

GCSE (9–1)

Set Text Guide

CLASSICAL GREEK

J292

For first teaching in 2016

Set Text Guide

Verse Literature B - Euripides

Version 2

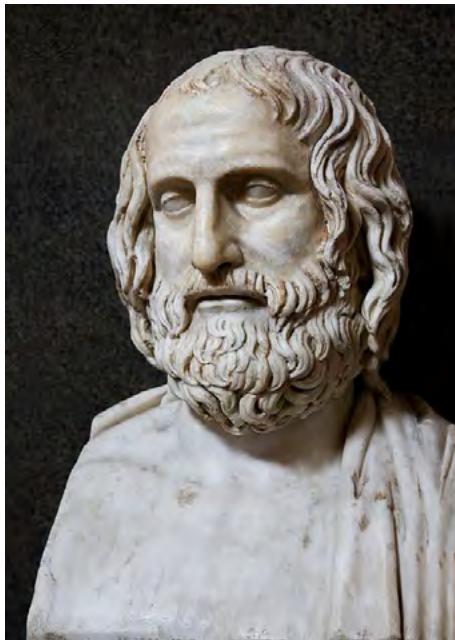
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Euripides

Euripides was the latest of the three most celebrated Attic tragedians, after Aeschylus and Sophocles, and a contemporary of the comic playwright Aristophanes. Born in the 480s on Salamis, he spent most of his life in Athens and was the author of at least 88 plays, 19 of which survive. He died in 406 in Macedon, at the court of King Archelaus. After his death he became one of the most celebrated tragedians of his era and his influence on later Greek and Roman playwrights was profound. Common themes in Euripides' plays include the terrible impact of war, female psychology, the battle between the sexes, and the capricious nature of the gods.



Euripides

Alcestis

Alcestis was first produced in 438 BC, making it one of the earliest surviving plays by Euripides. Its ambiguous tone, both tragic and comic, has earned it the label of a "problem play".

The play is set in Thessaly at the court of King Admetus, who lives with his wife Alcestis and their son Eumelus, as well as his elderly father Pheres. It is a drama of life, love and death; of dying wishes and broken promises; and of a magical world in which gods seem to walk on earth and the dead come back to life.

Alcestis is one of the most unusual of Euripides' surviving works. We know that it was performed in 438 BC not as one of the three tragedies but in the place of the satyr play. This may explain some of its surprising features, like the buffoonish character of Heracles, and the happy ending. It is a good reminder of how Greek drama was varied and flexible, and not always strictly bound by formal conventions.

Talking Points

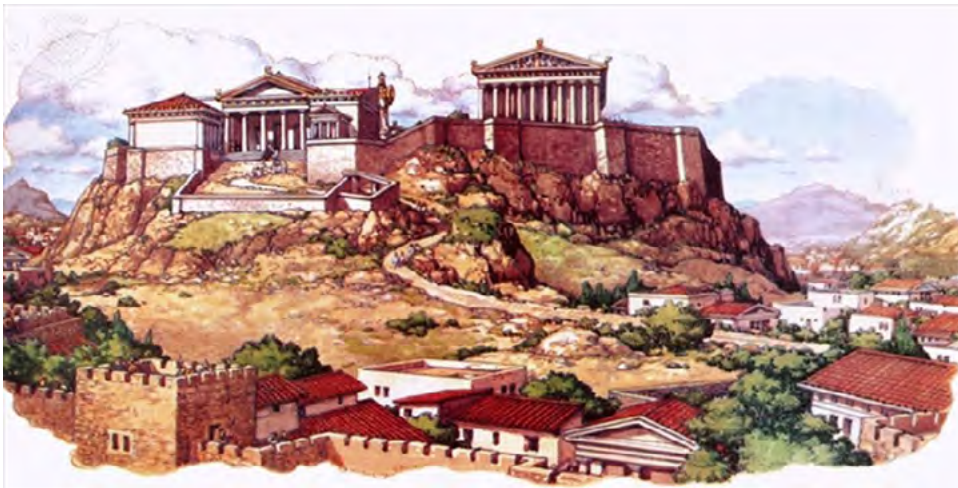
Talking Point	Explanation and Teacher Notes
<p><i>Which other dramas, Greek and more widely, do we know of as 'tragedies'?</i></p>	<p>Some students may be aware of other Classical tragedies, from <i>Agamemnon</i> to <i>The Bacchae</i>; through Shakespearean tragedies and on to Corneille, Racine and other European dramatists; and on to modern writers such as Arthur Miller.</p> <p>The contemporary fashion for adapting and modernising older tragic dramas may be explored - some students will have seen some, and a quick trawl of theatre websites such as the National Theatre will usually find current examples - and it is worth noting that later writers such as Anouilh, Shakespeare, Seneca and of course other Roman and Greek playwrights were very happy to revise and revisit preceding tragedies.</p>
<p><i>Thinking beyond drama, what does 'tragedy' mean to us? How many different ways do we use the word?</i></p>	<p>A potentially vast discussion! Possible areas to explore are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use in non-dramatic literature (Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy, John Steinbeck, John Green...) • Use by the media; especially in news stories • Use in public statements; especially where accidental or untimely death is involved • Use in everyday conversation; is the word 'tragic' being devalued? The Bee Gees song and the cover by Steps are worth noting. (Note that complaints about 'language inflation' are nothing new, and words are always changing their meaning!)

