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Reactivity in Greek Tragedy**

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May the Force Be *Within* You: Reactivity in Greek Tragedy

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Abstract

George Lucas, creator of Star Wars, popularized the concept of “the Force,” but Lucas acknowledges the idea of a “life force” has been used “for the last 13,000 years.” This article will illustrate how that force enhances natural and mental abilities and gives strength to tragic characters. By analyzing scenes from Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex and Electra and Euripides’ Medea, the presenters will show the similarities in approaches. In each of these plays, the force is revealed through the strength of a reaction to external circumstances. From Cassandra’s prophetic vision in Agamemnon to the sorcery of Medea, the Greek authors demonstrate not only that the Greeks believed in the force, but also introduced a way of depicting its impact in performance. Moreover, the tragic authors established an alternative way to viewing action that goes beyond having the actor simply seek external objectives. Through reactivity the Greeks found a way of revealing the character’s inner life through the emotional release of dramatic energy. For today’s theatre, understanding reactive energy can lead to fuller understanding and appreciation of these early masterpieces.

Keywords: Greek Tragedy, Force, Reactive Energy, Greek Theatre, today’s theatre

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George Lucas, the creator of the *Star Wars* franchise, popularized the phrase “May the force be with you.” The vagueness of the word “force” is obviously intended, and yet its role is crucial for the survival of a certain kind of prototypical American hero who is constantly being threatened by a totalitarian regime easily identifiable as Neo-Nazis. However, the leader of the armored white army is clad in black and represents the dark side of human nature. By contrast, the “force” that animates the heroes represents the “force” of light and reason.

Greek tragedy has none of the simplicity of the Lucas world view, for the Greeks were able to portray the Trojan princess Cassandra in more or less sympathetic terms. Like the two vessels that are in the concluding stanzas of Book XXIV of the *Iliad*, good and evil, dark and light, are mixed together, and it takes a god-inspired intelligence to decipher which is which. About the only overlapping feature between the Greeks and Lucas is that the quest for understanding this mixed jar of light and dark forces begins with the encomium of the Delphic oracle: “know thyself.”

In *Star Wars*, knowing who you are puts you in touch with the “force” and can make you a true Jedi warrior possessed of magical survival skills. In the three examples we will look at from the Greeks, understanding the force does not guarantee survival: in fact, the overwhelming evidence is that this god-like knowledge seems to confirm one’s mortality even as it bequeaths a certain immortality of spirit that lives on long after the body dies. This “force” does not come from robots, tokens, or totems; rather, it emanates from some intangible element deep *within* the character.

To begin our journey, we need to think of the drama not as entertainment, but as a species of rational discourse, a process to which the Greeks attributed transcendental qualities. In other words, the tragedies were considered an exemplification of what the Greeks held to be most dear—wisdom.

It was Aristotle in the *Poetics* who established certain parameters for tragedy by emphasizing the relationship of part to whole. Unlike Plato, he emphasized structure and construction of the work as something made by man, not inspired by gods. He observed that the special energy that flowed through tragedy was dependent on agents or actors. He distinguished two kinds of actors: protagonists and antagonists. Protagonists impel action by seeking purposeful and meaningful objectives. The resistance to them comes from counterforces often associated with pathos or feeling. However, sometimes these actors have their own goals. The point is that this back and forth movement resolves at long last in a result or ending that in tragedy is a perception or active thought.

In the *Oedipus Rex*, we find Oedipus possessed by a purpose: solving a murder. As it turns out, he is also living not in light but in darkness about who he really is. When he solves the crime, he discovers that he is the murderer he seeks. Sophocles creates an intense discovery scene, in which the hero undergoes a reversal of fortune. This is the climax of the play. The combined and simultaneous action purges the protagonist as well as the audience of the

emotions of pity and fear, leaving the opportunity for a final scene that codifies the thought or perception. The chorus observes:

Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.¹ (ll: 1529-30)

On its own, this take-home bit of wisdom is banal and meaningless, but in the context of the preceding drama, it achieves a level of profundity that brings the audience a bit closer to understanding the strange and often unknowable workings of the gods.²

If we take from this brief discussion that the purpose of tragedy is to bring the audience to the level of an awareness of divine will so that the audience is able to see the “force” of light in a blind beggar’s misfortune, then we can understand the essence of the three scenes we will be examining today. But first we must accept that not all action in a tragedy is accomplished by a single protagonist. And sometimes action is not outer-directed. Circumstances may dictate an adjustment so that the actor’s energy is expended *reactively*.³ Clearly, this is the case in the Cassandra scene from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*.

