

INTRODUCTION

Tragedy and Philosophy around 1800

TRAGEDY IS THE MOST PHILOSOPHICAL of art forms. The reasons may be historically contingent, but the consequences have been profound. No form of art has inspired as much theoretical reflection, or been as important to the development of philosophy. This interrelation of text and theory, which reaches from Greek antiquity to the present, results largely from the survival of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle, writing in the mid-fourth century BC, gave an account of tragedy's constitution and effect that has influenced nearly all philosophical understandings of the genre—and of poetry in general—since. Tragedy is the only form to arrive in modernity with a more or less comprehensive theory (despite its fragmentariness and occasional obscurity) from so authoritative a source. The *Poetics* is the origin of the notions that have turned the Greek form τραγῳδία, which flourished in Athens in the fifth century BC, into the modern genre of tragedy, which has effloresced in various times and places throughout Western cultures of the last half millennium.

The link between ancient Greek and modern tragedy is, in a historical sense, tenuous in the extreme. It is only through an act of will or imagination that we can speak of Sophocles and Shakespeare in the same breath. Yet, though there is no continuous tradition of creation linking fifth century Athens to the present, there is a rich tradition of reading and commentary. This is true for all of “canonical” classical literature, but tragedy is unique in that it has consistently been understood through the lens of a more or less systematic theory. This theory, much more than the Greek plays themselves, made possible the “revival” of tragedy in the Renaissance, and allows us to speak of a continuity in the genre from antiquity to the present (notwithstanding its variously diagnosed “deaths”). No modern genre has been defined by such an intimate relation between theory and practice, nor does any other form of art have such a substantial body of philosophical reflection surrounding it. Tragedy for moderns is uniquely philosophical.

But tragedy has not always been philosophical in the same way. Around 1800, tragedy's way of meaning underwent a major shift, with broad consequences for thought on literature and philosophy. This shift was not unique to tragedy—it was part of the intellectual currents associated with the romantic period broadly—but tragedy held a privileged place for some of the most important figures of the era, those associated with German idealist thought: Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, Schelling, Hölderlin, and

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Hegel.¹ Among these extraordinarily talented, closely interconnected thinkers, Greek tragedy acquired a philosophical importance different in kind from any envisioned previously. Through the eighteenth century, tragedy had been considered primarily in rhetorical terms (as a way of producing a certain emotional effect), but since 1800 it has more often been considered in speculative terms (as a way of making sense of the human world). This new way of meaning has had wide-ranging consequences for notions of tragedy and antiquity, and also for understandings of artistic value, of the project of philosophy, and of the character of modernity.² It is only since around 1800 that works of art have been considered in such philosophical and often metaphysical terms. Greek tragedy played a leading role in this development, as the foundation for elaborating a concept of “the tragic” that extended far beyond an aesthetic context, encompassing history, politics, religion, and ontology.³

This book tries to grasp the turn to tragedy around 1800 as both a historical phenomenon and a theoretical paradigm. Historically, it asks how the significance of tragedy changed so radically in such a short period and, especially, how the theories of Hegel and Hölderlin emerged as and when they did. Theoretically, it tries to understand the consequences of this shift for understandings of tragedy, philosophy, and antiquity, and to describe the most important legacies of idealist thought. These aims place the concerns of the book, perhaps somewhat uneasily, between the methods of positive, “scientific” inquiry and disciplinary history; and between the objects of literary criticism and philosophical aesthetics. Though these pursuits are usually separated in academic discourse—into classical philology and classical reception on the one hand, and philosophy and intellectual history on the other—I maintain that they are crucially interdependent, and that a continuous dialogue between them makes us more reflective and more insightful historians, philosophers, and literary critics. Imperfect as my attempt at integrating these perspectives is, I hope it will demonstrate the

¹Throughout, I use “idealist” in a general sense to describe the tendency to employ forms of speculative thought in reaction to the critical philosophy of Kant, indicating a broad swath of philosophers from the 1780s forward (some, though not all of whom, considered themselves “idealists”). “Idealism” (as a proper noun) refers, in a more specialized sense, to the philosophers Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel and their immediate circles (with Hölderlin important in the early development).

²“Modernity” in this sense is a philosophical category more than an epochal distinction, and is defined especially by the consciousness of historical rupture that characterizes the post-revolutionary age.

³On the relationship between tragedy and the tragic, see M. S. Silk, ed. *Tragedy and the tragic: Greek theatre and beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Glenn W. Most, “Generating genres: the idea of the tragic,” in *Matrices of genre: authors, canons, and society*, ed. Mary Depew and Dirk Obbink (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Simon Goldhill, *Sophocles and the language of tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 137–65.

value of bringing together positivist and historicist approaches, and critical and theoretical inquiries—and encourage others to do the same.

