CULTURE DESK

CAN GREEK TRAGEDY GET US THROUGH THE PANDEMIC?

A theatre company has spent years bringing catharsis to the traumatized. In the coronavirus era, that's all of us.

By Elif Batuman
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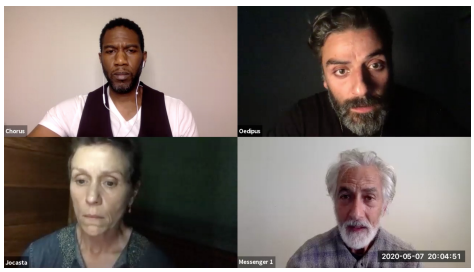

In Sophocles' "Oedipus the King," staged via Zoom by Theater of War Productions, the city of Thebes is in the grip of a terrible epidemic. Photograph Courtesy Theater of War Productions

"Children of Thebes, why are you here?" Oscar Isaac asked. His face filled the monitor on my dining table. (It was my partner's turn to use the desk.) We were a couple of months into lockdown, just past seven in the evening, and a few straggling cheers for essential workers came in through the window. Isaac was looking smoldery with a quarantine beard, a gold chain, an Airpod, and a black T-shirt. His display name was set to "Oedipus."

Isaac was one of several famous actors performing Sophocles' "Oedipus the King" from their homes, in the first virtual performance by Theater of War Productions: a group that got its start in 2008, staging Sophocles' "Ajax" and "Philoctetes" for U.S. military audiences and, beginning in 2009, on military installations around the world, including in Kuwait, Qatar, and Guantánamo Bay, with a focus on combat trauma. After each dramatic reading, a panel made up

of people in active service, veterans, military spouses, and/or psychiatrists would describe how the play resonated with their experiences of war, before opening up the discussion to the audience. Since its founding, Theater of War Productions has addressed different kinds of trauma. It has produced Euripides' "The Bacchae" in rural communities affected by the opioid crisis, "The Madness of Heracles" in neighborhoods afflicted by gun violence and gang wars, and Aeschylus' "Prometheus Bound" in prisons. "Antigone in Ferguson," which focusses on crises between communities and law enforcement, was motivated by an analogy between Oedipus' son's unburied body and that of Michael Brown, left on the street for roughly four hours after Brown was killed by police; it was originally performed at Michael Brown's high school.

Now, with trauma roving the globe more contagiously than ever, Theater of War Productions had traded its site-specific approach for Zoom. The app was configured in a way I hadn't seen before. There were no buttons to change between gallery and speaker view, which alternated seemingly by themselves. You were in a "meeting," but one you were powerless to control, proceeding by itself, with the inexorability of fate. There was no way to view the other audience members, and not even the group's founder and director, Bryan Doerries, knew how numerous they were. Later, Zoom told him that it had been fifteen thousand. This is roughly the seating capacity of the theatre of Dionysus, where "Oedipus the King" is believed to have premièred, around 429 B.C. Those viewers, like us, were in the middle of a pandemic: in their case, the Plague of Athens.

The original audience would have known Oedipus' story from Greek mythology: how an oracle had predicted that Laius, the king of Thebes, would be killed by his own son, who would then sleep with his mother; how the queen, Jocasta, gave birth to a boy, and Laius pierced and bound the child's ankles, and ordered a shepherd to leave him on a mountainside. The shepherd took pity on the maimed baby, Oedipus ("swollen foot"), and gave him to a Corinthian servant, who handed him off to the king and queen of Corinth, who raised him as their son. Years later, Oedipus killed Laius at a crossroads, without knowing who he was. Then he saved Thebes from a Sphinx, became the king of Thebes, had four children with Jocasta, and lived happily for many years.

That's where Sophocles picks up the story. Everyone would have known where things were headed—the truth would come out, and Oedipus would blind himself—but not how they would get there. How Sophocles got there was by drawing on contemporary events, on something that was in everyone's mind, though it doesn't appear in the original myth: a plague.

In the opening scene, Thebes is in the grip of a terrible epidemic. Oedipus' subjects come to the palace, imploring him to save the city, describing the scene of pestilence and panic, the screaming and the corpses in the street. Something about the way Isaac voiced Oedipus' response—"Children. I am sorry. I know"—made me feel a kind of longing. It was a degree of compassion conspicuous by its absence in the current Administration. I never think of myself as someone who wants or needs "leadership," yet I found myself thinking, We would be better off with Oedipus. "I would be a *weak leader* if I did not follow the gods' orders," Isaac continued, subverting the masculine norm of never asking for advice.

He had already sent for the best information out there, from the Delphic Oracle.

