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Opinion Articles

Acting Out: a preliminary exploration of the ethical implications of using ancient Greek Tragedy as a means of Psychotherapy

Patrick Guy Browne Johnson [1]

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the ethical issues which arise with the employment of the performance or viewing of drama as a therapeutic process for 'mental illness'. Looking into two case studies, this piece concentrates on the use of drama therapy along an axis of risk which balances patient safety and potential benefits. As this is a vast area of practice, this paper chooses to focus on the performance and viewing of Greek tragedy as a 'complementary therapy'. In the public and academic psyche, Greek tragedy has held a prominent place in artistic explorations of 'mental ill-health' and thus it is unsurprising that it has been a point of origin for drama therapy. Reviewing the content of the plays, the settings of their modern performances, and the 'ideology' behind such performances will enable this paper to highlight some of the greater issues concerning the ethical implications of these examples of drama therapy. Citing performances from the 1950s to the present day, we will explore the competing risks to individuals that come with using ancient Greek drama as a potential means of therapy.

[1] Faculty of Classics, Ioannou Centre for Classical & Byzantine Studies, University of Oxford Oxford, UK

E-mail corresponding author: patrick.johnson@stx.ox.ac.uk

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1. Introduction

The plethora of therapies and techniques for treating individuals suffering from psychological illness is a vast and ever-growing field. In addition to the physiological ambitions of medical and pharmaceutical treatments and the 'talking' therapies of past (psychoanalysis) and present (CBT), artistic methods have had their own ascendancy (Yohanni, 2008; Gantt & Tinnin, 2009; Akesson et al., 2014; Green & Denov, 2019). These non-medical therapies take their place alongside other techniques to achieve results which benefit individuals who may find less clinical

environments helpful. It is key to maintain an awareness for the mixed nature of the primary impressions that potential participants may have on the relevance of such activities. As such, these prejudices and inclinations affect the sorts of individuals looking to take part in these less orthodox methods and this factor will influence the feedback given. An openness to non-medical therapies and the sorts of activities these may involve – sports (Saxena et al., 2005; Carless & Douglas, 2008; Staal & Jespersen, 2015; Callow et al., 2020), music (Lin et al., 2011; Witusik & Pietras, 2019; Rebecchini, 2021), art (McNiff, 2008; Leavy, 2009; Denov et al., 2012), literature (Mcardle & Byrt, 2001; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2021) – will vary from individual to individual (Jones, 2021). Likewise, the responses to the efficacy of these concepts vastly depend on the questions that are put to the participants. Due to the reciprocal relationship that has developed between the genre of ancient Greek tragedy and psychology over the last 200 years (Kaufman, 1966; Devereux, 1970; Sale, 1972; Lyketsos, 1980; Howie, 1986; Padel, 1992 & 1995; Gill, 1996; Hershkowitz, 1998; Evans et al., 2003; Armstrong, 2005; Riley, 2008; Harris, 2013; Most, 2013; Carroll, 2015; Crichton, 2016; Manfredi & Massardi, 2019; Settineri et al., 2019; Ustinova, 2020; Johnson, 2023; Myles & Johnson, 2023), the two case studies in this paper will be examples of the use of dramas from antiquity for therapeutic aims (either through dramatherapy proper or therapeutic theatre). Looking into the content of the Greek tragedies chosen, the environment of these modern performances, and the intentions underpinning these efforts (these last two features will interact with each other), the case studies will offer a range of ethical issues encountered by drama therapy. The idea of 'acting out' as a subconscious defence mechanism was conceptualised by Sigmund Freud and articulated by his daughter Anna (cf. Freud, 2018). This paper will not address defence mechanisms *per se* but it is relevant to recognise the importance of social norms in the defining of what types of behaviour are perceived as abnormal. A great amount of research has been done with regards to defence mechanisms, the evolution of how they have been perceived, and their impacts on clinical settings (cf. Julien, 1994; Bèkès et al., 2021; Settineri et al., 2019; Gori et al., 2023; Kahraman-Erkuş, 2020; Di Giuseppe & Conversano, 2022; Blanco et al., 2023).