The idealist concept of the tragic is particularly in need of an integrative approach, as it is at once a major concern of critical theory, and a foundation, consciously or not, for many historical treatments of Greek tragedy. The list of twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers who have engaged with tragedy is extensive: Freud, Benjamin, Heidegger, Schmitt, Camus, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray, Žižek, and Butler would be only a start.⁴ Many of these theorists directly confront Idealism (though Nietzsche is a more direct influence on some), yet very often the mode of dialogue is appropriative or polemical, and fails to do justice to the complexity of the original theories. Such engagements are undoubtedly legitimate in their own terms, but they have often led to a severely attenuated understanding of idealist thought, and an overlooking of some of the most interesting and provocative elements of these theories.

If Idealism is rhetorically present and substantively absent in much philosophical discourse, for classical scholarship, the situation is the reverse. The influence of Idealism is profoundly and widely felt, but very seldom acknowledged.⁵ Though idealist theories substantially define the possibilities for reading tragedy in the present, they are often vaguely understood, ignored, or explicitly disavowed. This is particularly striking since the “political turn” in classical scholarship, which has often taken the form of a historicism that rejects the supposed universalism of idealist readings, while practicing a mode of historical interpretation that is profoundly indebted to Idealism. Only through a direct engagement with Idealism, though, can classical scholars genuinely question or appropriate its legacy. For both theorists of the tragic and historians of tragedy, a fresh approach to idealist thought holds the potential to enrich contemporary approaches and provoke new directions in scholarship.

The objections are well known: Idealism is ahistorical in its understanding of literature, willful and appropriative in its readings, selective in its canon, alternatively naive or reactionary in its politics, and fatally imbued with idiosyncratic Christian theologies. None of these reproaches is false, though most are less true than is usually assumed. The reason for taking Idealism seriously, though, is not that its readings of tragedy are convincing as historical scholarship, but that its readings of tragedy make profound sense of the texts of Greek tragedy. Even if the particulars of its sense would not be

⁴Though it appeared too late to be taken fully into account, there is an illuminating treatment of the twentieth century in Julian Young, *The philosophy of tragedy: from Plato to Žižek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵On the conflicted place of the philosophy of the tragic in classical scholarship, see Miriam Leonard, “Tragedy and the seductions of philosophy,” *Cambridge Classical Journal* 58 (2012): 147–54.

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upheld today, the *possibilities of meaning* it discovers can be a guide for us.⁶ These possibilities are importantly different from (though related to) the possibilities we actualize in reading ancient literature. Reading tragedy with idealist thinkers pushes us to reconsider our own approaches and to entertain other, no less significant, ways that Greek tragedy might be meaningful.

This aim is different from the “feeding back” often cited in studies of classical reception. The significance of reception studies, I propose, does not lie in their ability to offer answers to the questions typically posed by classical scholars, but in suggesting different questions to put to the classics. For the present purposes, the most significant result of reception theory and scholarship is the recognition that the traces of past readings are active in every interpretation, that there is no “immediate” access to a text—no more today than in 458 BC.⁷ In recent years, it has become clear that German Idealism remains the most powerful mediation of Greek tragedy for the present, and this inquiry seeks to vindicate and extend this importance.⁸ The aim of excavating the idealist roots of our understanding of tragedy is at once to increase our reflective consciousness of its influence, and, more importantly, to suggest ways in which our own frames of interpretation might be broadened by engagement with past mediations. We should not only look to receptions of the classics for their congruence with contemporary concerns (which can lead only to reinforcing our own critical orientations, with their inevitable blind spots), but for their difference, their untimeliness.

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The central historical argument of this book is that concepts of the tragic around 1800 are fundamentally conditioned by reflections on history, and particularly by a questioning of the place of ancient literature in modernity. The importance of historical thought for theories of tragedy has often been noticed, but its significance has not adequately been explored. The problems of historical thought, I argue, are formative for modern approaches to tragedy, and establish a crucial continuity between pre- and post-Kantian understandings of the genre. Concentrating on thought on tragedy through the long eighteenth century brings into focus the most important consequence of idealist thought on art: its reformulation of the possibilities of artistic meaning. This reformulation is crucially motivated by the question of

⁶For Idealism as a form of “making sense,” see Pierre Judet de la Combe, *Les tragédies grecques sont-elles tragiques? Théâtre et théorie* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2010), 46–56.

⁷There are productive discussions of such processes of mediation in Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas, eds., *Classics and the uses of reception* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006). For the current state of discussion, see *Classical Receptions Journal* 5.2 (2013).

⁸Especially important are Miriam Leonard, *Athens in Paris: ancient Greece and the political in postwar French thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Judet de la Combe, *Les tragédies grecques sont-elles tragiques?*; Goldhill, *Sophocles and the language of tragedy*.

how to account for the significance of works of art across time. Greek tragedy is the central ground for idealist inquiries into the historical nature of artworks and their philosophical significance, and an increasing knowledge of Greek tragedy is an important catalyst in its own right for these theories.

