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Το σπίτι φτωχικό στις αμμουδιές του Ομήρου.

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www.Prometheas.org

Οδυσσέας Ελύτης

Newsletter

July 2016

Prometheas' Events

- *Youth Art Painting Contest deadlines for application and submission have been extended to September 30 and November 18 respectively.* For more info, see attached.

Other Events and Announcements

- *Through July 17: "Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World"* at the Met Museum in New York City
- *June 1 - October 10: "The Greeks/Agamemnon to Alexander the Great"* at National Geographic Museum, Washington DC. Opening night on June 2nd. (tickets: natgeo.org/thegreeks)

Websites of the month

- *Χρειαζόμαστε ένα νέο Σύνταγμα;* <http://www.kathimerini.gr/syntagma>
- *Αναθεώρηση Συντάγματος: Μια σπάνια ευκαιρία για την ελληνική ανώτατη εκπαίδευση:* http://www.huffingtonpost.gr/konstantinos-drosatos/-_6291_b_10696566.html
- *Η Ελλάδα στη Ρωσία, η Ρωσία στην Ελλάδα:* <http://www.kathimerini.gr/863572/article/epikairothta/ellada/h-ellada-sth-rwsia-h-rwsia-sthn-ellada>
- *The Local Costs of the E.U. Refugee Deal:* http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/21/opinion/the-local-costs-of-the-eu-refugee-deal.html?emc=edit_th_20160621&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=37793171&r=0
- *Παιδείας έκπτωση διακομματική:* http://www.huffingtonpost.gr/athanasios-grammenos/-_5770_b_10198018.html?ir=Greece

- **Το «άγγμα» του Οσίου Λουκά:** <http://www.kathimerini.gr/858685/article/ta3idia/sthn-ellada/to-aggigma-toy-osioy-loyka>
- **Δίον: Στη σκιά του Ολύμπου:** <http://www.kathimerini.gr/861887/article/ta3idia/sthn-ellada/dion-sth-skia-toy-olympoy>
- **Ακολουθώντας τα βήματα του Αποστόλου Παύλου σαν ένα... road movie** («Στα βήματα του Αποστόλου Παύλου»):
<http://www.kathimerini.gr/863792/article/politismos/kinhmatografos/akoloy8wntas-ta-vhmata-toy-apostoloy-payloy-san-ena-road-movie>
- **Eleni Antoniadou: A Young Greek Scientist of Global Caliber:**
<http://www.greeknewsagenda.gr/index.php/topics/business-r-d/5915-eleni-antoniadou-a-young-greek-scientist-of-global-caliber>
- **Off the beaten track: The Greek treasures of the Hermitage:** <http://hellenicnews.com/off-beaten-track-greek-treasures-hermitage/>
- **Κίνησης Πολιτών για την Έπιαναφορά τοῦ Πολυτονικοῦ Συστήματος:**
[http://infognomonpolitics.blogspot.com/2016/05/blog-post_183.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed:+InfognomonPolitics+\(InfognomonPolitics\)&m=1](http://infognomonpolitics.blogspot.com/2016/05/blog-post_183.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed:+InfognomonPolitics+(InfognomonPolitics)&m=1)
- **Μια ἄλλη εκδοχή για την Ἄλωση που προκαλεί αντιδράσεις, της Ελένης Αρβελέρ:**
<http://constantinoupoli.com/%CE%BC%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CE%AC%CE%BB%CE%BB%CE%B7-%CE%B5%CE%BA%CE%B4%CE%BF%CF%87%CE%AE-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%B1%CE%BB%CF%89%CF%83%CE%B7-%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82-%CE%B5%CE%BB%CE%AD%CE%BD%CE%B7/>
- **Η ἄλωση της Κωνσταντινούπολης, 29 Μαΐου 1453:** <https://professors-phds.com/academics/articles-of-academics-2/articles-by-our-academics-2016/leonidas-koumakis/%ce%b7-%ce%ac%ce%bb%cf%89%cf%83%ce%b7-%cf%84%ce%b7%cf%82-%ce%ba%cf%89%ce%bd%cf%83%cf%84%ce%b1%ce%bd%cf%84%ce%b9%ce%bd%ce%bf%cf%8d%cf%80%ce%bf%ce%bb%ce%b7%cf%8229-%ce%bc%ce%b1%ce%90%ce%bf%cf%85-1453/>

