

How to Write a Greek Tragedy

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Assume that you're a budding playwright living in Athens towards the end of the fifth century BCE. You intend to write a tragedy. What are the constraints within which you must work? And what is the *significance* of these constraints – what do they tell us about the way tragedy is conceived? (Assume also that you weren't actually born in ancient Greece, but have been transported there back in time, for this allows you to take with you some knowledge of other, later types of drama; comparisons with these will be useful in clarifying the peculiarly Greek sense of theatre – even though, for a Greek of that time, such comparisons were obviously not available.)

If your goal is to write for performance at the major springtime dramatic festival, the City Dionysia, you'll have to write three full-length tragedies and a satyr play. But one step at a time. For present purposes we'll ignore the satyr play and focus on what it means to write a tragedy.

In the first place, state rules allow you no more than three ACTORS, a twelve- or fifteen-strong CHORUS, and as many EXTRAS (mutes) as you may require (or more accurately, as many as a state-appointed sponsor – known as a *choregos* – will pay for). These are all male. In performance they will be masked.

An actor impersonates a character essentially by speaking that character's words, or more precisely, by either speaking, chanting or singing these words (which of these applies will depend on the metre you write in), but 'speaking' conveys the key point here, that the gestural or 'motor' aspects of acting are not definitive in the same way (which is not to say that they don't matter). This follows from the fact that mutes 'don't count' (they're literally not counted as actors).

You're not restricted to three *characters*, however, because each actor is allowed to impersonate more than one character. The use of masks makes this easier. However, no actor is allowed to switch characters in view of the audience. Moreover, a given character doesn't have to be played throughout by the same actor.

Extras impersonate characters who do not speak. Either these are characters who never speak or they are characters who speak in other scenes in the play (when, of course, they have to be played by actors instead).

It follows from these rules that you cannot have more than three speaking characters in the same scene, however many characters you include in the play as a

whole or however many you bring onstage simultaneously.¹ More subtly, they entail that the continuity and even the unity of your play may depend more on the ‘comings and goings’ of actors than of characters.

Speech (or more broadly power of verbal utterance) is not just definitive of what it means to be an actor, but also essential to the conception of what this kind of drama is, for, in it, not having speech (at all) is equivalent to not having will or desire and even to not being able to ‘experience’ the tragic mismatch between intention and result. Underlying this is the fact that characters don’t really have an ‘inner life’; what later ages, and later dramatic traditions, will conceive of as psychologically internal is here necessarily external, already public. Articulation rules. It follows that non-speaking characters (those who never speak) cannot drive the plot in any way. But note, a character with speech may nonetheless express will or desire through chosen silence, the refusal to speak, as Achilles powerfully does in Aeschylus’ *Myrmidons*, or Niobe in Aeschylus’ play that bears her name – but only for a time; utterance follows, in these cases explosively. Nevertheless there may be one strict exception to the rule, literally interpreted: Philomela in Sophocles’ *Tereus*. *If* she appears in the play (as is likely), it must be after she has had her tongue cut out by Tereus.² According to the story, she reveals to her sister what has been done to her by means of weaving. Technical exception though this may be, however, it doesn’t really contradict the spirit of the rule, since “the shuttle’s voice”³ has effectively become Philomela’s proxy voice.

More generally, in this kind of drama speech should be understood as *constituting an action, or a reaction, in itself*. (The old saw that ‘actions speak louder than words’ is off-target here.)

You belong to a society, fifth century Athens, that values choruses very highly, not only in but also outside plays. In fact, the chorus is such a complex and powerful thing in itself that strange things happen when it is ‘contained’ within a play. The first strange thing is that it isn’t quite ‘contained’ at all. That is, while the chorus

¹ A minor qualification (pun intended): child actors don’t count as actors. That is, you can include small speaking parts for children, to be played by children. But child actors must play child characters.

² *Tereus* is a ‘lost’ play. Only a few fragments of it remain. The same is true of *Myrmidons* and *Niobe*.

³ Aristotle’s phrase in the *Poetics* (16), referring to *Tereus*, perhaps quoted from the play itself.

participates in the drama, its theatrical or performative ‘being’ is somehow more than that participation.

In a tragedy, the chorus has to impersonate some collective character in the world of the drama; that is, it must be given an identity (such as elder statesmen, foreign slave women, Furies – examples all taken from Aeschylus’ trilogy of 458 BCE, *The Oresteia*). This identity is a kind of ‘passport’ that allows it to be present during and hence to participate in the dramatic scenes or episodes. But at the same time a chorus is a chorus is a chorus. Saying this is not at all like saying that an actor is an actor is an actor, for a chorus is *already* more than the sum of its parts (its *choreuts*), independently of – and in that sense *prior to* – its dramatic identity. This ‘more’ is a kind of performative heightening of social life, yet to be fictionalized. Even when imagined as belonging to a fictional world, as in a play, the chorus remains a kind of institution-in-itself. In fact, although it may be quite marginal within the world of the play, it is *central* within the theatrical event of public performance.

In the episodes, the chorus has speech.⁴ Therefore it may have will or desire. This raises the question, can the chorus have what Stanislavsky will much later call a super-objective (a principal driving goal) *of its own* as against sharing in (supporting, amplifying) the super-objective of some other character? In principle, yes, but the only extant play where this is the case is Aeschylus’ *Suppliants*, probably dated around 463. This seems to have been an experiment which bucked the more general trend to reduce the dramatic role of choruses to witnessing.

The chorus is best defined as ‘many bodies with one identity’. It is not a crowd or a group of individuals. ‘Individual members’ of the chorus (as fictional persons) do not have names.⁵ The chorus can, however, split or fragment and engage in internal debate. Since this threatens to undermine the very nature of the chorus, it must be kept brief.

⁴ If you have heard the rumour that such speech is always or usually spoken by a Leader, you should ignore it (although it may be true). The more important point is that in something like the odd way Queen Victoria could say ‘*We* are not amused,’ a chorus can say collectively ‘*I* am not happy’.

⁵ *Hypermetra*, in the lost second and third plays of Aeschylus’ trilogy which begins with *Suppliants*, may be an exception. But she ‘acquires a name’ (thus becoming a character in her own right) precisely by breaking ranks with her sisters. In a sense, moreover, ‘individual identities’ are implied for the mothers of the dead Seven (against Thebes) in Euripides’ *Suppliants*. But these identities are studiously ignored through the course of the play; (there are, in any case, less of them than chorus members).