2. The Dromokaiteio Psychiatric Hospital of Athens, 1958

The first example of the employment of Greek tragedy in drama therapy comes from the Dromokaiteio Hospital in Athens, Greece. This psychiatric hospital was founded in 1887 and their use of Greek tragedy began in 1959, when medical staff aimed to use the ancient dramas as a means of psychotherapy (Lyketsos, 1980 – the majority of the details concerning this case study is thanks to Constantine G. Lyketsos' 1980 paper which reviewed the hospital's use of

Greek tragedy). Lyketsos cites ancient sources (mostly Aristotle's *Poetics*) and recent scholars (Kitto, 1950; Kouretas, 1962a & 1962b; Lyketsos, 1953 & 1965) in support of the potential for Greek tragedy to present a workable form of psychotherapy for modern patients, mainly from an 'abreaction' perspective. The hospital recruited volunteers for the first iteration of the programme from chronic schizophrenics (cf. Jablensky, 2010 for the changing nature of this term) who had been institutionalised at the Dromokaiteio for 2 to 30 years. This group studied Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* under the supervision of a social worker, psychologist, and philologist (Lyketsos, 1980). For the performance of such works, a replica ancient Greek theatre was built in the grounds of the Dromokaiteio. Over the next few years, a number of plays were selected for studying and performance: Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*; Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *Elektra*; and Euripides' *Eumenides*. The majority of these plays are significant in their subject matter of mental instability, violence to self and others, suicide, and *anormal* thinking and behaviour. Although to a certain level, one could argue that Greek tragedy as a genre focuses on the portrayal of mental instability and decline (Gill, 1996; Baker, 2011; Most, 2013; Fletcher, 2021; Johnson, 2023), the plays that were selected indicate an effort by the clinical leads to pick poignant plots. This programme is the most clinical case study in this paper, thanks to its physical setting in a psychiatric hospital but also for its efforts to assess the impact of the Greek drama work by maintaining the involved patients' medication and daily routines throughout the process (Lyketsos, 1980).

The plays selected for the participants to study and perform raise a number of ethical questions. The play chosen for the programme's inaugural project – Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* – presents some uncomfortable parallels with the lives of the Dromokaiteio's patients. In the dramatic lead up to Aeschylus' tragedy, Zeus has overthrown his divine father to become the new king of the deities and hopes to destroy mankind in an effort to wipe the slate clean for his own rule. Prometheus in turn saves humanity by stealing fire and giving it to humans, as well as teaching them the arts (Aeschylus *Prometheus Vinctus* (*PV*) lines 7-8). For these actions, Zeus plans to punish Prometheus by chaining him to a rock for eternity (Aesch. *PV* 3-6). The play focuses mainly on Prometheus' suffering at the hands of arbitrary and unquestionable authority (Sommerstein [2009] translates Aesch. *PV* 8-11: 'For such an offence he *must assuredly pay his penalty* to the gods, to teach him that he *must accept the autocracy of Zeus* and abandon his human-loving ways' [my emphasis]). Many aspects poignantly reflect on the process of institutionalisation which would have been relevant for all members of the group (cf. Akther et al., 2019, for a recent study concerning the incarceration-like experiences of being sectioned). Also, the punishment of incarceration for *acting out* of the standards expected by authority seems

highly relevant for patients whose behaviour had been judged by contemporary society as a potential threat to themselves and/or others. The other plays selected by medical leads in the early years of the programme (Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *Elektra*; and Euripides' *Eumenides*) also include the topics of madness, self-harm, obsessive behaviour, hallucinations, episodes of psychosis, and suicide. Lyketsos accounts for one such example when a woman who had been committed to the hospital for killing her husband, took on the role of the chorus leader in Euripides' *Eumenides*. This saw her cast in the role of one of the 'Furies' (divine goddesses of vengeance) who were seeking revenge on behalf of Clytemnestra, the queen of Argos who murdered her own husband. It is significant that the Greek tragedies chosen contain themes of great relevance to the patients studying and performing them. One could criticise this as a severe lack of sensitivity and caution by the staff in charge: the poignancy of such material could be very distressing for patients and may trigger episodes of re-experiencing (Georgescu & Nedelcea, 2023). On the other hand, the relevance of the works may have enabled participants an outlet for articulating their experiences and reduced their feelings of isolation. The exposure to emotive material may have been a welcome stimulus in contrast with the anodyne environment of psychiatric hospitals. Moreover, the inclusion of art and culture outside of the hospital setting may have nurtured a sense of connection to the outer-world and normality for the participants (Chaidemenaki & Giannouli, 2023).

