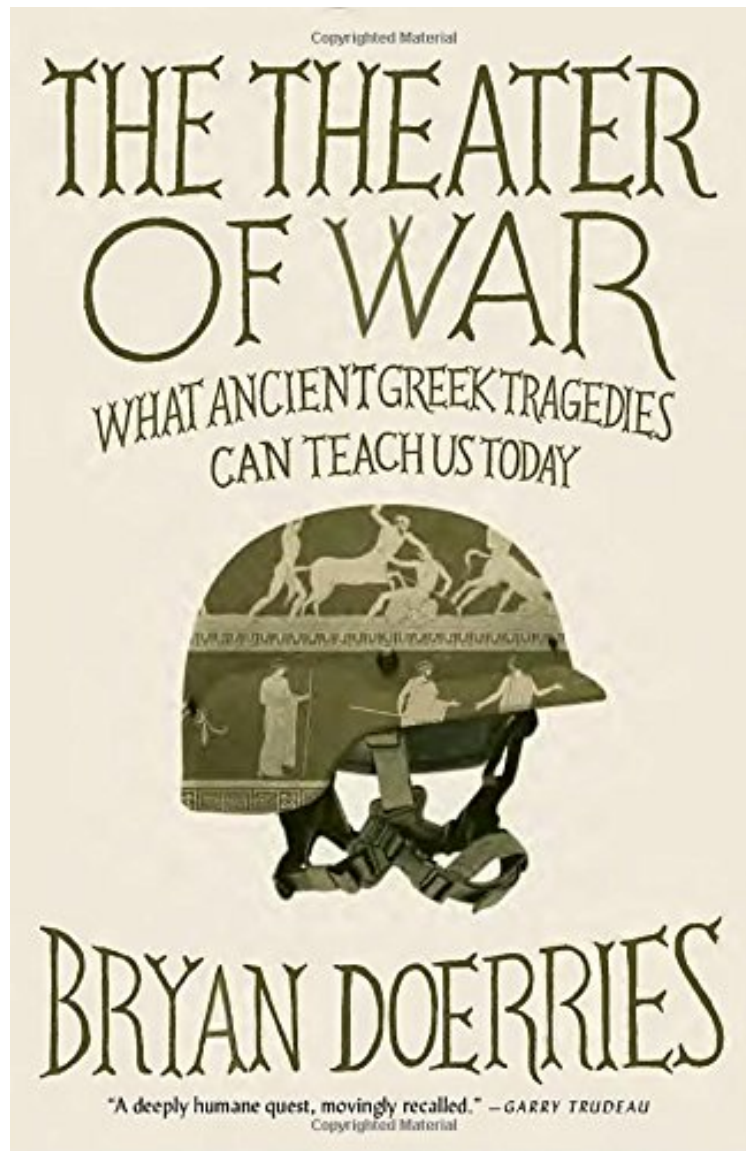


# The Theater of War: What Ancient Tragedies Can Teach Us Today

*Bryan Doerries*

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**Bryan Doerries : The Theater of War: What Ancient Tragedies Can Teach Us Today** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Theater of War: What Ancient Tragedies Can Teach Us Today:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. I love theatre and believe strongly in its potential therapeutic effects By Pat McKnight I could not put this down. I love theatre and believe strongly in its potential therapeutic

effects. IT enables us to "hold the mirror up to nature," as Hamlet says. This book demonstrates that statement, and the relevance of great plays which are 2,500 years old to our modern problems. Thank you, Bryan Doerries. This is a story which really needed to be told. "Live long and prosper," as my favorite Vulcan says, and please continue your superb work. For those who wonder -- the author has a strong background in ancient Greek (so he can do good adaptations) and in Latin and Hebrew. I would say, to those with both language and theatrical skills, read and learn and confer with him, work with him, to learn how it is done. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Shows what literature can do! By Thomas M. Magee I hope every literature teacher in the country reads this. It shows the power of literature in capturing the emotions of situations better than any lecture. Through the military chapter you can see the unfortunate timelessness of war. Some of the issues at Alexander's time is the issue armies face today. The book is about what a guy did with his Phd education in the classics. He took that knowledge to market plays to selective audiences. Through the discussion about each play the audience can learn about their own situation. He adapts the Greek play of Ajax for the military, Prometheus for corrections and Heracles for Hospice workers. The best chapter is what he did for the military through the play Ajax. He took a crew and went to over 100 bases. His stories of how the play woke people up to the realities of their own situation is very spell bounding. It really opens up your mind to the whole situation about PTSD. The other chapters aren't quite as good as the military one. That is why I gave it 4 stars. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Remarkable Work By AOA remarkable linkage of ancient Greek classics to the trauma of modern warfare, and how those ancient texts can help heal both warriors and their spouses. This isn't "just a book" -- Doerries has created an ongoing program where talented actors play an active role in the healing process. Knowledge of the classics deepens the readers understanding, but the text is clear and accessible to any intelligent reader.