CONTEXT

Fifth-century Athens

In the fifth century democratic Athens was at the height of its powers. This century is often called 'the Golden Age' of Athens. The city was immensely wealthy, drawing tribute from the many other Greek city states that formed its empire. Under the direction of the statesman Pericles, the Athenians built the lavish architecture of the Acropolis, including the Parthenon, the great temple dedicated to Athens' patron goddess Athene. The cult statue of Athene inside the Parthenon incorporated over a metric ton of gold – the weight of an elephant.

Athens was governed by a system of direct democracy, but only adult male citizens were able to vote on the laws and other political resolutions. Many of the most famous figures from ancient Greece were active at this time: the philosopher Socrates; Hippocrates, 'the father of medicine' (from whom we get the Hippocratic Oath, a form of which doctors still swear today); the historians Herodotus and Thucydides; and the playwrights Aristophanes, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.



The Acropolis, or ancient citadel, of Athens as it looked in the 5th century

Athenian Drama

Almost all the Greek drama that survives for us comes from Athens. Plays were performed in outdoor theatres, by actors – all men – who wore elaborate costumes and masks. There were three main dramatic genres, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satyr Play. Each had their own set of conventions, including a particular type of mask for the actors to wear. Like modern opera, Greek plays were written to be performed by a Chorus, a group of around 12 performers who moved and danced together, and a smaller cast of up to three principal actors. The Chorus represented a group of characters with a particular viewpoint on the action, sometimes as in the case of *Alcestis*, a group of elderly men who might show a mixture of wisdom and short-sightedness.

In the 5th century BC, tragedies explored the darker aspects of human nature usually through mythological themes and characters, familiar from the Homeric epics (like *Agamemnon*) or from other myths (like *Medea*, or *Alcestis*.)

Comedies were more rooted in the present-day, showing up the oddities or ridiculousness of politics by presenting the audience with a world turned upside down.

In Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* (*Εκκλησιάζουσαι*), for example, the audience is presented with an Athens governed by women – utterly unthinkable for the time!

Satyr plays featured choruses of satyrs, the half-man, half-goat followers of Dionysos. Although, like tragedies, they were often about mythological themes, they were high-spirited, raucous and bawdy.



Theatrical performance in Ancient Greece

The City Dionysia

Euripides' plays were performed at the city (or Great) Dionysia (in Greek, **Διονύσια τὰ ἐν Ἄστει ἢ τὰ Μεγάλα**). This was one of the most important religious festivals in the Athenian calendar. It was held every March or April in honour of the god Dionysos, and took the form of drama competitions between different playwrights, who were each commissioned to produce three tragedies and a more light-hearted satyr play.

The Dionysia is believed to go back as far as the 6th century BC, and the first tragedy presented there was said to have been by the actor and playwright Thespis. In the 5th century BC it had developed into an elaborate, five-day festival in which Athens showed off her cultural and imperial wealth, and the wealthiest citizens paid for public entertainments out of their own pockets. The archon (chief magistrate) would appoint a number of the city's men as "Chorus-leaders" (**χορηγοί**) to commission and pay for the playwright, actors and choruses.

