

# Greek Tragedy on the American Stage until the First Half of 20<sup>th</sup>: Identities and Intersections between Greek, Italian and Jewish Community Theater

Papazafeiropoulou Olga

**Abstract**—The purpose of this paper focuses on exploring the emergence of Greek tragedy on the American stage until the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century through the intellectual processes and contributions of Greek, Italian and Jewish community theatre. Drawing on a wide range of sources, we trace Greek tragedy on the American stage, exploring the intricate processes of community's theatre identities. The announcement aims to analyze the distinct yet related efforts of first Americans to intersect with Greek tragedy, searching simultaneously for the identities of immigrants. Eventually, the ancient drama became a vehicle for major developments in American theater as individual immigrant communities began their own theatrical endeavors. From 1903 the Greek actor Dionysios Taboularis arrived in America, while in the decade 1907-1917 Nikolaos Matsoukas and Petros Kotopoulos formed their own troupes. In 1930, the actress Marika Kotopoulis also arrived for a tour. Also, members of Vrysoula's Pantopoulos formed the "Athenian Operetta", with positive influence on Greek American theatre. The Italian immigrant community was located in the "Little Italies" housing throughout the city, and soon amateur theatrical clubs evolved. The earliest was the "Circolo Filodrammatico Italo-Americano" in 1880. Fausto Malzone's artistic direction paved the way for the professional Italian immigrant theatre. Immigrant audiences heard the plays of their homeland, representing a major transition for this ethnic theatre. In 1900, the community had produced the major forces that created the professional theatre. By 1905, the Italian American theatre had become firmly rooted in its professional phase. Yiddish Theater was both an import and a home-grown phenomenon. Since 1878, works began to be presented by Boris Tomashevsky. Between 1890 and 1940, many Yiddish theater companies appeared in America presenting adaptations of classical plays. American people first encounter with ancient texts was mostly academic. The tracing of tragedy as form and concept that follow the evolutionary course of domestic social, aesthetic and political ferments according to the international trends and currents, draws conclusion about the early Greek, Italian and Jewish immigrant's theatre in relationship to the American scene until the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Presumably, community theater acquired identity by intersecting with the spiritual reception of tragedy in America.

**Keywords**—American, Community, Greek, Italian, identities, intersection, Jewish, theatre, tragedy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this research is to explore the emergence of Greek tragedy on the American stage from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the intellectual processes and contribution of the theater of the Greek, Italian and Jewish communities. Drawing on a wide range of sources, we trace

Greek tragedy on the American stage by exploring the intricate processes of community's theatre identities that cross each other. This project aims to analyze the distinct yet related efforts of early Americans to intersect with Greek tragedy, searching simultaneously the identity of Greek, Italian and Jewish immigrants and the relations fostered each other in the American continent presenting corresponding plays such as works of ancient tragedy, melodrama and Yiddish and other theatre works.

In the present paper, an attempt is made to understand and interpret the cultural processes that led the above-mentioned immigrant communities to engage in myths and tragic plays, which ultimately resulted in the formation of American tragedy. Additionally, it seeks to understand how the aforementioned immigrant communities engaged with Greek tragedy and how their theatrical endeavors reflected their own identities as immigrants in America. Initially, American interest in ancient Greek tragedy and myth was located primarily in university plays, as most American plays continued to copy British models until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most plays in America were largely produced commercially for the benefit of a diverse audience that resided across the county. For this reason, critics have claimed that American drama was born with Eugene O'Neill in the 1920s. In conclusion, Greek tragedy played a decisive role in the evolution of American theater by exploring and shaping critical tensions in cultural and political Zoe.