The performances of these tragedies appear to be the most significant catalyst for patient benefits in this programme. Lyketsos reports that a great sense of camaraderie was cultivated amongst the groups and that some patients also found the storyline and the characters of the dramas helpfully relatable. This sense of cross-cultural, a-temporal identification shared by cast-members with the characters of the Greek tragedies was another avenue for reducing feelings of isolation in the patients. The diverse responsibility and exposure of the roles allowed involvement for even the more reticent participants and, therefore, a range of patients were able to find their place in the production (Lyketsos, 1980). An invaluable improvement was reported with regards to how the patients saw themselves, particularly concerning their self-worth and capacity to function (Lyketsos, 1980). The productions of these dramas also had a vast impact on contemporary society's view of 'mental illness' and psychiatric facilities and their patients. (The importance of society's view in this reflects poignantly on the socially constructed nature of labels, such as 'mental illness', and their further stratifications in clinical settings, for example 'institutionalised schizophrenics'.) Thousands of people attended the performances at the replica theatre in the grounds of the Dromokaiteio and scenes were filmed by the Prime minister's office (Lyketsos, 1980). The wide and successful exposure which these performances

garnered ameliorated the public view of the worth and potential of individuals suffering poor mental health. In turn, this improved social view of the place of psychiatric patients in society benefited how participants viewed themselves (cf. Johnson, 2018 for similar feedback on a current drama therapy programme). Out of the practicalities of studying and performing these Greek dramas, many positive outcomes for both the participants and contemporary society are reported in Lyketsos' paper. Such a range of beneficial results reflects well on the decision to implement this form of psychotherapy, pushing ethical concerns into the background.

This programme appears to have been instigated with the intention of offering some sort of complementary therapy involving the arts for institutionalised patients. Whilst the motives of any project are difficult to objectively determine – even if explicitly stated – the clinical environment and patient-focussed approach of the Dromokaiteio's programme vouches for their therapeutic intentions. However, the launching of this project presented a huge risk to the participants, especially with regards to an absence of previous models and guidelines. (Muthuswamy (2013) highlights the responsibility of researchers to refrain from over-exposing participants to unnecessary risk despite the importance for studies to break new ground and advance understanding. Such concerns remain highly relevant to studies undertaken today.) No real research or reports of this sort of programme were available to the clinical team to enable them to follow best practice. This lack of practical guidance was accompanied by a theoretical approach constructed from a potentially dubious combination of ancient and modern authors who assert Greek tragedy's emotive worth as a means to an end. (Moreover, of the scholarship cited by Lyketsos in support of the *Dromokaiteio*'s programme, only one piece is published before the hospital started using Greek tragedy in 1959.) The opinions prioritised in this programme had been based on individual responses to and observations of Greek tragedy, filtered through a tendency for psychoanalytic thinking. Indeed, the participant range ('institutionalised schizophrenics') selected through the Dromokaiteio's programme presents another issue. This appears to have been a very high-risk group to trial a new therapy format with, particularly when working with no established models. Questions could be raised concerning the target group's psychological vulnerability or even their capacity to give consent to such an activity (Anderson & Mukherjee, 2007). One feels that it would be unlikely that the clinical leads of this project could have comprehensively informed potential participants of the risks of the programme without previous examples. Moreover, the (potentially reckless) primacy that Greek tragedy was given for such an experimental therapy reflects the cultural investment of the programme's directors in such dramatic material. One gets the impression that the high status of Greek tragedy rendered it an unquestionably suitable resource for drama therapy and explorations of

psychological trauma. (The cultural favour given to Greek tragedy may be discerned in the reported poor efficacy and relevance of other literary resources: such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in spite of the author's similar focus on mental decline and inspiration from classical storylines). This decision to import an artform made in the vastly different context of a unique society 2,500 years ago for 'therapeutic' purposes in 20th century Greece seems heavy-handed and insensitive. Lyketsos' report however does express an interest in 'objectivity' which is visible in the documentation of participants' positive and negative reviews of their experiences on the programme. With the privilege of hindsight and modern ethical standards, the instigation and practice of the Dromokaiteio's project appears to be ethically insensitive and incautious, yet it is significant to recognise that prominent psychologists and psychiatrists of the time were complimentary of the project and its outputs in both a theatrical and therapeutic sense (Milopoulou, 1978; Rees, 1962).