This is the personal and deeply passionate story of a life devoted to reclaiming the timeless power of an ancient artistic tradition to comfort the afflicted. For years, theater director Bryan Doerries has led an innovative public health project that produces ancient tragedies for current and returned soldiers, addicts, tornado and hurricane survivors, and a wide range of other at-risk people in society. The originality and generosity of Doerries work is startling, and *The Theater of War* wholly unsentimental, but intensely felt and emotionally engaging is a humane, knowledgeable, and accessible book that will both inspire and enlighten. Tracing a path that links the personal to the artistic to the social and back again, Doerries shows us how suffering and healing are part of a timeless process in which dialogue and empathy are inextricably linked.

Extraordinary. . . Riveting. . . [Doerries] discussed Ajax with many troubled vets returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and may have saved some of their lives. His book interweaves tales from this journey with episodes from Doerries own life and moving discussions of the plays he cherishes his blueprints for felt experience, his conduits for connection and compassion it is through that intensity of focus, Doerries convinces us, that we can find permission to feel our own pain. To see his productions today, or to see Greek tragedy through his eyes, is to become measurably healthier and more human. James Romm, *The Daily Beast* The route Bryan Doerries describes in his memoir is as unique as the place it landed him. . . Moving. . . Mr. Doerries book loops around from autobiography to literary analysis to medical ethics and back again. . . It should win him a host of new admirers. Abigail Zuger, *The New York Times* The theater of ancient Greece was many things. . . [It is] the therapeutic potential of catharsis, that most interests Bryan Doerries. . . An impressive and accomplished journey. James Shapiro, *The New York Times Book Review* His compelling, raw book is both memoir and manifesto; he chronicles his own gradual discovery of the power and relevance of Greek tragedies while also championing their social utility. . . Such insights capture something essential about Greek tragedy: Unlike contemporary theater, these works aspired to serve religious, political, and even therapeutic functions in ancient Greek society. . . Across a gulf of two and a half millennia, the Greek tragedians can still help us know and cure ourselves. Nick Romeo, *The Boston Globe* This heart-gripping book is not merely one of the best theater books I've read this year; it's one of the best books I've read this year. . . An early tragedy inspired [Bryan Doerries] to found a company dedicated to bringing the ancient specifically lesser-known Greek plays to groups experiencing trauma of some kind. . . The results, as he recounts in fluent, agile prose, upheld his belief that communal exposure to the power of the Greek tragedies can be a profoundly useful healing tool. Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times* Doerries is well educated in the classics and in human suffering, which has opened his eyes to the therapeutic potential of art. He describes his father's slow descent into madness from diabetes and how, at the end of his life, he thought he was being watched over by black crows persecuting Furies who had come to carry out his fate, largely the result of his own life choices. Doerries likewise describes the slow death of his girlfriend from cystic fibrosis, which was preceded by a double lung transplant, bacterial infections, and the ultimate rejection of the donor organs by her body. He saw from these trials that there is a universal, timeless element to suffering, the psychological dimension of which can be alleviated through drama. Blake Seitz, *The Weekly Standard* Doerries account of his performances with Theater of War is at once an impassioned history lesson, a manual of therapy for the afflicted and a deep analysis of the power of ancient Greek tragedy. Arlice Davenport, *The Wichita Eagle* Important and illuminating.