The roots of idealist thought on tragedy, I argue, reach back well before the romantic era. Idealism is crucially shaped by a change in the status of history that took place in the latter half of the eighteenth century. For approaches to tragedy, the salient feature of this shift was that a sense of historical difference entered into an understanding of genre that had previously been essentially ahistorical. The history of tragedy could no longer be treated as continuous from ancient Greece to modern times, and the Aristotelian theory that had guided creation and reflection appeared radically limited in its ability to explain the experience of tragedy in the present. Without the assumption of continuity that grounded earlier critical approaches, the meaning of Greek works was refounded on the basis of a new philosophy of art that took its formative impulses from Kantian philosophy and the French Revolution. The conceptions of tragedy that emerged in the 1790s are animated by the question of the place of ancient literature in a philosophical modernity that saw itself as radically different from previous moments in time.

This might seem a rather narrow way of approaching idealist theories of tragedy. The importance of tragedy to post-Kantian thought reaches into many domains that are not ostensibly historical, and is not always elaborated in reflections on the difference between antiquity and modernity. Yet I argue that the engagement with historical thought is not simply one of many contexts for tragedy's meaning, but the foundation of tragedy's possibility of meaning for idealist thinkers. The importance of historical thought to theories of the tragic emerges particularly strongly when contrasted with previous understandings of the genre. For the early eighteenth century, the significance of Greek tragedy was essentially ahistorical, accessible to anyone with the proper rational faculties and a dose of imagination. This mode of thought ensured the continuing value of Greek tragedies, but it saw nothing especially meaningful about them, in comparison to Homeric epic, Latin lyric, or modern French dramatic poetry. The mid-eighteenth century, though, brought with it two important changes, which together raised Greek tragedy above other forms in its meaningfulness for modernity: first, a growing body of aesthetic thought sought to place different forms of art into more or less hierarchical relations, ultimately finding tragedy distinct in its representation of human action in general (a much broader sense than previous moralizing readings); and second, an explosion of philhellenic discourse elevated Greek above Roman culture in European (especially German) thought, and located the height of Greek culture in Athenian civic freedom. Tragedy's content, as a representation of meaningful action, and its

form, as a product of the Athenian golden age, gave the genre a privileged role as both *depiction of* and *object within* historical processes.

The historical perspective adopted here sheds new light on why idealist thinkers turn to tragedy in particular. Appropriations of tragedy around 1800 are efforts to grapple with the question of human freedom, a problem of central importance to post-Kantian thought.⁹ Idealist thinkers understand Greek tragedy to represent a distinctive form of human freedom, and to crystallize issues of agency and subjectivity that are central to their own philosophical inquiries. Oedipus' discovery of his own past, Antigone's struggle against the edict of Creon, Orestes' submission to the judgment of the Areopagus—all are seen in terms of a concept of freedom that is ontological, political, social, and religious at once.

Yet Greek tragedy's representation of freedom is also importantly alien to modernity, and this foreignness explains a great deal of the urgency of idealist theories. The questions of freedom that draw idealist thinkers to ancient tragedy do not find immediate answers, and force these thinkers to elaborate relations of distance and proximity in grappling with tragic freedom. This imbrication of historical and philosophical thought can only be adequately understood against the background of previous regimes of historical reflection. Theories of tragedy are not simply alternate means of philosophical inquiry, but represent a particular, and crucially important, perspective on a central problem: *the historical nature of human freedom*. The freedom at issue in Greek tragedy is and is not the freedom of idealist philosophy, and this tension makes Greek tragedy "the closest other" for philosophical thought around 1800.¹⁰ Grappling with tragedy's representation of human freedom becomes a means through which modernity seeks to understand itself by engagement with the alterity of antiquity.

Tracing the nexus of tragedy and history in idealist thought illuminates connections and continuities that previous scholars have neglected, and gives broader definition to a formative intellectual moment that is often studied atomistically.¹¹ Research into tragedy in the idealist period has been widely

⁹Robert Pippin has argued that the problem of freedom is the distinctive question of modern philosophy from Idealism forward: Robert B. Pippin, *Idealism as modernism: Hegelian variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a philosophical problem: on the dissatisfactions of European high culture*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 1999).

¹⁰The concept comes from the work of Uvo Hölscher, who describes the Greeks as the "closest other" ("das nächste Fremde") of modernity. See Uvo Hölscher, "Selbstgespräch über den Humanismus," in *Das nächste Fremde: von Texten der griechischen Frühzeit und ihrem Reflex in der Moderne* (Munich: Beck, 1994).

