

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live, Opening Up Classical Studies event. This session is about the world of Greek drama. And we're going to give you a brief overview of some of the things that make Greek drama interesting and important. So we're going to introduce you to some tragedy and comedy, including the themes that these plays address, and also talk a little bit about the way in which they were staged.

We'll think about some of the kinds of stories that the Greeks tell us, which are often based on well-known mythical subjects, and explore their meaning at the critical level. And we'll talk about the concept of theatrical competition in Athens and discuss the role that it plays in religious life of the city. And then we're going to look closely at some examples of Greek drama. And you'll have an opportunity, both at home and in the studio, to vote on which one you like best.

So I'm joined by- no, you can't do that Jan- it's best performance and best piece, I think, best everything, Jan Haywood is very excited about this. And he and Christine Plastow are lecturers here at the Open University in Classical Studies, both of whom have research interests in Greek literature. Jan's focus is on historiography. Whereas Christine's is on oratory, both of which require a good knowledge of how text works and reflects a particular culture.

So let's start by talking a little bit about why Greek drama is so important, Jan.

JAN HAYWOOD: I think, there's lots of reasons, but I would say, when we're looking at the classical world- and we have a lot of evidence for Athens in particular- drama is at the core of much of the evidence that we explore, as ancient historians or working classical studies. So when we're interested in the texts themselves or the historical cultural context of those texts or we want to think about what people were doing in Athens during the 5th century, drama is a really useful way in to look at the society and see what people are doing, and think about entertainment and literature at that time.

So it's just an important body of evidence. It's very rich for us.

KAREN FOLEY: And these were really public events. But they were also entertaining.

JAN HAYWOOD: Well, that's right, yes. So we will say a bit more later about how these are important religious occasions. These are festivals, where people are honouring their gods. So they're very

significant on that level, but then equally, they are also places, these are contexts for entertainment. And they have competitions, like the one that we're going to have a bit later, where they're all competing to be the best, the best performer, the best poet, writing the best play.

KAREN FOLEY: And what kinds of drama are there, Christine?

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: So we have two main genres, we have comedy and tragedy. Tragedy tends to deal with these big questions. So it's things about life and death, fate, the gods, justice, these kinds of questions. And it generally explores those through mythic narratives that are told in really succinct and compact ways. So it'll be a really important moment in a mythic narrative that asks some of these questions.

With comedy, obviously, we'd expect comedy to be a bit more lighthearted and a lot of them are based more in the everyday life of Athens, I suppose, though not all of them, some of them get a bit surreal, but just because they're light-hearted, doesn't mean they don't have something to say. A lot of them are quite satirical and can tell us quite a lot about what's happening in Athens at the time that they're on stage.

KAREN FOLEY: And in terms of how we study these, can you tell us a little bit about the sources and what sort of evidence we've got? In addition to, obviously, the scripts.

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: Yeah, so obviously, as you say, the main thing we have is the plays themselves. We have quite a few plays that we think are roughly complete. And then we have fragments of other plays, where we only have parts of them that survive. But we also have visual depictions of what the staging might have looked like on things like Greek vase paintings, some sculpture pieces that seem to reflect things like the masks that we might see later.

And we also have the theatres themselves. So particularly in Athens, we have the Theatre of Dionysus, which is right there on the edge of the Acropolis, and the large Theatre at Epidaurus as well.

KAREN FOLEY: You've mentioned the various types of things. And Jan, I wonder if I could talk a little bit about you and what sparked your interest in this. There was a particular play that really got you inspired.

JAN HAYWOOD: Yeah, that's right. So actually, my own background, coming into this material, is through drama and Theatre studies. And when I was doing an A level in Drama, I studied various plays,

including Sophocles' *Antigone*. I don't know if any of you have been studying it. But that was the first time I'd encountered any Greek literature. And I was just blown away by this play.

It's a play about a woman whose two brothers have fought against one another, in trying to resolve an ongoing internal war in where she lives. Both of the brothers die. And she goes ahead and buries the body of the brother that fought against the State. So she's doing something that she's not allowed to do.

She's been told by the ruler of the State, Creon, not to do this. And she's going against that ruling. She's going to bury the brother's body.

And I was just really blown away by the powerful- the strong position she was taking. It was an edict, a law, that you cannot do this. And nonetheless, she makes this brave decision that she's going to bury the brother's body. So it's just this powerful story. But equally, over time, I was blown away by Creon, the more I thought about it- who, initially, I thought was a wicked figure in not allowing her to pay honour to her brother.