## II. THEATRE OF GREEK IMMIGRANTS

In 1903 the Greek actor Dionysios Taboularis arrived in America, while the immigrant stream from Greece to the America brought his artistic heritage presenting in "Hull House" of Chicago the play *Return*. The second amateur performance was given in 1904, with Sophocles' *Ajax*. In 1906 in New York, an amateur group presented the play *The Alosi of Messolonghi* and next year in Chicago an attempt was noted with *Agapitikos tis Voskopoulas (Lover of the Shepherdess)*, dramatic romance [1]. However, the oldest and most permanent theater group was the "Sophocles Drama Troupe", established in New York in 1907 by Georgios Borgis, who became a troupe leader staging in New York and the surrounding cities *Golfo*, *Esme the Turkopoula*, the patriotic play *Alexandros Ypsilantis* and many other projects [2]. In March 1909, a well-known

Papazafeiropoulou Olga is with the National Kapodistrian University of Athens, Zografou, Greece (e-mail: olga.papazaf@gmail.com).

actor, Nikolaos Lekatsas, arrived in America and undertook an extensive tour in Massachusetts, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, California and San Francisco. He presented excerpts from Shakespeare's plays for the Greek parishes and previously had a career in England and Greece [3], [4]. In the decade 1907-1917 Nikolaos Matsoukas, founded and directed the "Arbe theater", while Petros Kotopoulos formed a troupe performing the plays: *Genovefa*, *Golfo*, *Kassiani*, *Othello*. Between 1923-28, Eutybios Vonaseras performed notable works of world repertoire, such as Ibsen's *Vampires* and Suttelman's *Timi*. In 1930, one of the greatest Greek theatrical events was the arrival of Marika Kotopoulos troupe with Katina Paxinou, Alekos Minotis, Yiannis Apostolidis, Chr. Tsaganeas, Lela Patrikiou, all the best actors of Athens. The troupe played Niccodemi's *Shadow* and Hofmannsthal's *Electra* at "New Yorker" theater in Broadway. Also, members of Vrysoula Pantopoulos troupe detached from the existing groups and formed a new one, "Athenian Operetta", which had positive influence in Greek American theatre [5]. In 1939, Aliko Theodoridou, Kyveli's daughter, arrived in America, and with the help of local actors, she made her first appearance in New York with Niccodemi's *Kourelis* (*Rag*) in Greek. After she also became a permanent resident of America, with the cooperation and support of her husband, Paul Knorr, she began to occasionally form theater groups with American and Greek American actors, presenting works exclusively in the English language, addressed to the foreign-speaking American audience [6]. In the years of the Second World War, several now permanently settled Greek actors in America will form theater groups, participating uncharitably in charity performances with patriotic plays and war reviews. During the post-war period and until today, many Greek troupes will continue to visit America, apart from the "National Theatre". At the same time, the local thematic efforts will also continue to be active, organizing sporadic performances mainly in New York and Chicago [7].

### III. THEATRE OF ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS

The living conditions of the first Italian immigrants contributed to the creation of an original theatrical expression, the Italian American immigrant theater of New York. His audience was the displaced men and women of Italy who thirsted for entertainment and recognition, emotional needs that led to the creation of theaters and nightclubs [8]. The Italian immigrant community frequented the "Little Italies" building and soon amateur theater clubs appeared throughout the city. The earliest was the "Circolo Filodrammatico Italo-Americano" with the Italian play *Giovanna Marni* in 1880. Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart's librettist, presented the first operas in Italian at the "Park Theater" in Manhattan and then he created the "Teatro Italiano" (later the "National Theatre"), while he even wrote a play in Italian for his students at Columbia College [9]. Lorenzo Da Ponte promoted the Italian language in America with the "Park Theater" opera in New York in 1825-26, along with a complex network of historical actors such as political refugees as Filippo Trajetta and Piero Maroncelli who worked to revive Italian opera in America [10]. Italian opera was met with admiration as well as skepticism. Fausto