¹¹I follow, loosely, the method of *Konstellationsforschung* pioneered by Dieter Henrich. Henrich showed the extent to which early Idealism developed as a corporate project, with many different and contradictory strands. Much the same could be said of idealist thought on tragedy. See the essays in Martin Mulso and Marcelo Stamm, eds., *Konstellationsforschung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005).

dispersed between the disciplines of history of philosophy, German studies, and classical reception, with individual studies usually concentrating on single thinkers or small groups, without giving a broader picture of their interactions and disputes. The idealist moment, I show, is united by common questions (though not shared answers), which make tragedy important to the development of quite disparate philosophical approaches. For all of the major theories, though, historical reflection is an integral aspect of thinking about tragedy. Charting this interplay as it emerges from the Enlightenment and becomes central to post-Kantian aesthetics yields a picture of Idealism as substantially engaged with the particularities of Greek tragedy and reflective on the limits of its own aesthetic theories. For idealist thinkers, elaborating a historical way of meaning for ancient literature seemed to demand, on the one hand, a contextual understanding of Greek tragedy, and on the other, an account of tragedy's place in modernity. The concept of the tragic is defined by a dual imperative: to understand both the Greekness of Greek tragedy and its modernity.

From the central nexus of idealist thought, other concerns and contexts radiate: textual scholarship and commentary, translation and adaptation, performance (especially operatic), other literatures with substantial bodies of tragedy (especially French, Spanish, and English), and philosophical idealism in its Platonic and Neoplatonic forms. Constructing this picture draws on various national literatures and social domains, and illuminates interactions and parallels that have not been noticed before. Such a broad-based inquiry is potentially endless and inevitably imperfect, but it is intended to serve as a corrective to the widespread tendency among historians of philosophy to concentrate only on more or less systematic theories, instead of accepting a broader diversity of reflection as relevant to theoretical understanding. Looking at philosophical developments in the context of a broader cultural change in attitudes to tragedy and antiquity, the perspective adopted here brings out the multiplicity of perspectives on a single, widely important topic.

In concentrating on historical thought, I draw attention to an area in which idealist theories could be especially valuable for contemporary approaches to antiquity. Idealism is highly—perhaps uniquely—reflective about the way that meaning is constructed through an interplay of past and present contexts. Poised between the universalizing assumptions of the eighteenth century and the historicizing currents that would dominate the nineteenth, idealist thinkers struggle to define a way of recognizing both the singularity of Athenian culture and its value for the present. The period around 1800 is a liminal moment in thinking about antiquity, and idealist theories show historical thought at a moment of particularly fruitful tension. Idealism understands the very process of reading ancient literature as a problem, considering the texts of tragedy in relation to a vision of what

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it is to be modern. This endeavor is historical and philosophical at once, and entails a reflection on the processes of mediation that condition the meaning of ancient literature in the present. Such reflection may be even more important today, when the universalist humanism that had ensured the central place of the Western classics is increasingly in question. In this moment of doubt about the educative value of antiquity, idealist theories of the tragic offer a rich ground for inquiry into the way that history conditions meaning in literature.

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Since Peter Szondi's 1961 "An Essay on the Tragic," it has been proverbial that "since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic."¹² Szondi diagnoses a symptom of a larger change in attitudes towards tragedy and antiquity generally, but he substantially misrepresents the causes of this shift and its continuity with earlier thought.¹³ Though the meanings attributed to tragedy do change as radically as Szondi suggests, I argue that the questions remain deeply Aristotelian, and develop reflections on antiquity and modernity that have a significant history in eighteenth-century, mainly French, thought. These contexts are important to any understanding of theories of tragedy around 1800. Moreover, the "philosophy of the tragic" inaugurated by Schelling and carried forward by Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, and Max Scheler and Walter Benjamin in the early twentieth century describes only one of many consequences of the broader shift in the understanding of tragedy at this moment. The significance of idealist thought on tragedy is not only that it establishes "the tragic" as a philosophical concern for an important (though limited) strand of German philosophy, but that the meaning that it finds in tragedy substantially alters ways of reading well beyond philosophy—that it establishes a possibility for Greek tragedy's meaning that did not exist before, which informs philosophical, literary, and historical discussions to this day. It is in creating these possibilities, rather than in discovering the essential tragic content, that Idealism has been and remains essential to thinking about tragedy.

The genealogical perspective adopted here is a direct response to Szondi's essay and the many accounts of the era that follow its basic narrative of rup-

¹²Peter Szondi, *An essay on the tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1. Szondi's historical narrative is broadly followed, though with a glance at earlier material, by Vassilis Lambropoulos, *The tragic idea* (London: Duckworth, 2006).

