

1 Drama: the idea of tragedy

Read the following statement and answer the question that follows:

A plot does not possess unity, as some people suppose, merely because it is about one man.

Aristotle, *Poetics*

Explore critically the extent to which a tragedy is effective because of its focus upon what happens to a central character. In your answer you should consider the statement above and your wider reading of tragedy, as well as the two passages below:

CLYTEMNESTRA: He who was sweet to every Trojan Chryseis,
And soured my life, lies here; with him his prisoner,
His faithful soothsayer, who shared his berth, and knew
Sailors' lasciviousness; their ends both richly earned.
He – as you see him; she first, like the dying swan,
Sang her death-song, and now lies in her lover's clasp.
Brought as a variant to the pleasures of my bed,
She lends an added relish now to victory.

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1437–47

OEDIPUS: My children,
I pity you. I see – how could I fail to see
what longings bring you here? Well I know
you are sick to death, all of you,
but sick as you are, not one is sick as I.
Your pain strikes each of you alone, each
in the confines of himself, no other. But my spirit
grieves for the city, for myself and all of you.

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* 58–64

2 Gods and Heroes: the importance of epic

Read the following statement and answer the question that follows:

Ancient literature is not much interested in forgiveness.

J. Griffin, *Virgil* (1986)

Explore critically Griffin's assessment of this aspect of behaviour in ancient epic. In your answer you should consider the statement above and your wider reading, as well as the two passages below:

Achilles is speaking to Hector:

'Make me no appeals, you dog, by knees or parents. I wish I could eat you myself, that the fury in my heart would drive me to cut you in pieces and eat your flesh raw, for all that you have done to me. So no man is going to keep the dogs away from your head, not even if they bring here and weigh out ten times or twenty times your ransom, not even if Dardanian Priam offers to pay your own weight in gold. Not even so will your honoured mother lay you on the bier and mourn for you, her own child, but the dogs and birds will share you for their feast and leave nothing.'

Homer *Iliad* 22, 344–354

Aeneas is speaking to Dido:

'So the news they brought me was true, unhappy Dido? They told me you were dead and had ended your life with the sword. Alas! Alas! Was I the cause of your dying? I swear by the stars, by the gods above, by whatever there is to swear by in the depths of the earth, it was against my will, O queen, that I left your shore. It was the stern authority of the commands of the gods that drove me on, as it drives me now through the shades of this dark night in this foul and mouldering place. I could not have believed that my leaving would cause you such sorrow. Do not move away. Do not leave my sight. Who are you running from? Fate has decreed that I shall not speak to you again.' With these words Aeneas, shedding tears, tried to comfort that burning spirit, but grim-faced she kept her eyes on the ground and did not look at him....then at last she rushed away, hating him, into the shadows of the wood.

Virgil *Aeneid* 6, 453–470 & 472–3

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