But the more I thought- he was also trying to maintain public calm and civility- stability in the State. And this woman was going against that and causing further chaos, potentially. So I just saw the richness there and that there's no easy answers with this play.

KAREN FOLEY: And I guess, at a time in your life when you're mindful that there is often no easy answer and people are doing things for very different reason, you can see why it struck a chord. But you were also interested not only in the story and the plot but, also, the way in which things were performed. The Chorus was something that we spoke about being really influential.

JAN HAYWOOD: Well, that's right, because I didn't really have any background with this literature. So this is the first time I'd seen a text where you've got a chorus who play the important role of a character. And they often come to the fore of the drama and use very, very metaphorical, rich, allegorical language to convey ideas about what's going on in the play.

And so just one that comes to mind would be a speech known as the "Ode to Man." And there, the Chorus are singing the praises of mankind, in our success with technological development. But then, at the end of that speech, the Chorus also say, maybe mankind should be aware of traditional morality and not overstep the mark. And this seems to be an implicit warning there, maybe, to the King Creon that I was talking about.

So the Chorus are a third character in their own right, in this instance. And again, that was new to me. I was quite struck by that structure of the drama.

KAREN FOLEY: And very briefly- because we're going to have a competition in just a minute- your work has developed. And so what have you been doing since then?

JAN HAYWOOD: So yeah, just recently, I've been working on a play called *Lysistrata*. I don't know if any of you have come across this play. But it's a comedy, actually, which we'll hear more about. And essentially, Athens and Sparta and the rest of the Greek world are at war at the end of the 5th century. And so they put on this play- the poet Aristophanes- in which the women of the Greek world bandie together and enact a sex strike to stop their men from going to war.

And so the whole thing is topsy turvy and fantastical. But it's all very much grounded, as Christine was saying before, in the real life of 5th century Athens. So I've been working a lot on that for our second year module, "Exploring the Classical World."

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant, well, that's wonderful. We're going to have a competition in just a minute. But you've been asking people whether they've got any plays. So if you've got a favourite play, you'd like to tell us what it is, I'm going to come to that just at the end. So we could ask you to think of something and let us know, if you're happy to share your answer.

And also, those of you watching in classrooms, at home, in your office, et cetera, if you've got a favourite, again, put that in the chat and HJ can feed us through. So Christine, you wanted to have a competition, but a mini one. Why are we going to be doing that?

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: Well, every year in Athens there was a great competition called the Great Dionysia. Now, this was a three-day religious festival that was in honour of the god Dionysus, which is where the name comes from. Dionysus was, amongst other things, the patron god of drama.

And so this three-day festival would be held in Athens. People would come from all over the city to watch these plays. And they would stage comedies and tragedies. And they would actually have voting on which was the best. And there would be prizes every year for the top play, basically. So that's what we're going to do today. But we don't have three days.

We don't have the space or the props to put on whole plays. So we're just going to read three extracts from, maybe, three of the most well-known Greek tragedies.

KAREN FOLEY: Perfect- so I have them here.

CHRISTINE Yeah.

PLASTOW:

KAREN FOLEY: I'm going to give those out. Now, you have cards in the studio to let us know which your favourite is. That's a very subjective thing. It's just your favourite. We're going to read these out. And at home, you can vote as well, using our rather more complex interactive widget, where you have a choice of three options.

So only at the end, once we've done our performances, you can vote. And then we'll see who's going to get the most popular play or extract from a play. So who's going to go first?

CHRISTINE I'll go first.

PLASTOW:

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely.

CHRISTINE I'm going to read an extract from the play *Persians*, which is a historical play about the war between Greece and Persia, I suppose. This extract is the Queen of Persia, talking about a dream that she's had.

PLASTOW:

I've been haunted by a multitude of dreams at night, since the time when my son, having dispatched his army, departed with intent to lay waste the land of the Ionians. But never yet have I beheld so distinct a vision as that of the last night. This, I will describe to you.

I dreamed that two women in beautiful clothes- one in Persian garb, the other in Dorian attire- appeared before my eyes, both far more striking in stature than the other women of our time, flawless in beauty, sisters of the same family. As for the lands in which they dwelt, to one had been assigned by lot the land of Hellas, to the other, that of the barbarians. The two, as I imagined it, seemed to provoke each other to a mutual feud.

And my son, when he had become aware of this, attempted to restrain and placate them. He yoked them both to his car and placed the collar straps upon their necks. The one bore herself proudly in these trappings and kept her mouth obedient to the rein. The others struggled and, with her hands, tore apart the harness of the car. Then free of the curb, she dragged it violently along with her and snapped the yoke in two.

