

Telò, Mario, *Greek Tragedy in a Global Crisis*; London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023; paperback, pp. 294, RRP: \$39.95; ISBN 9781350348127.

In *Greek Tragedy in a Global Crisis*, Professor Mario Telò of UC Berkeley continues his rhetorical exploration of the enduring relevance of Graeco-Roman antiquity to the modern world. Written during a COVID-19 isolation period, his close readings of 'ten emblematic Greek tragedies' draw on a vast breadth of multidisciplinary works – from queer theory to contemporary art and classical reception – to uncover thematic resonances between the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the anxieties of the (post)pandemic era (4). This is Telò's first publication to directly address the COVID-19 pandemic, building on his earlier studies using antiquity as a lens through which to rethink contemporary modes and concepts, such as *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy* (2018) and *Queer Euripides: Re-readings in Greek Tragedy* (2022).

This work contributes to a growing classical engagement with the unfamiliar terrain of the 'post' – the post-human, the post-Anthropocene, and now, the post-pandemic – challenging modern conceptions of humanness and the biopolitical axiologies that assign greater value to some lives over others. While scholarship in the field of classical reception has frequently addressed political and ethical questions, there has been little focused engagement with the post-pandemic moment itself. Telò's work breaks new ground by placing the pandemic's specific pressures at the heart of his analysis, even as some aspects of this post-pandemic discourse remain fluid.

*Greek Tragedy in a Global Crisis* is divided into four parts, each thematically distinct yet interconnected. Part one foregrounds breath and bodily suffering; part two focuses on relationality, kinship, and disposability; part three turns toward the posthuman and planetary scale; and part four returns to breath as political resistance.

A primary emphasis throughout Telò's work is on the strained, suffering, or expelled body. In chapter one, he connects Oedipus' wish to 'close up his wretched body so that (he) could be blind and hear nothing' with the pandemic-driven impulse to disconnect from a world in crisis (15). For me, this moment extends beyond metaphor, capturing the profound desire to erase the body as a site of suffering, a situation familiar to anyone who has endured the severe physical congestion symptomatic of coronavirus. While the social focus of the text is insightful, Telò's repeatedly overlooks these immediate, embodied realities central to the epidemic's lived reality; a strange oversight that contrasts sharply with his broader conceptual focus upon the corporal, visceral body.

Nevertheless, the thematic grouping of suffering, insurrection, and breathlessness forms a throughline across the text. In chapter eight,

Prometheus' 'frantically gesturing body' becomes a site of breathless rage and infinite subversion, as he breathes and re-breathes his final breath, defiant in his deviance (177). In chapter nine, Hecuba shatters dialogically into a series of breaths in the play's closing lines, literally 'becoming the air' as she exhales a final, breathless protest (189).

Telò's engagement with breathlessness reaches its culmination in the final section, which offers a sense of critical closure through a renewed focus on breath. This ties together his classically informed readings of the pandemic's necropolitical violence and viral death to stage a call for insurrection – both literary and literal (143). Here, Telò centres the death of George Floyd, invoking the 'respiratory crises' of COVID-19 to endow Floyd's final words – 'I can't breathe' – with transhistorical, multivalent significance (154).

Telò's sustained focus on George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement introduces another vital strand of the book: the unequal valuation of life during the pandemic, and the question of who gets to be protected, preserved, or sacrificed in the name of collective survival. Drawing on tragic examples, he examines the devaluation of Black, queer, and aging bodies during this period. His reading of *Iphigenia in Aulis* is particularly striking; framing Iphigenia, sacrificed for the good of the martial masses, as a symbol of the disposability of certain bodies, which became 'shockingly explicit at the outbreak of the pandemic' (76). Just as Iphigenia is offered up for the preservation of the state, the pandemic exposed how certain lives were disproportionately placed at risk or treated as expendable in the name of collective survival, particularly those already marginalised by race, sexuality, age, or class.

From this inquiry into precarity and expendability, Telò turns to the affective and relational dimensions of queer life under pandemic conditions. Centring the queer body in *Alcestis*, he surfaces moments of homoeroticism in tragedy to explore how non-normative attachments unsettle dominant narratives of kinship and survival. Despite the plague-haunted backdrop of both ancient tragedy and modern crisis, queerness here ultimately resists the normative logic that renders certain lives and forms of intimacy expendable, creating space for alternative, fluid modes of intimacy and care.

While his reading of the 'tragedy of heterosexuality' is both provocative and illuminating, its relative neglect of gendered violence – and its rise during the pandemic – feels disconnected from the previous chapter's focus on bodily vulnerability and structural abandonment (79).

Telò's most speculative, and arguably most ambitious, readings come as he shifts from pandemic-specific suffering to planetary-scale meditation. These chapters explore how the pandemic made tangible the prospect of human extinction and briefly revealed the Earth's capacity to heal in the absence of human intervention.

At the centre of this exploration are Telò's perceived tragic characters, who are desperate to reconnect with the earth. In this context, chapter six reads Antigone's famous desire to join her dead brother in the ground as a longing for reconnection with Gaia. In chapter seven, Aeschylus' Niobe not only reconnects with Gaia but becomes her. For Telò, frozen and weeping on stage, she comes to symbolise the enduring resources gifted by the Earth (or the mother, Gaia) which are ultimately pillaged and depleted. Though these readings are particularly inspired – and satisfy my own obsession with the classically posthuman – the book's previously sustained focus on the COVID-19 pandemic becomes noticeably obscured here. The shift from pandemic-specific suffering to speculative ecology risks fracturing the cohesiveness of his otherwise incisive analysis. Antigone's yearning to physically connect with the deep earth and Niobe's transformation into stone are deeply corporeal gestures, and while Telò draws out their materiality, his retreat from the visceral realities of illness and isolation blunts their impact.

Telò's greatest strength lies in his ability to trace unexpected continuities between ancient theatrical imaginaries and contemporary crises in a way that remains innovative and relevant even years after the pandemic's onset. His readings are ambitious and often dazzling in scope, and his talent for mobilising classical texts to interrogate present-day politics is undeniable. The work pulses with the momentum of the burgeoning field of classical posthumanism alongside the philosophical uncertainties of a (post)pandemic future, a pairing rich with striking potential. Though Telò's engagement with the body is a compelling thematic constant, the book occasionally sacrifices experiential immediacy for theoretical reach, particularly when moving into speculative posthumanism in the later chapters, where the immediacy of pandemic suffering becomes more diffuse. In privileging structural and symbolic registers, Telò at times sidelines the raw, embodied realities that these tragedies so powerfully convey. Ultimately, *Greek Tragedy in a Global Crisis* reminds us that the classics are not relics but restless companions, breathing with us even through our most difficult moments.

Jewel Oreskovich

*The University of Western Australia*