Aeschylus makes use of one of Sophocles’ innovations, the addition of the third actor, by bringing Cassandra on stage with Agamemnon, but he does not have her utter one word while Clytemnestra entangles Agamemnon in her metaphoric net of purple cloth. The audience has all but forgotten Cassandra, when Clytemnestra makes an extraordinary second entrance to order the enslaved princess and spoil of war to follow her master. The chorus is already fearful when Clytemnestra expresses her impatience. She states:

the cattle are standing ready for sacrifice
by the central hearth stone, victim for the fire,
a joy we never hoped to have.⁴ (ll. 1200-1202)

The audience, who knew what Clytemnestra had been praying for, must have felt a shiver go up their spine. Yet, Cassandra makes no reply and gives scant indication that she understands Greek. It is not until Clytemnestra leaves the stage and the Chorus Leader expresses some sympathy for the captive that Cassandra leaps from Agamemnon’s chariot dressed as a priestess of Apollo screaming a shrill cry of pain and suffering to Apollo that we have any indication of how Aeschylus intends to use Cassandra in this play.

¹ David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. trans. *Oedipus Rex* in *The Complete Greek Tragedies* Vol II. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) 76.

² Francis Fergusson introduction to *Aristotle’s Poetics*. trans. S. H. Butcher. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961) 7-13.

³ Bernard Beckerman. *Theatrical Presentation: Performer, Audience and Act* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 143. Beckerman discusses *reactivity* as structural basis for scenes. Cf. Beckerman’s *Dynamics of Drama* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979) 97.

⁴ Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. trans. by Alan Shapiro and Peter Burian (Oxford, University Press, 2003) 80.

She is a creature possessed, a prophetess with a vision in a drama that for now is completely her own. She laments her fate when she realizes that it is now intertwined with the evil house she has been ordered to enter. Cassandra speaks:

Apollo! My Apollo!
God of the roadside, my destroyer,
For you again, this second time,
with what ease have destroyed me.¹ (ll. 1228-31)

The audience would have known that Cassandra received her gift of prophecy from Apollo when she refused to submit to his amorous embraces with the caveat that she could foretell the future but no one would believe her prophecies. The consequences of this had already resulted in the fall of her native Troy when her countrymen opened the gates to receive the Greek tribute of the fabled Trojan Horse. Pointing to the door of the palace,

Yes, there they
are—the witnesses
I trust—look, the children are wailing
for their own slaughter, for the flesh
their uncle roasted, and their father ate.² (ll. 1246-49)

The chorus doesn't want to
hear her, but she continues

O god! What is she plotting now?
What devastation? What huge evil
lurks in this house, unbearable
for friends, beyond all remedy,
and no help anywhere in sight?³ (ll. 1252-56)
They don't understand her—

Ah, will you see through, wretch?
Your husband who shares your bed?
You wash him, soothe him, in the bath.
How can I tell it through to the end?⁴ (ll. 1259-62)

But she does:

Ah! Ah! What apparition shimmers
into view? It's a net of Haden, yes,

¹ Ibid., 81.

² Ibid., 82.

³ Ibid., 82.

⁴ Ibid., 82.

but a net that is his bedmate that shares
the guilt of murder. Let the fierce
gang ravenous for the house shout out
in joy over the butchery,
this sacrifice storming with avenge.¹ (ll. 1267-73)

But Cassandra not only sees the past and knows the present, she also can see into the future.

Yet my death, too, will go unavenged
by heaven, for there will come in turn, another
to avenge us, a son who will slay his mother, requite
his father; an exile and a wanderer, hounded
far from this land, he will return to put
the capstone on this killing of his kin.
For the gods have sworn a great oath that the stroke
that brings his father down will bring him home.² (ll. 1463-70)

She starts to exit to the house, but the “stench of slaughter” stops her.

The stench of slaughter. The whole house reeks of blood ... (l. 1330)
It's like the exhalation from a tomb.³ (l. 1332)

She starts to exit again and then turns one last time to address the chorus:

Ah, my friends, I won't cry any cry
of terror like a panicky small bird
caught in a brush. But after I am dead,
you be my witnesses when a woman is killed
for me, a woman, and a man dies,
in turn, for a man unlucky in his wife.⁴ (ll. 1500-06)

Her final pleas urge kind treatment for slaves who like herself are harmless prey. Although one critic sees this scene as the climax of the *Agamemnon*, no doubt because of its intensity, it is not.⁵ Cassandra is *reacting* to what is happening to her master. Her vision comes from outside circumstances and taps into a well of suffering that almost overflows her ability to give it form and meaning.