. . . This is an admirable book about an admirable project. Andrew J. Bacevich, *The American Scholar* The Theater of War is an enthralling, gracefully written, and urgently important examination of the vital, ongoing relationship between past and present, between story and human experience, and between what the ancients had to report about warfare and human values and the desperate moral and psychological struggles that soldiers still undergo today. Bryan Doerries has given us a gift to be treasured. Tim O'Brien Bryan Doerries's *The Theater of War* is a testament both to the enduring power of the classics and to the vital role art can play in our communal understanding of war and suffering. Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment*, recipient of 2014 National Book Award One has the feeling we are being watched by our ancestors, that they continually call out to us, bestow us with gifts of their wisdom, warn us about habitual traps and foibles common to all humans. We rarely have the presence to listen to, to receive that wisdom. Bryan Doerries asks: what lessons will we finally take to heart from these ancients? In this riveting narrative, simply but elegantly told, Doerries movingly resurrects the inner life of a people who lived 2,500 years ago, but whose struggles evoke our own familiar and damaged present, now endowed by this wonderful book with more drama, more tragedy, more compassion, more possibility. Here is the proof at last: our future depends on the gifts of the past. Ken Burns Bryan Doerries ongoing staging of Greek tragedies before U.S. military personnel and others processing trauma is an act of courageous humanism: a tribute to vanished lives and a succor to current soldiers and citizens. In connecting the valiance and pathos of modern military life to a 2500-year tradition, Doerries has returned dignity to countless troops nearly destroyed by war. His capacious yet intimate book offers a privileged look into not only the psychological costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts and other proximate disasters, but also the larger meaning of inhabiting an unpredictable and militarized world. Andrew Solomon, author of *Far From The Tree* I have always thought of Greek tragedies as the earliest public service announcements. Those ancient stories of family politics, their warnings about civic duty, and their parables of grief and its management are as vital today as when first written. Through his translations and public readings, and now this powerful book, Doerries offers modern audiences access to these ancient PSAs. We hunger and thirst for the guidance these plays contain. Frances McDormand A deeply humane quest, movingly recalled. Doerries passionate search for meaning in ancient text has led him out of the dusty stacks of scholarship into an arena of ecstatic public engagement. He has taken his elegantly reasoned thesis that the main business of tragedy has always been catharsis and created a theatrical experience that has lifted countless audiences out of isolation and into profound community. Garry Trudeau This book illuminates how Greek tragedy penetrates to the deepest of levels in us all. It also shows how certain audiences, when given permission, can help illuminate the urgency and relevance of these ancient stories today. In his approach to tragedy, Doerries has found the way to remove out-of-date barriers and clean the outer crust of language with fresh words so that the essential can appear once more. Peter Brook About the Author BRYAN DOERRIES is a writer, director, and translator. He is the founder of Theater of War, a project that presents readings of ancient Greek plays to service members, veterans, and their families to help them initiate conversations about the visible and invisible wounds of war. He is also the co-founder of Outside the Wire, a social-impact company that uses theater and a variety of other media to address pressing public health and social issues, such as combat-related psychological injury, end-of-life care, prison reform, domestic violence, political violence, recovery from natural and man-made disasters, and addiction. A self-described evangelist for classical literature and its relevance to our lives today, Doerries uses age-old approaches to help individuals and communities heal after suffering and loss. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Learning Through Suffering II In the fall of fourth grade, I landed a small role in a production of Euripides *Medea* at the local community college in Newport News, Virginia, where my father taught experimental psychology. I played one of the ill-fated boys slaughtered at the hand of their pathologically jealous mother. I can still remember my one line, which I belted backstage with abandon as several drama majors pretended to bludgeon me with long wooden canes behind a black velvet curtain No, no, the sword is falling! The director, a short, fiery German auteur with spiky white hair and a black leather jacket always draped over his shoulders like a cape, would scream at the cast during rehearsals at the top of his lungs until we delivered our lines with the appropriate zeal. Whenever our performances reached the desired fever pitch, he would jump up from his chair and explode with delight, Now veeee are kooooking! During daytime performances for local high school students, the boredom in the theater was as palpable as the thick layer of humidity generated by sweaty adolescents fidgeting in their seats, whispering and blowing spitballs in the shadows, waiting for the agony to end. Whenever I entered the stage, wearing a tight gold polyester tunic, which clung to my thighs and itched mercilessly under the unforgiving lights, I heard rippling waves of laughter move through the crowd. What's so funny? I wondered, squinting into the stage lights. After the show closed, at the cast party, one of my fellow actors confirmed that the laughter had, in fact, been at my expense. Unaccustomed to wearing a tunic, I had provided the high school audiences with an extended, full frontal view of my underwear while perched atop a large granite boulder. Seeing my *Fruit of the Looms* was likely the most memorable event in those students mandatory encounter with Euripides. Most of us probably developed an allergy to ancient Greek drama in high school, when some well-intending English teacher required us to read plays like *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, *Prometheus Bound*, and *The Oresteia* in rigid Victorian translation, or forced us to watch seemingly endless films featuring British actors in loose-fitting sheets and golden sandals declaiming the vocative refrain O, Zeus! from behind masks. If your early encounters with the

ancient Greeks zapped you of any ambition to ever pick up a play by Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides again, you are not alone. Aeschylus is known for having written in his play *Agamemnon* that humans learn through suffering, but for most students, studying ancient Greek drama is just an exercise in suffering, with no apparent educational value. Ironically, some scholars now suggest that attending the dramatic festivals in ancient Greece and watching plays by the great tragic poets served as an important rite of passage for late-adolescent males, known as *ephebes*. It is for this reason, according to the argument, that so many of the tragedies feature teenage characters such as Antigone, Pentheus, Neoptolemus, and Orestes thrust into ethically fraught situations with no easy answers and in which someone is likely to die. According to this understanding, tragedy may have been viewed as formalized training, preparing late adolescents for the ethical and emotional challenges of adult life, including military service and civic participation. In other words, the very plays that were designed thousands of years ago to educate and engage teenagers, to help transform them from children into productive citizens, have managed to bore them senseless for centuries. One hope of this book is to administer an antidote to the obligatory high school unit on ancient Greek tragedy. The first thing you learn in school about tragedy is that it tells the story of a good and prosperous individual who is brought to ruin by some defect in his or her character. This traditional reading of Greek tragedy goes something like this: Blinded by pride, or *hubris*, Oedipus ignores the warning of an oracle, unwittingly murders his father and sleeps with his mother, and though he manages to save the people of Thebes from the bloodthirsty Sphinx ultimately turns out to be the contagion that is plaguing his city. Conclusion: Oedipus was a great but flawed individual who was deluded by power and crushed by external forces beyond his grasp. We love stories about well-intentioned, flawed characters, because they make the most compelling drama. Also, as Aristotle pointed out, we take no pleasure in watching morally flawless people suffer. But the ancient Greek word commonly translated in textbooks as *flaw*, *hamartia*, more accurately means error, from the verb *hamartano*, to miss the mark. Centuries later, by the time of the New Testament, the same word *hamartia* came to mean sin, fully loaded with all its moral judgment. In other words, tragedies depict characters making mistakes, rather than inherent flaws in character. I know that I miss the mark hundreds of times each day. I often have to lose my way in order to find the right path forward. Making mistakes, even habitually and unknowingly, is central to what it means to be human. Characters in Greek tragedies stray, err, and get lost. They are no more flawed than the rest of humanity; the difference lies in the scale of their mistakes, which inevitably cost lives and ruin generations. At the same time, being human and making mistakes even in ignorance does not absolve these tragic characters of responsibility for their actions. Had they fully understood what they were doing, they most certainly would not have done