(In passing, we should also note here that another kind of character, the functionary – a Guard, the Nurse,⁶ the *Pedagogos* (Tutor), etc. – also usually has no name. A character must have a name in order to ‘have a story’ – such, at least, as can be the focus of a play).

There is more to say about the different functions and aspects (or ‘modes of being’) of the chorus, but first you need to grasp the basic principle by which a tragedy is structured, since this is a closely related issue. That principle is this: in certain sections of the play, the *dramatic action* continues, or develops; in other sections, it doesn’t; such sections usually alternate.

By ‘dramatic action’ I mean the action represented ‘onstage’ (that is, within the visible performance space), not reported story-events presumed to happen offstage (in a fictional extension of the world of the play). The point is that when the dramatic action is, as it were, ‘suspended,’ giving the chorus leave to ‘be itself’ (in the ‘chorus is a chorus is a chorus’ sense) by dancing and singing, nothing that advances the story is enacted on stage; however, the story may be advanced by offstage events presumed to be happening at that time. (The term *stasimon* – plural *stasima* – is widely used to refer to these suspensions of the dramatic action. It is first found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, perhaps in an interpolated passage, and implies that the chorus is ‘stationed,’ i.e. it holds its onstage position, not that it is stationary, or static. *Dance-song*, as will be the preferred term below, captures the reality better. Scenes in which the onstage action develops are usually called episodes.)

Where the dramatic action is evidently suspended in this manner, it is between two different episodes rather than within a single episode of the dramatic action.⁷ This implies that it follows some kind of ‘closure’ in the preceding action.

In its dance-song, the chorus is commonly left onstage alone, but no rule stipulates that this should or must be the case (there are too many exceptions). However, any characters that remain on also remain silent and still; that is, they do not participate in the dance-song. The dance-song is (usually) *not* an action in the

⁶ The Nurse in Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers* is named *Cilissa*. This seems to be because she interacts with the chorus with no main character present. Giving her a name establishes her common status with the chorus as slaves. Even so, I suspect it was a little ‘shocking’ for the original audience.

⁷ There is a single exception to this in Aeschylus’ (generally exceptional) *Suppliants* at 418ff. Here the dramatic action is ‘suspended’ as King Pelasgus thinks through his options; however, the song of the chorus remains tied to the dramatic situation and appears as an indirect (abstracted, stylized) attempt to influence the King’s decision.

drama (though there are exceptions). Nonetheless the dance-song is performed *in character* (the chorus does not shed its dramatic identity) and, mimetically, it almost always constitutes a *reaction* to the preceding dramatic action, although probably an indirect one.

It may help you understand the way in which the dance-song is not a dramatic action to imagine an actor/character entering as it ends. The *actor* naturally sees the dance finishing but the *character* does not. From the character's point of view, it is as though the chorus has not been dancing at all, but just standing there. At least, this is the usual case. Relatedly, the dancing of the chorus needs no motivation. (You can give the 'act of dancing' a dramatic motivation if you want, but since there is no need to do so then any such motivation should serve a special purpose; for example Sophocles does this at *Ajax* 693-701 where the chorus says that it could dance for joy. But this is ironic. It brings out how completely the chorus has misunderstood Ajax' intentions. Moreover, if you decide on a chorus of bacchantes, as Euripides does in his *Bacchae*, it will always be 'in character' and dramatically appropriate for them to dance.)

We might try to sum all this up by saying that *the dance-song of the chorus is extra-dramatic but intra-mimetic*. But in fact this rigorous-sounding formulation won't quite do. While in its dance-song the chorus remains within the mimesis, it nonetheless 'pulls in' something of the larger theatrical event, almost but (usually) not quite self-reflexively. Its specific fictional identity notwithstanding, a chorus is a chorus (as I've already said – twice) – and it will be perceived in this mode especially in the dance-song. This is the sense in which the chorus is not quite 'contained' by the play. After all, this is how theatre (at least in Greece) got started, so they say, with Thespis stepping out from a chorus; the chorus, then, was *already there*, and in an important sense it *still is* (it still is 'already there,' I mean). Mere characters, on the other hand, come and go. As for actors, they will soon start to get above themselves (during the fourth century BCE), but a chorus is by definition more than a group of *choreuts*, even when it is 'out of its dramatic character'. It is in some sense already more than the mere 'raw material' out of which tragedy is made, already an institution, already artistically, culturally formed (as I also said earlier, but the point is important and bears repetition).

Suppose then that in your projected tragedy you'll have a chorus of old men. Must its members dance (100% mimetically) *like old men* (as Euripides presents

Cadmus and Tiresias dancing in *Bacchae*)? You might ignore this question in your role as scriptwriter, but not in the role of director-choreographer which will fall to you if the City grants your play a chorus – so it ought to be part of your thinking-while-writing too. Played by ephebes (adolescent males),⁸ we might imagine something more stylistically akin to Chinese opera, where the physical depletions and limitations of old age are represented in a manner that *by the same token* reveals the youthful vigour and acrobatic prowess of the performer. This would be ‘intra-mimetic’ in one sense but not in another. And as for the term ‘extra-dramatic,’ we might need to understand it both in the sense of ‘outside the drama’ and of ‘*especially* dramatic,’ not in the sense of ‘especially gripping’ but of shifting the drama to another (‘higher’) plane.

To complicate matters a little more, the chorus can sing, and maybe dance too (this will depend on how dance is defined), *together with a character*. In this case an ‘action’ does take place within the drama (as conventionally understood), but of a ritual – or at least a ritualized – kind. The best examples of this are Xerxes and the chorus at the end of Aeschylus’ *The Persians*, or Electra, Orestes and the chorus trying to summon the ghost of Agamemnon in *Choephoroi*, or the strange wedding-cum-funeral song between Antigone and the chorus in *Antigone*. In such cases the ritualized action remains entirely within the drama, but there is nonetheless a kind of suspension of plot development. It may thus be useful to think of such scenes as lying between the ‘pure (plot developing) drama’ of the episodes and the ‘transcendence (elevation) of the drama’ in the dance-songs (*stasima*), although strictly such sequences belong to the episodes.

Within the episodes you can have one character (or the chorus) sing while another character (even, perhaps, the chorus),⁹ interacting with the first, simply speaks. Save this so-called ‘epirrhematic structure’ for special occasions – that is, when there’s a good reason for it.