¹ Ibid., 82.

² Ibid., 89.

³ Ibid., 90.

⁴ Ibid., 90.

⁵ Anne Lebeck. *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure* (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Hellenic Studies, 1971) 52.

Another critic likened it to the changed speech of a schizophrenic.¹ But in actuality Aeschylus has carefully crafted this scene, giving it a beginning, a middle, and an end to be persuasive. The substance of Cassandra's rant is that the gods do not alter their demands for justice, a justice achieved by an eye for an eye, death for death, until all blood crimes have exacted their toll. Moreover, this scene is necessary to stimulate interest in the next play, *The Libation Bearers*.² Aeschylus, like George Lucas, wants to make certain that audiences are primed for the next installment, in which we will see Cassandra's prediction, which at this point in the story's development the Chorus cannot comprehend, fully realized. But Cassandra is not allowed to predict the end of the *Oresteia* trilogy, the *Eumenides*. Clearly, Aeschylus wanted the *Eumenides*, which brings private revenge to an end by providing public tribunals, to be a surprise as well as tribute to the City of Athens and her institutions.³

Since our aim is to broaden our inquiry to include all of the great tragic authors, we will substitute *The Libation Bearers* with Sophocles' *Electra* and pick up with the title character's scene of lamentation for Orestes.

In Aeschylus' Cassandra scene, we cannot doubt the power of Apollo. He literally confronts Cassandra, and, as one critic has noted, the actor would have had his eyes fixed upon a statue of the god in the theatre.⁴ In the scene that we will consider from Sophocles' *Electra*, the reactivity that propels the scene forward comes from an urn supposedly filled with the mortal remains of Orestes, Electra's brother. Orestes' plan after he arrives home is to conspire with Electra to avenge their father's murder. But before he can do that, he has to test her loyalty. In disguise, he delivers what he describes as his own funeral urn. Electra, like Cassandra, is utterly horrified and emits a wailing sound:

OIMOI TALAIN.⁵ (l. 1478)

A long *reactive* scene follows that is essentially a lamentation. Electra is not acting on another. She is acting on herself, and that action, which comes from *within*, starts with simple reaction to the urn itself. However, it continuously deepens as the feeling of loss becomes more intense and personalized. Electra addresses the urn:

If this were all you were, Orestes,
 how could your memory
 fill my memory,
 how is it your soul fills my soul?
 I sent you out, I got you back:

¹ Seth L. Schein. "The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, *Greece & Rome*. XXIX, 1 (April 1982) 12.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ Bernard Knox. *Words and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979) 50-2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵ Sophocles. *Electra*. trans. Anne Carson (New York: Oxford Press, 2001) 93.

tell me
how could the difference be simply
nothing?
Look!
You are nothing at all.¹ (ll. 1501-10)

Her feelings are clearly maternal as she cradles the urn as if it were a baby. She then retells the story of how she saved the young Orestes from the murderer who felled their father. She recounts how she nursed and bathed him. Those familiar with Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers* may recall that in that play, another character, the Nurse, reacted with horror when she learned of Orestes' death and was given the lines about nursing the infant Orestes. Sophocles borrows this idea from Aeschylus but gives these tender lines to Electra, making her more sympathetic. It also helps to make the action that follows more a reflection about childhood and mothering, allowing for greater intimacy between Electra and Orestes. Both were victims of an abusive parent, and as Electra probes deeper into the past, this common bond arouses her anger.

One day three people vanished.
Father. You. Me. Gone.
Now our enemies rock with laughter.
And she runs mad for joy—
that creature
in the shape of your mother—
how often you said you would come
one secret evening and cut her throat!² (ll. 1542-49)

And Electra's anger grows upon itself as Electra mourns. Her cries now are no longer shrill but pitiable. The perception that started this lament was that the urn was as light as nothing. Now Electra intones that she herself is nothing, and she longs to join the loved one in death:

Oh my love, I was once part of you—
take me too!
Only void is between us.
And I see that the dead feel no pain.³ (ll. 1567-70)

She desires to kill herself to be with her beloved.

With her energy spent, she is a pathetic figure. It is as if the air had been let out of a balloon; her nothingness and the urn's nothingness are one. There is now a pervasive feeling of despair and hopelessness, but as she laments, Electra has revealed the following: she has no reason to go on living; her

¹ Ibid., 94.