Soon, Oedipus' brother-in-law, Creon—John Turturro, in a book-lined study—was doing his best to soft-pedal some weird news from Delphi. Apparently, the oracle said that the plague wouldn't end until the people of Thebes expelled Laius' killer: a person who was somehow still in the city, even though Laius had died many years earlier on an out-of-town trip. Oedipus called in the blind prophet, Tiresias, played by Jeffrey Wright, whose eyes were invisible behind a circular glare in his eyeglasses.

Reading "Oedipus" in the past, I had always been exasperated by Tiresias, by his cryptic lamentations—"I will never reveal the riddles within me, or the evil in you"—and the way he seemed incapable of transmitting useful information. Spoken by a Black actor in America in 2020, the line made a sickening kind of sense. How do you tell the voice of power that the problem is *in him*, really baked in there, going back generations? "Feel free to spew all of your vitriol and rage in my direction," Tiresias said, like someone who knew he was in for a tweetstorm.

Oedipus accused Tiresias of treachery, calling out his disability. He cast suspicion on foreigners, and touted his own "wealth, power, unsurpassed skill." He decried fake news: "It's all a scam—you know *nothing* about interpreting birds." He elaborated a deep-state scenario: Creon had "hatched a secret plan to expel me from office," eliciting slanderous prophecies from supposedly disinterested agencies. It was, in short, a coup, designed to subvert the democratic will of the people of Thebes.

Frances McDormand appeared next, in the role of Jocasta. Wearing no visible makeup, speaking from what looked like a cabin somewhere with wood-panelled walls, she resembled the ghost of some frontierswoman. I realized, when I saw her, that I had never tried to picture Jocasta: not her appearance, or her attitude. What was her deal? How had she felt about Laius maiming their baby? How had she felt about being offered as a bride to whomever defeated the Sphinx? What did she think of Oedipus when she met him? Did it never seem weird to her that he was her son's age, and had horrible scars on his ankles? How did they get along, those two?

When you're reading the play, you don't have to answer such questions. You can entertain multiple possibilities without settling on one. But actors have to make decisions and stick to them. One decision that had been made in this case: Oedipus *really liked her*. "Since I have more respect for you, my dear, than anyone else in the world," Isaac said, with such warmth in "my dear." I was reminded of the fact that Euripides wrote a version of "Oedipus"—lost to posterity, like the majority of Greek tragedies—that some scholars suggest foregrounds the loving relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta.

Jocasta's immediate task was to defuse the potentially murderous argument between her husband and her brother. She took one of the few rhetorical angles available to a woman: why, such grown men ought to be ashamed of themselves, carrying on so when there was a plague going on. And yet, listening to the lines that McDormand chose to emphasize, it was clear that, in the guise of adult rationality and spreading peace, what she was actually doing was silencing and

trivializing. "Come inside," she said, "and we'll settle this thing in private. And both of you quit making something out of nothing." It was the voice of denial, and, through the play, you could hear it spread from character to character.

By this point in the performance, I found myself spinning into a kind of cognitive overdrive, toggling between the text and the performance, between the historical context, the current context, and the "universal" themes. No matter how many times you see it pulled off, the magic trick is always a surprise: how a text that is hundreds or thousands of years old turns out to be *about* the thing that's happening to you, however modern and unprecedented you thought it was.

"Nothing can be foreseen," Jocasta said, and I heard our President declaring, of the global pandemic about which he had been warned, repeatedly, in the direst possible terms, that "Nobody could have predicted something like this." Then the voice of denial passed to Oedipus: "Why, my lady, should we ever again listen to the Pythian priestesses at Delphi or study the patterns of eagles and kingfishers shrieking loudly above us in the sky when they all foretold that I would one day kill my father? He is now dead in the ground and I am still here." That one sounded like climate change, because it involved ignoring birds, but the sinister thing was precisely how the objects became interchangeable: global warming, gun violence, pandemics, sexual assault, genocide, the legacy of slavery.

You've never really seen "Oedipus," I found myself thinking, till you've seen it during a plague. The plague hadn't really stood out to me on previous readings, yet it was the key to everything: the way the denial of the contagion reflected right back on the contagion of denial, its tendency to morph into "denialism." I felt a new appreciation, too, for all the work the plague was doing to power the plot. It reprised the riddle of the Sphinx: Oedipus had to save the city again. It was a ticking time bomb: every moment that he *didn't* solve the plague, the bodies were piling up, death-rich Hades was making off with more shades. And the ultimatum from Delphi—solve the murder, or the plague goes on—turned the myth of Oedipus into a whodunnit, with Oedipus himself as both detective and murderer.