My son was held to the ground. And his father, Darius, stood by his side, filled with pity. But Xerxes, when he caught sight of him, tore the garments covering his body.

KAREN FOLEY: Very good.

JAN HAYWOOD: And so I have a passage from *Oedipus the King*, which I'm sure is familiar to some of you. This is very early on in the drama. And it's the priest, imploring Oedipus.

Oedipus, ruler of my land, the city- as you yourself see- is now sorely unsettled and can no longer lift her head from beneath the angry ways of death. A plague has fallen on the fruitful blossoms of the land, the herds among the pastures, the barren pangs of women. And the flaming god, the maligned plague has swooped upon us and ravages the town. He lays waste to the house of Cadmus, but enriches Hades with groans and tears.

It is not because we rank you with the gods that I and these children are suppliants at your hearth, but because we deem you first among men in life's common fortunes and in dealings with the divinities. When you came to the city of the Cadmeans, you freed us from the tax that we rendered to the hard songstress, and that when we knew you know more than anyone else, nor had you been taught, but rather by the assistance of a god, as the story goes, you have lifted our life.

Now, Oedipus, king, glorious in our eyes, we, your suppliants beseech you to find some defence for us, whether you hear it from some divine omen or learn it from some mortal. For I see that the outcome of the councils of experienced men most often have effect. On, best of mortals, uplift our state. On, guard your fame, since now this land calls you "saviour," on account of your former zeal.

Let us not remember of your reign that we were first restored and then cast down. Lift this state, so that it falls no more. With good omen, you provided us this past happiness. Show yourself the same now to, since, if you are to rule this land just as you do now, it is better to be a lord of men than of a wasteland. Neither ward, town, nor ship is anything if it is empty of and there are no men dwell within.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent, thank you. I don't know why I volunteered to read this. Christine, could you introduce *Medea*, which I am going to read a little bit from?

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: Yeah, so *Medea* is a tragedy. Medea is a woman who was married to the hero, Jason. But when they get back to Jason's homeland, Jason decides to go and marry a different woman. And Medea ends up taking the extraordinary action, in revenge, of killing their children.

KAREN FOLEY: Harsh. Right- OK. So this is my piece from *Medea*.

My children, my children, you have a city and a home in which, leaving your poor mother behind, you will live henceforth, bereft of me. But I shall go to another land as an exile, before I have the enjoyment of you, see you happy, before I've tended to your bards and wives and marriage beds and held the wedding torches aloft. How wretched my self will has made me.

It was all in vain, I see, that I bought you up, all in vain that I laboured and was wracked with toils, enduring harsh pains in childbirth. Truly, many were the hopes that I, poor fool, once had in you that you would tend to me in my old age when I was old and, when I died, dress me for burial with your own hands, an inevitable fate for mortals. But now, this sweet imagining has perished for, bereft of you, I shall live out my life in pain and grief.

And you will no longer see your mother with loving eyes, but pass into another manner of life. O what is the meaning of your glance at me, children? Why do you smile at me with this last smile of yours? [SIGHS] Alas, what am I to do? My courage is gone, women, for ever since I saw the bright faces of my children, I cannot do it. Farewell, my foremost designs. I shall take my children out of the land, why should I wound their father with their pain and win for myself pain twice as great?

I shall not. Farewell, my designs. Oh, it's an awful predicament.

CHRISTINE Awful stuff-

PLASTOW:

[LAUGHTER]

-yeah- yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: So those are the little excerpts. And now, we would like you to vote on which one you liked the best and, also, to think about if you have another choice of your favourite play. We'd like to know what that is. And at home, you can vote, using the widget. Just press on the button that you liked most. And let's see what everyone had to say. So which one did you like?

Oh, *Oedipus*, right, I haven't- oh-

CHRISTINE Oh, I think, [INAUDIBLE]-

PLASTOW:

KAREN FOLEY: -*Oedipus* and *Medea*. Six for *Oedipus*, five *Medeas*, very close.

CHRISTINE The poor queen and the Persian's.

PLASTOW:

[LAUGHTER]

It wasn't powerful enough, obviously. What have people said at home?

HJ: At home, it's a clear winner. We all agree that *Medea* is our favourite. But we have got some other ones we've been discussing as well. So I do have to apologise if I pronounce this incorrectly. But *Bacchae* is one of the favourites in the chat as well. It's Kim Mason's favourite. And Emma Bridges said that one of the first things she loved about the ancient world was Athenian comedy. So for now, she's going with Aristophanes' *Frogs*. But depending on the day of the week, it does differ, her favourite one.