Books and Music

- ***"Travels with Epicurus"*** by Daniel Klein
- ***"Socrates as a teacher for adult education and lifelong learning in the Athenian Society"***
by Dr. Monica A. Papas
- ***"Greek 101/Learning an Ancient Language"***: [TheGreatCourses.com/5NYROB](https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/greek-101-learning-an-ancient-language/)
- ***"Καλλιπρόη Παρρέν - Η Ζωή και το Έργο"*** Maria Anastasopoulou Krimigis

News – Articles

How Greek Drama Saved the City

Daniel Mendelsohn

June 23, 2016 Issue of New York Book Reviews



Eolian Museum, Lipari, Italy/Erich Lessing/Art Resource

Jason meeting Medea, with Amor between them; detail of a Sicilian red-figure cup, circa 350 BCE

At the climax of Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs*, a tartly affectionate parody of Greek tragedy that premiered in 405 BCE, Dionysus, the god of wine and theater, is forced to judge a literary contest between two dead playwrights. Earlier in the play, the god had descended to the Underworld in order to retrieve his favorite tragedian, Euripides, who'd died the previous year; without him, Dionysus

grumpily asserts, the theatrical scene has grown rather dreary. But once he arrives in the land of the dead, he finds himself thrust into a violent literary quarrel. At the table of Pluto, god of the dead, the newcomer Euripides has claimed the seat of “Best Tragic Poet”—a place long held by the revered Aeschylus, author of the *Oresteia*, who’s been dead for fifty years.

A series of competitions ensues, during which excerpts of the two poets’ works are rather fancifully compared and evaluated—scenes replete with the kind of in-jokes still beloved of theater aficionados. (At one point, lines from various plays by the occasionally bombastic Aeschylus are “weighed” against verses by the occasionally glib Euripides: Aeschylus wins, because his diction is “heavier.”) None of these contests is decisive, however, and so Dionysus establishes a final criterion for the title “Best Tragic Poet”: the winner, he asserts, must be the one who offers to the city the most useful advice—the one whose work can “save the city.”

Today, the idea that a work written for the theater could “save” a nation—for this was what Aristophanes’ word *polis*, “city,” really meant; Athens, for the Athenians, was their country—seems odd, even as a joke. For us, popular theater and politics are two distinct realms. In the contemporary theatrical landscape, overtly political dramas that seize the public’s imagination (Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, say, with its thinly veiled parable about McCarthyism, or Tony Kushner’s AIDS epic *Angels in America*) tend to be the exception rather than the rule; and even the most trenchant of such works are hardly expected to have an effect on national policy or politics (let alone to “save the country”). Such expectations are dimmer still when it comes to other kinds of drama. The lessons that *A Streetcar Named Desire* has to teach about beauty and vulnerability and madness are lessons we absorb as private people, not as voters.

The circumstances in which we attend theatrical performances today underscore the segregation between our theater and what Aristophanes would call “the city.” When we see a drama or a musical comedy, we do so as private persons expressing personal preferences: we choose the play we happen to be interested in at the moment; we select the date and the time and the seats we prefer. When we enter the theater, however, the “selves” that we have expressed in making these choices disappear; we assume a kind of willed anonymity, exchanging the familiar world of lights and activity and noise for an uncanny, hushed darkness.

Private, personal, anonymous, invisible: it would be hard to think of a theatergoing experience less like the one familiar to the ordinary Athenian citizen during the 400s BCE. This—the so-called “Athenian century,” the hundred-year period of Athens’s political and cultural dominance from the establishment of its democratic government, in 509 BCE, to its humiliating defeat at the end of the three-decade-long Peloponnesian War, in 404—was also the century, not coincidentally, in which the great dramatic masterpieces of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were composed, produced, and performed for the first time.