The plague arrived in Athens in 430 B.C., the second year of the Peloponnesian War. Athens was under siege from Sparta. Much of the rural population had, per instructions from the statesman Pericles, sought shelter within the city's newly built fortifications, putting an extra burden on sanitation and housing. Perhaps as much as one-third of the Athenian population died, including Pericles and his two sons. Thucydides also got sick, but recovered, and was thus able to leave a vivid record, in his history of the Peloponnesian War, of not only the physical symptoms but the miasma of horror that swirled around the city: the confusion of the doctors, whose efforts to increase their knowledge about this unknown disease were generally rewarded by a slow and painful death; the absence of reliable advice, "for what helped one sufferer harmed another"; the apparent ineffectiveness of divine offerings and supplications, which led some people to become more religious, and others to embrace the most antisocial behavior; the collapse of the funeral rites and the desperation of the increasingly isolated survivors.

And yet: evidence suggests that the theatre was still open. What does that mean? Was Thucydides exaggerating how bad it was? Did Athenians not believe in social distancing? Or were the city's actors and playwrights considered to be

essential workers? Increasing research has been devoted, in recent years, to the connection between ancient theatre and medical treatment, which often took place in the temple to Asklepios, the god of healing. There is archeological evidence that some such temples had an adjoining theatre, and some have argued that listening to a play may have been a part of treatment that also typically included going to sleep in the main hall, praying for gods to appear in their dreams and guide them toward a cure, a dream that priests and attendants would then interpret. When Athens got its own temple to Asklepios, it was built adjacent to the theatre of Dionysus—reportedly, with some involvement by Sophocles. I've been to the Asklepion in Pergamon, in present-day Turkey: an underground passage provides easy access between the theatre and the patients' sleeping hall. According to Doerries, the acoustics in Athens were such that a person bedridden in the temple would still be able to hear every word spoken in the theatre.

How differentiated *was* the function of the theatre from that of the clinic? The question might not have made that much sense at the time. Plato was born during the Plague of Athens, so he hadn't yet gotten around to articulating some of the dichotomies—body versus soul, real versus ideal—without which we can now barely imagine the world. According to some historians of science, the idea of "religion" and "science" as opposing terms requiring reconciliation, eternal as it may seem to us now, dates only to the nineteenth century, at which time there was, for example, a lively debate—incited by Freud's wife's uncle—over whether *katharsis* (purification, purging), the term Aristotle used to describe the effect of tragedy on an audience, had primarily a medical or a religious connotation.

Freud himself would complicate the categories again in his study of hysteria: a disease marked by diverse physical symptoms in the absence of a physiological cause, occurring primarily in women. In the eighteen-eighties, Josef Breuer came up with and introduced Freud to a treatment he called the cathartic method. In Freud's subsequent works, which were more radical and which proposed treating physical symptoms through, for example, the interpretation of dreams, he drew support from his knowledge of the temples of Asklepios, alluding to "such familiar procedures" from antiquity as "the elicitation of oracular dreams by sleeping in the temple precincts." The records from the Asklepion at Epidaurus mentioned patients whose symptoms—headaches, paralysis, blindness, stomach distress—matched those of hysteria.

Freud had identified closely with the character of Oedipus since he was in high school, where he studied classical Greek. At the University of Vienna, he dreamed that he would be recognized for solving the riddle of the Sphinx. In his psychoanalytic office, he had an approximately two-thousand-year-old Greek Sphinx statue on his table and a reproduction of Ingres's "Oedipus and the Sphinx" over the couch. His bookplates had a Sphinx on them. For Freud's fiftieth birthday, his followers gave him a medallion engraved with an image of Oedipus and the Sphinx. Some sources say that, when Freud read the inscription—a quote from Sophocles that read, roughly, "he who knew the famous riddles and was a most powerful man"—he went pale: his adolescent fantasy had come true.

The basic insight of psychology, as it has come to us via Freud, is closely connected to the riddle of the Sphinx: "What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?" Oedipus' answer is man—who crawls as a baby, walks unassisted as an adult, and uses a cane in old age. Thus do some strands of psychology tell

us that babies and children are already people, with emotions and boundaries and dignity that can be violated, and that these violations cause sickness in adults. Psychology also tells us that all adults, with no exceptions, were once babies, and aren't free from the indignities they suffered in this capacity. These truths may seem self-evident, and classicists have occasionally critiqued the riddle of the Sphinx for being too easy: why was nobody able to solve it before Oedipus? And yet, however clear it is to us, intellectually, that the adult who walks around on two feet is the same person as the baby who crawled on hands and knees, we rarely acknowledge it fully. The adult doesn't look the same as the baby, or feel the same. "Former baby" isn't part of anyone's self-image. All we want is to forget that we were ever so weak and helpless.

The riddle of the Sphinx plays out in the plot of "Oedipus," particularly in a scene near the end where the truth finally comes out. Two key figures from Oedipus' infancy are brought in for questioning: the Theban shepherd, who was supposed to kill baby Oedipus but didn't; and the Corinthian messenger to whom he handed off the maimed child. The Theban shepherd is walking proof that the Sphinx's riddle is hard, because that man can't recognize anyone: not the Corinthian, whom he last saw as a young man, and certainly not Oedipus, a baby with whom he'd had a passing acquaintance decades earlier. "It all took place so long ago," he grumbles. "Why on earth would you ask me?"