² Ibid., 95.

³ Ibid., 96.

creature of a mother has relegated her to a slave's lot; her body is an empty vessel unable to bear children; and all life has been sucked out of her prematurely.

What Electra does not know, but the audience does know, is that the beloved Orestes, the author of this deceitful device to unburden her heart and crush her spirits, is alive and standing right next to her. The pain the audience feels at this moment raises the stakes for the dialogue that follows and makes it tantalizingly intense.

In the spirited interrogation that follows, we discover that Orestes cannot suppress his grief at seeing Electra in her current state. Obviously, this is worse than he had imagined, and he cannot doubt her loyalty to the cause, for it is the only reason given for her to go on living. He utters the same mournful cry at her situation as she uttered when she beheld the urn that she thought contained his mortal remains. Like a shuttlecock, the lines between the two of them fly back and forth as Sophocles builds the tension and the audience breathlessly awaits the anticipated, joyful revelation that Orestes is alive and ready to avenge his father's death. Were this a *Star Wars* film, we might imagine racing rockets and flashing light-sabers backed by a John Williams score with constantly mounting crescendos of the main theme tumbling and topping one another as the hero returns to rescue the helpless and near lifeless form of Electra.

Sophocles masterfully makes his revelation intense by prefacing it with Electra's deep despair. What the lamentation also does is to reveal to Orestes the very real pain of his sister's existence, providing him with an immediate justification to punish "the creature in the shape of your mother." Sophocles replaces Apollo's gaze in the Cassandra scene with an impassioned plea for justice. The path Orestes takes after discovering her plight is informed by a desire to protect and to liberate Electra. It redoubles his desire to kill Clytemnestra, that heartless creature who goes by the name of mother.¹

Our final reactive segment comes from Euripides' *Medea*. It is in stark contrast to Aeschylus' Apollo-inspired vision that drove Cassandra's prophecies, and it is not at all like Sophocles' *Electra*, where a cry for immediate justice assumes a moral grandeur. No, *Medea* is more inner directed, and where Sophocles might have supplied a character to oppose Electra, Euripides literally has Medea oppose herself as she wavers back and forth about whether to murder her children or not. As Gilbert Norwood has pointed out, this is a "fearful soliloquy,"² and although the children are present from time to time, Medea is almost completely self-absorbed. The children are mere props to her anger.

The scene is set after the children's tutor has informed Medea that Jason's new love, the Corinthian princess Glauce, will welcome Jason and Medea's children to her palace. Medea's mood darkens at this disclosure. She does not see happiness as possible for her children because she knows that the gifts they

¹ C. Maurice Bowra. *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) 248-50. As Bowra makes clear, love and justice are necessary components to the revenge.

² Gilbert Norwood. *Greek Tragedy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960) 199.

bore from her to Glauce are poisonous and that the princess' death will occur as soon as she tries on the garments. Yet, she addresses the children as if they might prosper in their new-found home in Corinth.

Children, my dear sons, this is your city. Here is your home where you will start new lives, bereft of me, your abandoned mother, I must begin my exile in a land far from you, without the happiness of seeing you grow and prosper, unable to perfume your nuptial baths, arrange the bridal sheets or light the wedding torches.¹ (ll. 998-1005)

We can see that as Medea continues to speak, her reaction grows stronger and the focus shifts from the children's would-be gains to her certain losses. The topic soon turns to her foolishness in even having children if in the end they will not share her heart-broken grief. And unfortunately, they will eventually grow accustomed to her absence. And then, as if awakening from a dream, she notices that the children are smiling. In their smiles, she finds her vengeful resolve vanishes. Briefly, she hesitates. Her plan to murder her children, which the audience was alerted to in the very first speech in the play given by the Nurse, is abandoned:

See, my strength and resolve vanish in the children's lively faces.² (ll. 1020-21)

And a moment later, she says:

When I leave I'll take
My sons with me.
Why should I make them
suffer to revenge their father and make
my own suffering so much worse? No,
farewell.³ (ll. 1022-25)

For a moment, the audience is relieved. They have been spared the horror of a mother slaying her sons, and sweet reason seems to have prevailed. Medea unveils her plan to save the day. And yet in the next breath:

But it's too late. By all of Hell's vengeful
demons I'll not leave my sons
for my enemies to ridicule.⁴ (ll. 1035-37).