it. But they did it all the same. It is in this gray zone at the thin border between ignorance and responsibility that ancient Greek tragedies play out. This is one of the many reasons that tragedies still speak to us with undiminished force today. We all live in that gray zone, in which we are neither condemned by nor absolved of our mistakes. What is so utterly flawed about the idea of the tragic flaw is that it encourages us to judge rather than to empathize with characters like Oedipus. Tragedies are designed not to teach us morals but rather to validate our moral distress at living in a universe in which many of our actions and choices are influenced by external powers far beyond our comprehensions such as luck, fate, chance, governments, families, politics, and genetics. In this universe, we are dimly aware, at best, of the sum total of our habits and mistakes, until we have unwittingly destroyed those we love or brought about our own destruction. It is not our job to judge the characters in Greek tragedy to focus on their flaws. Tragedy challenges us to see ourselves in the way its characters stray from the path, and to open our eyes to the bad habits we may have formed or to the mistakes we have yet to make. Contrary to what you may have learned in school, tragedies are not designed to fill us with pessimism and dread about the futility of human existence or our relative powerlessness in a world beyond our grasp. They are designed to help us see the impending disaster on the horizon, so that we may correct course and narrowly avoid it. Above all, the flaw in our thinking about tragedy is that we look for meaning where there is none to be found. Tragedies don't mean anything. They do something. Another concept that gets drilled into our heads in high school is fate. The word for fate in ancient Greek *moira* means portion. In Greek antiquity, Fate was worshipped in the form of three goddesses: Clotho, the spinner; Lachesis, the allotter; and Atropos, the unturnable. Fate was older and more powerful than all the gods combined, and the entire cosmos was subject to its laws. No one lived above it or beyond it. Yet the Greek concept of fate, as it is encountered in Greek tragedy, is much subtler than many of us generally understand. In tragedy, the concept of fate is not mutually exclusive of the existence of free will; nor does the ancient idea of destiny negate the role of personal choice and human agency. In fact, as in the case of Oedipus, human choices and actions are required in order to fulfill an individual's fate or destiny. In 1976, the year I was born, my father was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, an insidious, cruel disease that dismantled his mind and body slowly, almost imperceptibly, over a period of thirty-three years. In spite of the diagnosis, he adamantly refused to adjust his lifestyle, though he knew this choice would eventually come at a deadly cost. The nerves in his feet died first. Then the bones in his ankles collapsed. Then came the incurable lesions, the festering sores, the bouts of colitis, the kidney failure, the daily dialysis treatments, the kidney transplant, the septic infections, the endocarditis, the blindness, the dementia, the seizures, the horrifying hallucinations, and finally after much suffering a protracted, terrifying death, during which he believed a gaggle of black, ravenlike demons were swarming all around him, waiting to take his soul to hell. The word diabetes comes from the Greek verb *diabaino*, to run through. The name derives from

the signature symptoms of the disease, an unquenchable thirst combined with a constant need to urinate. Water runs through diabetics. The condition results from a deficiency in the pancreas, which normally produces insulin, a hormone that regulates sugar levels in the blood. Without enough insulin, sugars run wild, causing, among other symptoms, extreme thirst while steadily choking off the blood supply to nerves and tissues. Ultimately, over decades, the disease leaves no organ unscathed. Type 2 diabetes is a fitting metaphor for the human condition as portrayed in ancient Greek tragedy, and for the interdependence of human action and fate. Those who are diagnosed with the disease often possess a genetic predisposition to develop it. It is written into their DNA, like an ancient intergenerational curse. And yet what diabetics choose to do with the knowledge of their condition has a direct impact upon their lives, and upon those who love them. Thus, in spite of the curse of their disease, diabetics still play a role in shaping their destiny. How they behave and the choices they make help determine the course their lives will take. Many are able to control their blood sugars through a combination of drugs, diet, and exercise, extending their life spans and delaying the progression of the disease for decades. But as many as 60 percent of type 2 diabetics do not adhere to the recommendations of their doctors or faithfully take their medication. This is primarily