Tragedy Lessons from Aristotle: Crash Course Theater #3

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=nGlQkaoIfBI
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/nGlQkaoIfBI

Hey there. I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today is going to be a tragedy. A Greek tragedy. Which is a lot like a regular tragedy, only older and with more stuffed grape leaves.

We'll be exploring Aristotle's theories on this art form, written more than a century after the golden age of Athenian drama. Then we'll apply them retrospectively to the only surviving tragic trilogy we have - the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. Get ready for some husband killing, some mother killing, and, maybe unsurprisingly, the invention of the jury trial!

[Opening music]

Meet Aristotle. Just Aristotle. No last name. Like Cher, but older. Also believes in life after love, though. He was born in 384 BCE and lived in Greece and Macedonia. He spent many years studying with Plato, a philosopher who wasn't a big fan of drama or poetry. Plato wrote that poets encourage a false vision of reality and should be excluded from the ideal state. Harsh, dude.

Luckily for us, his pupil Aristotle was a little more open-minded. In 335 BCE, a little while after he'd finished tutoring Alexander the Great, Aristotle sat down to write the *Poetics*, the first substantial work of literary criticism. Originally, the *Poetics* was in two parts - a section on tragedy and a section on comedy, but only the tragedy part survives.

Aristotle was writing 200 years after the City Dionysia really got going and 150 years after the beginning of the golden age of Greek drama. So the *Poetics* isn't really about analyzing contemporary work; it's about looking at the work that came before Aristotle, deciding what's great about it, and providing a handbook for future playwrights and audiences. Aristotle was basically trying to stick it to Plato by proving that poetry and theater could be useful to society.

He was a big fan of Sophocles. And the rules Aristotle set out apply most closely to Sophocles's own *Oedipus Rex*, which you might remember from *Crash Course Literature*. Club foot, murder, incest, stabbing out the eyes...it's memorable stuff.

But Aristotle's theories apply in many ways to all of the works of Greek tragedy. And often we can gain a lot of insight through how ancient plays do or do not tick the boxes that Aristotle set up. And in fact, Aristotle's theories continue to influence how we write and think about modern plays.

First off, the tragedy portion of Aristotle's *Poetics* considers several forms of poetry, including the tragedy and the epic, which is different in that it's mostly descriptive rather than imitative. It tells rather than shows, like the dithyrambs we discussed last episode.

But we're here to talk tragedy, which Aristotle defines as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."

So okay, a lot of this language is ambiguous, but there are some conclusions we can draw. We're going to go bit by bit. What does "serious" mean? Well, there probably aren't a lot of satyrs or phalluses. "Complete?" Each play in a tragedy has to stand independent from other works in its trilogy. That's lucky for us, because, as we discussed last time, invading hordes have a bad habit of burning libraries and we've lost a lot of plays.

"Of a certain magnitude?" That's trickier, but if you read Greek tragedies, you'll notice they deal with legendary heroes or royal families, characters whose lives will have a sizeable impact. Also, their difficulties are not minor. These are stories about murder, vengeance, betrayal. Again, memorable stuff.

By "language embellished," Aristotle means not only poetry but also song. "In the form of action not narrative" means showing rather than telling. And "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of those emotions?" That's catharsis, and, as we suggested last episode, it's kept scholars fearful and piteous for centuries.

We offered one explanation last time: that plays helped make people better citizens by purging them of emotions unhelpful to the city-state. You have a good cry at the theater so that you're not crying when it comes to making political decisions.

But scholars have argued that this catharsis is actually supposed to happen for the characters on stage. There's been a lot of debate about whether the goal of catharsis is an emotional purgation or an intellectual clarification. Is catharsis supposed to awaken your emotions or trigger some deeply rational thoughts? Shockingly, experts disagree.

Aristotle also said tragedy is composed of six parts: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. They're important pretty much in that order, although he does say that song matters more than spectacle. So take that, projection designers! Wait a minute, I've designed projections.

You don't want too much spectacle, he says, because that's cheap, and tragedy should be enjoyable but not, like, too enjoyable. And Aristotle argues that even though it's characters we care about, it's actually the plot - the tragic action - that's most important. You can have a character just like Oedipus, for instance, who doesn't kill his father or marry his mother, but, well, that's not really much of a tragedy.

Aristotle believes that in order for a tragedy to really work, it needs to focus on a mostly good character who, through the tragic action, is then brought low. If you have a mostly bad character brought low, big whoop, they had it coming, no tragedy. Same goes for a mostly good character who stays good - no pity, no fear, no catharsis. An unimpeachably good character brought low doesn't work either, because the tragic action has to be their fault, at least a little.

Aristotle writes that "the ideal is to have a mostly noble and illustrious character whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty." The word for frailty in Greek is *hamartia*. It's a term that comes from archery, and it means "missing the mark." Our tragic character doesn't have some horrible inborn flaw, but more like tries to do a good job and whiffs it.