Where a dance-song is outside the dramatic action, that is, when it divides episodes, then, usually, *fictional time is not represented as passing* during it. This means that hours, days or even weeks can pass ‘offstage’ during a dance-song: time

⁸ John Winkler’s suggestion in “The Ephebes’ Song: Tragoïdia and Polis” (in J.J. Winkler & F.I. Zeitlin, *Nothing to do With Dionysus?* Princeton University Press, 1990) – but uncertain.

⁹ Aeschylus’ *coup de théâtre* in *Agamemnon* is to have Cassandra ‘upstage’ the chorus by singing while the chorus, in its bewilderment, can only speak to her.

enough, in *Agamemnon*, for Agamemnon to sail home from Troy! However, don't draw attention to the passing of such large chunks of time (this, by the way, will cause confusion to scholars in later periods, who will be seriously misled by a concept called the 'unity of time'), and certainly don't do anything like Shakespeare does in *The Winter's Tale* – your characters can't actually 'grow older' during a play. The converse is that during a dramatic scene, *fictional time must coincide with stage time*. You cannot compress time as, say, Marlowe does at the end of *Doctor Faustus*, making an hour pass in just a few minutes. This is a really fundamental difference between the dance-songs and the episodes; thinking about it will help you understand how these different modes of writing work theatrically.

As a dramatist, you must provide a dramatic motivation to take your chorus off (before the end of the play), but not to leave it on. Assume, then, that you'll leave it on (that is, when characters go off) much more often than not. In effect this means that you'll have to have your chorus dance and sing. But no rules govern the frequency or the proportion of dance-songs to drama. This means you can reduce the (singing-dancing) role of the chorus if you wish. But if, as a potential other side of this coin, you increase the number of speaking characters, you will need some (relatively brief) *stasima* to allow your actors to change. But the really important principle is that, in this kind of play, *you only need three actors because you've got a chorus – not that you need a chorus because you've only got three actors*.

Writers don't necessarily write the scenes of their plays in the correct playing order. Where they don't, however, they probably need a reasonably clear prior idea of the dramatic structure of their play. Given the alternation of episodes and dance-songs just discussed, you will certainly need to have such a structure (roughly what happens in each episode) fairly clear in your mind. But this raises a crucial question: how exactly do the dance-songs relate to the episodes? I've said that a dance-song is typically a reaction to the immediately preceding action. But what does this mean in practice? Above all, what does the chorus sing about? Moreover, is it best to compose the choral odes (the lyrics of the dance-songs) when you get to them, immediately following each episode, or can they be left till the end?

A certain contemporary of yours, Agathon, will be ‘accused’ (the word may be an exaggeration, but not by much) by Aristotle of composing odes that can be used in different plays! I mention this not only as something to be avoided, but also as something to be (sympathetically) understood – and learned from – for it is *almost* a ‘logical consequence’ of a key feature of the odes from an early stage: the way they tend to be only *indirectly* related to the preceding action. Agathon may have taken this a step too far, but not in an entirely arbitrary move.

It will help if you think of overall structure in metaphorical terms, firstly as a (slowly) beating heart; in the episodes the heart contracts, sending the blood out through the arteries, while in the dance-songs it ‘relaxes’ and expands. This, at least, is the overall rhythm you should aim at. But it doesn’t tell us quite what ‘is happening’ in the dance-songs; driving the blood through the arteries may provide a good(-ish) analogy with the momentum of plot development, but in the dance-songs it is certainly not the case that more blood (plot) is being gathered ready for the next episode. So we need a second metaphor; in an episode, focus is on the stone thrown into a pond, while in the dance-song focus is on the *ripples* that result (allusions to other myths, generalizations about human existence...). This tells us why the odes tend to have an indirect relation to the action that precedes them; it is because ripples travel out a long way.

The linear (blood, plot) is interrupted by the non-linear (ripples). The dance-songs, thus, exist ‘at an angle’ to the episodes. But note also: *ripples go out in circles*. Keep this in mind when we go on to think about the circular playing space you are writing for.

Your goal is to balance two things. On the one hand, the way in which, for the tragic hero(ine), ‘the buck stops here’ – as so precisely captured by Sophocles when he has his Oedipus say “Now I am Oedipus”. Behind this there is an *emergent* sense of individual autonomy. But it is nothing like the post-Renaissance sense of the individual, so on the other hand you must give equal weight to the knock-on effects of tragedy. These are not like falling dominoes, but something more paradoxical: knock-on effects on the unaffected. The chorus is *not Oedipus*, indeed, it is ‘left behind’ by (the fate of) Oedipus, uncomprehending, but in some other sense it *participates* in the (his) tragedy, more than mere onlookers. Although ‘tragedy’ happens to particular people, its very nature as tragedy means that it doesn’t stop there. For the witness, too, is challenged to make sense.

Why else should people want to pay money to watch it?

(You might think that, as a result of all this, you can use the odes to express some of your favourite ideas. Well, yes, you can – but if, in doing so, you lose the sense that this is truly a reaction to the preceding action, you will be... following Agathon.)¹⁰

Naturally you must write your Greek tragedy for a Greek theatre. This is neither a simple truism nor a triviality. The extant plays are infused with a certain conception of space as this is both embodied and encoded by such a theatre in a way that contributes fundamentally to their significance.

All or almost all the seen action is to be enacted in a circular arena, the playing space, called the *orchestra*.¹¹ You will probably also use a ‘stage building’ or *skene* and you can put a little of the seen action on its roof if you want. The skene is relatively small, one storey high, at the back of but inside the orchestral circle;¹² a central (double) door connects it to the orchestra. Note that no skene is used in the extant plays written before 458 BCE, the date of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. After its introduction around 460 it seems to be used in all plays (including *Rhesos*, where its use is not obvious).¹³ The introduction of the skene is a momentous event in the evolution of tragedy, one that radically affects the conception of space in the genre.

The circular arena is shared by chorus, actors and extras. There is no stage.¹⁴

However, the chorus is not allowed to enter the stage building. Hence the chorus cannot appear on its roof. Note however that the chorus, in its given fictional

¹⁰ Even so, the famous ‘Ode on Man’ from Sophocles’ *Antigone* shows how ‘indirect’ an ode can be.

¹¹ Some claim that the main fifth century playing space – the Theatre of Dionysos itself – was roughly rectangular. There is no strong archaeological reason to believe this. If true, the switch to a circular space must be explained. The only plausible reason I can think of for it would be to accommodate a far larger number of spectators, but again there is no evidence of any such transformation. It is far simpler to suppose that the orchestra was circular from the start.