Days Three to Five (**οἱ ἀγῶνες** – the Contests) were devoted to the dramatic contests. Tragedies took place in the morning. Each company had a morning to perform a 'tetralogy' of four plays: three tragedies, followed by a satyr play. Comedies were performed in the afternoon. The plays were judged and ranked.

We know that the tetralogy containing *Alcestis* came second when it was first performed at the Dionysia of 438 BC. Euripides, in fact, only won first prize four or five times in his career, compared with Aeschylus's 13 and possibly over 20 for Sophocles. Unfortunately the vast majority of Greek drama has been lost; bear in mind that we can only read Classical books because they have been copied and distributed through the ages, which - especially before the invention of the printing press - was expensive and difficult. We may never have a chance to read the plays that the Athenian judges preferred!



Theatrical performance in Ancient Greece

Talking Points

Talking Point	Explanation and Teacher Notes
<p><i>Theatre was an essential part of life in 5th Century Athens, as it was part of a huge festival attended very widely. Is this comparable to theatre today?</i></p>	<p>The largest theatres in the UK can seat up to 3500. The Theatre of Dionysos could accommodate around 17,000 spectators (the demographic is the matter of debate, however, with differing opinions on the proportion of slaves and women who actually attended.) Out of a fifth-century population of up to 300,000 this makes about 5-6% attendance at a single live event. For comparison, the same percentage of London's population today is approaching half a million; Wembley Stadium, the UK's largest, can fit about 90,000. So proportionately speaking, the theatre festival in Athens was attended by five times more people than our biggest comparable live events. (However, to consider pure popularity, at its height The X Factor drew an audience of about 10% of the UK population!)</p> <p>As an extension task, ask students to research the most popular types of live entertainment available today, and consider the range and variety of these.</p>
<p><i>Greek drama was usually quite clearly divided into Comedy, Tragedy and Satyr plays. Do we see the same divisions in modern drama?</i></p>	<p>Look at the upcoming season at a local theatre - listings will be available online. How easy is it to divide these into categories? Note that currently, 'genre-crossing' is considered a strong selling point for theatre and film. When Shakespeare blends features of comedy and tragedy, one serves to enhance the other; but (for example) <i>King Lear</i> remains clearly a tragedy. Can the same be said of (for example) the recent play <i>King Charles III</i>?</p>
<p><i>Given that many people today consider Euripides's plays to be some of the very best ever written, his small handful of victories at the City Dionysia seems strange to us. Did the judges get it wrong? Is there always a 'right answer' when judging artistic competitions?</i></p>	<p>Students may offer strong opinions and many examples of injustices! Furores over bribery, partisan voting and prejudice are common, especially in the high-profile Oscars, BAFTAs, etc. Bear in mind that the Athenian judges appear to have been judging the whole production rather than just the play itself, so a poor actor or sloppy Chorus may have counted against even a play as fine as <i>Alcestis</i>. Moreover, if the tragedies and satyr play were judged together as a complete set, perhaps one of the tragedies let the set down?</p> <p>Perhaps most importantly, we must remember the plot of Aristophanes's <i>The Frogs</i>: Dionysos visits Hades to bring back to Athens the playwright who can best advise and teach the city. He is not (for example) looking for the author of the plays with the most vivid action or strongest emotions. Perhaps a playwright could only expect to win the competition if their plays were felt to offer the best advice, or at least sit best with the prevailing attitudes? Consider the popularity of novelty acts in talent shows; occasionally the audience vote might lie with a joke act, but the judges tend to uphold the integrity of their own artistic or moral standards.</p>

THE TEXT

The plot of *Alcestis*

In the play's prologue, the god Apollo describes how Zeus once condemned him to be a servant among men on earth, but King Admetus showed him hospitality. In return Apollo tricked the Fates into allowing Admetus to escape death by giving another person's life to the Underworld instead. His parents refused to give up their lives, so when the time came for him to die his devoted wife Alcestis volunteered her life instead.



Apollo

As the play opens, Death appears and accuses Apollo of trickery and cheating; after an inconclusive argument Apollo leaves, prophesying that 'a man' (Heracles, easily identified by the reference to his eighth labour) will take Alcestis from Death by force.