¹³Szondi's work is teleological in two ways: its historical account is, as he himself acknowledges, dominated by the thought of Hegel, which provides a lens through which all other thinkers are understood; and he then seeks to vindicate the Hegelian pattern of thought on tragedy through readings of tragedies in the second half of the book.

ture.¹⁴ Without disputing that there is something radically new in what Szondi calls the “philosophy of the tragic,” I argue that questions of history, which have been central for thinking about tragedy since the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, persist through the idealist era and continue to define modern approaches to tragedy. This necessitates a methodology that is developmental, or in Foucault’s Nietzschean terminology, “genealogical.”¹⁵ Rather than jumping from one more or less fully developed theory to the next, I attempt to bring out the historical conditions, influences, and tensions that define thought on tragedy in this period.¹⁶ The scope of thought treated is therefore much broader than has previously been considered relevant to the tragic. The account begins with the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* in France at the end of the seventeenth century, and passes through eighteenth-century translations and commentaries on Greek tragedy to focus on the crucial period of idealist thought from 1792 onward. The account of this period pays far greater attention to the interaction of thinkers than any previous discussion, and describes the collective and far-reaching development of a broadly idealist approach to tragic meaning. Finally, I turn to a close study of two major tragic texts of the early nineteenth century, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and Hölderlin’s “Notes” to his translations of Sophocles (1804), extraordinarily dense and fruitful discussions, which represent the strongest and today the most influential idealist theories. Though this story is teleological, privileging two texts over others of the period, it is also importantly aporetic in that it sees the significance of these texts in their formulation of tensions and paradoxes in the modern understanding of tragedy and antiquity, which define thought to

¹⁴Michael Lurie (Lurje) describes the history of reading Sophocles, *contra* Szondi, as essentially continuous: Michael Lurie, “Facing up to tragedy: toward an intellectual history of Sophocles in Europe from Camerarius to Nietzsche,” in *A companion to Sophocles*, ed. Kirk Ormand (Chichester: Blackwell, 2012). See also Michael Lurje, *Die Suche nach der Schuld: Sophokles’ Oedipus Rex, Aristoteles’ Poetik und das Tragödienverständnis der Neuzeit* (Munich: Saur, 2004). I agree with certain aspects of Lurie’s narrative, but it fails to do justice to the impact of the idealist philosophy of art. Though the nineteenth century’s interpretive questions are substantially continuous with the eighteenth century’s, the speculative theory of art changes the consequences of these concerns substantially, and in turn the way that tragedy is meaningful.

¹⁵See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, genealogy, history,” in *Essential works of Michel Foucault, 1954–84*. Vol. 2: *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998). I should make clear, though, that my adherence to Foucault’s methodology is quite approximate, and would be fatally flawed (to a dogmatic genealogist) for its focus on “great thinkers” and the implicit—though self-conscious—teleologies of the discussion.

¹⁶This focus on the historical conditions of thought on tragedy distinguishes my study from most English-language literature on the topic: Dennis J. Schmidt, *On Germans and other Greeks: tragedy and ethical life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Terry Eagleton, *Sweet violence: the idea of the tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); David Farrell Krell, *The tragic absolute: German Idealism and the languishing of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Young, *The philosophy of tragedy*.

the present. It seeks neither to vindicate nor to apologize for idealist theories, but to show how idealist approaches have redefined the meaning of Greek tragedy and still pose urgent questions.

A genealogical perspective on German philosophy around 1800 allows for continuities with previous thought to emerge as they have not previously. These form a background—nearly always neglected—to the tragic philosophy of idealist thinkers. Two continuities are particularly striking, and are emphasized throughout the book. The first is the engagement with Aristotle's *Poetics*, and especially the notion of *catharsis*.¹⁷ This may be surprising, as the generation following Herder is usually thought to be the first to see Aristotle's importance as primarily historical, describing conditions and goals that were valid for a single point in time, but which are not necessarily transferable to other ages. That picture needs nuance—even “arch-Aristotelians” like Dacier invoke reason as well as ancient authority, and “anti-Aristotelians” like Herder see elements of the *Poetics* as valid in all times and places—but the change in Aristotle's prestige is real. Despite the diminished centrality of the *Poetics*, however, Aristotle's terminology and his preference for the *Oedipus the King* (*Oedipus Tyrannus*) remain powerful for idealist thinkers. This is particularly evident in descriptions of the ends or aim of tragedy, which inevitably center on moments of cognitive revelation and recur to cathartic models in one way or another. Amid the variety in understandings of tragedy, an interpretation of *catharsis*, implicit or explicit, lies at the heart of every major theory around 1800.