3. Bryan Doerries' Theater of War, 2009-

Bryan Doerries and Phyllis Kaufman instigated the *Theater of War* company in 2009 and it continues to produce plays tailored for the perceived societal issues of specific target audiences. The concept was founded from a belief that ancient Greek tragedy presented an effective format to 'help people suffer openly and communally' and mitigate the 'cumulative effects of prolonged trauma' that damage people and societies (Dorries, 2016). The productions present 'community-specific, theater-based projects' that aim to explore significant 'public health and social issues' (Theater of War Productions, 2024). With 31 ongoing projects addressing a plethora of difficult topics such as substance abuse, incarceration, and the psychological damage of war, *Theater of War* is an influential and widely-known programme which hopes to spark conversation and healing through the performance, witnessing, and discussion of drama. Although its dramatic inspirations grew out of ancient Greek tragedy, other 'classical' plays – such as Shakespeare's *King Lear* – and modern pieces are part of the company's repertoire of productions. Bryan Doerries remains the company's artistic director and the varying, eclectic cast ranges from war veterans and social workers up to famous and acclaimed professionals including the likes of Adam Driver and Karla Mosley. Doerries' vision focuses on delivering a scaled-back, sparse staging of dramatic readings of the original texts or his translations thereof. With ancient Greek tragedy acting as the programme's cornerstone, Doerries has translated and adapted the original texts for contemporary performance. With a spotlight on the dramatic *reading* of these texts, much emphasis is placed on the impact of the relevance, comprehensibility, and relatability of the language he has chosen. In his own words, 'all the translations of Greek tragedies within

these pages are mine. However, they are not literal word-for-word renderings of Greek into English, but rather adaptive attempts to convey the drive and action of Greek drama, clearly and directly, for contemporary readers' (Doerries, 2015, 8). This interpretive flair is visible where he builds upon Sophocles' greek: where Lloyd-Jones translates lines 205-207 as 'for now the dread, the mighty Ajax, harsh in his might, lies low, stricken by a turbid storm of sickness', Doerries' version engages his audience with modern-day concepts: 'he sits shell shocked inside the tent, glazed over, gazing into oblivion. He has the thousand-yard stare' (Fiely, 2009; Soph. *Aj.* 205-207; Lloyd-Jones, 1994). Doerries' translations have been praised as 'clipped, precision-tuned versions of Greek tragedy', capable of delivering 'intense, hard-driving performances' (McGuire, 2015). Focussing on the following Greek tragedies – Sophocles' *Ajax* & *Philoctetes*; Euripides' *Bacchae* – and their intended audiences, we shall review some of the ethical issues which arise.

Sophocles' *Ajax* is a foundational text in the repertoire and work of *Theater of War* (sometimes performed under Doerries' *Outside the Wire* company). Perceived by many as an eminent example of the portrayal of the psychological effects of combat on soldiers, Doerries is one of many to have read 'shell-shock', 'PTSD', or 'combat trauma' symptoms in Sophocles' work (cf. Wertenbaker, 2013; Lodewyck, 2015; Spring, 2017; Cole, 2019; Roberts, 2020 Fletcher, 2021). The plot centres around the Homeric hero Ajax who feels dishonoured by his fellow soldiers when he isn't awarded Achilles' weapons (the Greek epic tradition records this event – Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica*, bk. 5, 1-332). Devastated by this news, he enters a manic state and sets out to slaughter the Greek commanders and soldiery (Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica*, bk. 5, 352-486). The play begins when he comes to his senses, he realises that he has slaughtered a herd of sheep instead, and thus his humiliation is increased (Sophocles *Ajax* (*Aj.*) 284-333). Resolved to his shame, Ajax decides that his only option is to commit suicide (Soph. *Aj.* 356-480). Whilst different characters hope to dissuade Ajax from his intentions, including his concubine Tecmessa, he deceives them and ultimately kills himself (Soph. *Aj.* 485-595; 646-692; 852-865). Many elements of Ajax's behaviour have found resonance in the psychological damage exhibited in war veterans over many centuries and societies (Cole, 2019; Roberts, 2020). Ajax's disproportionate response to the slight of losing the contest for Achilles' weapons has been interpreted as a reflection of the fragility of his damaged self-view and an incapacity for trust. The slaughter of the herds has been viewed as symptomatic of psychosis, 'beserking', or re-experiencing combat behaviours. Ajax's indifference to Tecmessa's pleas reflect a blunted emotional capacity and lack of humanity, whilst his consequent suicide reveals his terribly low mood. The play does not focus on the actions of the events, but rather offers the space for Ajax

