1 History of Interpretation as Intellectual History

Since Plato’s incisive, though unsympathetic, analysis of “tragic poetry” as a dangerously powerful medium of a certain worldview and mentality, Greek tragedy in general and Sophocles in particular have generated a fascinating history of critical responses, intellectual engagement, and conceptualization that lasted well into late antiquity and began anew with the rediscovery of Greek tragedy in the early sixteenth century, evolving as one of the central contests in the history of Western thought.

Surprising as it may seem, an intellectual history of modern attempts to make sense of Greek tragedy, to come to terms with Sophocles’ tragic vision, and, in doing so, to conceptualize the relationship between tragedy and life has never been fully written. We now know a great deal about the history of textual criticism, printing tradition, translation, poetic imitation, performance, and cinematic adaptation of Greek drama. But we still know astonishingly little about the ways in which Sophocles’ plays were interpreted and discussed between 1500 and 1800 and the prominent role the debates on Sophocles and Greek tragedy played in the intellectual history of Europe. What is more, from the few studies that touch upon the history of interpretation, one usually gets the impression that the history of serious modern intellectual engagement with Greek tragedy only began, almost miraculously, in the nineteenth century, with Schelling and the Schlegel brothers – an opinion strongly endorsed by Peter Szondi in his influential Essay on the Tragic of 1961.
The Schlegel brothers and Schelling, however, were not the first to think about the meaning, purpose, and value of ancient tragedy. Nor were they the first to conceive of tragedy, both ancient and modern, as a central medium of exploration of man’s place in the world and to use Greek tragedy in order to develop their own tragic theory and to conceptualize, or challenge, the category of the tragic as a fundamental and timeless feature of human existence. As we shall see, Schelling and the Schlegels stand not so much at the beginning as at the end of a complex intellectual debate that began in the early sixteenth century and has continued unbroken ever since. By the 1540s Sophocles and Greek tragedy in general were already the topic of intense discussion and disagreement throughout Europe. These early debates initiated two crucial developments which together not only have shaped both the entire reception history of ancient drama and the history of dramatic theory in Europe, but have also deeply influenced all subsequent critical approaches and responses to Greek tragedy. They still retain their influence today.

2 Aristotelization of Greek Tragedy: Joachim Camerarius 1534

Ever since their rediscovery at the beginning of the sixteenth century, attempts to make sense of Greek tragedy and of Aristotle’s *Poetics* went hand in hand. Since Aristotle’s normative theory was misunderstood to be a descriptive analysis and hence to present an authoritative key to understanding ancient drama, scholars and critics believed that they always had to refer to Aristotle’s doctrines when interpreting Greek tragedies. At least, they always tried to corroborate their own readings by demonstrating that this was how Aristotle, too, saw the matter, even if this sometimes required a great deal of tampering with the *Poetics* to suit the argument.

This approach is already employed in the text that stands at the very beginning of modern Sophoclean criticism: the *Argumentum fabulae* by Joachim Camerarius, published in 1534 as an introduction to his commentary on *Oedipus Tyrannus* (fol. 9r–11v) and reprinted several times in various Sophoclean editions and translations during the sixteenth century. This earliest assessment of the play is intricately connected with a conception of tragedy that is based on some of the central categories of Aristotle’s tragic theory. First, Camerarius defines tragedy as an imitation of momentous events entailing an unexpected and undeserved change of the tragic hero’s fortune from good to bad that is designed to arouse fear and pity – a definition that does not link the specific tragic emotions to any moral purpose and cautiously avoids any explicit interpretation of catharsis. Second, since for Aristotle the emotional effect of tragedy must result from its plot structure, Camerarius categorically rejects those plays which show the workings of divine justice and where the wicked get what they deserve, because in such cases the spectator or reader could neither feel fear nor have pity. Closely connected to this is, finally, Camerarius’ interpretation of Aristotle’s concept of *hamartia*, the cause of the tragic hero’s undeserved downfall. According to Camerarius, the tragic hero’s *hamartia* had to be an involuntary crime committed out of ignorance or against his own will that would leave his moral innocence intact. This understanding of Aristotle’s conception of tragedy serves here as a foundation for an interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannus* as the best tragedy – that is to say, one that serves best to evoke fear and pity in the audience – because Oedipus, a morally good, honorable, and virtuous human being, forced by some
dark power of fate into misery he does not deserve, commits crimes unknowingly and against his own will that lead nonetheless to harrowing punishments (fol. 11r).

That was in 1534. At the time, Aristotle’s *Poetics* was still regarded by many as bewilderingly obscure and scarcely comprehensible. Its integration into the critical tradition was only about to unfold. The first reliable Latin translation, by Alessandro Pazzi, would only be published two years later, in 1536. The first commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, by Francesco Robortello, would appear 14 years later, in 1548. Yet, even at this early stage, interpretations of Greek tragedy and of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy seem already inextricably intertwined. And this was only the beginning. It was not long before Pietro Vettori set out to analyze at length not just *Oedipus Tyrannus* but all of the preserved plays by both Sophocles and Euripides, with the help of the central categories of Aristotle’s theory as he understood it (1540/50). Many others would follow in his footsteps. The flood of commentaries and learned treatises on the *Poetics* published in Italy in the second half of the sixteenth century not only eventually transformed Aristotle’s theory into a strict set of rules to which modern playwrights had to adhere, but also gave modern scholars and readers a welcome, though inadequate and misleading, conceptual framework within which to view and judge ancient drama. By the end of the sixteenth century the validity and authority of Aristotle’s theory as a principal interpretative tool and the only genuine key to understanding Greek tragedy was no longer questioned. When in March 1585 *Edipo Tiranno* was performed in Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, those who attended this first modern vernacular production of Greek tragedy could not but see the play through Aristotle’s eyes and describe their impressions in terms of whatever each one of them believed to be Aristotle’s doctrines (Pigafetta 1585; Riccoboni 1585). As we shall see, the resulting interdependence between interpretations of ancient tragedy and of Aristotle’s *Poetics* proved to be a hermeneutical disaster.