"Because," the Corinthian (David Strathairn) explained genially on Zoom, "this man whom you are now looking at *was once that child*."

This, for me, was the scene with the catharsis in it. At a certain point, the shepherd (Frankie Faison) clearly understood everything, but would not or could not admit it. Oedipus, now determined to learn the truth at all costs, resorted to enhanced interrogation. "Bend back his arms until they snap," Isaac said icily; in another window, Faison screamed in highly realistic agony. Faison was a personification of psychological resistance: the mechanism a mind develops to protect itself from an unbearable truth. Those invisible guardsmen had to nearly kill him before he would admit who had given him the baby: "It was Laius's child, or so people said. Your wife could tell you more."

Tears glinted in Isaac's eyes as he delivered the next line, which I suddenly understood to be the most devastating in the whole play: "Did . . . she . . . give it to you?" How had I never fully realized, never felt, how painful it would have been for Oedipus to realize that his parents hadn't loved him?

In a famous early essay called "The Aetiology of Hysteria" (1896), Freud described his treatment of eighteen patients suffering from severe hysterical symptoms. In each case, he laboriously traced each symptom back as far as human memory would go—all the way to early childhood. Over the course of more than a hundred hours, each patient independently recovered a memory of early-childhood sexual trauma. The trauma frequently involved an interaction with an adult, often a close relative, like a father. Both Freud and the patients were horrified. The patients' memories were "reproduced with the greatest reluctance," Freud wrote. "While they are recalling these infantile experiences to consciousness, they suffer under the most violent sensations, of which they are ashamed and which they try to conceal."

Freud was extremely reluctant to believe that eighteen people from respected Vienna families could have been abused as children. (Indeed, he soon backed away from this conclusion, developing his idea of the Oedipus complex, according to which the incestuous abuse wasn't a real memory, but rather an infantile fantasy.) But, at least in 1896, he found himself unable *not* to believe the experiences that the patients relived in front of him. The remembered scenes fit the larger story with the specificity of a missing puzzle piece; in two cases, he found witnesses to corroborate the patients' memories. So, in "The Aetiology of Hysteria," as in "Oedipus the King," an investigation into an inexplicable physical illness (hysteria for Freud, plague for Sophocles) turns up a seemingly unrelated, decades-old, father-implicating act of violence against a child. Wrestling out the truth is a huge ordeal. The ex-child denies it as long as possible. When the truth is finally spoken, the plague is over.

When I talked to Bryan Doerries over Zoom after the performance, he told me that he had initially planned to stage "Oedipus" with a focus on climate change. The themes were all there: a prophecy denied; children paying for the sins of the fathers; a plague that "ravaged the land, killing the cattle and the crops," and which Sophocles compared to a raging wildfire; as well as birth defects ("our women die in labor, delivering shrivelled little corpses. . ."). He was hoping to cast Greta Thunberg as Tiresias or the chorus. But once COVID-19 happened, and a physical plague started revealing and exacerbating the preëxisting conditions of the body politic, a new application suggested itself. (A U.K. production of "Oedipus," starring Damian Lewis, is scheduled for September 3rd. "The narrative of a leader who discovers that he's the contagion will probably have a different resonance there," Doerries reflected; Boris Johnson had just returned to work after his own bout of COVID-19.)

Doerries's first encounter with Greek tragedy was playing one of the children in "Medea." (That's the one where Medea kills her children: his one line was, "No, no, the sword is falling!") It was 1985, and he was nine years old. The performance took place at a community college in Newport News, where Doerries's father taught experimental psychology. Doerries describes his father as one of the last old-school behaviorists, a follower of B. F. Skinner, who was known for his belief that free will is an illusion, and that human and animal behavior are determined by positive or negative conditioning. As a child, Doerries often visited his father's lab, where he watched albino rats act out the fate dictated to them by rewards and punishments. In one experiment, rats were electrically shocked, seemingly at random, until they gave up on life, resting their heads on the floor of their cages and waiting to die.

Doerries went to Kenyon College, where he majored in classics, learning ancient Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and the principles of Biblical exegesis. When he and his father debated the meaning of Greek tragedy, his father thought the plays represented a world view in which people didn't have "human agency or consciousness." Doerries disagreed. The analogy he uses now for the working of fate in Greek tragedy is Type 2 diabetes, the disease that eventually killed his father. Most people who get the diagnosis, he explains, have a genetic predisposition—it's "written into their DNA, like an ancient intergenerational curse"—but they can choose what they do with the knowledge, and that choice can change their own and others' lives.