to exhibit his poor psychological condition and self-esteem. Sophocles' *Philoctetes* presents a seemingly, similarly well-suited play for veteran audiences. The story concerns the physical and psychological harm manifested in the figure of Philoctetes, who has been left to die by his comrades on a deserted island (Sophocles *Philoctetes* (*Phil.*) 254-284). The commander who was crucial in Philoctetes' abandonment, Odysseus, returns to the island with the young hero Neoptolemus as a prophecy has foretold that Troy can only be conquered by the Greeks with Phloctetes' bow (Soph. *Phil.* 1-69). Through coercion, pressure and persuasion, Odysseus forces Neoptolemus into tricking Philoctetes to agree to rejoin the fight against the Trojans (Soph. *Phil.* 70-134). The upsetting mental and physical state of Philoctetes reflects the reality of survival for many wounded veterans (Soph. *Phil.* 285-316). Philoctetes' abandonment and Odysseus' treatment of Neoptolemus finds modern parallels in the abuse of soldiers by unaccountable and inhumane military leadership practices and structures (Shay 1994; Shay et al., 2002). These plays are both highly relevant and relatable for the veteran and active-servicemen audiences which *Theater of War* performed them to. Whilst the upsetting experiences and behaviours staged present the risk of psychological distress for the audience members, Sophocles' works and Doerries' translations display the more relatable, victimised characters in a very sympathetic light.

However, another of *Theater of War*'s Greek tragedy productions – Doerries' translation of Euripides' *Bacchae* – may present us with an ill-fitting storyline for his purpose. *The Dionysus Project* made its debut performance in rural Kentucky in the Appalachians to a 'community ravaged by prescription medication and methamphetamine abuse' (Reid, 2012). By selecting certain scenes from Euripides' drama, Doerries' conception of the *Bacchae* centres on the potency and volatility of intoxication. These dramatic readings could be tailored for different audiences depending on their relationship with substance abuse. For example, in Appalachia, the personal and social damage of legal and illegal drug abuse and alcoholism were brought to the fore, whereas pilot performances of the play at UCLA focussed more on the 'correlation between creativity and substance abuse in Los Angeles' (Reid, 2012). *Theater of War*'s production of the *Bacchae* portrays the following storyline: Dionysus – the god of wine, festivity, religious ecstasy, and theatre – arrives in Thebes and sends all the citizens into the hills to drink and dance in his honour. Pentheus, the young king of Thebes, attempts to subdue the uninhibited debauchery and takes up arms against Dionysus. Yet when the king also 'tastes the drug that has ravaged his city', he too surrenders to its appeal and is brutally killed by his similarly intoxicated mother (Theater of War Productions, 2024). However, whilst uninhibited, abnormal behaviour is at the heart of the play's action, the reduction of the *Bacchae* to the dangers of

substance abuse seems to be an insensitive employment of Euripides' material. This angle misses a number of the play's key themes: religious reverence (Andújar, 2016), sex (Segal, 1978), societal tensions, gender roles (Rodríguez, 2014), power structures, humour, exoticism, family dynamics, non-substance-related mental illness – all topics which have garnered much more commentary than that of intoxication. Euripides' *Bacchae* is ambiguous in its portrayal of the agency of its characters and the motivations of the events that drive the plot. On the one hand, Pentheus can be read as a sacrilege despot who is rightly overpowered by the divine authority of Dionysus (Euripides *Bacchae* (*Bacch.*) 215-357; 476-505; 778-809). At other times presented as a victim, Pentheus appears to have been subjugated by Dionysus' religious influence and godly power (Eur. *Bacch.* 32-54; 810-861; 918-976). In Euripides' version, intoxicating substances do not play a particularly crucial role, rather the power of religious appeal, obeisance and possession drives the extreme behaviour of the human characters (Dodds, 2017). Like many Greek tragedies, Euripides' *Bacchae* has been labelled as provocative precisely due to the obscurity of any 'message', moral, or positive and negative agents (Versnel, 2015: 'Every reader gets the *Bacchae* he deserves. No two scholars agree on the play, let alone on the intention of its author'; Susanetti, 2016). In my view, maintaining this Euripidean ambiguity would align better with Doerries' ambition for community engagement, inviting a much more audience-driven, rather than author-led, interpretation. The relevance and relatability of the subject matter to its audience are, of course, crucial elements of any performance (Teasdale et al., 2021), and translation by its nature is an interpretive, creative process (Eco, 2003; Reynolds, 2011). However, there is an ethical tension with the favouring (or exploitation?) – to the point of mis-representation – of certain themes for Doerries' cathartic ambitions for *Theater of War*'s performances among their target communities.