### 3 Christianization, or the Denial of Tragedy: Philipp Melanchthon 1545

While the Aristotelization of both tragedy and tragic theory after Camerarius took place mainly in Italy, in the second crucial development — the process of Christianization of Greek tragedy — Protestant humanists played a central role, first of all Philipp Melanchthon. His manifesto entitled *Cohortatio ad legendas tragoedias et comoedias*, written in 1545, marks a pivotal moment in the history of interpretation of Greek tragedy.

The first half of the sixteenth century was still pervaded by the idea that tragedy was a warning representation of the mutability of unpredictable *fortuna*, and hence of the frailty of human happiness and the misery of human life. Jodocus Badius Ascensius, for example, defined tragedy in his *Praenotamenta in comoedias Terentii* of 1502, one of the most influential treatises on dramatic theory in the first half of the sixteenth century, as a “play composed in meter that mainly shows the fragility of human affairs” (fol. Vr). The tragic poet’s principal duty was to demonstrate “*infelicitas & miseria humane vite*” (fol. Vr). In the dedicatory epistle to his voluminous edition of Seneca’s tragedies published in 1514, Badius declared tragedies particularly beneficial to kings and rulers, who are to be reminded of misfortunes of humanity “as they see so many people fall from such a high throne down into such a low dust” (p. 252). Guillaume Bouchetel claimed in the preface to his translation of Euripides’ *Hecabe* of 1544 that
tragedy was invented by the ancients to demonstrate to kings and rulers “l’incertitude et lubrique instabilité des choses temporelles” (p. 108).

Melanchthon opposed this understanding of tragedy in his manifesto of 1545. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including ancient and humanist moralizing traditions as well as Aristotle’s notion of the emotional effect of tragedy, Melanchthon claimed with religious fervor that the Greek tragedians did not write their plays for entertainment, let alone for kings and rulers to be warned of unpredictable misfortunes, but with the intention of forcing the souls of their fellow-citizens to keep their pernicious passions in check out of fear of God’s punitive justice. For in all their tragedies, he contended, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides went out of their way to bring to light the workings of divine providence, to reveal human vices and depraved passions as the true causes of human misfortunes and suffering, and to show the audience that just deeds would be rewarded in the end and crimes would always be punished. In representing the tragic end of a great hero as the terrifying, yet nonetheless just, punishment of crimes ensuing from his own vices, passions, and character flaws, tragic poets sought to make people believe that it was not unpredictable fate but divine providence that ruled the world, that there was an eternal spirit that always punished crime and protected the just – if not always, at least most of the time. In this way Melanchthon interpreted all of Greek tragedy as a uniform theodicy that warned of God’s punitive justice, a theodicy that was perfectly in agreement with the doctrines of the Christian church:

These events [sc. in Greek tragedies] impressed upon men the causes of human misfortunes, which they saw in these examples being brought about and exacerbated by depraved passions. And, just as Pindar [P. 2.40ff.] said that Ixion, tangled on the wheel among the dead souls below, cried out the following words repeated by Vergil, “Be forewarned! Learn Justice and not to scorn the Gods!” [Aen. 6.620]: Thus, in all the tragedies, this is the main subject. This is the thought they wish to impress upon the hearts of every man: that there is some eternal mind that always inflicts severe punishments upon atrocious crimes, while bestowing mostly a more tranquil path for the moderate and just. And although now and again accidental misfortunes can fall upon men – for there are many mysterious causes – still, that fundamental, unmistakable principle cannot be dispelled: clearly the Erinyes and cruel misfortunes are always the companions of heinous misdeeds. This thought persuaded many to temper their actions and ought to move us even more since we know that it was often delivered to the Church by the clear voice of God. (Melanchthon 1545a: 568)

Reprinted at least eleven times during the second half of the sixteenth century, Melanchthon’s Cohortatio was not only a powerful defence of Greek tragedy against its Platonist and Christian critics, but also a passionate appeal to provide interpretations of Greek tragedies that would reveal their true salutary meaning. For it had yet to be shown by the analysis of the surviving plays that in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides the tragic fortune of a great hero was, indeed, always presented as the consequence of a vice and depraved action he himself was to blame for, and therefore as God’s just punishment. Thus, scholarship was given its missionary purpose, and interpretation of Greek tragedy became a tool in the service of theodicy.

And Melanchthon did not rest content with general claims and appeals. In the same year of 1545, he gave a series of lectures on Sophocles at Wittenberg. Published one year later, by, and under the name of, his student Veit Winshemius, the lectures were designed to demonstrate how Greek tragedies ought to be read and interpreted. In his general introduction, Winshemius expounded the true meaning and moral purpose of Greek
tragedy as it was taught by Melanchthon (Melanchthon and Winshemius 1546 A2–[A7v]).

More importantly, he prefaced each of the translations with an interpretative essay written by Melanchthon for his own lectures. These were new, detailed interpretations of Sophocles’ plays, in which Melanchthon tried to apply to Sophocles the conception of Greek tragedy developed in his Cohoratio and, in so doing, to corroborate it exegetically.

Melanchthon understood Ajax as a conflict between Ulysses as a modest and self-restrained politician and Ajax as a burly soldier who was driven by ambition, spite, and a fatal inability to tolerate an offence and who brought about his own downfall as a result of these vices (Melanchthon 1545b: 3r = Melanchthon and Winshemius 1546: B2). In The Women of Trachis it was Heracles’ own adulterous lust, vaga libido, that was responsible for his ruin (Melanchthon and Winshemius 1546: Y3r–Y4v). In his search for divine justice in Electra, Melanchthon had to focus on the idea of inherited guilt and family curse and to explain the events on stage as mere links in a long providential chain of catastrophes with which God had the family of Pelops pay for the murder of Myrtilus (Melanchthon 1545b: 31r = Melanchthon and Winshemius 1546: E7r–E8r). In Antigone, Melanchthon did not – unlike some modern critics – blame Antigone, but Creon. Although he refused to praise Antigone’s disobedient behavior towards authority or to condemn Creon as a ruler who had to enforce his power by every means possible, Melanchthon did acknowledge that the tyrant Creon had to pay for his immoderate cruelty and stubbornness (Melanchthon 1545b: 71r = Melanchthon and Winshemius 1546: O1r–O2r).

