosely allied with law, medicine, and politics, as endemic to the historical moment of tragedy. My aim in doing so, in an essay ostensibly about the “now,” is to enlarge the autonomy of tragedy as the condition of its viability in this present.

Sophocles’s Oedipus is a cipher from the start. In the *Oedipus at Colonus* (performed approximately two decades after the *Oedipus Tyrannus*), Sophocles scripts two modes of making sense of what has happened to Oedipus that meet but do not merge. When Oedipus, blind and nearing the end of his life, first has his infamous name pried out of him by the chorus of elderly Colonians, he slips into a rhetorically polished speech of self-defense. I am a man, he says, whose deeds were suffered more than acted, who went unknowingly along the path he traveled.<sup>6</sup> Midway through the play, he revisits this language of ignorance and blamelessness in a blistering rebuke to Creon, who has stirred up old slurs to goad Oedipus’s newfound protectors into expelling him from their city.<sup>7</sup>

Oedipus here is very much the master of the legal vocabularies that had been refined over the course of the fifth century. The appropriation of legal vocabulary by the tragedians is the main reason why Vernant put so much emphasis on the evolution of legal thought as a condition for the historical development of Athenian tragedy, which he located at the juncture of older religious paradigms of blame and punishment and fifth-century legal institutions.<sup>8</sup> But the mode of the law-court interacts with others. Once the chorus has agreed to let Oedipus wait for their king Theseus, they return to the story of his life, now told through song and punctuated by lament. Oedipus does not give up the language of blindness and innocence here. But as another kind of sense-making surges up around it, suffering becomes the con-

dition of Oedipus’s life, what defines it as his own even as he disclaims ownership of the actions that create it. His hands are not stained and yet without the stain (*mi-asma*) – and the ongoing work of making sense of the stain – he does not exist. The law is little help here.

What about medicine? A number of scholars have noticed a spike in “medical” vocabulary and depictions of disease in tragedy toward the end of the fifth century. These developments are usually chalked up to a vague “realism” and sometimes secularization, particularly in Euripides. I have elsewhere argued that they can be more productively understood as part of the larger story about tragic agency. More specifically, they stand at the heart of new ways of thinking about human nature, vulnerability, and agency stimulated by the emergence of a concept of the physical body under the aegis of naturalizing medicine and the larger “inquiry into nature.”<sup>9</sup>

What makes these developments so powerful for tragedy is the fact that the open-ended structure of the symptom allows the eruption of pain and violence to sustain different kinds of narratives of cause, some attached to gods, others to generic or named diseases. In the last decades of the fifth century, Greek tragedy is working out the implications of different kinds of stories that can be attached to the symptom. By emphasizing gods, tragedy figures the human being as a vehicle of daemonic power, as we saw above. This figuration is always problematic. But the spike in the language of disease, together with an increased use of medical language and imagery, radically expands the space accorded to the human as an incubator of harm to self and others in accordance with the contemporary conceptualization of the corporeal interior as the space of disease and the origin of the symptom. The body on this model comes to figure the strangeness of what is both not self – for what is



new about the physical body and its nature is its status as an object – and constitutive of self. It thereby enlarges and sharpens tragedy’s conceptual resources for problematizing agency. Euripides’s *Orestes* maps a very different world by turning the Furies, who appear onstage in the final play of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, into the unseen hallucinations of an Orestes now described with the language of disease as a man capable of murder without divine sanction. The disease motifs of the same playwright’s *Hippolytus* magnify the ethical conundrum of Phaedra’s desire. The stakes of disease-language often go unrecognized by scholars of tragedy. But as we wade deeper and deeper into the complexities of subjectivities formed through biopolitics and biotechnology, perhaps we are ourselves at a historical moment to appreciate more fully the shock of the physical body as a concept, one that upends what it means to be a subject and an agent in ways as powerful as the democratic institutionalization of the law. From this vantage point, the drama of the symptom and the medicalization of tragic agency acquire new depths.

The trust we place in medicine and law to deal with questions of harm and blame can make tragic agency especially powerful and disturbing. Our own attachment to the idea of the individual, however, is sometimes said to distort the way we interpret ancient tragedy. The chorus, on this line, is the perennial problem of modernity. There is a risk here of overcorrecting a fixation on the isolated hero and losing sight of the shifting coordinates – legal and medical but also political – for imagining the tragic subject in the fifth century. But if we remember that part of the problem of tragic agency has to do with boundaries, then it becomes clear that tragedy is also a site for thinking about the distribution of agency within networks that extend widely over space and time and

encompass a broad range of relations between people: kin, armies, slaves, and other subject populations (who are favored members of the chorus).

The web of kin relations, in particular, is notoriously sticky in Greek tragedy. The legacy of the family can be seen to enable forms of agency. Antigone, in Sophocles’s eponymous play, demands that Ismene prove that she is the offspring of noble parents by assisting in the illicit burial of their renegade brother Polyneices. More often, though, what is transmitted from one generation is the curse (as Antigone herself suggests at other moments in the play), which ensnares later generations in ancestral crimes and misfortunes. In Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, the city and its law-courts appear to arrest the potentially interminable chain of harm. But by the time we get to the *Orestes*, Euripides’s wildly perverse sequel staged in the last decade of the fifth century, the city no longer appears as a ready savior.

The curse binds one generation to another, but it also entangles humans in a world of nonhuman judges and avengers. Nonhuman agents sometimes resolve into clear forms, such as the Erinyes of the Orestes myth or Olympian gods. But deified force also spreads more diffusely in our extant tragedies to animate and disrupt what we would call the natural world, perhaps most memorably in the *Bacchae*, with its flows of milk, its uncannily tame animals, the eerie quiet of the forest before Pentheus is destroyed. In so doing, intensities of power seem to become unmoored from the gods’ intentions and the narratives they support. The circulation of power through the natural world can also give rise to heterodox forms of human and nonhuman community (as in the *Philoctetes*). The fluid movement of power thus works against the arrest of cause required for responsibility and explanation at the level of not only humans but also

nonhumans. The inscrutability of a cosmos unpredictably implicated in what we do and suffer and marked by ancestral damage signals another facet of Greek tragedy newly visible in light of our present ecological predicament. Tragedy does

not offer to fix a broken world. Instead it demands that we attend to the complexity of embodied and earthbound life through attempts to make sense of suffering and its causes. In an age of quick fixes, this is a lot.

Brooke  
Holmes

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> On philology as a model science, see Lorraine Daston and Glenn W. Most, "History of Science and History of Philologies," *Isis* 106 (2) (2015): 378–390.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Simon Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Victoria Wohl, *Euripides and the Politics of Form* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> Joshua Billings, *The Genealogy of the Tragic* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014); Miriam Leonard, *Tragic Modernities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard, *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). This is not entirely new ground for classicists; for example, see M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); M. S. Silk, ed., *Tragedy and the Tragic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); and James I. Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on The Birth of Tragedy* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).
- <sup>4</sup> Anne Carson, *Antigonick (Sophokles)* (New York: New Directions, 2012).
- <sup>5</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- <sup>6</sup> Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 258–291.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 960–1013.
- <sup>8</sup> See Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 25–28.
- <sup>9</sup> Brooke Holmes, "Euripides' Heracles in the Flesh," *Classical Antiquity* 28 (2) (2008): 231–281; and Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 228–274.