The environment in which these performances are given are a crucial part of *Theater of War*'s work with audiences. Following each performance is what Doerries describes as a 'town hall' panel discussion in which the audience is invited to discuss how the material that has been read relates to their lived experience. Indeed, Doerries holds a nuanced view of the worth of the relevance of dramatic storylines: where the material need not exactly reflect the lives and concerns of the audience to inspire an emotional response (Sandhu, 2015), rather the opening of communal discussion and the sharing of individual stories amongst the group drives much of the therapeutic work. Moving and cathartic responses to these dramatic readings are well-recorded. One such example is recorded from a performance at the Juilliard School in New York when Jonathan Shay (a psychiatrist whose appreciation for classical literature informed his work with Vietnam veterans: cf. Shay 1994, 2014, Shay et al., 2002) questioned the therapeutic

efficacy of watching war-related ancient drama. US Army Major Joseph Gerarci was quick to defend the value of this format of performance arts 'therapy'. Similar testimonies about the healing commonalities, relevance, and empathy evoked by the dramatic materials and the constructive discussions enabled by the performances are well documented. However, this set-up does not encourage or enable all voices and views to be heard. Some audience members may not feel comfortable with offering their views in such a public environment, particularly if they are contradictory to the opinions of others (Smithson, 2000 discusses this phenomenon and its impact on research from focus groups). There is also the potential for the case that some individuals could not derive meaning from the performance. Consequent feelings of an inability to appreciate or understand the performed materials may inadvertently lead to damaged self-esteem and stronger feelings of isolation (Crowther, 2003, highlights how art can be used as an exclusionary tool). In the discussions that follow *Theater of War* performances, it would be natural to assume that the opinions of some individuals would be privileged over others (Laguna et al., 2005). The example stated above, concerning Shay and the US Army Major, is illuminating in this respect. The journalist's report affirms this phenomenon when stating that Major Gerarci's credentials – his medals and active tours – made his opinion more valuable than Shay's (Fiely, 2009). Although the environment cultivated as part of these stripped-back performances and 'town hall' discussions have the purpose of enabling the text to speak to the audience and consequently spur conversation amongst these individuals, nevertheless there are ethical issues that concern power structures and the right to knowledge and opinions.

The theoretical framework founding the *Theater of War* project(s) is outlined in Doerries' (2015) monograph *The Theatre of War*. After suffering a number of close personal tragedies, Doerries was experiencing compassion fatigue and, returning to the Greek tragedies he had studied during his education, found that these dramas were able to 'speak directly' to him (Doerries, 2015). Therefore, deducting that these tragedies should be able to address 'anyone who had lived the human experiences they described', Doerries clearly subscribes to the concept of a certain universality of human experience and responses (Doerries, 2015). In the performance of Greek tragedy, whilst the plays themselves are despondent and traumatic, there is 'healing and hope' in the individuals who have gathered 'to bear witness' to this suffering (Doerries, 2016). *Theater of War* does not present its productions as a means of formal psychotherapy, yet their performances are intended to initiate conversations on the visible and invisible traumas of conflict of many kinds, affecting some form of communal emotional healing. The intentions which this project was instigated with mark an effort to reduce isolation in communities and spark difficult debate on pressing issues through the evocative art of ancient Greek tragedy

(MacGregor, 2017). In a way, this constitutes a noble effort to open up discussions on taboo or painful topics whilst increasing access to the performing arts in communities where opportunities may be sparse. However, due to the distressing content of numerous Greek tragedies, productions can pose the risk for episodes of re-experiencing and psychological distress for audience members (cf. Otto et al., 2007, for a study which explored PTSD symptoms in mentally at-risk children after exposure to traumatic events). Nevertheless, Doerries acknowledges the volatility of this work, and does not shy away from the ethical tension here: 'That sense of overwhelming and unfolding emergency and helplessness is critical to achieving a shared discomfort. […] I'd much rather the actors deliver this emergency – even to the point where the audience may want to leave the room.' (Sandhu, 2015).