So far, so good. In Oedipus Tyrannus, however, Melanchthon seemed unable to discern God’s justice at all or to prove Camerarius’ interpretation wrong. As a result, he discreetly opted not to comment on the play. Thus, wretched Oedipus was made to wait for divine justice once again. Although Melanchthon’s silence about the meaning of Oedipus Tyrannus would very soon prove significant, it did not in any way diminish the lasting success of Melanchthon’s understanding of Greek tragedy or his providential reading of Sophocles. The volume published by Winshemius in 1546 (and reprinted in 1549 and 1551) was followed by a whole range of translations and bilingual editions, produced and distributed throughout Europe, in which Sophocles was relentlessly, though not always convincingly, subjected to the Christianization initiated by Melanchthon and denied the tragic sense of life he once seemed to have (Rataller 1550, 1570; Naogeorg 1552, 1558; Camerarius 1556; Lalamantius 1557; Bornemisza 1558; Codicillus 1583; cf. Stiblin 1562 and Riccius 1568).

4 Christianizing Aristotle, Searching for Oedipus’ Guilt: Sophocles and the Development of the Doctrine Classique

Very different developments though they originally were, Aristotelization and Christianization eventually merged in the seventeenth century neo-classical dramatic theory, the doctrine classique. This became possible, however, only after Aristotle’s Poetics underwent a Christianizing and moralizing re-interpretation of its own. This re-interpretation was generated by dozens of learned commentaries and theoretical treatises written in Italy during the second half of the Cinquecento which, while disagreeing on many key issues, all tried nonetheless to integrate Aristotle’s treatise into the prevailing
critical tradition by eliciting from the text of the *Poetics* unwilling responses to their own theoretical and increasingly moralistic concerns. As a result, the notion of Greek tragedy envisaged by Melanchthon eventually seemed to align neatly with what was now widely thought to be Aristotle’s tragic theory. Christianizing re-interpretations of Aristotle and Greek tragedy mutually reinforced each other. Ironically, the touchstone of the required unity of ancient practice and ancient theory was Aristotle’s favorite tragedy, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* – the only play Melanchthon himself found impossible to accommodate in his anti-tragic vision.

The crucial issue in this complex process was the re-interpretation of Aristotle’s concept of tragic *catharsis* as the moral aim of tragedy. Aristotle’s reticent remarks on *catharsis* provoked a dazzling array of competing and contradictory interpretations in the second half of the sixteenth century. Only one of them, however, fit well into the increasingly influential theory prefigured by Melanchthon which claimed that the function of tragedy was to provide moral instruction through exemplary and deterrent representation of the workings of divine justice. Tragedy had to bring to light the justice of God by always punishing vice and rewarding virtue on stage. If the doctrine of what Thomas Rymer would later call “poetical justice” (Rymer 1678: 26) was to be found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, *catharsis* inevitably had to be transformed into a moral purgation of our souls from perilous vices, depraved passions, and character flaws which the spectators see to be the true causes of the tragic hero’s downfall. Proposed by Maggi in 1550 and endorsed, among many others, by Benedetto Varchi, Giraldi Cinthio, Minturno, Lucio Olimpio Giraldi, Viperano, and Paolo Beni, this interpretation was eagerly taken up in the early twenties of the seventeenth century by Jean Chapelain, who, unconcerned about controversial philological details, made it – together with the compulsory representation of divine justice – one of the central dogmas of the neo-classical dramatic theory. From now on, the paramount utilité of tragedy, and the only aim of a tragic poet, consisted in *la purgation des passions vicieuses* (Chapelain 1623: 205).

This re-interpretation of *catharsis*, however, entailed in its turn a particular understanding of tragic *hamartia* as the cause of the tragic hero’s downfall. Whoever accepted Maggi’s and Chapelain’s explanation of *catharsis* had to turn *hamartia* into a morally culpable action committed out of one’s own vicious passions and character flaws from which the audience, struck by fear and pity, would be consequently purged. Although logically inevitable, this interpretation has proved most elusive. In the very first modern commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics* published in Florence in 1548, Francesco Robortello cogently argued that tragic *hamartia* could only mean an involuntary action done through ignorance of particulars, because according to Aristotle’s theory of action, which his theory of tragedy as *mimesis* of actions is grounded on, only this type of involuntary action would fulfill all the requirements set out in the *Poetics* for the *hamartia* of the ideal tragic plot (Robortello 1548: 129–32). Robortello’s argument, supported, among others, by Castelvetro (1570) and Heinsius (1611), was as compelling as it was troubling. Not only did it imply that most of the surviving Greek tragedies simply did not fit Aristotle’s formula, thus casting a shadow over the presumed universality of his theory as a whole. It also left the moral innocence of the tragic hero intact and was therefore absolutely incompatible with Maggi’s and Chapelain’s theory of *catharsis* and the doctrine of poetic justice, both of which depended on the causal nexus between the hero’s moral character and his downfall.