For his senior project, Doerries translated and staged Euripides' "Bacchae," using a Buick Skylark for the deus ex machina. A career choice loomed between academia and theatre. Interpreting a classical text, translating it, and directing a play are traditionally viewed as different jobs, to be done by different kinds of professionals, but Doerries saw them as one thing: a set of techniques to get old plays to work on new audiences. He applied to grad school for classics, then changed his mind and moved to New York to pursue directing.

In New York, he began dating Laura Rothenberg, a friend of many years, then a Brown undergraduate, who had just gotten a double lung transplant in a long-shot effort to treat the cystic fibrosis she had been fighting since childhood. Becoming involved with her was kind of a test. As Doerries later wrote in "Theater of War," a book about how his company came into being, "From the moment we first kissed, awkwardly, hesitantly, in her apartment, I knew I would soon face a choice, one that would define my own moral character and perhaps the rest of my life. If I truly cared for Laura, then I would put everything else on hold. . . . But a nagging and persistent voice of self-preservation within me said to run away, as fast as I could."

He didn't run away. Nor did the voice shut up. Doerries ended up being Rothenberg's primary caretaker, and during that period he witnessed intubations, "air hunger," and the "drowning on the inside" that accompanies cystic fibrosis. He was twenty-six, and had never felt so close to anyone, or realized his own "immense capacity to care for another person." At the same time, he found himself discovering the limits of that compassion—the unbearableness, at times, of the plea to be present—and had never felt so alone.

It was then that he reread Sophocles' "Philoctetes." It felt as if it had been written for him. When the play starts, Philoctetes has been stranded for ten years on a desert island, with a suppurating, foul-smelling wound on his foot. He was bitten by a snake when he and the other Greek warriors stopped on an island on the way to fight in the Trojan War. His agonized screams were destroying the other soldiers' morale, so Odysseus left him behind. Then the Trojan War dragged on for a decade, and a seer told Odysseus that the Greeks couldn't win without Philoctetes. Now Odysseus has come back to the island to get him—bringing a young soldier, Neoptolemus, to do the talking.

Doerries realized that "Philoctetes" was about chronic illness—the way every sick person is on a desert island—and about the temptation to leave them there and forget about them. After Rothenberg died, in 2003, at the age of twenty-two, he started work on a translation of the play. By the time he was finishing it, Doerries was back in a hospital, where his father was recovering from a kidney transplant, necessitated by his worsening diabetes. (Doerries's father had found out about the diabetes in 1976, the year Doerries was born, but had eventually given up on changing his life style, viewing the diagnosis as fate.)

Doerries now calls hospitals his "finishing school": the place where he came into contact with what the Greek plays were about. In 2007, at the Weill Cornell medical school, he staged the first Theater of War Productions-style event: a dramatic reading of "Philoctetes," followed by a discussion. It was written up in the *Times*, and when Doerries's father, who was suffering from an ulcerated foot, read the article, he missed the mention of Philoctetes and thought he was

reading about himself and *his* foot.

In June, I saw Theater of War Productions do a Zoom staging of a scene from "Philoctetes" for Baltimore-area front-line health-care workers. Neoptolemus (Jesse Eisenberg) was trying to get Philoctetes (David Strathairn) to agree to help the Greeks. Philoctetes kept seeming like he was going to agree, then would start screaming in pain, expressing his anger at Odysseus, his fear of being abandoned again. The scene was extremely hard to watch. A respiratory technician said afterward that she felt as if she was hearing what the COVID-19 patients she dealt with were thinking, but did not have the lung capacity to express. Eisenberg's face registered all the dismay of someone who is realizing, belatedly, just what he signed up for: being on a desert island face to face with a screaming embodiment of unmeetable need.

Doerries described "Philoctetes" to me as a "moment of concrescence"—a "dawning that this is a path for me out of all this." As in a Freudian case history, new pieces kept fitting into the puzzle. A few weeks later, reading about the Walter Reed scandal, in which Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were left languishing in an understaffed D.C. hospital plagued by vermin, black mold, and bureaucratic dysfunction, Doerries started to think about Philoctetes, too, as a veteran. Technological advances in warfare and medicine had created "a subclass of patients" like him, all abandoned on their islands to live potentially long and unbearable lives. A few months later, he read another exposé about a hundred and twenty-one incidents of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who, on their return to the United States, were charged with killing someone. Reading about soldiers who come home only to "find themselves at war with their spouses, their children, their fellow service members, the world at large and ultimately themselves," Doerries realized he was seeing a multiplication of Sophocles' "Ajax": the tragedy of a war hero who loses his friend, comes home mad with grief, massacres livestock, and tries, in Doerries's translation, to strangle his wife in his sleep. How had Doerries not recognized in it a textbook description of combat trauma?