Malzone's artistic direction paved the way for professional Italian immigrant theater. Immigrant audiences heard the plays of their homeland, representing an important transition for this ethnic theater. By 1900, the community had created the major forces that created the professional theater. Antonio Maiori introduced Shakespeare to his immigrant audience in his Southern Italian dialect productions. Francesco Ricciardi dominated as "the Prince of Punchinellos" in the nightclub arena. Eduardo Migliaccio, whose stage name "Farfariello" means "Little Butterfly", created the unique art form – the macchieta coloniale, the character sketch of Italian immigrants in New York, inspired by them. Guglielmo Ricciardi created Italian Brooklyn and went on to a successful career in American theater and film [11]. Antonietta Pisanelli Alessandro, who started in New York, appeared in Chicago and then went on to create on her own, San Francisco's Italian American Theater with great success and much more. By 1905, the Italian American theater was rooted in its professional phase, having begun to produce theater in the "Apollo Hall" in San Francisco and then in a concert cafe, "Berglieri Hall", directed by Pisanelli, called "Circolo Famigliare Pisanelli". Pisanelli invited many artists there and toured with her troupe before retiring from theatrical production in 1925. The main purpose of these performances was to escape the audience from the harsh reality of their lives, to listen to well-known ballads and opera arias [12]. The Commedia dell'Arte tradition, historical dramas and melodramas, depicted the well-ordered universe they sought in their theatrical experience. Throughout the 1930s (despite the Depression) and into the early 1940s, radio gave theater an impetus, but the Italian American theater gradually began to decline [13]. Actors like Giglio, in the 40s, and Gardenia in the 50s, were two of the last to remain, while some, like Guglielmo Ricciardi long ago, managed to reach the American theatrical musical traditions and national identities to North America. However, the death of Italian Theater was largely due to Americanization/Assimilation itself, Second World War (Don't Speak the Enemy's Language), but also other intricate factors [14].

### IV. THEATRE OF JEWISH IMMIGRANTS (YIDDISH)

Like many Jewish traditions in America, Yiddish Theater was both an import and a home-grown phenomenon. What started with post-Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) art and entertainment in Europe soon evolved into a combination of escapism, self-deprecating reflection and nostalgia. Written in 1878, *The Sorceress (Di Kishefnakerin)* is one of the earliest works by Avrom Goldfaden, the father of modern Yiddish theatre [15]. It was brought to America in 1882 by Boris Thomashefsky. Based on biblical, historical, operatic and Jewish liturgical sources, Goldfaden's work was popular among the Jewish patrons and achieved great success in New York. For a decade and more, most American Yiddish actors were immigrants. By 1900, talent scouts were aggressively importing actors whose reputations had arrived at Ellis Island along with other news from home.

In 1903, Avram Goldfaden (1840-1908), "Yiddish Shakespeare", settled in New York, and opened a drama school

[16]. Since many of his dramatic works were set to music by himself, Goldfaden was also considered the founder of Yiddish opera. With nearly 400 works to his credit, his play *David at War* was the first Jewish play produced in the United States, performed in 1904 [17]. Yiddish theater in America attracted a large audience, as between 1881 and 1925 some three and a half million Jews arrived in America. They came mainly from Eastern Europe. For these immigrants the Yiddish theater was the only gathering place of the Jewish community. The "People", "Thalia", and "Windson" theaters hosted Yiddish theater performances on weekends and Jewish holidays. In 1906, Jewish actors formed their own union, "Actors Equity". The Yiddish Theater later expanded to include the "Second Avenue Theatre", the "National", the "Yiddish Art Theater" and the "Public" [18].

Odessa-born Jacob Adler (1855-1926) after many adventures and successes in London theaters, collaborated in America with writer Jacob Gordin (1853-1909) to offer a more modern spectacle to American audiences [19]. In 1901 he presented Shakespeare's usurer *Shylock* as a man "of high intelligence, proud convictions, and excellent character" who ruled "with pride rather than courage". Gordin's play *The Yiddish King Lear* was also a great success, thanks to Gordin's prolific writing, which contributed some 80 plays to the world of Yiddish theatre. As a result, Yiddish plays were presented from New York to Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland. In 1927, a total of 24 theaters presented Yiddish plays. However, with the end of the migration wave, the decline of the species began. The new generation of American Jews began to write plays about America. Samson Raphaelson (1894-1983) of Newark wrote *The Jazz Singer*, and in 1925 Al Jolson (1886-1950) played the title role in its 1927 film adaptation. In the theme of the play, the protagonist abandons his past in order to become an American jazz singer, *Jack*.

However, Clifford Odets (1906-1963) in his *Awake and Sing!* (1935) presented the story of a traditional New York Jewish family. Musicians of Jewish descent such as Irving Berlin (1888-1989), George Gershwin (1898-1937) and Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) wrote lyrics and music for many performances. During the 1890s and 1940s, many Yiddish theater companies appeared to perform in the Lower East Side, Bronx, and Brooklyn areas. In several, the subject matter of their works was contemporary, such as generational conflict, immigrants' attempts to pass on their culture to their American-born children, and their rift with them.