¹² *Not* outside it, as in Epidaurus.

¹³ The *skene* and the third actor seem to have been introduced around the same time. There is an interesting logic in this: with the *skene*, the number of entrances to the orchestra also becomes three!

¹⁴ This is a controversial point about which I am being dogmatic (though in admitting this, I am in fact being less dogmatic than the many who assume that a stage was used but do not even admit the controversial nature of their assumption). As far as I can see, no extant tragedy ‘writes in’ any need or evident use for a raised stage in front of the skene. The text isn’t everything, of course, but since use of the skene is generally obvious from a text, arguably use of a stage ought to be too. This assumes that any stage would be treated not as mere theatrical equipment but as a different ‘level’ within the fictional setting. (This does not happen in Hellenistic New Comedy, which had a stage, but there’s an evident explanation of this: New Comedy admits no traffic between stage and orchestra.) Apart from this there is simply no technical need for a stage. (See David Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens*, chapter two, for a full discussion.)

character, need not know this fact about itself. Hence it can debate the possibility of entering. (Euripides' violation of this in *Helen* should be seen as 'the exception that proves the rule'.)¹⁵

The playing space shall represent some fictional location. *Any such location must be exterior*. This might seem a simple consequence of the outdoor performance space, but in fact, it wasn't true earlier in the century; Aeschylus' *Myrmidons* and probably *The Ransoming of Hector* too appear to have been set inside Achilles' tent at Troy. I take the 'rule' to be a consequence of the introduction of the skene, which represents some immediately adjacent interior space – which is what it really is – fictionalized, for example, as palace or temple or cave or even grove of trees.¹⁶ Since the skene represents an interior, a stronger contrast is established by restricting the orchestra to exterior locations. The interior space of the skene is not 'open to view,' at least not while any action is supposedly taking place within it. However, 1) characters' voices can be heard from within, as necessary, and 2) the results of actions within can be revealed by means of a trolley (the *ekkyklema*), to be 'read' as turning the interior space 'inside out'.

The fictional location represented by the playing space is 1) *singular*, 2) *inelastic* and 3) variable only *discontinuously*. Explanations follow.

To say that the fictional location is *singular* is not to say that it must remain the same throughout (this is not a recipe for 'unity of place' in its narrow sense) but that only one location can be represented at a time, even if it's a complex one.¹⁷ In other words, *split-staging* is not allowed.

It follows from this that if actors can see each other, their characters can see each other too. (Include the chorus in this, of course). This is worth saying because it

¹⁵ When Euripides has the chorus enter the skene, it is surely intended to draw attention to an underlying, social inequality. The chorus, comprising Helen's lower-ranking but fellow captives, enters the skene as a gesture of solidarity with Helen. This is reciprocated only by Helen's hollow promise to them when she escapes at the end. Servants often identify verbally with their masters, but true solidarity, which involves action, implies a kind of assumed equality – but, in the end, this turns out to be 'equality' on one side only.

The best known example of the chorus debating the possibility of entering the skene, then failing to do so, is in *Agamemnon*. Euripides does something similar in *Hyppolytus* (782ff), possibly parodying Aeschylus.

¹⁶ It becomes such a grove in the second part of *Ajax*.

¹⁷ Some fictional locations seem to be composite, as the Thebes of Aeschylus' *Seven* and the Athens of his *Eumenides*. But in these cases different locations have been fused together *as if they were one*. There is no question of actors moving in a theatrically significant way from one location to another while in full view of the audience.

is not true of various other theatrical traditions, such as classical Sanskrit¹⁸, Japanese Noh, and medieval Christian. Thus the playing space of Attic Tragedy is *open, shared and revealing*.

The fictional location is *inelastic* in the sense that it is understood as having *roughly* the same dimensions (size) as the playing space which represents it. It is not possible in this playing space, then, to make a 20-metre distance seem one hundred metres or two metres. This is relevant in relation to the following.

Scene changes are possible.¹⁹ That is, the fictional location represented by the playing space can be varied. However, doing so (usually) requires the *exit of all characters (including the chorus)*. This implies that the playing space, as signifier, can only change its signified if it is first ‘de-signified’ – i.e. *left empty* such that it signifies *nothing in itself*. This is what is meant by the *discontinuous* variation of the fictional location. To vary location *continuously*, as in certain other traditions, characters stay on and commonly make an onstage ‘journey’ – usually by circumambulation – from the old location to the new one.²⁰

Choephoris is sufficiently an exception to (part of) the above to warrant some discussion here. This may be a digression from my main purpose, but on the other hand it reflects what is probably the most important rule of all, that ‘all rules have exceptions’. It is also worth keeping in mind that throughout the century tragedians have been *inventing* the genre. Aeschylus in particular was a great experimenter and there is no need for you to feel that you are more constrained than he was. On the other hand, you must work within the tradition as it has come down to you (think of it as something like being born into a family). Your own experiments, that is, should not seem like you are ‘starting all over again’.

The first part of *Choephoris* is set at Agamemnon’s tomb, then the action shifts (between lines 585 and 650) to outside the palace. These locations are assumed to be distinct. However, the shift takes place during a *stasimon*, so the chorus does not exit although Electra, Orestes and Pylades do, with Orestes and Pylades then reentering in the new location. How to explain this? Notice that this *stasimon* is the *first* point in

¹⁸ The Sanskrit *Natya Sastra*, or Drama Manual, a major source book of early Indian staging practices, explicitly discusses the division of the playing area into discrete zones or *kaksya* (14, 3-15).

¹⁹ If we had Aeschylus’ *Women of Aetna*, we might know much more about this. A fragmentary hypothesis suggests that five scene changes occurred in this play, involving four different locations!

²⁰ One can circle the whole stage ending in the ‘zone’ one started from, which is now a different location. This is a little different from onstage journeys from one zone to another. The former is common in Noh, the latter in medieval Christian, while both are used in Sanskrit drama.

the play where the chorus assumes its more formal role (partially) ‘outside’ the dramatic action. In both its *parodos* and the *kommos* it is in full ‘mourning mode’ and fully involved in the action.²¹ Aeschylus exploits the especially strong dramatic involvement of this chorus so that, in relaxing it only at a relatively late stage – almost to the point at which the play ‘starts again’ – a jump of place becomes as plausible as a jump in time. This effect is aided by a clear change of focus within the playing space, from the tomb, presumably placed at the centre of the circle, to the palace (skene) doors.²² Still, since the chorus remains on and has a dance-song, is it plausible that some sense of a ‘journey’ would have been choreographed? This seems to me unlikely.²³ In the first place, the characters could then have made the same ‘journey,’ without needing to go off. That, however, is a mere question of ‘realism’. In the second place, nothing in the ode refers to or suggests a journey. But most importantly, and simply, the transformation of the *style* of the play at this point makes it unnecessary.