And Emmy Davis, Rebecca Shooter, and Valerie Hope all agree that *Medea* is the best. And some people who are studying A229, as well, brought up that the *Persian's* also shown in that one. And they've been enjoying that one.

CHRISTINE So some people do like the Persian's then, at least.

PLASTOW:

[LAUGHTER]

Just no one in this- well, you see, my poor performance is probably the problem.

KAREN FOLEY: And have any of you guys got a favourite play?

AUDIENCE: *Medea* is my favourite-

KAREN FOLEY: Is it?

AUDIENCE: -definitely. But I think it only really works if you know it in the context of the other plays that are performed. And so the techniques that are used to show her lack of punishment at the end is, I think, really shocking for a modern audience and would've been, perhaps, even more shocking for an ancient audience. And so knowing it in its context with the other plays that are there, I think, makes it particularly powerful, along with its really strong feminist speech within it, which has become quite famous.

And preferring to stand in the battle line a number of times, rather than to give birth, I think, is really quite a powerful image as well.

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: Yeah, the end of *The Medea* is fantastic, because, for those who don't know, Medea, unfortunately- spoiler alert- does end up killing her children. But then she gets to ride away in a chariot drawn by, maybe, dragons at the end. So yeah, she kind of gets away with it, which is a bit weird, isn't it?

KAREN FOLEY: A must-read on everyone's list now, if you haven't read it already.

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: Yeah.

CHRISTINE PLASTOW:

KAREN FOLEY: And anybody else, would you like to share something that you've enjoyed learning about? Someone's got to speak. Put your hand up. And we'll come back. And it'd be great to know what you've liked best. You don't need to give us full an answer. But it would be lovely to see what you think as well.

It's all very nerve-racking, being in our live studio audience. So let's bring in some comedy. Christine, we've talked a bit about the tragedy. But we've mentioned before that comedy also has a real relevance and isn't just for a laugh. So can you tell us a little bit more about some of the comedies?

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: Yeah, well, we actually have two subgenres of comedy in Athenian comedy, which we usually call Old Comedy and New Comedy. And we have one author whose work survives for each. So when I say what these are like, this is really based on one author. They might have been a bit more varied in practice.

Now, Old Comedy- we heard Jan talking about *Lysistrata* earlier. That's an example of the work of Aristophanes, who's an old comic poet. Now, these plays tend to be highly satirical, often kind of bawdy. They might have slapstick elements. But there's always some kind of political message to them. So *Lysistrata* is one, this idea of the sex strike to try and stop the war. There's clearly a political message there, but something absurd as well.

New Comedy, on the other hand, we have the poet Menander, his work. And these are more what we might compare to a modern sitcom or rom com. These tend to have stock characters- grumpy old man, beautiful young woman- these kinds of characters. And they're always

getting into these scrapes and situations- often, a love plots and things like this. So I don't know. People might have a favourite one or the other, Old Comedy, New Comedy.

KAREN FOLEY: Let's see what you think, here in the studio. So do you prefer Old Comedy to New Comedy? So a thumbs up or down, Old Comedy's thumbs up. Let's see what people say. Ah! Excellent, so-

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

[LAUGHTER]

JAN HAYWOOD: New Comedy, New Comedy.

KAREN FOLEY: Just to be different, what do you prefer?

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: I definitely prefer Old Comedy. Menander is great. But Aristophanes is really where it's at for me. I think that there's just something fantastic about his plays. Sometimes, you need to know quite a lot about Athenian culture to really get everything out of them. But there's something in them for everybody.

So for example, one of the ones I really like is called *The Birds*. And this is actually a really surreal story, in a lot of ways. It's about these two Athenian guys who get sick of life in Athens. They go in search of this mythical king, who got transformed into a bird. And they get together with all of the birds and decide to go up into the clouds and build a new bird city and decide to live there instead of in Athens.

It's actually called, Cloud Cuckoo Land. That's where we get that term from. And I'm sure many of us have, at some point, thought yeah, it would be quite nice to just go and live in a bird city, instead of in the real world.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, often. Now, we started talking a little bit about how we know stuff- some of the sources. And I wonder if we can think about how these plays were presented and how we know a bit about the actors and what they did. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: Yeah, so most famously, the majority of these plays, when they were on, they only had three actors on stage at any one time. And the actors would play different roles throughout the play. So you'd only ever get three characters on the stage at one time. And they were also wearing

these masks, weren't they?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, we've got a couple of examples to look at.