Alcestis is carried off by Death, but help comes in the form of the hero Heracles, an old friend of Admetus (they had travelled together on the *Argo*). Heracles, on his way to perform his eighth labour, is portrayed here as a buffoonish, larger-than-life boozier; he wrestles Death and forces him to give up Alcestis. He returns her to Admetus, and the play – unusually – has a happy ending.



The Farnese Hercules (The Farnese Heracles)
Created by Lisippo

The death of Alcestis lines 280-393

In the section you will be reading, Alcestis addresses Admetus just before she dies, explaining why she has decided to sacrifice herself: she prefers to die herself than have to live without him. She asks him to promise that he will not marry again, and Admetus agrees. He promises that he will live in sorrow without her, and says that if there was anything he could do to persuade the gods of the Underworld to release her, he would. The Chorus promises to stand by Admetus, and finally Alcestis dies.

Themes and Motifs

Mortality

Drama, like all forms of art, often finds itself exploring questions of life and death. Alcestis confronts the issue head-on, with the twist that the characters have made deliberate choices about whether (or not) to give their lives for another. By using the mythical story and bringing the gods onstage, Euripides could place his characters in an extreme situation that is not 'realistic', and explore its implications. Remember that 'life expectancy' was very different in ancient Athens; although many people lived to 80 and beyond, death at younger ages (and especially in early childhood) was far more common than in most parts of the world today.

Family

Alcestis wishes for Admetus not to marry again, saying that she does not wish for a stepmother to join the family. In her view, it seems, none but the birth-mother will do to bring up a daughter; by contrast, her son will have Admetus as a guardian and role-model.

Mourning

Greek society had its own ways of dealing with death, including ritualised mourning. In his speech, Admetus promises the various ways that he will show his sadness once Alcestis is gone, as well as promising to obey Alcestis's dying wish that he should not take another bride. This will go on to be a key theme in the rest of the play, as both promises will be challenged.

Stylistic Features

Here are just some of the ways that Euripides crafts his poetry. Often you will find these techniques in combination. Whenever you think about a poet's style you should ask yourself why the writer might choose to use a particular technique; the technique is only interesting if you can explain how it enhances the meaning.

Choice of vocabulary What is the difference between 'great sadness', 'bitter grief' and 'abject misery'? Which of these is the best translation of **πένθος λυπρόν** when the Chorus speak (369-70)? Euripides chose his words extremely carefully, giving subtle emphasis to particular ideas, and we can ask ourselves exactly what the resulting effect is.

Word order As you know, the order of words in Greek is much more free than in English. Euripides is usually free to choose which word comes first in each line and each phrase, for example; these are 'emphatic' positions. When Admetus starts a line with **παύσω** (343), he seems more forceful in his decision to stop merry-making at his court. When he ends his observation about seeing our loved ones in dreams with the word **χρόνον** he draws attention to the aspect of time (i.e. it is pleasant no matter how long we see them for.)

Repetition Many poetic effects (including alliteration and assonance) rely on repeating something: a sound, a word, or an idea. Repetition reinforces the idea behind the words, and some times literally 'acts out' the thoughts of a character. Alcestis emphasises how much of her daughter's life she will be missing by repeating the negative words (two of them in emphatic position at the start of the line!): **οὐ... οὔτε... οὔτ'** (317-8); indeed the latter part of her speech features many negative statements.

Glossary of Key Terms

alliteration

The repetition of similar consonant sounds.

anaphora

A repeated structure.

apostrophe

Addressing a divine character, usually in a moment of high emotion.

assonance

The repetition of similar vowel sounds.

catharsis

The feeling of relief that audience members may experience through watching an emotionally charged tragedy. (**κάθαρσις** literally means 'purification').

chorus

A group of characters in a play who comment on but are not directly involved in the action. In *Alcestis*, the Chorus is made up of old men. Their choral 'songs' employ a variety of different 'metres' (or 'rhythmic schemes'), often extremely complex.

iambic trimeter

The name of the poetic metre that Euripides' dialogue is written in: essentially a sequence of alternating light and heavy syllables (each pair an iambic 'foot') organised into three 'metra' in each line, each containing two feet. For comparison, Shakespeare's verse is largely set in iambic pentameter, with five feet per line.

pathos

A sense of pity that audience members may experience through watching specific events (note that pathos usually applies to individual moments or situations, unlike the more general feeling of catharsis, above).