Note then that onstage journeys as a way changing scene would violate the inelasticity of the playing space. The change of focus in *Choephoroi* does not do so.

What is most interesting about this ‘scene-change rule’ is that it does not apply to Old Comedy. In *Frogs*, Dionysus and Xanthias make an onstage journey which leaves the skene behind as the Temple of Heracles, arriving at it again as the palace of Plutos. Hence, clearly, such a way of changing scene had occurred to the Greeks. Moreover, it is well suited to a circular playing space. It is the more significant, then, that it is ruled out in the case of tragedy.

Whatever fictional locality the playing space represents, the presence of the chorus makes it a *public space*. Its fictionality, thus, is metonymically ‘continuous’

²¹ A *parodos* is the chorus’s entry song. A *kommos* is a sung lament.

²² In original production, would whatever represented the tomb be left on? If not, how would the set have been changed? Surely not by the chorus itself (even as it danced) – though this might well be the preferred option of a modern staging, thus lending the chorus a kind of ‘story-teller’ (facilitator) role. But while the modern sense of these things might be ‘disturbed’ by seeing the tomb left on, like an ‘oversight’ or an unsolved technical problem, some other cultures have no such difficulty. In the Noh play *The Sumida River*, a tomb is placed onstage from the start but it ‘exists’ on the other side of the river, to which a crossing is made (mimed) during the play. There is a technical reason for this: the tomb contains the spirit of the dead boy, who will appear, so it cannot be brought on in the usual way by the Stage Assistant. Even so, this is turned to a kind of symbolic advantage and I suspect the same sort of approach, or sense of the issues, would have been the case in Aeschylus’ day.

²³ I guess there would have been some repositioning of the chorus by the end of the ode, given the change of focus of the action, but nothing that would have been ‘readable’ as a journey.

with its reality as a theatre space, since the latter is paradigmatic as public space, a place where citizens assemble in common cause.

In the episodes, even if you don't give the chorus any lines, its presence will still transform the action taking place between the characters, firstly (simply), by making that action take place in public, and secondly (more complexly), by shaping that action as being somehow also *for an audience*. Key examples of a writer making good use of the latter: Klytemaistra's speech of welcome to her husband in *Agamemnon* (it humiliates Agamemnon that a woman should make a public speech of welcome to him, especially one in which she airs her most 'feminine' feelings, and this already constitutes an act of revenge upon him) and Oedipus' refusal to give up his enquiries when Jokasta, having realized the truth, begs him to do so in *Oedipus* (for it is telling that Oedipus wants to pursue the (private issue of the) secret of his birth, which he now knows he is on the point of discovering, in front of the chorus – as though he cannot stop 'acting the king').

There follows the 'rule of rules': *speech rules in public*. If you intend to write a Greek tragedy, you must understand the full force of this.

Note firstly that speech *is* action, or reaction, as I said before. We must distinguish therefore between *speech-acts* and *arm-acts*. This distinction is much more appropriate in relation to Attic tragedy than the more common but simplistic distinction between speech and action.

The big arm-acts (murders, rapes, suicides...) must not take place (that is, they must not be enacted) in the playing space. They can be threatened, to the point of *almost* taking place,²⁴ or smaller arm-acts may be enacted.²⁵ Moreover, the

²⁴ There are many examples of characters simply threatening violence. More interestingly, with Ajax' suicide, Sophocles seems to want to steer the action as close to a breaking of the rule as possible (deceiving some readers that it is broken. Evadne's suicide in Euripides' *Suppliant Women* is also interesting. Clearly she throws herself off the skene, behind it, moving thus from 'on' to 'off' in the moment of her 'big arm-act'. A problematic case is Sophocles' (fragmentary) *Niobe*. Lloyd-Jones claims that "Fragment 441a shows that at least some of the girls were killed on stage, apparently by Artemis shooting from the roof." (Sophocles III, Loeb Classical Library, 1996, 228-9) But what the fragment says – "Do you see that frightened one inside, the one who is cowering alone, trying to hide, in the tun-store and by the bins? Will you not aim a swift arrow at her, before she can hide out of sight?" (231) – indicates the girl is inside. Moreover, the Hypothesis says that Artemis "shot the girls in the palace" (231). However, one of the daughters says, "I beg you, queen... do not shoot an arrow and kill me" (233). This may be a voice from within the skene, or the girl may be running across the playing space to 'safety,' or she may even be spared, for one of the daughters is not killed in some versions of the story. If this killing did take place on stage, however, how would it have been represented? The shooting of and slaying *by an arrow* would have to be represented symbolically in some way – an interesting speculation.

consequences of big arm-acts can be shown (bodies, even in bits). Later scholars will attempt to explain this rule in three broad ways: religious (the playing space is sacred and must not be contaminated); aesthetic (violence is such bad taste); and practical (in the first place, heavy violence is relatively difficult to stage persuasively;²⁶ in the second place, it's a waste of precious actors to leave them lying around as corpses). There is some truth in each of these, but for you as a writer it is better to try to think of the matter differently, more in terms of the *sense of space* that is involved in Greek tragedy. This refers, not just to the use of the real playing space, but to the relation between that and the fictional space(s).

A major consequence of the rule is what I'll call a 'complexification' of fictional space, in the sense that a complex of spaces is created, each being imaginary but in a different way. Note first that the big arm-acts can be imagined as taking place in either one of two different types of non-playing fictional space. One is inside the skene. Let's call this the *dark inside*. The other is a space imagined as beyond the circular arena of the playing space. Since the playing space, or rather its represented location, is itself an outside, I'll dub this the *outside of the outside*.

In fact, the 'outside of the outside' is often two different locations, each accessed by a different entrance or *parados*. Typically, these spaces are opposed; for example, one leads into the city, the other – sometimes exerting a more powerful 'pull' – into the wilderness. Concerning the 'outside of the outside,' moreover, another important distinction has to be made between the *immediate-off* and the *far-off*. The former is an imagined space just outside the playing area and connected to it by being visible to characters who are on and/or audible both to those characters and to the audience. The latter, of course, is too far away to be visible or audible like this. Now, a feature of Attic Tragedy is that it tends to make greater use of the far-off than of the (outside) immediate-off. (In Sanskrit drama and Noh, the opposite is true.) One reason for this is the skene, which takes over much of the dramatic potential of the immediate-off (especially as it plunges this particular immediate-off into darkness and renders it *unknown*). But a strong sense of *disconnection* is also at work here. To try to understand it, let's think for a moment about how tragedy began, with only one actor.