Sophocles himself had been a general in the Athenian army—at least twice. And it wasn't just Sophocles: Aeschylus' gravestone, which didn't mention that he was a playwright, praised him for fighting in the Battle of Marathon. Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, the three most famous Greek tragedians, wrote their works in the course of a century in which Athens was at war for roughly eighty years. Every citizen—a category that excluded women, children, and slaves—was also a soldier. They were constantly having to fight, and then return home. How many great tragedies —"Agamemnon," "The Madness of Heracles"—were about men who couldn't switch the social contract back on?

Doerries started thinking of Greek tragedy in functional terms, as "ritual reintegration, for combat veterans, by combat veterans." It was, in a way, a continuation of his argument with his father. If his father had viewed the plays as more or less static representations of a fatalistic world view, Bryan saw them as an "ancient technology"—a program that you run, on an audience, to do something specific. What if he could start it up again?

In 2008, Doerries mounted his first combat-trauma event, for several hundred Marines and their families, in a Hyatt ballroom in San Diego. In his book, he describes the ensuing scene of painful awkwardness, with Marines in the

back of the room "nursing Budweisers, gazing at the floor," and everyone cringing as Ajax and Philoctetes screamed unsayable things at the top of their lungs.

In the discussion afterward, the unsayable continued to be said. "My husband went away four times to war, and each time he returned, like Ajax, dragging invisible bodies into our house," stated the wife of a Navy SEAL, who was also the mother of a Marine. She invoked the words of Ajax's wife, asking his comrades for help: "How can I say something that should never be spoken? You would rather die than hear what I'm about to say." A nun who had been an Army chaplain stood up and said that one of Ajax's lines—"Witness how the generals have destroyed me!"—was something she'd heard from countless soldiers.

At that point, the wife of the assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, who was sitting in the front with some other generals' wives, stood up and accused the nun and the SEAL's wife of undermining their husbands. "This is about healing, not assigning blame!" Soon, at least thirty people were lined up at the microphone. The session became a conversation between people usually prevented by different hierarchies and norms from addressing one another. Not long afterward, the Theater of War Productions got a $3.7 million contract from the Pentagon to replicate the program on military sites around the world.

During the First World War, soldiers who had fought in trenches began to display a range of troubling symptoms: muteness, speech disorders, nightmares, paralyses, blindness, headaches, and uncontrollable screaming. Some military doctors noted their similarity to the symptoms of hysterical women, but hesitated to diagnose the soldiers with hysteria, at risk of impugning their courage and masculinity. The new diagnosis they invented, "shell shock," was based on a theory, later disproved, that its cause was "organic" damage resulting from proximity to exploding shells. Despite its manly name, the treatment for shell shock, Elaine Showalter points out, was pretty much the same as the treatment for hysteria: torture, by electric shocks and isolation, designed to get the patient back in the trenches A.S.A.P.

In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, it became increasingly clear that hysteria and shell shock shared not just many symptoms but also an underlying mechanism. Studies conducted or supported by second-wave feminists were yielding new data on domestic violence, rape, and child abuse, at the same time that Vietnam veterans and antiwar activists were finally managing to get combat trauma recognized as a legitimate affliction. Repeated assaults on women and children, often by the people they most trusted, had been producing the same feelings of unremitting physical terror, loss of self, and blockages of memory and language that soldiers experienced in a war. In other words, what had seemed to be a lot of different problems, or non-problems, with different causes, or with no cause, was accepted as a single, real phenomenon. This was the foundational insight of what became known as trauma studies as we might think of it today. In 1980, post-traumatic stress disorder (P.T.S.D.) was added to the *DSM-III*, based on data from Vietnam vets, Holocaust survivors, and the survivors of sexual trauma.

Frances McDormand played Heracles in a virtual performance for Baltimore-area front-line health-care workers. Photograph Courtesy Theater of War Productions

Judith Herman, an eminent figure in trauma studies, has observed that every advancement in the study of trauma has taken place only with the help of an accompanying progressive political movement. "It never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on": trauma is inevitably met by the same denials, which are advanced by perpetrators, and accepted by everyone else, because we are all predisposed to identify with power. (By the same token, soldiers come home to realize that "no one wants to know the real truth about war.") Believing victims is a lot more work than believing people who have brought about, or benefit from, the status quo; after all, perpetrators and beneficiaries ask only for our neutrality, whereas a victim asks us to listen to, and empathize with, their long, awful story. Furthermore, believing the disempowered involves overcoming some of our most deeply ingrained ideas, like that it's natural or appropriate for children and women to be subordinated in the family, or for young men to be sacrificed in wars. The recognition of trauma becomes so controversial that it ends up being suppressed, unless it is legitimized by a political movement. Rape trauma wasn't taken to be credible and real until second-wave feminism emerged; the antiwar movement did the same thing for combat trauma. The major progressive movements of recent years, #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, are both about acknowledging the credibility of certain long-denied traumas. The broken N.D.A.s and the cell-phone videos put new information into the public sphere. Something many individuals had known, and even experienced, but hadn't always named to themselves or to others, became accepted as reality. The reason Greek tragedy works for so many of our social issues is that virtually all the tragedies, like the social issues, dramatize the conservative, contagious impulse to deny trauma: to negate that anyone is a victim or that anything bad is happening. Then someone defies the impulse and screams horrifying stuff that nobody wants to hear, and the spell is broken.