because diabetics do not experience the negative effects of eating junk food, not exercising, and allowing blood sugars to fluctuate for years. It is also because the medical regimen for most full-blown diabetics involves daily injections of insulin and constant monitoring of sugars with needle pricks to well-worn fingertips. Fate refers to the cards we were dealt, the portion we were given at birth. Tragedy depicts how our choices and actions shape our destiny. No one ever said that change was easy, but my father believed it was impossible. He often told his experimental psychology students that when it comes to human behavior, what passes for change is no more than a fantasy, an illusion. This was his long-formed, heavily entrenched conviction, based on years of research, working with human beings and rats. Nothing infuriated me more than to listen to him rationalize his own self-destruction with this specious argument. His unwillingness to acknowledge even the remote possibility of meaningful change fueled some of our worst fights and forever drove a wedge between us. In the heat of one memorable argument, he eyed the collection of Sophocles plays I had under my arm and asked, Don't you believe in fate, Bryan? All those Greek plays end in disaster, no matter what the characters try to do. Like Oedipus, my father was adopted, but he wasn't told until much later, so he spent the entirety of his childhood believing that his adoptive parents were his biological parents. And like Oedipus, he discovered who his biological parents were near the end of his life, when it was too late to act upon this knowledge and avert his own self-destruction. In Sophocles version of the Oedipus myth, a Corinthian man, in a moment of inebriated indiscretion, accuses Oedipus of being a bastard, planting the seed that, decades later, bears fruit in the horrifying realization of his true identity. When my father turned sixteen, it was his grandmother, Hattie, who took him aside and casually, one might say cruelly, shattered his world by telling him he was adopted. Decades later, while searching for a viable kidney donor for my father, we found out who his biological parents were. As fate would have it, they both worked at the Catholic hospital in Fairhaven, New Jersey, where he had been born. My father's father had been his pediatrician, a Spanish immigrant, who had indulged in an extramarital affair with a Puerto Rican nurse. My father's adoptive parents, who were in their forties and had been unable to conceive, were more than willing to help the physician and the nurse sweep their dalliance under the rug by taking the baby off their hands. Had it not been for my great-grandmother's loose lips, they might have perpetuated the myth that he was their son for the rest of their lives. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Hispanic Americans are at a particularly high risk for type 2 diabetes. My father's fate, as it turned out, was something he could have, at the very least, deferred, had he investigated the identity of his biological parents. But like Oedipus, he did not really want to know the truth until it was too late. When Oedipus discovers who his parents were, he gouges out his eyes with golden pins from his mother's gown and stumbles off into the desert to die. My father drank a chocolate milk shake and slipped off into sugar-induced oblivion. A week before my father died, frail and demented, at the age of sixty-six, I flew down from New York City to visit him at a nursing home in Virginia, a few blocks from where I had grown up. I brought him a chocolate milk shake from Monty's Penguin, the local diner we had frequented during my childhood. Though neither of us wanted to say goodbye, we both knew it was the last time we would see each other. After a long day of reminiscing and grappling with unanswerable questions, we eventually ran out of things to say. The sun had already set, though I hadn't noticed its absence until after the room faded to black and the floodlights outside poured through cracks in the blinds, crisscrossing the floor. We sat in the darkness for an indeterminate time and looked at each other with understanding and regret. Finally, after my father closed his eyes and slipped back into semiconsciousness, I tossed my coat over my shoulder and slowly approached his bed, bending over to look at him one last time, to take in his face, so I wouldn't somehow forget its contours after he was gone. Suddenly, without opening his eyes, he reached up and grabbed my arm, pulling me toward his face contorted in a rictus of horror with the desperation of a drowning victim. Clamping down with all his remaining strength, he sobbed: The same thing is going to happen to you, and to your brother! Its fate. Its fate! Its his dementia talking, I told myself, not him. But it was also a curse. As a child, I often spent afternoons observing him train his advanced psychology students in a small laboratory a few blocks from our house. Among the many wonders of that mysterious windowless space was a floor-to-ceiling polygraph machine, a shriveled human brain floating in a glass jar of formaldehyde, and rows of metal cages packed with albino lab rats,