That the fates of Athens and of tragedy were so closely entwined suggests a profound organic connection between the polity and the genre. For us, the children of Freud, great drama is often most satisfying when it enacts the therapy-like process by which the individual psyche is stripped of its pretensions or delusions to stand, finally, exposed to scrutiny—and, as often as not, to the audience’s pity or revulsion. (One thinks again of *Streetcar*.) But although there are great Greek plays that enact the same process—Sophocles’ *Oedipus* inevitably comes to mind—it would appear, given the strange

twinning of Athenian drama and Athenian political history, that for the Athenians, tragedy was just as much about “the city” as it was about the individual.

The notion of “the individual” in our sense of the word would, indeed, have been strange to an Athenian of the classical period: when the philosopher Aristotle famously says that “the human is a political animal,” he doesn’t mean that we are all like Lyndon Baines Johnson but, rather, that the human species is naturally social and civic—by nature suited to live in a *polis*. Over the course of the fifth century BCE, tragedy evolved into an ideal literary vehicle for exploring, and often questioning, the political, social, and civic values of Athens itself.

In his treatise *Poetics*, the first extended work of theater criticism in the Western tradition, Aristotle, writing in the mid-300s BCE and looking back to the great century of Athenian drama and, beyond that, to the dim origins of drama itself, suggests that tragedy grew out of a kind of ritual chorus known as dithyramb, sung in honor of the god Dionysus. (We know that in the fifth century—perhaps a century and a half after the primal moment that Aristotle was trying to reconstruct—dithyrambs were sung at public festivals by choruses of fifty singers, men or boys. These were led by an *exarchon*, a performer who “led off” the singing.) The philosopher asserts that tragedy grew out of moments of “improvisation” on the part of these chorus leaders who, evidently, decided at a certain point that instead of simply feeding the opening bars of the chorus to their fellow singers, they were going to sing a few lines of their own.

Whether this notion was based on hard evidence known to the philosopher and since lost or was simply a shrewd surmise, the theory has an obvious appeal: its basic image—of the leader who sets himself apart from the group, the individual who is willing to stand isolated from others—is, in embryo, central to most Greek tragedies. Every one of the thirty-two Athenian tragedies that have survived from antiquity enacts the process whereby a character makes a decision to stand in opposition to something—fate (expressed in oracles), family, the state; and every one of those plays consists of a series of arguments about that decision. These arguments take the form of speeches that are delivered in the presence of a chorus that never leaves the stage and that, at intervals, sings elaborate songs that comment on, or are thematically related to, the controversy at the heart of the play. What is noteworthy in all this, what contributes “the political” element (in Aristotle’s sense), is the constant presence of this chorus: the group that, like the city itself, is always watching, listening, observing.

These relatively simple formal components allowed Athenian dramas to explore with particular incisiveness the city’s great social and civic preoccupations. Many people know that Athens in the fifth century BCE was a radical democracy, in which all citizens voted directly on most matters of pressing public concern, and in whose day-to-day workings all citizens were, at least theoretically, expected to participate. (Certain offices were assigned by lot.) What is less well known is that the great aristocratic families of an earlier era in the city’s history continued to hold and to covet power, manipulating the ostensibly democratic system in order to preserve their prestige and privileges. Pericles, for instance, belonged to a family that might well be compared to the Vanderbilts or the Rockefellers of a later age.

Unsurprisingly, the tensions between glamorous, charismatic, and powerful leaders—“heroes,” in a word—and the masses, who are simultaneously susceptible to, and suspicious of, those heroes’ allure, often make themselves felt in Greek tragedy, where uneasy dynamics between the main

characters and the chorus are a central feature in many works. Whatever else Sophocles' *Oedipus* is about, the arc that it traces from the chorus's worshipful adulation of the hero at the beginning of the play to the revulsion and pity they feel for him by the play's final revelation of his true identity reminds us that our relationship to great leaders is often an ambivalent one.

The opposition between individual and group, between actor and chorus, that is one of the two essential components of tragedy's structure allows these plays to dramatize with particular elegance certain kinds of political conflicts—and, indeed, to examine certain kinds of politics. Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* begins with the Watchman hinting darkly at the smoldering resentment felt by the people toward the queen, Clytemnestra, who has seized power illicitly with her paramour, Aegisthus. By the end of the play this tension erupts into open confrontation between the queen and the chorus leader, a dire instability that is only resolved at the end of the final play of the trilogy to which *Agamemnon* belongs, when the rule of law is established at last.