Worse still, the problem was compounded by the ease with which Robortello’s interpretation appeared in accord with Aristotle’s paradigm for the ideal tragic plot,
Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Oedipus, who unknowingly and unwillingly killed his father and married his mother, seemed to provide an excellent, and obvious, example for the *hamartia* as an involuntary mistake committed out of ignorance of particulars. Yet, for Maggi’s and Chapelain’s theory to work, the plot of the tragedy which Aristotle regarded as the best had to reveal the punitive justice of God. Oedipus had to be morally responsible for his downfall. He had to be at least to some extent guilty and to fall into misery not because of his innocent ignorance, but because of his character flaws and vices. What was Oedipus’ vice that Sophocles wanted the hearts and minds of the spectators to be purged from? What was his character flaw? And where on earth was divine justice in this tragedy? Thus, the search for Oedipus’ guilt and God’s justice in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, abandoned by Melanchthon and his disciples at Wittenberg, was bound to begin anew, and with much greater urgency, in the context of the Christianizing re-interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

Yet, despite some desperate attempts, neither the sixteenth-century scholars and commentators nor the seventeenth-century critics were able to dismantle Robortello’s restrictive explanation of *hamartia* or to dismiss Camerarius’ interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In the last Renaissance commentary on the *Poetics*, published in 1613, Paolo Beni had to acknowledge openly that the problem was still dangerously unresolved. In 1640, la Mesnardière was still grappling in vain with the same question. The failure to provide consistent and compatible interpretations of *hamartia*, on the one hand, and of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, on the other, left the moralizing re-interpretation of the *Poetics*, which the neo-classical dramatic theory rested upon, precariously vulnerable to potentially devastating attacks.

This loophole was exploited by Corneille, who sought to debunk the moralizing interpretation of the *Poetics* and the rigid neo-classical rules drawn from it in his subversive *Discours de la tragédie* (1660). What fault, he asked, was Oedipus punished for? In fighting as a gentleman and man of courage, an *homme de coeur*, against an unknown who attacked him with superior force, Oedipus inadvertently killed his father. He is morally innocent and his *hamartia* is no doubt but a mere error made out of ignorance. From what vice, then, can his example possibly purge us? Consequently, since Aristotle considered *Oedipus Tyrannus* the best tragedy, he clearly did not expect from tragedy the edifying delivery of divine justice and could have hardly meant by *catharsis* a purgation of the spectator’s soul from passions and vices. Is perhaps tragic *catharsis* as it was understood by Maggi and Chapelain an imaginary concept? For it is more than doubtful, contended Corneille, that such purgation has ever been, or will ever be, achieved by any play, whether ancient or modern, even though Corneille’s own *Cid* – the very play that Chapelain and the French Academy severely criticized in 1637 for allegedly breaking the rules of what they believed to be Aristotle’s infallible theory – would have been so much better suited for it than Sophocles’ celebrated *Oedipus*. All of a sudden, the whole system of the neo-classical dramatic theory was collapsing like a house of cards.

It was only André Dacier who, in his learned and extraordinarily influential commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics* published in 1692, sternly rebuked Corneille and reinforced the validity and authority of the rules of the *doctrine classique* by finally providing the missing link between Aristotle and Sophocles. Dacier drew on Aristotle’s theory of action to redefine the *hamartia* of the perfect tragedy as an involuntary, yet nonetheless morally culpable fault resulting from one’s own character flaws and vicious passions. Having taken the wind out of Robortello’s sails, he then went on to discover divine justice in *Oedipus Tyrannus* after all. Following a suggestion already made by Vettori (1560), he
argued, and with some power, that Oedipus – in accordance with Aristotle’s *Poetics* – did not suffer innocently at all, but fell victim to his own vices and weaknesses in character. For it was not Oedipus’ ignorance, but his outbursts of anger as well as his pride, his curiosity, his imprudence and intemperance, so pervasively exposed by Sophocles during the dramatic action, that led to his earlier patricide and would now lead to his terrible but deserved ruin. By exposing Oedipus’ vices as the true causes of his misfortune, Sophocles, insisted Dacier, wanted the spectators and readers to purge these very vices from their wretched souls in order that they would avoid such catastrophes in their own lives:

Oedipus’ fault [*i.e. hamartia*] is the fault of a man who, being transported to anger by the insolence of a coach-man, killed some men only two days after the oracle told him he should kill his own father. He himself relates the action in Sophocles very naturally. This action alone sufficiently denotes *his character*, but Sophocles has given one by all his manners so conformable to this; and which answers so perfectly to Aristotle’s rules that he appears in every respect a man who is neither good nor bad, a mixture of virtue and vice; *his vices are pride, violence, anger, temerity, and imprudence*; it is not properly his patricide nor incest, which made him unhappy. Any punishment for those had been in a manner unjust since they were crimes involuntary, and committed without his knowledge; he fell not into those terrible calamities but *by his curiosity, rashness and violence […]* *These are the vices which Sophocles would have us correct.* (Dacier 1692a: 192f.; trans. 1705: 213)

Thus, the Christianization of both Aristotle and Sophocles, which the neo-classical dramatic theory stood or fell by, was completed at last, and Camerarius was defeated with his own weapons: with yet another interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Innocent no longer, the Sophoclean Oedipus would from now on provide an enduring model for moralizing interpretations of Greek tragedy that seemed authorized by Aristotle himself and that has remained popular to this day with scholars and students alike.

5 Sophocles and the Crisis of the European Mind: *Querelle, Paganism, fatalité*

Yet by the time Dacier’s commentary was published, it was almost too late. Europe was already embroiled in an unprecedented intellectual upheaval that, generated by the rise of the New Philosophy, the scientific revolution, and the emergence of a new art of historical criticism, shook the foundations of traditional authority, thought, and belief, and ultimately resulted in a revolutionary transformation of almost every aspect of European culture. One of the defining intellectual contests entailed by the crisis was the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. Begun in France – officially on January 27, 1687, when Charles Perrault’s poem celebrating *Le Siècle de Louis le Grand* was read before the French Academy – but quickly engaging all Europe, the *Querelle* challenged everything Renaissance humanism and neo-classical dramatic theory stood for and eventually led to a radical re-interpretation and re-evaluation of Greek tragedy and ancient literature and culture in general.