Where does the impulse of victim-denial come from? Many psychologists of trauma would say that the answer is early childhood. The psychoanalyst Alice Miller traced numerous individual and political ills to "the Fourth Commandment"—the one about honoring thy parents—some version of which exists in many religions. For Miller, it might more accurately be translated as "Thou shalt not be aware," because it has produced a taboo against children admitting the reality of their own experiences. Even the life of a loved infant is not an easy one. According to Miller, parents often have children in order to satisfy their own unmet needs for love, respect, and attention, or to please their own parents. (The phrase "have children" itself, perhaps, carries the implication that children are their parents' property: a moral and legal notion that has been with us since Aristotle.) Infants, being totally dependent on their caretakers for their survival, come to live in mortal terror of disappointing their parents and losing their love.

"For most people, the idea that they were not loved by their parents is unbearable," Miller writes. "The more evidence there is for this deprivation, the more strongly these people cling to the illusion." In other words, the first victim we don't believe is ourselves. What most of us are unable to feel for these powerless former selves is the "pity and terror"—the Aristotelian *catharsis*—that is evoked in the course of a tragedy like "Oedipus." Before the catharsis, when Oedipus is asked about his scars, he reacts only with shame: "Why do you speak of that ancient disgrace? . . . A shameful disfigurement that has scarred me since birth." He must believe that the scars are inborn (not inflicted by his parents), and also somehow his own fault ("shameful," "a disgrace"). It's only through the confrontation with the Theban shepherd that he is able to feel, in all its belated immediacy, the terror he had to block off in order to survive. But, by that point, he has already passed on his trauma to all the "children of Thebes," including his literal sons—whom he curses, and who eventually murder each other in a civil war.

Repressed trauma produces wars, just as it is produced by them, in armies structured like families, with junior people forbidden to criticize their superiors. Based on her study of the German child-rearing manuals popular around Hitler's parents' generation, Alice Miller, who was a Holocaust survivor, concluded that beating children "for their own good"—training them to accept and idealize their own abuse—is the perfect way to produce obedient subjects of an authoritarian government. Children whose perceptions haven't been respected become adults who support strongmen who rule by gaslighting and disinformation. Children who aren't allowed "to be aware of their own needs or to defend their own interests," as she wrote, will never know them.

This is the simplest answer to the much-debated question of why people vote against their own interests: the connection between "my interests" and "good" has been scrambled at an early age. Christopher Wylie, the Cambridge Analytica whistle-blower, has said that the algorithm he worked on there found that one of the strongest predictors for vulnerability to alt-right nationalism is whether a person is in favor of corporal punishment for children. The algorithm was initially devised to identify potential ISIS recruits, who apparently share the alt-right's enthusiasm for beating children. The worship of power, the silencing of dissent and of logic, and the dehumanization of everyone perceived as weak or other are characteristics shared by authoritarian groups across the ideological spectrum. They might, according to Miller's study, exercise a magnetic effect on people who were dehumanized as children.

The Trump Administration is known for its readiness to put children in harm's way, whether by actually placing them in cages, or by maintaining, despite evidence to the contrary, that they are "almost immune" to COVID-19. It is a truism among standup comics and on Twitter that Trump wasn't loved as a child; a new memoir by the President's psychologist niece makes the house of Fred Trump sound a lot like the house of Laius: a place where children are raised to become "killers," and kindness is viewed as a form of criminal idiocy. But the immense political and economic harm caused by the dehumanization of children has not yet been treated as the urgent public-health crisis it is.

Invoking childhood is often dismissed as a way of depoliticizing, of trying to "reduce" the affairs of nations to what happened between mommy and daddy. And yet, as Tolstoy shows in his quarantine-compatible classic "War and Peace," what happens between mommy and daddy may cause little Nikolai or Petya to flee their feelings of humiliation and disempowerment by joining a war, thus determining the fate of nations. We must do for childhood what the second-wave feminists did for the lives of women (and tried, in some radical cases, to do for children): politicize and de-privatize, eroding the rules that turn each family into a closed-off realm where the weakest players (women, children) have no recourse against the strongest (men, adults).