Doerries' employment of professional actors or volunteer performers reduces ethical issues surrounding consent which were present in the case of the Dromokaiteio psychiatric hospital. Similar to the Dromokaiteio's programme, there was meagre previous research and potentially little concern for it regarding the setting up of the *Theater of War* company and its productions. Doerries even states that 'in the early days of *Theater of War*, I followed a hunch about ancient Greek tragedies' (Doerries, 2015). This is a discomforting admission in the light of his lack of experience and training in psychological studies. Doerries' selection of dramatic materials – ancient Greek tragedy, the Bible (the Book of Job), Shakespeare's works and modern American classics – are indicative of the predominantly euro-centric, Western cultural investment of American higher education curricula. Once again, it seems that certain works are being favoured over others for their innate 'abilities' or heritage (although Doerries did produce a 15th century Noh play for survivors of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan). Whilst *Theater of War*'s ever-growing repertoire may be encouraging for the access and relevance of productions with regards to diverse audiences, nonetheless it reflects a process of theoretical dilution concerning the power of ancient Greek tragedy which inspired this programme (Doerries, 2015). The limitation of feedback to the solely positive is another ethically concerning feature. Since the company needs to market itself, it is understandable that complimentary comments are centre-stage for the productions (see Keller et al., 2016, for a discussion of the ethical issues associated with the commercialisation of clinical and academic research in the field of pharmaceuticals). However, the reduced ambit for criticism questions whether wider regulation should be enforced by independent bodies to make sure that these productions are presenting as little risk to audiences as possible. Yet, perhaps such endorsement has already been shown to *Theater of War*'s work, since they have received large financial support and backing from the US government. Large grants from the US Army have been the cause of much moral criticism for Doerries' company, being accused of operating as war propaganda (Sandhu, 2015) or providing

vital (yet unregulated) grief-work and recovery for individuals who should be entitled to more from the government.

4. Concluding Comments

The employment of ancient Greek tragedy as a means of psychotherapy engenders a number of ethical issues. As with ethics applications in the field of research, the balance between risk and reward is a subjective, blurred area in which different priorities compete. As evidenced by the two case studies that have been cited, all decisions concerning the dramatic material selected, the performers cast, the environment productions take place in and the theory-related motivations behind such efforts come with their own associated hazards and opportunities. With the *Dromokaiteio*'s programme, they were delving into uncharted territory whilst recruiting high-risk participants to perform plays whose main themes were very pertinent for patients. Nevertheless, this programme permitted hospitalised patients the opportunity to produce something, building relationships with others and promoting a sense of achievement and boosted self-esteem. *Theater of War*'s work is complicated again by a lack of prior models and theoretical basis as well as its need to market itself. With the growth of its fame, the dilution of Doerries' originary theories, hand in hand with the possible exploitation of art for sometimes clumsily insensitive target audiences (e.g., *Prometheus Bound* performed in US prisons), undermines its ethical claims. Yet, Doerries' productions and the discussions that follow have received much praise in their ability to address painful and taboo topics, in an effort to reduce stigma and isolation within society. With both of these studies, there is no accompanying qualitative data to analyse alongside participant feedback. Such data would give us a better idea of the overall impacts of these programmes without the concern of the privileging of positive feedback over negative outcomes. In recent years, the publishing of a number of systematic reviews of clinical studies, and particularly the quantitative data gathered, highlights an ongoing interest in the efficacy of dramatherapy (cf. Feniger-Schaal & Orkibi, 2020; López-González et al., 2021; Melvin et al., 2024). Although the ethics regarding any project will be subject to diverse views from different people, societies and time periods, with the increase of its practice, I believe that the employment of ancient Greek tragedy for therapeutic purposes should be subject to much greater ethical scrutiny. Good intentions have taken this area a long way, yet a greater rigour would ensure a greater quality, accountability, and hopefully efficacy of this and related (potentially) therapeutic practices.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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