In general, Yiddish theater with adaptations of classics such as Shakespeare's *King Lear* or Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, preserved traditional Jewish values while maintaining a high intellectual level, making the great European dramatists known to the workers societies. Although melodrama was the preferred form of Yiddish theater, American theatergoers watched these plays with respect, and Yiddish theater bridged the gap between two different worlds [20].

#### V. DRAMA PERFORMANCE IN AMERICA

As far as the ancient Greek theater in America is concerned, initially more excerpts of plays, stage actions than actual

dramatic texts were presented. For example, the pantomime *Medea and Jason*, performed in New York in 1798, 1800, 1801 and finally in 1805, *Theseus and Ariadne*, performed at the famous "Chestnut Theater" in Philadelphia, the theatrical metropolis of America, around 1810. The plays they had little to do with ancient tragedies that betrayed more interest in the myth itself. Americans' first encounter with ancient texts was primarily academic as universities pioneered performances of ancient tragedy. Oxford's first Greek play was *Agamemnon* given in 1880, while Cambridge's inaugural Greek play, *Ajax*, came out two years later in 1882. In America, *Philoctetes* was presented in 1830 (St. Lewis), *Antigone* in 1892 (Nebraska) and a year later at Vassar college in the original Greek [21]. It was the first production ever attempted in the county and was a great triumph for Vasar [May 27, 1893]. Yet the first Greek play performed in ancient Greek appears to have been at Harvard, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, performed in May 1881, an undertaking that met with immediate success. The five performances given attracted a total of 6,000 spectators, and a professional company took the production, in translation, to New York and Boston for two additional weeks. Harvard had a long tradition in the works of ancient tragedy [Jun 22, 1912]. Harvard Professor Robert Dawning produced *The Wife of Miletus* by Timagenis at the Olympic games (1893) and then produced in Boston under the auspices of Harvard University [Dec 12, 1895]. *Agamemnon* was also performed in 1906 at Harvard. In 1912 the students of St. Patric seminar in Menlo Park presented *Oedipus Tyrannus* in the original Greek [Jun 22, 1912]. In 1886 the University of Pennsylvania presented the first Greek comedy, *The Acharnians*, while in 1889 Smith College was the first with an all-female cast, producing Sophocles' *Electra* [22]. An estimated 101 plays based on ancient Greek drama were given in 47 American institutions between 1881 and 1910, with about half of the performances in Latin. Despite the gulf that divided the classical world, ancient Greek drama provided a fertile source for the American theater with tragedians such as Katharine Tingley, Margaret Anglin, Dorothea Spinney. With the revival of the Olympic Games in the reconstructed Panathenaic Stadium in Athens, the current of turning towards Greek antiquity was strengthened. Benjamin Ide Wheeler, who was in Athens for Academic Studies, judge of the Olympic Games, raised the issue of building a theater in San Francisco, modeled after the Epidaurus theater, as president of the University of California in 1899 [23]. The theater was only built in 1903 and *The Birds* were presented by Professor Isaac Flagg [24], while in 1907 the students of the Greek Department of the University presented *Eumenides* in the original Greek [Sept 24, 1907]. In 1909 *Oedipus Tyrannus* was presented at the Greek Theater in English by the University of California [Oct 8, 1909]. Margaret Anglin presented in 1910 *Antigone* at the same theatre [Dec 3, 1909], in 1913 *Iphigenia in Tauris* with the role of *Electra* and in 1915 *Medea* [Jul 1, 1910]. Other troupes also presented their works in the Greek theater, such as *Le Noaze de Figaro*, Mozart's opera lover [Sept 7, 1913], but also Robert Mandel, America's preeminent classical tragedian, presented *King Lear* [Jul 24, 1919]. Ruth de Deny, an internationally famous dance star, presented the work *Miriam, Moses' sister*