Driven by the belief in the power of human reason and in the possibility of progress as well as by a new understanding of all human works as historical products, the *Modernes* rejected the absolute authority of the ancients, their models, their texts, and the rules drawn from them, arguing against blind admiration and servile imitation of antiquity and
asserting the technical, scientific, philosophical, religious, moral, and cultural superiority of the rapidly changing modern world. The Modernes’ assault on antiquity and the classical tradition caused an uproar. What is more, it went hand in hand with a series of systematic, determined, and scathing attacks on paganism which, while pursuing diverse intellectual (and rhetorical) goals, nonetheless held invariably that, as Pierre Bayle puts it, there is “nothing more monstrous than the religion of the Pagans” (Bayle 1702: s.v. “Jupiter”). These attacks undermined the Christianizing interpretation of Greek gods forged in the Renaissance, resulting in a radical reappraisal of Greek religion and theology as a mythic and superstitious mentality of a primitive people, on a level with American savages (Fontenelle 1691–9: 30–32). In the ensuing fierce intellectual debates, which lasted more than a century, Greek tragedies, both as undisputed, universally acclaimed, unsurpassable masterpieces of the ancients and as powerful products of pagan religion and mentality, were bound to come under intense scrutiny. And since Oedipus Tyrannus played a paradigmatic role in both Aristotle’s Poetics and the neo-classical tragic theory, it immediately became the target of choice for the Modernes as well as the last bastion of hope for the Anciens.

For the most part, the Modernes espoused the same conception of tragedy as Melanchthon, Chapelain, or Dacier, convinced of the utmost importance of moral utility and the doctrine of poetic justice. Yet they denied that this genuinely modern theory ever existed in pagan antiquity, claiming that it was neither endorsed by Aristotle nor adhered to by Greek tragedians. They implacably tried to expose the interpretations of Greek tragedy and Aristotle’s Poetics developed by commentators and critics during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as an unfounded distortion and a profound misunderstanding. And they argued powerfully that in Sophocles’ tragedies, absolutely alien to us, pagan, amoral, harmful, and anti-Christian, there was no divine justice at all; that the individual was only a blind toy in the hands of cruel, treacherous, merciless, and unjust pagan gods and an innocent victim of inevitable fate.

This intellectual onslaught on Greek tragedy was spearheaded in the early nineties of the seventeenth century by two prominent figures of the early Enlightenment: Saint-Évremond and Fontenelle. In his brief, yet breathtakingly iconoclastic essay De la tragédie ancienne et moderne, published in 1692 – the same year as Dacier’s commentary – Saint-Évremond challenged fearlessly everything Melanchthon and Dacier stood for. Pointing out the immense advances in knowledge achieved by modern science and philosophy, he dismissed Aristotle’s Poetics as an excellent, yet outdated book of little value for contemporary dramatic theory. Insisting on profound cultural and religious differences between pagan antiquity as the age of superstition and Christian modernity as the age of reason and justice, he denounced Greek tragedy as a medium of the unspeakably cruel and barbaric pagan religion, designed merely to instill in the audience a superstitious fear of unjust and impious gods – and therefore detrimental to morality and virtue, alien to our religious beliefs and moral values and hence completely unsuitable for the modern stage:

[Si]hould a man translate even the Oedipus, the best performance of all Antiquity, into French, with the same spirit and force as we see it in the original, I dare be bold to affirm that nothing in the world would appear to us more cruel, more opposite to the true sentiments which mankind ought to have. (Saint-Évremond 1692: 182; trans. 1714: 110)

Saint-Évremond did not go into much detail here, but Corneille’s nephew Fontenelle explained in his Réflexions sur la Poétique of 1691 why exactly the plot of the Oedipus
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Tyrannus, which Aristotle declared to be the best, was in fact the least suitable for a good tragedy, as well as why Sophocles’ tragedy, which the Anciens proclaimed to be the finest play ever written, was actually the worst and most useless of all: The story of Oedipus, who falls into misery neither through his own fault nor because of his own character but “by a pure fatality” (fatalité), is a depressing story of an innocent man “wiped out by a bolt of lightning”:

One brings away from Oedipus, and from other plays that resemble it, only a disagreeable and useless conviction of the miseries of the human condition. (Fontenelle 1691: 141)

These subversive insinuations were quickly followed by a series of most comprehensive and detailed attacks. In his highly provocative book The Antient and Modern Stage Survey’d of 1699, James Drake was determined to prove that “the modern stage” was “infinitely preferable to the Athenians.” The starting point of his deconstruction of the Christianizing interpretation of Greek tragedy is a lengthy re-assessment of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus (Drake 1699: 126–47). For Drake, there was not a word of truth in the whole interpretation devised by Dacier and other critics, who tried in vain to “raise a Christian Moral upon a Pagan bottom” (p. 147). For the only moral one could draw from this acclaimed ancient tragedy – and from many other Greek tragedies as well – was the irresistible power of fate and the injustice and villainy of the divine providence:

Oedipus is made [sc. by Sophocles] Virtuous, Just, and Wise, but unhappy thro a Fatality, against which his Virtue is no security; Justice requires that he shou’d be rewarded and encouraged, but Providence will have him afflicted, and punish’d with extremity of Rigour.

Can anything be more disserviceable to Probity and Religion, than these Examples of Injustice, Oppression and Cowardice in their Gods? (p. 199)

Abbé Jean Terrasson, too, vehemently disagreed with Dacier in his most radical Dissertation critique sur l’Iliade d’Homère of 1715, which was designed to apply to literature and literary theory the spirit of the New Philosophy (Terrasson 1715, vol. 1: iij) and to establish a new system of the art of poetry, that would be founded not upon arbitrary rules drawn from ancient texts, but upon the principles of reason. Dealing at length not only with the perilous pagan theology and highly questionable moral values of the Iliad but also with Greek tragedy and tragic theory (pp. 144–262), piling argument upon argument, Terrasson methodically dismantled Dacier’s interpretation of catharsis and hamartia and dismissed his reading of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus as an untenable falsification. This pagan play, he insisted, was extremely impious and harmful to modern readers because Sophocles’ dramatic intention was clearly to make people believe that, if a man is destined by the Gods to commit a crime, virtuous though he may be, he will inevitably be led to commit it against his own will:

But I am of a very different opinion from Mr. D[acier] as to Oedipus’s character, and think that even in the intention of Sophocles he was one of the most virtuous persons the Ancients ever brought upon the stage. The poet’s design was to teach us that whenever a man is destin’d by the Gods to commit a crime, he is necessarily and unavoidably engaged therein, and even by those very methods and means be takes to avoid it. Most of the pagan authors, especially the tragic poets, are full of this impious notion: and to confirm it the more, Sophocles chose an excellent prince, full of horror of vice, and love of virtue. And he had esteemed the person who in his time should have said Oedipus was really vicious, or could have possibly avoided the crimes
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and misfortunes [that] were denounced him by the oracle, as his chief enemy, and the great corrupter of the principle design and moral of his tragedy. (Terrasson 1715, vol. 1: 188; trans. 1722–5, vol. 1: 204–5)

Having unmasked the shockingly amoral and anti-Christian character of Greek tragedy, the Modernes demanded that modern poets produce new, contemporary Oedipus tragedies that would be rid of the monstrosity and absurdity of pagan theology and truly display all those edifying features Melanchthon and Dacier were erroneously trying to read into Sophocles’ rotten plays (see Terrasson 1715, vol. 1:193f.). It was these demands for a new, undeniably guilty, and thus deservedly punished, Oedipus that Fr. Melchior de Folard’s Œdipe (1722) and Houdar de la Motte’s Edipe (1726) were designed to satisfy.

The Anciens responded to these unrelenting attacks by shifting ground and employing new hermeneutical principles. In his voluminous Théâtre des Grecs published in 1730, the Jesuit Pierre Brumoy lamented the fate of the Greek tragedians, who “suffered most in the war that still goes on among the Ancients and Moderns,” and appeared to be seeking reconciliation (Brumoy 1730, vol. 1: ii). While acknowledging the foreignness of the pagan beliefs and customs of ancient Greeks and the profound cultural and religious differences between the ancient and the modern world, he urged modern readers “to forgive their [sc. the Greeks’] tragic poets for having imitated nature, such as they saw her in their own times” and to look at Greek tragedies as historical products of their own time and culture that should not be judged by modern criteria, but understood on their own terms (p. xii). In order to be able to discover the universal beauty and truth hidden behind the foreign façade of pagan Greek culture, we ought to follow the principle devised by Dubos and “transform ourselves, as it were, into those for whom the poem was written” (Dubos 1719, vol. 2: 245) – or, as Brumoy himself puts it, to “become an Athenian as much as those whom the poet intended to entertain” (Brumoy 1730, vol. 1: xij f.). These were admirable principles of historical criticism; yet, when Brumoy sets out to put his relativist historicism into practice, it very quickly proves to be only a means of salvaging the traditional Christianizing interpretation of Greek tragedy and Aristotle’s Poetics. For the universal meaning and value he sought to find in Greek tragedy turned out to be still the deterrent representation of divine justice and the resulting salutary purgation of the audience from vicious passions. In the paradigmatic Réflexions sur l’Œdipe, which open a series of interpretative essays on individual plays, Brumoy did not eschew confronting directly the question of Oedipus’ guilt as what “in the opinion of many” was the fundamental, insurmountable flaw of Sophocles’ masterpiece:

What is the crime of Oedipus? [...] If there be any crime, it is Apollo, and not Oedipus, who is guilty. Yet it is Oedipus who suffers for this crime. And by what a dreadful punishment! (Brumoy 1730, vol. 1: 95; trans. 1759, vol. 1: 76)

There was no denying for him that pagan theology – bizarre, appalling, and wrong – plays a disturbingly central role in Sophocles and in Greek tragedy in general and that inevitable destiny is “the soul of all that passes here” (Brumoy 1730, vol. 1: 96). In order to be able to appreciate Sophocles, we ought not, declared Brumoy, to condemn this absurd system but to “adopt” it “for a few moments” (p. 97). Adopting the pagan system, however, meant little more than turning a blind eye to “this strange theology” and to imagine that it is simply not there. It is true: Oedipus acts in ignorance and the involuntary crimes for which he is punished are “ratified by Fate.” But he is still not free from guilt, for he still commits murder and his moral character leaves much to be desired.
“Choleric, irascible, and curious in excess,” he has the vices of a private man as well as those of “an imprudent King.” Having dispensed with pagan theology in this manner, Brumoy felt justified in the end to return to Dacier’s interpretation of both Sophocles and Aristotle’s *Poetics* and to claim that Oedipus’ misery excites in us [...] compassion for Oedipus, and fear of the Gods, who punish even involuntary crimes in a person who is not wholly free from guilt. Hence arises that sympathetic concern for ourselves blended with our compassion; which restrains us from committing the same faults that we see are productive of such fatal consequences. This is the pure doctrine of Aristotle, or rather that of nature, or true wisdom. (Brumoy 1730, vol. 1: 97f.; trans. 1759, vol. 1: 76f.)