And then finally:

¹ Euripides. *Medea*. trans. Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer (New York: Oxford, 2006) 69.

² *Ibid.*, 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

The children
must die. I gave them life and now
I'll take it. No more wavering. It's settled.¹ (ll. 1038-39).

Medea has a vision. She sees the princess wearing the poisonous robe and crown. Her sorcerer's gift utterly destroys the idea of leaving her sons in Corinth, for now they will be considered enemies. The children make another brief appearance. She bids them a final farewell, wishing that happiness will follow them into that other place. Medea adds:

Here your father
has stolen your happiness.
Such tenderness
my hand caressing your skin, your sweet breath.
My sons,
Leave me, go into the house
I can bear no longer to look at you.² (ll. 1048-52).

Children or no, we have seen into a mind that has been destroyed by a corrosive anger. In spite of its mirroring a sophist discourse, the entire scene is informed by this wild passion. Euripides has not advanced the plot. In fact, it could be argued that we know all we need to know about Medea's murderous anger from the Nurse's speech in the play's first episode. The Nurse fears these specific consequences. All has been foreshadowed.

So, why has Euripides taken this scene so near the play's climax to churn through it all again? The answer is quite simple, if logically unsatisfactory: because he can. Euripides must have known that he had in Medea a character bigger than life, a barbarian³ and sorceress who could best any Greek by not playing by their rules. She is a fascinating and volatile mixture, which makes her irresistible theatrically. In this scene, she not only recapitulates all of the arguments that might apply to her situation, but she brings them to a new emotional height by immediately juxtaposing one image of motherly adoration to another of jealous rage. She is not deliberating so much as tapping into the ebb and flow of her emotions. Unfortunately, for the victim children, the angry side of her character has already eaten away at what is left of her maternal feelings. What other conclusion can one draw when she is more concerned about the ridicule of her enemies than she is about the welfare of her children? It is a twisted argument indeed that finally drives her to kill a child rather than leave the child, for my enemies to ridicule.⁴ (l. 1037)

¹ Ibid., 71.

² Ibid., 71.

³ Jason calls her a barbarian. No one else in the play refers to her that way.

⁴ Ibid., 71.

Euripides has given us a strikingly interesting personality whom more than one critic has found repugnant for her self-dramatization.¹ This scene that alternates between tender smiling children and laughing enemies gives us an all too human portrait of a soul in torment.² It prepares the audience for the final horror of the deed itself. As Bernard Knox states, “In this great scene the grim heroic resolve triumphs not over an outside adversary or adviser but over the deepest maternal feelings of the hero herself,”³ and although Aristotle took exception to the play’s *deus ex machina* ending in which Medea is wafted aloft in Apollo’s chariot, but audiences are left aghast at the audacity of it.⁴ On a purely emotional level, the play remains one of the most popular and memorable in the canon. Murder springs from blind passion, and if reason and perception seem overwhelmed, it is because Euripides wanted it that way. George Bernard Shaw would have called the *Medea* an “unpleasant” play, and clearly the Greeks felt it was by awarding it no better than a third place in the Athenian competition.

In conclusion, we have examined these great scenes of passion from Greek tragedies and have shown that for the protagonist, the energy that informs the action is *reactive*. Each scene functions differently within the specific play in which each appears, but all are concerned with vengeance as a form of justice. From Cassandra’s godly view to Medea’s fear of enemy ridicule, an outside trigger unleashes a floodgate of passion to which the character adjusts before purposeful action can be taken. We are not dealing with action heroes, but impassioned heroines. These women are not Jedi warriors. They do not battle with light sabers, but they are in touch with the darker side of human nature, and each battles with an internal demon. To Cassandra, Electra, and Medea we might say, “May the force be *within* you.” And may that which caused you torment bring you justice!

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¹ Richmond Lattimore. *The Poetry of Greek Tragedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956) 107. While we agree she “harangues” herself forward, we doubt she is putting on an act. If she were, who would her act deceive? Cf. Peter Arnott finds this scene “among the most poignant in Greek drama” (112).

² Shirley A. Barlow. *The Imager of Euripides, A Study in the Dramatic Use of Pictorial Language* (London: Methuen, 1971) 81. Barlow states, “It is the visual features of their faces which haunt her.” Later Barlow singles out Euripides for his use of the visible and tangible which she relates to an outlook which is no longer dependent on divine aid (130).

³ Knox, op. cit. 300. Knox views her as a female “hero” who must use deceit to triumph.

⁴ Norwood, op. cit. 196.

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