[May 6, 1918]. Also, in 1904 *Hamlet* was played in Elizabethan style by Ben Greet and his company, while in 1906 Sarah Bernhardt played Jean Racine's *Phaedra* as a benefit for the victims of the earthquake and fire San Francisco [Oct 1, 1904]. In 1934 Max Reinhard staged the second act of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a production that was later turned into a popular film project [25]. The first act took place on the Glade School campus and then the cast, holding torches, led audience members into the "Greek Theatre", where the rest of the play was performed, lit by torches. The cast included stars like Olivia De Havilland and Mickey Rooney [26]. Dorothea Spinney also presented at the "Alcazar Theater" on the third American tour *Iphigenia in Tauris* [Nov 17, 1916] a play she had previously staged with the *Bacchus* at the "Century Club" in London [Jan 27, 1917]. As the San Francisco's newspapers reported, Murray's translation was well received, the text being perfectly acceptable and comprehensive [Jul 7, 1915]. In 1917 Dorothea Spinney presented Euripides' *Trojans Women* at the Columbia Theater [Jul 9, 1915]. Since 1915, *Trojans Women* had been presented at the "Festival Hall" (made a deep impression) by the "Chicago Little company" in a repeated performance translated by G. Murray, as an anti-war manifesto [27], [28]. The "Women's Peace Society" was responsible for sending the company to California. In 1932, at the Bennett School's "Greek Theater" in Millbrook, the *Trojans Women* were presented in a new choral approach [29], as well as *Iphigenia in Tauris* for five performances two years later [30]. The Yale's "Dramatic Society" presented *Hippolytus* at the University Theatre with the Broadway's actress Selena Royle as *Phaedra* [31].

## VI. CONNECTIONS AND INFLUENCES OF IMMIGRANT THEATER

The theatrical activity of Greek, Italian and Jewish immigrants in America was created by the overwhelming need to preserve their national identity. The actors of the performances belonged to the emigrant environment, they did not intend to crystallize, or to depict in an artistic form their love for the homeland, or much more to represent the sad reality of everyday life on the other side of the Atlantic. Immigrant theater did not yet aim to move aesthetically and indulge the audience, but to keep the ethnic roots alive [32]. This theater was completely connected to the new social reality and had as its common characteristic the nostalgic meetings of the ethnic groups. However, these individual groups of immigrants interacted and influenced each other although they appeared to act separately from each other. In their reality, immigrants had created their own parallel universes, but there were interactions and channels of communication between them.

In 1899 the first actors' union in New York to be founded was the Hebrew Actors' Union (HAU) by Jewish workers led by Joseph Barondess, a leading figure in Jewish unionism [33]. Also, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Italian American actors founded the "Italian Actors Guild of New York" [34]. Immigrant theater had begun to interact with domestic theater since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced by its intermingling with American actors. More generally, during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the area between Broadway and 7th Avenue developed

into an important gathering center for theater artists and intellectuals, where the dominant artistic genres, Vaudeville and American Burlesque, had gathered a host of would-be "stars". Somewhere on the outskirts of the area, immigrants were also moving.

In Chicago Jane Addams, an American settlement activist, believing that the community would benefit from the theater, created the amateur stage of "Hull House" in 1899 [35]. The first performances given were *Odyssey* by Greek immigrants led by Mabel Hay Barrows, but also Shakespearean excerpts from the children of others immigrant groups. In 1903, Barrows returned to the same theater to stage Sophocles' *Ajax*. Both plays were performed in Attic Greek by members of the Chicago Greek community [36]. In Chicago, immigrant's ethnic groups consisted of Jews, Germans, Italians, Irish, and of course Greeks, who resided in Greektown, a triangle formed by Harrison, Halsted, and Blue Island streets. Among other things, entertainment evenings were organized by each different immigrant group; Polish, Italian, German and Greek evenings interacted with each other. In 1907, Peresiades' dramatic romance *Golfo* was "taught" in New York at the "Lyric Hall" in English by the Greek American Dramatic Troupe. The hero of the drama, *Tasos*, was played by Patroklos Georgakopoulos, Greek American actor, who had studied acting in Los Angeles and was the leader of the 24-member group. In 1911 Georgakopoulos is seen re-presenting *Golfo* in English verse at the "Turner Hall" in Chicago while Miss Mabel Barring, German American actress, who presented the part of *Golfo* had appeared in this role over 70 times [37]. In 1909, Nikolaos Lekatsas, having a bilingual repertoire of Shakespearean monologues in his quiver, toured America experiencing remarkable success and enthusiastic reviews, arousing the interest of the academic community and the non-Greek speaking public. In 1909 Lekatsas revived a great historical figure in a performance of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Richelieu* given at the Chicago's "Auditorium Theater" by the "Young Men's Christian Association". He was ably assisted by the talented Greek actresses, the Misses Palamaris and several young people from the Community.