The other essential structural element of tragedy—the *agones*, those stark confrontations between two individuals, each often acting as a mouthpiece for an entire worldview—allowed the genre both to articulate and to investigate other kinds of tension that surged through the Athenian polity. The best-known example occurs in Sophocles' *Antigone*, which turns on a bitter opposition between two very different notions about the individual's relation to the state. One of the two main characters, the new king Creon, insists on the authority of Thebes and on obedience to its laws, whereas the other, his niece Antigone, insists on adherence to religious custom and allegiance to family and clan. In real life, these two concerns were and are, of necessity, interdependent. The staged conflict in Sophocles' play dramatizes the difficulties of finding an equilibrium between them.

The equilibrium at issue is, occasionally, that within a single individual's mind; sometimes, a troubled character becomes a microcosm for "the city" as a whole. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the protagonist is an overly rigid young king with an obsessive interest in maintaining political control (and in what we would call psychological "boundaries"; he's very anxious about sexuality, among other things). His preoccupation with authority leads him, as it does the king in *Antigone*, to ignore social and religious obligations at terrible cost to his city. This political failing is enacted in *Bacchae*'s highly symbolic finale, a scene of astonishing violence in which the youthful ruler is literally torn to pieces: no longer in control of anything, even his own body.

Bacchae, it's worth pointing out, was produced in 405 BCE, one year after its author's death and a year before the fall of Athens itself—a polity whose inability to maintain its own balance, one might say, led to its "tragic" fall from the heights of political and cultural supremacy. And 405 was also the year that saw the first performance of *Frogs*, the comedy that expressed Aristophanes' forlorn hope that a play could save the city.

The circumstances under which the Athenian citizen attended these dramas, followed these plots, and analyzed these conflicts further emphasized the theater's public and civic concerns. All Greek tragedies were originally composed for and performed as part of a grand religious and civic ceremonial known as the City (or "Greater") Dionysia, held each spring in honor of Dionysus (a deity who, as the timing of the festival suggests, also presided over vegetative fertility and growth). The climax of this celebration, which went on for five days and featured magnificent processions and sacrifices, was the theatrical performances. Each year, three dramatists were selected to present four plays each: three tragedies (sometimes linked by plot or theme as a trilogy) plus one so-called "satyr

play,” a short comedy whose ribald humor was, presumably, meant to alleviate the intense emotionality of the serious dramas that preceded it.

These performances had virtually nothing in common with the ones we are familiar with today. Whereas our theaters plunge us into darkness as a necessary condition for the “suspension of disbelief,” Greek plays were performed in broad daylight, the performances starting at dawn and ending at sundown. This meant, among other things, that the citizens who attended the plays were not anonymous, as we are, but as plainly visible to one another as the actors and chorus on the stage were.

Those chorus members, it’s worth mentioning, were not professionals but ordinary Athenian men and boys who’d been selected to sing and dance in the performance: the spectators therefore saw themselves reflected on stage—a feature of Athenian tragedy that must have given audiences a thrilling sense of connection to the dramas that were unfolding (particularly, you can’t help feeling, those in which the choruses stood up to kings and tyrants). The audience members didn’t choose their seats, as we do, but were seated according to “tribes”: the ten subcommunities into which all Athenian citizens were divided as part of the city’s political structuring. The evidence suggests that citizens were strongly expected to attend: by Aristotle’s time, a fund had been established to help poorer Athenians pay to attend the theatrical and civic festivals.

The identity of the audience specifically as members of the *polis* was reflected in the elaborate pre-performance ceremonials. Before the performances began, the city’s ten leading generals, the *stratêgoi*, solemnly poured libations before the vast audience. (The Theater of Dionysus could hold as many as 18,000 spectators.) Following that rite, the tribute that had been amassed that year from Athens’s subject-allies was paraded around the theater precinct; then the names of citizens who had greatly benefited the city in some way were recited by heralds, each civic benefactor receiving an honorary garland or crown.