peeking between bars with beady red eyes. In one experiment, which I observed at perhaps too young an age to fully understand, he demonstrated how rats would eventually give up their will to live if provided enough negative reinforcement, through a series of seemingly indiscriminate electrical shocks. Eventually, when theyd had enough, the rats stopped struggling, rested their heads on the floors of their cages, opened their mouths, and simply waited to die. Now, as I left the nursing home and rushed to my car, with my fathers last words still echoing in my ears, it occurred to me that the curse of his interpretation of fate was that it permitted him to act like those rats. Did he somehow expect me to do the same? Was this the lesson he wanted me to learn from tragedy? For my father, fate was a pretext to behave fatalistically. It was the same notion of inescapable fate that I had encountered in school. Whenever I heard it, every cell in my body rose up in revolt, resisting the idea that we humans live without the ability to change the course of our destinies. Thinking about the way my father placed the concept of fate at the center of his self-destructive, pessimistic worldview, I couldnt help believing that the objective of ancient Greek tragedy and its grim depiction of humanity was radically different from what we have imagined for thousands of years. Fate and free will are not mutually exclusive in ancient Greek tragedy. Fate always requires human action or inaction in order to be fulfilled. Perhaps by cultivating a heightened awareness of the forces that shape our lives and of the pivotal role our choices and actions play in realizing our destiny, Greek tragedy was designed to promote the possibility of change. In other words, the fate that awaited Oedipus was avoidable, as was my fathers. So is yours, and so is mine. II

Although I first encountered Greek tragedy in elementary school, it wasnt until my first year at Kenyon, a small liberal arts college in rural Ohio with a rich literary history, that I became interested in the classical world, for all the wrong reasons. The classicist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote: 1. A young man cannot have the slightest conception of what the Greeks and Romans were. 2. He doesnt know whether he is fitted to investigate them. In his 1874 essay *We Philologists*, a wry polemic against nineteenth-century German classicism, Nietzsche argues that young students are poorly suited to study the ancients precisely because they lack the life experience to understand the motivations and struggles of other humans, let alone those who lived more than two thousand years before them. Even worse off than students in this regard, suggests Nietzsche, are career academics. The philologist, he writes, must first of all be a man. Philologist in Greek means lover of words, and for centuries the term has denoted the profession of studying ancient languages and cultures. Nietzsche argues, tongue firmly planted in his cheek, Old men are well suited to be philologists if they were not such during the portion of their lives which was richest in experiences. In other words, only those who have lived the extremities of life who have loved, traveled, risked, lost, and suffered can extract anything of value from reading the ancients. Conversely, he suggests, studying philology can get in the way of living a full, rich life. In short, he concludes, with a playful jab at his critics, ninety-nine philologists out of a hundred should not be philologists at all. At the core of Nietzsches argument lies the concept that experience is a prerequisite for understanding the ancient world. At age eighteen, with relatively little life experience, I signed up for two semesters of ancient Greek, in a class that met for several hours a day, Monday through Friday, and set out to prove to myself that I had what it took to investigate the Greeks. The four other students in my class and I convened daily around a large, stately oak table on the first floor of a neo-Gothic building, complete with gargoyles and soaring stained-glass windows. On the first day of class, the legendary professor Bill McCulloh, a former Rhodes scholar from Ohio and then chair of the classics department, passed around a short survey that included the question *Why are you interested in studying ancient Greek?* My response, in retrospect, was embarrassingly nave: *In pursuit of esoteric knowledge.* I somehow envisioned ancient Greek to be an initiation, a rigorous course of study that would provide access to a hidden world, such as the Eleusinian Mysteries, famously secret rites and ceremonies held each year in honor of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone. Nietzsche was right. I hadnt the slightest clue as to who the Greeks and Romans were. But I possessed a burning desire to find out.