## VII. GREEK TRAGEDY, AMERICAN THEATER, IMMIGRANTS

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American theater was increasingly entrenched in stereotypical modes of production. A few plays and playwrights began to shape it, like Anna Cora Mowat's *Fashion* [38]. Advances began to free artists interested in performing a wider range of serious poetic drama from dependence on the theatrical syndicates that dominated the theater world of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and to invite new audiences to witness Greek tragedy: the growing success of Greek drama on university campuses from the 1880s to the 1930s and the establishment of new venues for performances that allowed for theatrical experimentation in stage design with strong ties to "Greek theatre". Outdoor performances across the country, including those in sports stadiums and in new auditoriums often built on college campuses, complemented the establishment of small, innovative regional theaters. Reinterpretations of ancient Greek drama were sometimes

distortions of the classics with questionable results from this broad cultural osmosis. However, the response to this legacy, the engagement of American culture with classical Greece, significantly shaped American drama and theater in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, emphasized ethnic, gender and class issues. Both translation productions of *Oedipus Tyrannus* and new editions have repeatedly confronted the American desire to modify tragic plots beneficial to conform more or more attractively to the nation's preference for reconstructing both itself and the lives of individuals [39]. This impulse coincided with a concern, often influenced by a long-standing national preference for melodrama, to define and expand the moral implications of the tragic act. Plays like *Oedipus Rex*, *Medea* have resonated deeply with contemporary concerns and controversies such as war, religion, identity, immigration. As drama creates the most comprehensive art of all, ethnic communities gained recognition, satisfied emotional needs, celebrated holidays and served social causes performing theatrical plays. Greeks, Italians, and Jewish immigrants were focused on their own national worlds creating their own theater in America according to national cultural origins [40]. The influences and cultural encounters of ancient drama are the target of this comparative study. The American actress and activist Eva Palmer, wife of the poet Angelos Sikelianos, also contributed significantly to the Philhellenic current, who with the Delphic holidays and the movement she organized in America made the turn to the ancient Greek spirit a global issue [41]. From the research examination of the spectrum of historical sources, the presence of Greek tragedy on the American stage is identified, through the works of the first American writers.

The comparative study of the Greek, Italian and Jewish theaters' transformations, alongside the birth of tragedy in America, leads us to the conclusion that the theater of the Hellenic Community was more influenced by the primary ancient Greek tragedy. Accordingly, the Italian immigrant theater dominated by melodrama was influenced by ancient tragedy through the Latins. The case of the Jewish community is a special cultural case as it transferred its own cultural standards to the existing theater genres. By analyzing the influences and cultural encounters between these immigrant communities through the interplay of ancient drama we could argue that the formation of American culture was deeply influenced by immigrant cultures. The findings of this research highlight the significant contribution of Greek, Italian, and Jewish community theaters to the introduction of Greek tragedy to American audiences. Examining the intersection between immigrant communities and early drama in America, and exploring cultural encounters and influences among Greek, Italian, and Jewish immigrants, our understanding of the immigrant experience and their contribution to the development of American theater is enhanced. The study reveals that Greek tragedy had a considerable impact on flourishing of American theater until the half of 20<sup>th</sup> century and facilitated the exploration of immigrant identities [42]. In addition, it divulges the ways in which these communities used Greek tragedy to

connect with their ancestral cultures while adjusting to their new American lives. Eventually, the intersecting identities of immigrant theater producers pose a challenge as the subject of a deeper study of the relationships and influences both among themselves and between American theater and ancient tragedy.

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