Finally, the sons of Athenian soldiers who had died in the city’s wars—boys who had since been raised at the state’s expense—were paraded before the vast audience. The official proclamation that was recited by a herald during this portion of the ceremonies underscored the elaborate connections between the city, its citizens, and the theater that lay at the heart of the entire festival:

These young men, whose fathers showed themselves brave men and died in war, have been supported by the state until they have come of age; and now clad thus in full armor by their fellow citizens, they are sent out with the prayers of the city, to go each his way; and they are invited to seats of honor in the theater.

The daylight, the fanfare, the solemn rites and loud proclamations, all cumulatively emphasizing the authority and might of the city, the dignity of its military leaders and institutions, the honors that attached to civic service and to military self-sacrifice: we are very far here from the private, anonymous way in which we today experience the theater.

To be aware of all this is, often, to be forced to rethink our customary responses to some of the most familiar Greek tragedies. *Antigone* often appears to modern audiences as a straightforward parable about the virtue of individual resistance to state oppression. In the play, the headstrong young Theban princess Antigone defies a decree issued by the city’s new ruler, her uncle Creon (to whom, as the

play opens, she pointedly refers as “the general”), which forbids anyone from burying the body of her traitorous brother, Polyneices, who has been slain while trying to invade the city. She opposes Creon’s decree in the name of family ties and of religious law, which insists that bodies must be interred with due ritual. In her defiance, we have liked to see an unambiguously heroic act of conscience—an admirable act of individual resistance to the state. Small wonder that Sophocles’ drama has been a favorite of later adapters with a pointedly political agenda: Jean Anouilh, for instance, whose *Antigone* premiered in Paris in 1944 and was clearly intended as a parable of resistance to the Nazi occupation.

But it is hard not to wonder how, precisely, the original audience would have considered the act of resistance to military and political authority that is the fulcrum of the play. There is no doubt that the spectators would have had sympathy for Antigone’s obsessive sense of obligation to bury her dead brother—proper disposal of the dead being a social and religious imperative in Greece as in all other cultures. But just how would the young woman’s frequently voiced contempt for “the general” and his decree have struck an audience that, only minutes before the actor playing Antigone uttered this speech, had witnessed a moving ceremony presided over by the city’s greatest generals and honoring its civic leaders, a rite during which they beheld the poignant sight of young men who had been raised by “the state”—the orphaned children of soldiers who, unlike Antigone, had unquestioningly followed the orders of their commanding officers, at the cost of their own lives?

So, too, with many other plays. There is a wrenching moment early in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* when the chorus recalls the long-ago crime that has led to the play’s action: Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia at the beginning of the Trojan War, a rite performed in order to win fair winds for the Greek armada as it sailed for Troy. It is in revenge for this infanticide that Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon at the climax of Aeschylus’s play. (Like Antigone, Agamemnon’s queen sees herself as the champion of family ties that have been eclipsed by those of the state.) And yet here again, an awareness of the tribal and patriotic energies that must have animated the audience members as they watched this play for the first time makes it difficult to dismiss Agamemnon’s decision (as modern audiences tend to do) as crass military opportunism or political self-interest. The Iphigenia myth symbolizes, and the play dramatizes, a far more complicated and vexed reality: that whenever a city goes to war, every family, every private household, must “sacrifice” its children.

From these few examples yet another crucial feature of Greek tragedy emerges, the nuances and ramifications of which are also best appreciated in light of the realities of Athenian culture and society. The conflict between ideologies, between competing allegiances, that animates the plays written for the Athenian stage is often dramatized as a conflict between a man and a woman: Clytemnestra versus Agamemnon, Antigone versus Creon, many more. Looking at the titanic heroines of Greek drama—not only Clytemnestra and Antigone but Sophocles’ Electra and Euripides’ Phaedra, Hecuba, and Helen—it can be easy to forget that in classical Greek society, women were meant to be largely invisible: confined, at least in theory, to the women’s quarters of their houses, compelled to wear veils in public, unable to own property, and denied any role in political life. (There is still debate about whether women even attended the tragic performances.)