The second major area of continuity is a sense of Greek tragedy's political valences. The turn to tragedy around 1800 is in many ways a response to the French Revolution, but it is not a turn away from politics. Theories of tragedy continue the questioning of authority and social constitution that had become urgent with the events in France. Consciously or unconsciously, tragedy came to be seen as a figure for the aporias of social transformation that the Revolution had revealed. This is well-documented and much-debated in the case of Hegel and Hölderlin, but frequently overlooked with respect to other idealist thinkers. It has not been noted, moreover, that the connection between Greek tragedy and contemporary political organization emerges directly from Enlightenment thought and establishes itself as the dominant approach to tragedy well before the 1790s. English and French approaches to tragedy from early in the century placed political issues at the heart of the genre, and sought to harmonize the social world of

¹⁷Aristotle's continuing influence through the idealist period is discussed brilliantly and provocatively in the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, especially: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “The caesura of the speculative,” in *Typography: mimesis, philosophy, politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Métaphrasés, suivi de le théâtre de Hölderlin* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998).

tragedy with modern notions of authority.¹⁸ These impulses gained new resonance in Germany with the fashion for Greek freedom inspired by Winckelmann, and led to readings that emphasized the kinship of Greek and German (or Swiss) political organizations and saw tragedy as an essentially patriotic (*vaterländisch*) form of art. The belief that Greek tragedy was fundamentally about political events transformed the early modern trope of history-as-tragedy into the modern notion of tragedy as a meaningful representation of historical process.

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The genealogical viewpoint on idealist thought reveals that what is often thought of as a single movement is actually composed of two distinct (though interrelated) strands: the first centers around the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (*OT*) and is elaborated mainly by Schiller, Schelling, and A. W. Schlegel from 1793 onward, then canonized in Schelling's *Philosophy of Art* and Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*; the second is centered on the *Antigone* and seems to emerge from almost nowhere in the writings of Hölderlin and Hegel in 1804 and 1807, respectively, and is canonized by Hegel's posthumously edited and published *Lectures on Aesthetics*. To be sure, the strands are related. Schelling and Schlegel do not ignore the *Antigone*, and Hölderlin and Hegel both write prominently about the *OT*, but their respective generic understandings of tragedy are substantially based on a single play. Hölderlin is unusual in giving equal prominence to the two works, but he is at pains to distinguish between their differing models of the tragic.

Though idealist interest in the *OT* was quite importantly rooted in thinking on tragedy going back to Aristotle, and spoke in important respects to the concerns of previous generations of critics, the interest in the *Antigone* did not arise from any substantial critical tradition. The *Antigone* had only been moderately popular with previous translators and adaptors, and Hölderlin and Hegel were among the first philosophers to take the work seriously. The central models of Sophoclean tragedy, from antiquity onward, were the *OT* and the *Electra*; both were included in the "Byzantine triad," the three plays that were most intensively studied and commented in late antiquity, and the revenge plot of the *Electra* exerted great influence on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century drama. The *Antigone*, by contrast, was largely absent from discussions of the generations before Idealism, and was not thought a particularly seminal work—though, to be sure, as one

¹⁸Political contexts for Greek tragedy are emphasized in Christian Biet, *Ceipe en monarchie: tragédie et théorie juridique à l'âge classique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1994); Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, *Greek tragedy and the British theatre, 1660–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). My discussion of the eighteenth century in France and England builds on their studies.

of Sophocles' seven surviving plays, it did receive sporadic treatment and translation. (It had in fact been translated into German by Martin Opitz in 1636—though that version seems to have been forgotten by the eighteenth century).¹⁹

One can find only scattered hints of interest in the *Antigone* before 1800, and it definitely belonged to the second tier of extant Greek tragedy. From around 1800 to the present, though, it is the *OT* and *Antigone* that have been the touchstones of tragedy. The rise of the *Antigone* in critical esteem is both a symptom and a cause of changing conceptions of genre: its central ethical conflict, political context, and foregrounding of gender relations (to say nothing of the power of its poetry and drama) have given it a special role in modern thought about tragedy. The play's importance has only increased since the idealist period, and today it is one of the most frequently translated, adapted, and appropriated of all Greek tragedies.²⁰ The *Antigone*, as much or even more than the *OT*, poses the questions of meaning that have been central to thinking about tragedy over the past two hundred years. The idealist canon has powerfully defined later interests and placed questions of freedom and identity at the heart of modern approaches to tragedy.

Changes in taste and aesthetics brought about a broad reorganization of the canon of classical works in the late eighteenth century. Aeschylus' presence grew, while Seneca's, and then Euripides', waned. Sophocles, whose importance in the *Poetics* had ensured his prestige previously (though it was occasionally challenged by a love for Euripides, especially in France), became the undisputed pinnacle of tragedy. Until the 1770s, Aeschylus had largely been absent from popular discussions of Greek tragedy, and was considered primitive, obscure, and impossibly difficult to translate (Aristotle's neglect of his plays in the *Poetics* did not help either). Complete translations into French and English only appeared in the 1770s, and Germany had to wait until the 1780s for translations of individual plays (and until 1808 for a complete translation). Still, Germany seems to have taken the most readily to Aeschylean drama. This is visible in an attention to the chorus, which had been quite marginal in earlier discussions but became vitally important for German thinkers.²¹ Aeschylus also brought (or cemented) a new model of tragedy that became particularly central for Idealism: the *Eumenides*, so unusual a work in the ancient context, came to represent the possibility of

¹⁹On the baroque *Antigone*, see Anastasia Daskarolis, *Die Wiedergeburt des Sophokles aus dem Geist des Humanismus: Studien zur Sophokles-Rezeption in Deutschland vom Beginn des 16. bis zur Mitte des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000).