²⁵ For example, Ioalus, in *The Children of Heracles*, is knocked down and at least one of Aeschylus' suppliant maidens may be dragged by the hair (at least, the Egyptian Herald's threat to do so lasts a long time and would be most effective if put into practice immediately before the King's re-entry).

²⁶ Tell that to Kyd, Marlowe, Shakespeare and Webster!

Actually (and jumping fully back for a moment to the twenty-first century), I have to admit that we know almost nothing about early one-actor tragedy. But it is interesting here to consider George Thomson's 'reconstruction' of it:

In the light of these considerations it is not difficult to envisage the outline of a pre-Aeschylean tragedy. The chorus entered with a song or recitative, and after taking up their positions around the altar they sang a *stasimon*. Then the hero appeared, explained his identity and expounded the situation in a dialogue with the chorus. Then he disappeared, and after another *stasimon* from the chorus, a messenger entered to announce the hero's death. There followed a lament, the messenger retired, and the chorus left the orchestra in the same manner as they had entered.²⁷

I can see no obvious reason to reject this speculation other than the fact that that is what it is, speculation. It builds in certain assumptions about Greek tragedy that are worth drawing out. In the first place we should note that there is an alternative to having the one actor return as a messenger with news of his death; that is for the hero himself to return, mortally wounded, to die onstage. Why not? There may have been some kind of taboo against representation of onstage death, though by the time of Euripides it must have been relaxed.²⁸ But it is more interesting to assume that no such taboo existed. Then there must have been some other reason for preferring the 'messenger solution'.

Let's assume for definiteness that the hero dies in battle. Note then that this battle takes place (fictionally) a long way away, in what I've called the *far-off*. Given our knowledge of the way Greek tragedy developed, that is, our knowledge of later works, we can reasonably assume that the battle would not have been narrated *as it happened* by the chorus, that is, as if it were happening just offstage, visible to the chorus, in what I've called the *immediate-off* – a device that is relatively common (and theatrically very effective) in early Sanskrit theatre, for example in Bhasa's *The*

²⁷ *Aeschylus and Athens*, p. 179

²⁸ Two of Euripides' characters expire onstage, Hippolytos and Alkestis.

Broken Thigh where the hero, Duryodhana, is mortally wounded just offstage and then crawls onstage to die there.

Therefore the Greek battle/death has to be narrated *in the past tense* and as having happened in a (*disconnected*) *elsewhere*.²⁹

One important reason for rejecting the ‘live commentary’ approach is the assumption of a *common ground* between the chorus and the audience in the theatre. The sense of this is literal: where the chorus can see beyond the orchestral circle, there the audience can see too. Hence, for the chorus to narrate a battle apparently being witnessed taking place in the immediate-off would require the audience to imagine it happening in a space that was visible to them as well (as was not the case in Sanskrit *indoor* theatres), though the battle itself would be invisible. The problem with this is not so much the violation of ‘realism’ but precisely the way it would create a rift between chorus and audience.

The chorus represents the audience by proxy. Its absorption into the fictional world of the play must not transgress this relation.

None of this means that you shouldn’t make imaginative use of the immediate off that’s just outside the orchestra. But think of it as an extension of the ‘world of the play’ rather than a site of story-events. At the start of his *Phoenician Women*, for example, Euripides has Antigone and her Tutor looking from the roof of the skene at the Argive forces ranged against Thebes. This is a particularly telling case, because when it comes to the battle itself this ‘visual accessibility’ is ‘forgotten’ and the battle takes place in some imagined far-off, as usual.

The sense established of a *significant far-off* is linked to the *non-return* of the hero – although the hero’s *body* can be brought back (and often is). Put differently, the far-off becomes significant through that non-return, and the messenger, who does return, not only tells of the hero’s death but returns *in his place*, in a way that *erases* him.

²⁹ The sense of ‘disconnected-ness’ here can be better understood by comparing it with another typical Sanskrit treatment of the messenger’s report which would not be acceptable in Greek tragedy. In Bhasa’s *The Minister’s Vows*, Act 1, Hamsaka’s long report of the army’s defeat (delivered seated) is continually interrupted by Yaugandharayana, who seems to be ‘living’ the story. The high point of this is when he cries out: “To victory! Alack, in my zeal I was forgetting your previous story.” It is notable that in Greek tragedy, after some initial dialogue, the messenger speaks at length and *uninterrupted*, such that the *speech* ‘takes over’ and the stage-situation is ‘backgrounded’. Bhasa’s technique is the opposite; it displaces, even subverts, (the audience’s) imaginative reconstruction of the narrated scene by drawing attention to an ‘over-imagined’ *living* of the scene by a character onstage.

To try to get at the full sense of this, you must put aside a modern way of thinking. Drama is not really about characters. Don't even think (primarily) of the exits and entrances of your characters, through the skene doors or the two *parodoi*, and of their resulting confrontations. *Think instead of the playing space you are writing for as a place where **three roads meet**.*³⁰ Schematically, these are roads from the *hearth*, the *city* and the *wilderness*. Of course, you are free to define the skene and the 'outside of the outside' in many other ways – but the basic schema will help you understand this: a road is a force, it exerts a kind of 'pull'. The 'destinies' (for want of a better word) of your characters are not internally given; *they are decided elsewhere*. *Everything* about Greek tragedy reflects this. *And the disconnection of this 'elsewhere' is at the heart of tragedy.*

[There's another side to this coin, though. You can explore it by giving your messenger a 'character' as Aeschylus does with the Herald in *Agamemnon* (ll. 503-680) and, even more strikingly (discordantly?), as Sophocles does with the Guard in *Antigone* (ll. 223-440). Such moments are like the interruptions of *another humanity*, outside but still touched by the pull of tragic forces.]

The significant far-off is far off because destiny is decided a 'long way away' from the person whose destiny it is. Of course, you don't have to agree with this (Euripides seems, at least, to be questioning it), and even if you do, you don't have to think of destiny as something decided by other agents, like gods. But you need to understand the key implication of it, that *tragedy involves a de-centering*.