We cannot know the precise extent to which these social conventions were observed in day-to-day life, but certainly the women and girls in Greek tragedy were aware of them. In a drama by Euripides called *The Children of Heracles*, a young girl who volunteers to be a human sacrifice in order to save

the city of Athens makes her entrance by apologizing for having violated feminine decorum by speaking in public.

Yet despite the limitations imposed on them in real life—or, perhaps, because of them—women as represented on the tragic stage could speak for values and concerns that were too easily trampled on by men, or had been left out of their plans. In Euripides' *Medea*, the heroine is, to be sure, outraged that her husband has abandoned her for a younger woman (this all-too-familiar story being the focus of many a modern production); but attentive readers will notice that what bothers her even more than this blow to her vanity is the fact that Jason has broken the oath he took when he married her. It is this betrayal—the betrayal of words and their connection to action—that she incredulously refers to throughout the play.

There is an irony here that, it is hard not to suspect, would have struck the original audience of the play in 431 BCE—the year in which the Peloponnesian War began—with discomfiting force. For here, it's the woman (and, indeed, a non-Greek) who champions the integrity of language, the connection between words and deeds; while her Greek husband—a legendary hero, no less—is portrayed as a glib opportunist whose mortifying sophistries about how he's leaving her and the children for their own sake convince neither the other characters nor the audience.

In the same playwright's *Trojan Women*, produced only months after Athens carried out a savage reprisal against a rebellious ally during the Peloponnesian War, the mothers, wives, and daughters of the brutally conquered Trojans of myth become, in abject defeat, triumphant symbols of civilization itself. As Cassandra, the prophetess daughter of the murdered Trojan king, Priam, reminds her captors, the Greek “winners” of the great war have in fact lost, because they have abandoned the moral, ethical, and cultural values that make humans civilized. By contrast, she observes, the defeated Trojans have maintained their values and traditions, and are thus, in some larger sense, the real victors. The fact that this moving case is made by an unmarried young woman—which is to say, a member of Athenian society who was unable to participate in the political decisions that set great wars in motion in the first place—lends a complexity, even an irony, to *Trojan Women's* pronouncements about war and civilization.

Complexity; irony. I don't mean to suggest that a lively awareness of the social and civic conditions that produced Greek drama should lead us to exchange one reductive kind of reading (Antigone is a moral heroine, Creon is a political villain) for another—in which, say, Antigone's resistance would have been frowned on. Rather, the contradictions I've mentioned should deepen and complicate our readings of Greek tragedy. The tension between the celebratory civic ceremonial that preceded the plays and the acts of defiance and opposition to authority and social norms that furnish so many of those plays' plots surely created a space for fruitful consideration of the complexities of life as a citizen. Every polity, to recur once again to the example of *Antigone*, must find a way to balance the concerns of the state with the concerns of individuals and their families: the point of Sophocles' play is not that Antigone is “right” and that Creon is “wrong,” but rather that each character has a valid point to make. The problem—and the source of dramatic excitement—is that each is unable to see any validity in the other's views.

This consideration takes us very close to what it is that makes Greek tragedy “tragic.” A play about an unambiguously heroic young woman, someone's mother or sister or daughter, squaring off against an unambiguously villainous general or king, a man greedy for military renown or for power, would

not be morally interesting. What gives *Antigone* and *Agamemnon* and other plays their special and unforgettable force is that they present the irresistible spectacle of two worldviews, each with its own force, harrowingly locked in irreducible conflict. And yet while the characters in these plays are unable to countenance, let alone accept, their opponents' viewpoints, the audience is being invited to do just that—to weigh and compare the principles the characters adhere to, to reflect on the necessity of seeing the whole and on the difficulties of keeping the parts in equilibrium. Or, at least, to appreciate the costs of sacrificing some values for others, when the occasion demands.

It is in this way—by sensitizing its audience to such bitter conundrums, to the agonizing choices that come with being both an individual and a citizen—that Athenian drama could educate those who saw it performed. This is why, at least in theory, tragedy could “save the city.” As we know, tragedy failed in the end to save Athens. But we cannot doubt that, during the great century of its efflorescence, Athenian drama provided many thousands of citizens with opportunities to reflect deeply on their lives and on the city with which those lives were so inextricably bound.

Source: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/06/23/how-greek-drama-saved-the-city/>