²⁰See, most recently, S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė, eds., *Interrogating Antigone in postmodern philosophy and criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley, eds., *Antigone on the contemporary world stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²¹See Joshua Billings, "An alien body? Choral autonomy around 1800," in *Choruses, ancient and modern*, ed. Joshua Billings, Felix Budelmann, and Fiona Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

an affirmative tragedy. The influence of the *Eumenides*, along with that of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (*OC*), suggested that reconciliation could be an essential element of Greek tragedy, and that it might have been the aim of the greatest dramatists to provide a sense of redemption after suffering (often with Christian overtones). These affirmative conclusions provided a way of understanding *catharsis* as a form of spiritual reconciliation, and established the *Eumenides* and *OC* firmly within idealist thought.

The disappearance of Seneca from the canon of tragedy is another striking feature of the late eighteenth century in contrast to the early modern period, when Senecan practice was by and large more influential than Greek works. The change in taste is difficult to date, but Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was particularly influential. After advocating for the Roman tragedian in his youth, Lessing turned against Seneca, launching an influential broadside in the *Laocoön* (1766) and generally disparaging his works as poor imitations of Greek tragedy. The growing sense of ancient Greece's historical distinctiveness and the philhellenism of the time continued to marginalize and demonize Seneca within major discussions of tragedy. Though not forgotten, he was no longer a touchstone of the genre, as he had been for earlier dramatists. Seneca's visceral, bloody dramas seem to have offended the aesthetic of distance and idealization that was often invoked to justify Greek tragedy. His works can seem to deny any comfort to the reader, focusing on bitter hatred and acts of vengeance that are more shocking than calming or uplifting.

Euripides fell along with Seneca, losing the prestige that he had enjoyed in the Renaissance and French classical era. In the earlier eighteenth century it would have been rare to find someone who preferred Euripides to Sophocles, but the younger tragedian's works were broadly considered more approachable, somehow more "modern." Racine's Euripidean adaptations (*Phaedra*, *Iphigenia*, and *Andromache*) shed reflected light on the Greek tragedian and made his works the more fruitful for adaptation in French (notwithstanding important adaptations of the *OT* by Corneille and Voltaire and of *Electra* by Crébillon and Voltaire). Through the eighteenth century, Euripides was also better edited and more widely discussed in scholarly circles than the other Greek tragedians, with Joshua Barnes' bilingual Greek-Latin edition of 1694 setting a standard of accessibility. German tastes, though, always ran more to Sophocles than Euripides, in part because Sophocles was thought, on evidence from his ancient *Life*, to be the more patriotic. It was, however, on aesthetic grounds, that the Schlegel brothers influentially attacked Euripides, and the poet's reputation would not recover until the age of Wilamowitz.²² Like Seneca, Euripides seemed to transgress idealist

²²See Glenn W. Most, "Schlegel, Schlegel und die Geburt eines Tragödienparadigmas," *Poetica* 25 (1993); Ernst Behler, "A. W. Schlegel and the nineteenth-century *damnatio* of Euripides," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 27 (1986); Albert Henrichs, "The last of the detractors: Friedrich Nietzsche's condemnation of Euripides," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 27 (1986).

aesthetic norms and to deny the emotional and philosophical reconciliation that works like the *Eumenides* and even the *Antigone* (for its apparent symmetry of punishment) offered.

A subtle shift in vocabulary underlines the broad transformation of notions of Greek tragedy. For the German eighteenth century, the word for “tragedy,” ancient and modern, is *Trauerspiel* (literally, “mourning play”), a word coined in the Renaissance as a German equivalent to the Greek term and a counterpart to the word for comedy, *Lustspiel* (“pleasure play”). Before 1800, *Tragödie* and its derivatives are in occasional use, but they are never consistently preferred and have a faintly exotic air about them.²³ The first translation of Greek works to place *Tragödie* in the title comes only in 1802, and the word is used throughout K.W.F. Solger’s important 1808 *Tragedies of Sophocles (Des Sophokles Tragödien)*.²⁴ Without ever being discussed, the change in vocabulary seems to have taken hold, for it is visible almost immediately in translations of Greek texts and works describing themselves as *Tragödien*. From Greek tragedy, the word spread to describe modern works in elevated style, establishing a continuity founded on the ancient genre. This is only a symptom, but a significant one, of the growing recognition of Greek tragedy’s historical singularity, and, often, of the desire to emulate the ancient form. *Tragödie* came to have a distinct connotation as Greek works established themselves as the generic standard.²⁵ “Tragedy” and “tragic” acquired a normative force that remains with the genre, marking it out for its profundity and universality.