For, in relation to this complex of fictional spaces, you will do well to keep asking yourself: *WHERE IS THE 'CENTRE' OF THE DRAMA I AM WRITING*

Literally, of course, the playing space, being circular, has a centre, which is its *focus*. From a performer's point of view, circles are difficult spaces. Having just one focus, they don't have much 'energy' that can be tapped into (such energy lies in the lines between different foci). The skene usefully disturbs the perfect symmetry (this is one reason it must be placed within, not outside, the circle), but it will help more to think of the hero, who – when on – naturally occupies the centre (and often the line immediately between it and the skene doors), *being pulled off-centre* by reports of events in the 'outside of the outside'. *Thus the dynamics of this space are not simply*

³⁰ Oedipus recalls killing a man 'at a place where three roads meet' – his unrecognized father, of course. The phrase is resonant in the way it hints at the strange 'meetings' in this story of three persons: father, mother and child. The roads are also destinies. Three destinies meet in one. And if there is such a thing as destiny, it is something one must one day meet up with.

those of the playing area. This is not true of most other kinds of theatre, even those where offstage events play a major part. It is intrinsically more difficult to achieve such an effect in an indoor theatre. Moreover, up to some point the playing space is itself *marginalized* in relation to the ‘dark inside’ and the ‘outside of the outside,’ that is, in relation to *where ‘the action’ is.* The playing space – both in reality and within the fiction – is public, but the ‘dark inside’ (often a female space) and the ‘outside of the outside’ (especially as it tends to the wilderness, the beyond-the-polis, *the mountain*) are not public. Thus *the public space is decentred* by a ‘crazy’ rule that says: the *intrinsically visual* (that is, big arm-acts) *must not be seen!* Hence we have a ‘drama of reaction,’ as is often said, but this is a relatively weak formulation. Note that in democracy, as practiced through much of the fifth century in Athens, speech precedes action (this is Pericles’ key point in the famous funeral oration in Thucydides), but in tragedy speech *both* precedes and follows action.³¹ Theatre is *an art of the present* (it presents – makes present – as it re-presents); but the playing space of Attic tragedy is a *before* and an *after.*

We can sum much of the above up as a kind of ‘paradox’: **in Greek tragedy, the chorus and the messenger are theatrically *central* but dramatically *marginal.*** This does not imply that every tragedy must have a messenger scene. But it is interesting, and may even be useful, to think of tragedy as arising in a synthesis of the Dithyramb (the prior territory of the chorus) and the Epic (the poet-rhapsodist turning into the messenger). For tragedy involves a complex interaction between the HERE-AND-NOW (the domain of the chorus) and the THERE-AND-THEN (the domain of the messenger).

In relation to all this, it’s important that your play is for staging outdoors, for the sense of a wider world beyond the playing space should contribute something to it. Let’s call it ‘wind’. In fact, during this period, the late fifth century BCE, a significant change has begun to take place: a minimal sense of the ‘inner person’ has just about started to emerge. But tragedy has deep roots in the older view in which the person is traversed by forces originating outside him or herself. Commenting on medical treatises, Shigehisa Kuriyama writes “[W]hereas in Hippocratic works like *Airs,*

³¹ I’m aware that I’ve reverted to the ‘simplistic distinction,’ which sometimes has its uses.

Water, Places, Sacred Disease, and Epidemics 1 and 3 *pneumata* were [literally] winds that provided, as it were, a *context* of human being, writers from Aristotle through Galen elaborated *pneuma* as inner *content*.³² This context/content distinction is very suggestive. I would relate it to the difference between an outdoor and an indoor theatre; in the latter there is a strong (one might say ‘absolute’) distinction and separation between inside and outside, which the former can never achieve. This reflects (or can reflect, in certain philosophical circumstances) a sense of the strict distinction between the inner ‘self’ and the outer ‘world’. Hence one way of conceiving drama is precisely in terms of the *inner life* being revealed through the *outer life* (in the genre-defining absence of a narrator); this view presupposes that we aren’t interested in action in itself, but in what lies behind it (the complex of motivation) – the ‘within’ (our human content). *But this doesn’t hold for Greek tragedy, where there is no ‘inner life’ in this sense.*

A future play-goer at Epidaurus in the twenty-first century will get the wrong impression about this, since the play will begin at nightfall and be illuminated by electrical stage lighting. But for the Ancient Greeks the sun plays an important role in the very conception of what theatre is; true, March in Athens is often cloudy (and cool), but your play is for staging outside in daylight. Now, just as the fictional location represented by the orchestra should be outside, so too the represented action should take place during the day.³³ It’s a common trick to start the action just before dawn in order to emphasize this.³⁴

But why? Firstly, not exactly because a daylight setting is more ‘realistic’ in a daylight performance, but because a setting in darkness, for a play performed in daylight, requires acting that draws some attention to itself.³⁵ We’ll see shortly why this is to be avoided. Secondly, more importantly, in this kind of play *coming out* has more significance than *coming to pass*.

³² Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York: Zone Books, 1999) p. 261.

³³ Among the extant tragedies, one is a strong exception to this ‘rule’ – *Rhesos* – but the exceptional setting of the action at night might be taken as a ground for the speculation of later, fourth century composition. Sophocles’ (fragmentary) *Dineros* may also be an exception, but a) it may be a Satyr play, and b) the action outside Agamemnon’s tent would almost certainly not have emphasized or made use of darkness as happens in *Rhesos*.

³⁴ As in *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi*, *Antigone* and *Ajax*, among others.

³⁵ Not necessarily to the degree of Commedia-style ‘*lazzi* of darkness,’ of course – but more or less as it does in *Rhesos*.

That which ‘comes to pass’ happens – an event. That which ‘comes out’ is revealed, uncovered, seen, *brought to light* – a truth *that already was*.

The sun underpins this, for it does more than illuminate. The sun *sees*. Moreover, this is *theatre*, from *θέα* – not just ‘something (to be) seen,’ but also ‘a looking at’.

The light also *exposes*. It brings to light.

This conception is very Greek. In contrast, in Japanese Noh theatre, more specifically in phantasmal Noh, the typical pattern is the opposite. The action begins during the day and ends during the night when the full truth is revealed, that is, when a spirit is able to appear in its true form. This truth is not something the sun can expose. It is not a truth *of this (phenomenal) world*. On the contrary, it requires this world to ‘fade out’.