The position of the *Anciens* was taken one step further by Charles Batteux, who succeeded Terrasson as professor of ancient philosophy at the Collège Royal in 1750. The emotionalist theory of tragedy developed in his *Principes de la littérature*, published in 1747–50 and significantly expanded in 1753 and in 1764, opened up the possibility to see Greek tragedy and its paradigm, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in a new light (Batteux 1747–50, vol. 4: 271–389). Although still thinking very much in Aristotelian terms, Batteux saw the moral aim of tragedy, and the meaning of *catharsis*, no longer in the purgation of our souls from vicious passions, but in the enlargement of our sensibility through the exercise of fear, pity, and other sad emotions. To provoke the required emotional response in the audience, tragedy did not need to bring to light the workings of God’s justice any longer. On the contrary; for Batteux, the aim of tragedy could best be achieved if, in a heroic and touching action, a virtuous person like Sophocles’ Oedipus is destroyed “by an irresistible *fatalité*, to which all mankind is alike subject” (Batteux 1747–50, vol. 4: 284f.). This new conception of tragedy allowed Batteux to embrace the interpretation of Greek tragedy developed by the *Modernes*, yet at the same time to reject their criticism as unjustified by reclaiming for Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and Greek tragedy in general, timeless value and meaning as an emotionally pleasurable and beneficial representation of the universal malheurs de l’humanité:

> In him [sc. Oedipus] we see a man born under [an] unhappy planet, constantly pursued by his fate, and led into the greatest misfortunes by a train of seeming successes. I cannot be of opinion with one of our greatest wits that this catastrophe is a “bolt of lightning” that creates horror [Fontenelle 1691: 141, see above]; it appears to me rather a representation of the miseries incident to humanity, which affects us with dread and apprehension. Where is the man, who, if unfortunate, does not attribute at least the most part of his misfortunes to his unhappy star? We are all of us fully persuaded that we are not masters of our own destiny, but are guided by a superior power that very often over-rules us; in which respect the story of Oedipus is only an assemblage of misfortunes, of which the cause has one time or other, and in some degree, been experienced by the greatest part of mankind. Hence the man, conscious of his own weakness and ignorance of futurity and full of the sense of an over-ruling deity, does, in beholding this piece, tremble for himself; and lament Oedipus […] (Batteux 1747–50, vol. 4: 317f.; trans. 1761, vol. 2: 300f.)

Although Batteux’s innovative thoughts, endorsed in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* by Louis de Jaucourt in 1765 and developed further by von Schirach in 1769, did have a considerable impact, they could not allay the prevailing moralistic concerns shared by the majority of both the *Anciens* and *Modernes*. Only very few of them were prepared to believe that a dramatic representation of the destruction of an innocent human being through divine will and inevitable fate could be anything but amoral, shocking, and harmful. The
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Querelle was bound to continue. In 1761, Louis Dupuy was still combating the increasingly popular, yet in his opinion absolutely wrong view that Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus did not fulfill “une condition essentielle à la tragédie” that virtue should be rewarded and vice punished and was therefore morally useless, unholy, and disrespectful to God. And in his commentary on Aristotle’s Poetics, published in 1771, Batteux himself caved in to the moralistic demands and, in a sudden change of heart, rediscovered the doctrine of poetic justice in Aristotle as well as Oedipus’ character flaws in Sophocles, thus undermining the very foundations of his own tragic theory (Batteux 1771: 257–9).

In the meantime, the arguments brought forward by the Modernes were systematically reinforced and expanded, this time not from a Christian but an explicitly deistic point of view, by Jean-François Marmontel, a prominent critic and a close friend of the radical philosophes d’Holbach and Diderot. With his monumental and most influential Poétique françoise published in 1763, Marmontel intended to replace Aristotle’s Poetics as the mouthpiece of ancient tragedy with a modern dramatic theory. Marmontel was convinced of fundamental and unbridgeable differences between Greek tragedy and modern drama. The moral end of modern tragedy, in which human beings are free and responsible for their lives, where virtue prevails and crimes are punished, is moral improvement, correction des mœurs. The only lesson of ancient tragedy – in which human beings are but blind victims of the gods and of chance, where everything is driven by fate or by the will of the gods, often bizarre, unjust and cruel, where it is commonly innocence and goodness that give way while crime emerges victorious – is the demoralizing notion of man’s vulnerability to the fatalité and superstitious fear of undeserved, yet inevitable suffering at the hands of treacherous gods (Marmontel 1763, vol. 2: 102). While dismantling moralizing interpretations of Greek tragedy, Marmontel never grew tired of ridiculing all those who “take so much care in searching out the vices” of Oedipus and would “bleed everything dry to blacken” this good, courageous, and evidently innocent king (p. 110).

The controversy continued almost unabated until the end of the eighteenth century. Nothing could make the defenders of Greek tragedy stop searching for Oedipus’ guilt. Marmontel’s views, however, became increasingly influential in the second half of the eighteenth century and were embraced, among others, by Beaumarchais in his programmatic “Essai sur le drame sérieux” (1767) and by Lenz in his Anmerkungen über das Theater (1774), an important manifesto of Sturm und Drang drama. And it was Marmontel who was asked by Diderot to write a new comprehensive article on tragédie for the Supplément à l’Encyclopédie published in 1777. The authoritative and widely read text reflects the profound transformation the understanding of Greek tragedy underwent during the long eighteenth century. Ideas which in 1690s seemed breathtakingly new, provocative, and subversive are conveyed here confidently and firmly as common, impartial, and undisputed knowledge. Ancient and modern tragedy, asserted Marmontel, have very little in common because they represent two different systems (Marmontel 1777: 1087–9). The ancient system is the “système de la fatalité.” In Greek tragedy, innocent human beings fall invariably into misery through “le caprice aveugle & tyrannique de l’inflexible Destinée” (p. 1091). The modern system, conversely, is the “système des passions actives.” In modern tragedy, edifying and infinitely superior morally, the cause of the tragic hero’s downfall lies in his character, his own imprudence, passions, and vices. Modern drama is therefore the tableau “des malheurs & des crimes de l’homme esclave de ses passions,” whereas the Greeks brought on stage “le tableau des calamités de l’homme esclave de la destinée” (p. 1089). As the paradigm for the ancient system of fatalist and morally useless tragedy, Marmontel, of course, invokes
again Sophocles’ Oedipus, – a blind victim of the cruel gods of paganism and inexorable fate (pp. 1091–3). But the Querelle was not over yet.