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Making the case for continuities, and giving definition to discontinuities requires a form of presentation that takes into account the variety of contexts in which Greek tragedy was important to the eighteenth century. The methodological weight is laid differently in the three parts of the book, first on broadly cultural developments, then on intellectual-historical constellations, and finally on textual exegesis. The focus is resolutely on Idealism, and earlier material is introduced primarily in so far as it gives background to the idealist turn in thinking about tragedy. The first two chapters form the first section of the book (“Tragic modernities”) and construct this background by ranging across scholarship, translation, literature, and philosophy, and across French, English, and German-speaking contexts from the

²³For example, Steinbrüchel in his 1763 *Das tragische Theater der Griechen* uses the word *Trauerspiel* throughout his preface. Generally, *tragisch* is often used where *Tragödie* is not, reflecting the lack of an adjectival form of *Trauerspiel*.

²⁴Friedrich Leopold zu Stolberg’s 1802 *Vier Tragödien des Aeschylos* is the first prominent usage of the term in a translation, and Solger’s extensive preface uses *Tragödie* exclusively.

²⁵This forms the (unconscious) background to Walter Benjamin’s distinction between the two forms in the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.

late seventeenth century to 1790. Over this period, Greek tragedy went from being a relatively obscure form, little translated and discussed, to being the touchstone ancient genre, considered a distillation of the ancient Greek spirit. Crucial to this change in prestige is the development of historical thought, which was given particular impetus by the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* in France. Especially in the wake of the *Querelle*, tragedy was an important ground for comparisons of antiquity and modernity, and such juxtapositions increasingly revealed fundamental differences between the ages. Changing conceptions of history resituated debates about tragedy, and introduced a sense of distance and idealization into the relation to ancient Greek literature and culture. Tragedy was the central literary touchstone for this growing historical consciousness, because it, more than any other ancient genre, seemed to have a modern canon of comparable achievement. Thinking about ancient and modern tragedy together became a particularly pressing task for literary criticism, and led to the development of radical historicisms in Germany and France, as well as to a flourishing of interest in Greek tragedy generally.

The second section of the book (“Tragic themes”) investigates, in three roughly chronological chapters, major topics in idealist thought on tragedy: freedom and necessity, the relation of ancient and modern culture, and theology. These issues are reconceived in the wake of Kantian critique and the French Revolution, which form the immediate catalysts for idealist thought. A pervasive consciousness of rupture made tragedy, as the genre of *peripeteia*, newly important as a means of representing and grasping historical chaos. The chapters trace dialogues between major thinkers in detail—a notable lacuna in previous studies, which have tended to isolate and privilege certain strands. The picture that emerges brings out the pivotal role of Friedrich Schiller, along with the continuing importance of questions of tragic poetics and politics. By looking carefully at the variety of approaches to each issue, new continuities as well as divergences emerge, suggesting a much more dynamic and contradictory intellectual field than has ever been acknowledged. There is no unified idealist theory or approach, but all the thinkers are united by a conviction that Greek tragedy has an urgent contemporary importance. The paradox of an ancient form that offers a unique insight into modern existence is the defining feature of post-romantic understandings of Greek tragedy.

The final two chapters look in depth at the most complex idealist works dealing with tragedy, Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and Hölderlin’s translation of and “Notes” to Sophocles. Both chapters emphasize close engagement with the texts of Greek tragedy, grounding broader understandings of the tragic in specific acts of interpretation. Hegel and Hölderlin developed their thought on tragedy in conversations of the late 1790s, and for both tragedy is essentially historical and progressive, not only depicting but contributing

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to moments of revolutionary change in ancient Greece. Though Hegel's text was published three years after Hölderlin's, it is discussed first, both to challenge accepted teleologies of Idealism, and because Hegel's concerns are more easily framed by the previous discussions. Hölderlin's *Sophocles*, though it draws on all the major strands of idealist thought, nevertheless resists the dominant tendency towards reconciliation, understanding tragedy as a catastrophic and transformative meeting of god and man.

Hegel and Hölderlin suggest different paths for thinking the place of Greek tragedy in modernity: for Hegel, the social role that tragedy played in ancient Greece has been superseded in modernity by Christian religion and philosophy, leaving the form of tragedy valuable only for its crystallization of a past stage of spirit; for Hölderlin, on the contrary, Greek tragedy remains radically alien to the present, and its value lies in its historical perspective on timeless questions of meaning. For both, the question of Greek tragedy's role in modernity presents a profound philosophical and aesthetic challenge. Though their understandings are highly individual, Hegel and Hölderlin are both foundational for, and exemplary of, the importance of Greek tragedy to modern thought. If, like them, we today think of tragedy both as central to our understanding of Attic culture and as profoundly meaningful to our own lives, then in some way we remain idealists.