To understand more of this, we have to turn to something very basic. Any live dramatic performance is a kind of ‘mix’ of two things, signifier and signified, the ‘here and now’ of the performance itself and the enacted or represented world. The ‘here and now’ can be more or less foregrounded or more or less effaced. Old Comedy foregrounds it. Tragedy not only effaces it, but constructs the enacted/represented world as a ‘*somewhere else*’.

(True, the tragic chorus always invokes the here-and-now, as I’ve stressed several times – or, in a better formulation, it *roots* the performance in that here-and-now; but the other side of this coin is its relative marginalization in the ‘somewhere else’ of the tragedy.)

There is a fundamental concern and engagement with *otherness* in this – fundamentally the otherness of myth, which is also a ‘time before’. Moreover, the plays tend not to be set in Athens, but in Thebes, Argos, the environs of Troy.... The *female* (characters or chorus) too is *other*. Choruses are often foreign, socially marginal, displaced.³⁶

Tragedy works to efface the ‘here and now’ of performance in order to realise the ‘somewhere else’ as *also here*.

This is the underlying reason why actors cannot change characters in view, why scenes cannot be changed by circumambulation, why actors are not asked to enact the

³⁶ *Suppliants, Bacchae, Phoenician Women,etc*

‘at night’ by failing to see what is evidently in front of them... and so on. These things would draw attention to the ‘here and now’ of performance itself, undermining the way the ‘somewhere else’ is ‘also here’.³⁷

However, this *realization* (the making ‘also here’) of the ‘somewhere else’ is *necessarily incomplete*. This is why the *offstage* (especially the ‘far off’) matters, not just as the site of the big arm-acts; it indexes the extent to which the ‘essential project’ of this theatre is an impossible one.

The ‘somewhere else’ can never be *wholly* ‘also here’.

But (in what is like a key to its nature) this impossibility is something that tragedy can turn to its advantage! The *kommos* in *Choephoroi* is the perfect instance of this. The invocation of the dead Agamemnon conjures his ‘presence’ even in his absence – an effect, we might add, that is conditional on the fact that *no ghost appears*.³⁸

It is in/through this feature of the genre that your work can overlap with ritual.
(Ritual exists to access some kind of ‘other’ world.)

Returning to more practical (‘hands-on’) questions, can your characters address the audience directly? *Yes*, provided this doesn’t call attention to the ‘here and now’ of *theatre*, by calling attention to the audience *as an audience*. Hence two of the four basic kinds of theatrical direct (verbal) address are allowed and two are not, as follows:

³⁷ An especially interesting case here is that of ‘onstage hiding’ in order to eavesdrop. As we might expect, this is rare in Attic tragedy. In Sanskrit drama, Commedia dell’Arte and Restoration comedy, all of which draw attention to their performance conventions, it is very common. Notably, it is more common in Roman comedy than in Hellenistic New Comedy. In tragedy, as we have seen, the space is singular, open, shared and revealing. It is unthinkable that a character can mime hiding among imaginary bushes, as happens in Sanskrit drama. Nonetheless in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*, Orestes and Pylades ‘hide’ during the *parados*. They must ‘act’ this, but they can then remain unnoticed because the chorus and Electra are focused on Agamemnon’s tomb, to which they bring libations, not because they have a theatrically convincing ‘hiding place’. See also Euripides’ *Electra*, but Sophocles avoids it in his version.

³⁸ Unlike Darius in *Persians* and, of course, Clytemnestra in *Eumenides*. In the latter case, note, nobody calls up the dead woman – she ‘walks’ in the continuing excess of her passion and in her frustration that the Furies are not doing their job. I suspect an important displacement is at work here, of a metatheatrical kind. The problem (impossibility) of the actor ‘becoming’ the character has been displaced onto the problem (impossibility) of the son taking the father’s place. How on earth can Orestes achieve this when what we witness in this scene is the ongoing reality (presence) of the father in his unreality (absence)? Indeed, Agamemnon’s absence is turned by the lament itself into a kind of presence. (The metatheatrical significance arises in the fact that Orestes has been *cast in a role*, much like Hamlet.) Note that, by comparison, Ibsen’s way of ‘realising’ the dead father in *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler* involves much less of an ‘equation’ between presence and absence. Such ‘primitivism’ is hardly within the scope of naturalism.

Allowed:

1. Direct address as in a ‘Euripidean’ prologue. Nothing in the address defines the audience as an audience. The audience is a neutral addressee. (But don’t do this *after* the prologue, except in a few ‘exit lines’ you may give to the chorus as the very last lines of the play – it’s necessary, that is, to keep the main body of your play ‘sealed off’.)
2. ‘Casting’ the audience within the world of the play; e.g. Eteocles’ “Citizens of Thebes...” in *Seven Against Thebes*. (The same applies: restrict this to a prologue.)

Not allowed:

3. Addressing the audience as an audience (“Ladies and gentlemen” or something similar), even where this does *not* puncture the world of the play (i.e. where it’s as though *this* (dramatic, fictional) world, rather than the theatre, has an audience – as in Menander).
4. Addressing the audience as an audience where this does puncture the world of the play, drawing attention to the actor-audience as distinct from the character-audience relation – as in Plautus.

(And as far as 1 and 2 (the allowed) are concerned, these certainly *cannot* be effected by means of the technique called ‘spotting’ (that is, clearly addressing individual audience members) – but this is merely something you will need to make sure your actors understand.)

I turn now to what you might believe to be the most important topic of all (but in fact it’s not) – what will your tragedy be about?

There is really only one thing to say here. *Take your story from myth*. Then, if you’ve truly understood the conventions of this kind of theatre, you will choose the story wisely and you will treat it appropriately.

And as for ‘the tragic,’ think of it as the invention of German philosophers from Schiller onwards. That is, *don’t* think of it at all. For if you do, you’ll never be able to write something tragic.

[**Postscript.** I forgot to mention the ‘machine’ – the crane for ‘flying’ gods or demi-gods above the orchestra. But then, if my topic were how to write a twenty-first

century play, no doubt I'd forget things like revolving stages too, let alone holograms. You'll certainly find a fifth-century techno-geek to explain its wonders to you.

More seriously, I've strongly emphasized the *horizontal* axis of tragedy. But there is, or can be, a *vertical* axis too: characters appearing on the skene roof, the *apomechane theos* (deus ex machina), ghosts popping up from tombs.... Still, you only have to consider how significant the vertical axis is in medieval Christian drama, and how it is complemented by a contraction or narrowing of horizontal space (creating a world without distances), to realize that *tragedy* arises on the horizontal plane.]