Aristotle thought that a tragic plot needed to have three main elements: reversal, recognition, and a scene of suffering. The Greek word for reversal is *peripetia*. You might recognize it from the English word "peripatetic," which means "walking back and forth".

"Reversal" means just when you think something's going okay there's a change, usually signaled by the arrival of a messenger, and then everything just gets terrible again. Someone has got to start shooting those messengers. It's the only way to solve this problem.

Recognition, known as *anagnorisis*, is what happens when a character finally recognizes something. "That was my mother!" "That was my son!" "I shouldn't have eaten that second piece of cake!"

Recognition combined with a reversal is best, Aristotle says. It automatically produces pity or fear, maybe even both. Shortly after recognition comes the scene of suffering - exile, suicide, huge psychological trauma. It's fun stuff, and just the kind of thing a healthy city-state would want to sponsor for the good of its people.

To get a feel for some of these elements, let's take a good look at *The Oresteia*, the only surviving Greek tragic trilogy, which won first prize in 458 BCE. It retells a mythical story, one covered at least in part in *The Odyssey*. Its three plays are *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. We'll look at the first two in the Thought Bubble.

In the first play, the general Agamemnon returns to Argos from the Trojan War. His wife Clytemnestra only pretends to greet him happily. Why is she mad? Because he sacrificed their daughter to make some winds blow, that's why. To make matters worse, Agamemnon has also brought home his concubine, Cassandra.

Clytemnestra's lover, Aegisthus, is also ticked because (get ready) his father, once king, raped his daughter because an oracle said an incest-son would get revenge on his uncle who tricked his father into eating his now-deceased half-siblings. His sister-mom, ashamed, disowns him, so he's got to work his way from goat farmer back up to royalty, which he does but then is ousted by Menelaus, who installs Agamemnon as king.

So, long story medium-short, Clytemnestra convinces Agamemnon to walk on some tapestries, which is a sacrilegious act, a sign that he is prideful (which he sort of is), thus, by ancient tradition, justifying his murder. In some versions Aegisthus kills Agamemnon, in others it's Clytemnestra, but either way, he gets it...in the bath, no less.

In the second play, things go bad in Argos. Electra, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, is miserable. Orestes, her brother, arrives in disguise and, together, they plot to murder their mother. Which is usually frowned upon, but the chorus is all, "Right. On." So, giving into their worst impulses, they kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

Just when it seems like things might get back to normal, the Furies, aka the Erinyes, arrive. The Furies are scary snake-haired women who terrorize you when you've spilled family blood. They chase Orestes out of the palace. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

But tragedy does not stop there. In the third play, Orestes seeks shelter with the god Apollo and then heads to Athens. He appeals to the goddess Athena, and she arranges a trial for him, drafting twelve citizens for the jury. Orestes and the Furies present their cases. The jury deadlocks, and Athena acts as the tiebreaker.

The case comes down to whether it's worse to kill a mother or a husband. Apollo argues that mothers aren't really parents, they're just hosts for the father's seed. I'm sorry, what?

And then Athena is like, "Well, I was born from my father's forehead, so I can totally get behind that. Orestes, you're free. Furies, I'm rebranding you the Eumenides, the Kindly Ones, and making you patron goddesses of marriage and children. Libations all around!"

So that is how we get the jury trial... and some messed-up ideas about parentage.

As you may have noticed, each of these three plays don't tick every Aristotle box. The third play has a non-tragic ending. But we can see how the engines of Aristotelian tragedy drive these works. In each play, the action is more important than the characters, who can seem somewhat flat and unconvincing. Clytemnestra offers about six different motivations for her dastardly deeds, including that she finds murder sexually arousing, which is troubling.

But in every play, there is plenty of action. In the first two plays, we can see mostly noble characters missing the mark. Agamemnon agrees to walk on some tapestries, Orestes decides to resort to violence, there's suffering aplenty.

Taking the three plays as a whole, they show that the only thing to break the tragic cycle of blood, guilt, and vengeance is literal divine intervention. Divine intervention and jury duty, which is a pretty convincing way to remind the audience of the importance of the city's democratic institutions.

Do these plays offer catharsis? Well, that's going to depend on how we interpret catharsis. And of course, it's also going to depend on how these plays are performed. But in a strong production, I would say chances are good that you feel pity or fear or both. So enjoy your purgation, and then go vote with a clear head.

We'll see you next time for Greek comedy. Yup, all the phalluses. And on that note, curtain.

Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows, like The Art Assignment and Eons and It's Okay to Be Smart.

Crash Course Theater is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana, and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Café.

Crash Course exists thanks to the generous support of our patrons at Patreon. Patreon is a voluntary subscription service where you can support the content you love through a monthly donation and help keep Crash Course free for everyone forever.

Thanks for watching.