CHRISTINE Yeah.

PLASTOW:

KAREN FOLEY: We've got two masks. And we'll see them on the screen in just a second. And the actors would have worn masks like this, wouldn't they?

JAN HAYWOOD: That's right, yeah. So masks, you can imagine, when you've got a mask made of gypsum and linen, this would have been made in a mould, that you're wearing, that has a real impact on your performance. So the performances would have probably been not to modern tastes. They may have been very performative, very gestural, in order to get to an audience at the back and make an impact.

But those masks, they're something that's being used from the 6th century. So we know they're being used from quite early on. And they certainly have an important religious function, like what I was talking about earlier on. Those masks have associations with the god Dionysus, which the whole festival is for. And we even have evidence, on vase paintings, that seems to be showing that those masks are then being returned to the temple of the god, after the performance, that people go and see the various plays. They've been donated as votive offerings to the god Dionysus.

KAREN FOLEY: And the other thing that's important to recognise is that there was a rotation of characters, wasn't there as well? A rotation of actors?

CHRISTINE Yes, yes. So you get the same actor playing multiple characters within one play, which can be quite interesting actually. Because you might get the same actor playing two characters who are completely opposed to each other. Sometimes, we think there might have been some quite interesting multi-rolling going on, where you would play one person and then you would go off and come back on as that person's mortal enemy, or something like this.

And you get to see how, actually, there are connections between these characters that you might not have made otherwise.

KAREN FOLEY: Mmm and Jan, we've got the masks now that we can show people at home. So would you like to talk about the first one very briefly?

JAN HAYWOOD: So these are slightly later versions, as we can see. So this is an example of a Hellenistic period. So we've been focused on the 5th century. But now, we're going forward in time. And what we're looking at here are some terracotta versions of masks. So the performers wouldn't be wearing this kind of material. But this is a good illustration of going beyond the period we're interested in.

Because of course, drama, we've been talking about as an Athenian thing. But actually, across the ancient world, there's good evidence that people are watching dramas and that they're being toured.

KAREN FOLEY: And very briefly, the second example is quite different.

JAN HAYWOOD: Yes, maybe you could say more about this one, Christine?

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: Yes, well, I think this one's really powerful. I like to imagine, if you're sitting right in the back of the Theatre, and if you've ever seen these Greek theatres, they're enormous. The sound carries really well. If you ever get a chance to go, get someone to stand down in the bottom and shout up at you. You really can hear them.

But if you're sitting right at the back, you might not be able to see the facial expression of the person down on the stage. And so if you've got a mask like that one we just saw, with this big facial expression on it, there it is again, you can really imagine that you're actually getting a sense of what emotional state that person might be in.

I assume this person is maybe quite angry.

[LAUGHTER]

They look like they're in some kind of turmoil, anyway.

KAREN FOLEY: Perfect, right. Now, we're out of time. So I want to end by asking you both a question. Does Greek drama still matter today?

CHRISTINE PLASTOW: Well, I would say, yes, it certainly does. I would say so because, particularly the tragedies, but also the comedies, these plays deal with questions that are still relevant to us today, justice, what's fair, what's right, how do we deal with the fact that fate, things might just happen to us, and we have to deal with them? That didn't go away with the ancient world. These are still things that are relevant to humanity today.

KAREN FOLEY: And what do you think, Jan?

JAN HAYWOOD: Well, not to mention their pure artistic merit. These are cultural products of serious significance that have been recognised since antiquity for a reason. They are seriously good. And they're worth engaging with, and the pleasure that one derives from that.

So we've been talking that *Medea* and how powerful that is and how much people still engage with that story. But we've also been talking about *Lysistrata*. And interesting enough, that's a story that people continue to perform, and in interesting ways. A film I saw not very long ago by Spike Lee, called *Chi-Raq*- it's a brilliant film. And that is a version of that story, but mega up-to-date in the south side of Chicago, so made relevant to the issues in that context, but still playing, riffing on the *Lysistrata* story.

So it still speaks to us artistically and because of what's going on around us, I think.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, Jan Haywood and Christine Plastow, thank you very much. That's been a fantastic session. We'll be back for an interview with Edith Hall after these animated versions of the Greek tragedy, *The Persians*- which we heard about before- and also *The Iliad*. And both of these are available on Open Land, which we'll be introducing you to a little bit later in the programme. I'll see you for that next interview very soon.

[MUSICAL JINGLE]