6  Querelle Recast: From Schelling to Nietzsche

It was precisely this de-Christianizing, fatalist understanding of pagan Greek tragedy developed and expounded by the Modernes during the Enlightenment that after the French Revolution was to be taken over and radically re-evaluated in the light of Kant’s Third Critique by Schelling and the Schlegel brothers. Intimately familiar with the eighteenth-century debates, they were hoping to succeed where Batteux ultimately failed and to overcome the inconclusive Querelle within the framework of a new philosophy of tragedy that imparted to Greek tragedy as it was understood by the Modernes positive value and meaning (Schelling 1795; F. Schlegel 1795–97: 309–29). In their new conception of tragedy as representation of “the struggle between freedom and necessity,” the Sophoclean Oedipus as he was interpreted by Fontenelle, Drake, Terrasson, and Marmontel – “a mortal, preordained by fate for guilt and transgression, struggling against fate and fleeing that guilt, and nonetheless frightfully punished for a transgression that was actually a work of fate” (Schelling 1795: 106f.; 1802–3: 696) – could become again the only genuine tragic hero, and Sophocles the father of the only truly tragic tragedy: the tragedy of fate.

This fatalist interpretation caused, in its turn, a ruckus in classical scholarship. There is a certain irony in the fact that the intellectual controversy that was fought out during the long eighteenth century in the context of the monumental Querelle repeated itself during the nineteenth century as an endless scholarly debate in the newly established classical Altertumswissenschaft. In dozens of books and articles published during the nineteenth century, scholars took strenuously to recuperating the Christianizing understanding of both Sophocles and Aristotle’s Poetics developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by generations of commentators and critics, from Melanchthon to Dacier, and obstinately defended by the Anciens during the eighteenth century (see e.g. Hoffmann 1832; Wilbrandt 1836; Geffers 1850; Vetter 1885).

It was only Jacob Burckhardt and young Friedrich Nietzsche who, in the early 1870s, advanced an uncompromising understanding of Greek literature and culture that neither followed Plato and his Christian followers in condemning Greek tragedy as a dangerous medium of a perilously wrong theology and worldview, nor attempted to defend Greek tragedy against Platonist and Christian accusations by means of its moralizing re-interpretation on Platonist or Christian terms, but tried to face up to the view of the world and human life that emerges from Greek tragic poetry and that Plato was so vehemently opposed to as a dark, yet nonetheless genuine and universal, insight into the human condition. At the heart of their daring, and explicitly anti-modernist, visions of Greek culture lay the notion of “Greek pessimism” – of the grim view of the universe and man’s place in it that, as Burckhardt has shown (Burckhardt 1872–85, vol. 20: 349–95), looms large in pre-Platonic Greek literature and thought and has found its most radical expression in the paradoxical, chilling wisdom that for all human beings it is by far the best not to be born and the second best to die early (Burckhardt 1872–85, vol. 20: 372f.; Nietzsche 1870: 80; 1872: §3). In this context, Sophocles will become the pessimist poet par excellence, and his Oedipus – the man who lived too long from the very moment of his birth, the man for whom it would have been by
far the best never to have been born – will return at the dawn of the twentieth century
as Nietzsche’s paradigm for the tragedy of human existence.

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The history of interpretation of Sophocles and Greek tragedy in general is a central and
fascinating part of the intellectual history of Europe in its own right. For a student of
Greek tragedy, however, it is at the same time more than a captivating genealogy of
errors. It is the history of a debate that still continues today and that we all are participat-
ing in when reading Sophocles. For better or worse, many lines of inquiry initiated in the
Renaissance, many attempts to come to terms with Sophocles’ tragic vision made by
generations of thinkers from Camerarius to Nietzsche, are still with us. In one way or
another, our own approaches to Greek tragedy, the questions we ask and the answers we
seek, often turn out to be the product of the history of its interpretation. By exploring
the intellectual history of Sophocles’ plays in Europe we can discover what we can think
both of Greek tragedy and ourselves.

Guide to Further Reading

The intellectual history of interpretation of Sophocles in Europe is a vast and largely
neglected field; many sources are not easily accessible, and a great deal of relevant scholar-
ship is written in languages other than English. Many of the developments sketched in
this chapter have been discussed in detail in my Die Suche nach der Schuld (2004:
13–240). On various other aspects of the reception history of Sophocles, see Mueller
(2004), Hall and Macintosh (2005), Walton (2006), Borza (2007), Macintosh (2009),
and Winkler (2009).

On ancient responses to Greek tragedy, see Halliwell (2005). On the theory of tragedy
in the Middle Ages, see Kelly (1993). On the Christianization of ancient religion
and mythology in the Renaissance, see Seznec (1953), Bull (2005), and Brumble
(2007). For a detailed analysis of the moralizing critical tradition resulting in the doc-
Greek tragedy and his lectures on Sophocles, see Ritoók-Szalay (2001), Roling (2004),
Renaissance, see Weinberg (1961), Hathaway (1962), Herrick (1965), Tietgerstedt
(1968), Javitch (1999), and Lurje (2004: 13–91). On the development of the neo-
classical dramatic theory in France, see Bray (1927), Phillips (1980), Lyons (1999), and
Civardi (2004). For the history of interpretation of hamartia, see Lurje (2004: 79–91
and 278–386).

On the intellectual history of the early Enlightenment in general, see the seminal
works by Hazard (1935) and Israel (2001 and 2006). On the Querelle, see Rigault
(2005) and Edelstein (2010). On the debates on ancient pagan religion, theology, and
mythology in the early Enlightenment, see Manuel (1959), Whelan (1989), Grell (1995:
359–85), Poulouin (1998), Boch (2002), and Gisi (2007). While the controversy over
Homer has been studied in detail (Hepp 1968: 521–755; Levine 1991: 120–244), the
role of Greek tragedy in the Querelle remains largely ignored; for a preliminary analysis,


For recent attempts to recuperate the Christianizing interpretation of Sophocles and Greek tragedy in general with the help of a moralizing re-interpretation of Aristotle’s Poetics, see the works by E. Lefèvre and Arbogast Schmitt and his school (Thiel, Pietsch, Radke, Kappl et al.).

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Note

1 The emphases in all displayed quotes have been added by the author.

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