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to seeing the political reality of childhood is our attachment to the moral scaffolding of individual blame and personal responsibility. Within this framework, to ascribe any of Hitler's actions to his upbringing is seen as going easy on Hitler, or as blaming the Holocaust on Hitler's parents. And yet, to quote Alice Miller, "it is not a matter of assigning blame to individual parents . . . but of identifying a hidden societal structure that determines our lives." Western thought since Aristotle has largely construed children as lacking in reason and thus in full personhood. The resulting systemic inability to view children as fully human resembles the kind of moral alibi that has been used to excuse slavery and anti-Black racism, and is still with us in parts of the law and custom. Early learning—especially the education of children between birth and age three, which is the period when the most brain development takes place—is widely viewed either as the inalienable labor of mothers, or as an unskilled job rightly left to low-status women.

In "Antigone in Ferguson," the Greek chorus is represented by a demographically and ideologically diverse gospel choir. Photograph Courtesy Theater of War Productions

The essence of structural or systemic problems is that they can't be solved by isolating and punishing individual culprits, leaving the rest of the society pure. Which individuals should be isolated, punished, or removed, so that our workplaces aren't toxic to women? Which individual is *really* a racist? The power of "Oedipus" is that it eventually reveals such questions to be the wrong ones. Who is to blame for the Plague of Thebes? Is it Oedipus, because he killed Laius? But Laius tried to kill *him*, when he was a defenseless baby. Then again, Laius thought the baby was going to kill him. On the other hand, Laius raped the son of the king of Pelops, and yet, if you look up why Laius raped the son of the king of Pelops, it all really started when *he* was driven from Thebes in his youth. And on and on.

By introducing the theme of plague into his "Oedipus," Sophocles invites us to replace the mechanism of blame with that of contagion. Of course, within a given plague, individuals may be responsible for making things worse: mask refuseniks, governors who won't issue stay-at-home orders, or, you know, Pericles, for making the whole Attic countryside crowd into Athens. But we don't normally expect whoever gave us a respiratory virus to be punished. Questions of personal responsibility are ultimately viewed as secondary to questions of cure and containment.

It is in the context of contagion that I first felt able to understand the role of fate, which is surely the most foreign thing to us in Greek drama. "So does he have a choice, or doesn't he?" we ask in exasperation. It's the conundrum that Doerries and his father used to argue about, and it's at the heart of the confusion elicited by questions of systemic injustice: "How responsible or complicit am I?" Defunding the police and decriminalizing mental illness, addiction, and poverty are ways to shift the conversation from "Who is to blame?" to "What is to be done?" Fate, like plague, gives us a way to remove guilt and innocence from the equation. Fate *is* plague. We are what we catch. But that doesn't mean there's no way to change it.

If we borrow the terms of Greek drama, 2020 might be viewed as the year of anagnorisis: tragic recognition. On August 9th, the sixth anniversary of the shooting of Michael Brown, I watched the Theater of War Productions put on a Zoom production of "Antigone in Ferguson": an adaptation of Sophocles' "Oedipus" narrative sequel, with the chorus represented by a demographically and ideologically diverse gospel choir. Oscar Isaac was back, this time as Creon, Oedipus' successor as king. He started out as a bullying inquisitor ("I will have your extremities removed one by one until you reveal the criminal's name"), ordering Antigone (Tracie Thoms) to be buried alive, insulting everyone who criticized him, and accusing Tiresias of corruption. But then Tiresias, with the help of the chorus, persuaded Creon to reconsider. In a sustained gospel number, the Thebans, armed with picks and shovels, led by their king, rushed to free Antigone.

"Antigone" being a tragedy, they got there too late, resulting in multiple deaths, and in Isaac's once again totally losing his shit. It was almost the same performance he gave in "Oedipus," and yet, where Oedipus begins the play written into a corner, between walls that keep closing in, Creon seems to have just a little more room to maneuver. His misfortune —like that of Antigone and her brother—feels less irreversible. I first saw "Antigone in Ferguson" live, last year, and, in the discussion afterward, the subject of fate—inevitably—came up. I remember how Doerries gently led the audience to view "Antigone" as an illustration of how easily everything might happen differently, and how people's minds can change. I remember the energy that spread through the room that night, in talk about prison reform and the urgency of collective change.

Tragic theatre and democracy arose around the same time in Athens, and some scholars maintain that the two are related: that Athens's "homegrown literary vehicle allowed its citizens to think through how to run their democracy." It's a tempting theory, especially with "Antigone" in mind. On August 9th, the performance was followed by a panel discussion with the Mothers of the Movement, an activist group comprising women whose Black children have been killed by police. "Antigone was very much like us," said Marion Gray-Hopkins, whose nineteen-year-old son Gary Hopkins, Jr., was killed in 1999. "Creon is very much like the legislators that we are dealing with every single day." Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner, beamed in her Zoom window and said, "Yes!"

"I was kind of proud of him," Gray-Hopkins continued, of Creon. She noted that he had initially seemed impermeable to reason and to new information, and then suddenly "decided he was listening. So we are continuing to talk to people," she said, "because somebody is hearing our voice."

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Elif Batuman has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2010.

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