rhetorical question

A question that is asked without expecting an answer, often because the only possible answer is very obvious, or because the question is unanswerable. Both Alcestis and Admetus use these to great effect.

stasimon

An interlude, or choral song, in which the Chorus comments on the action.

stichomythia

Quick-fire dialogue; a sequence where alternating lines are given to alternating characters. The final section of your passage, the dialogue between Admetus and Alcestis, uses stichomythia; as does the argument between Apollo and Death early in the play. In Greek **στιχομυθία** literally means "line-speech" (**στίχος + μῦθος**).

tragedy

In Greek, tragedy means "goat song" (**τράγος** = goat). The reasons for this are disputed, but legend has it that Thespis, the first actor to perform at the Dionysia, was rewarded with a goat.

Talking Points

Talking Point	Explanation and Teacher Notes
<p><i>Trading lives: if it was possible to swap one life for another, as Apollo has promised to Admetus, how would we choose when to do so? Or would we simply never take up the offer?</i></p>	<p>A potentially vast discussion that will probably continue long outside the classroom! It is worth considering that question seems different in two different ‘worlds’: the world of the play and these characters, and the world in which we live today.</p> <p>Debates about life and death today are often framed in issues of the ‘quality of life’ (where it might be proposed that the life of a person who in a permanent and irrecoverable coma) could ethically be traded for another, as opposed to the ‘sanctity of life’ (where it may be held that all life is of equal value, and any attempt to weigh the worth of one existence against another is by definition immoral).</p> <p>Alcestis, in her speech, seems to speak largely in terms of quality of life: she suggests that Admetus’s parents might have made a more just trade due to their advanced age, and on a very different tack she seems to feel that her life without Admetus would not be worth living.</p> <p>In terms of the world of the play, the question is made more complex by the Admetus’s that he will dwell with Alcestis, after his eventual death, in the Underworld.</p>
<p><i>The wishes of the dead: should we always respect the wishes of those who have died, or are there occasions when this is impractical or even wrong?</i></p>	<p>It goes without saying that students should want to read the rest of the play more than fleetingly, and will find their discussions of the play thereby become much more interesting! In the case of Alcestis’s wish for Admetus not to remarry, students may have strong reactions to her opinions of stepmothers and her very pessimistic view of the children’s prospects. Is Admetus bound any more strongly to his dying wife’s wishes by the fact that she has actively given her life for him? Does it complicate this situation that Admetus expects that some day he will meet Alcestis again when he does eventually go down to the Underworld?</p> <p>There are echoes in many later stories of the dilemma that Admetus will face, and it seems counter-intuitive that the best imaginable outcome should come from Admetus disobeying his promise! At the end of the play, does Admetus in fact do the ‘right’ thing?</p>

Talking Points

Talking Point	Explanation and Teacher Notes
<p><i>Stylistic writing: which of Euripides's techniques, both dramatic and verbal, do we find most effective? Which are still in use today?</i></p>	<p>An ongoing discussion that will probably resurface throughout study of the text. Students will recognise many techniques from their studies of other literature, most especially Classical works where the same analytical terms are often used. It is worth reinforcing the point that Euripides's language was not 'realistic' but ritualised, most obviously in the choral songs but also in the speeches and stichomythia (Shakespeare is, as so often, a worthy comparison.) In terms of dramatic performance, remember also that although Greek theatres had remarkably good acoustics, speech would still have to be loud and declamatory to be heard by such a large audience, and the positioning of critical words at the start and ends of lines would likely be even more emphatic than (for example) in the poetry of Vergil.</p> <p>Consider also that physical gesture probably played a large part. Students may rightly notice that the children are clearly present onstage during the scene being studied - this was of course a deliberate choice by Euripides. What are the implications for the emotional impact of this scene? Would the scene be more or less effective without them there?</p>

ACTIVITIES AND STUDENT TASKS

Activities

Introducing Greek Tragedy

National Theatre

<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/backstage/greek-theatre>

Explore videos introducing Greek Tragedy, with particular focus on the National Theatre's recent production of Sophocles's *Antigone*. Note the links on the right of the page to further videos on particular aspects of the drama.

Exploring the metre and techniques of Greek poetry

Armand D'Angour

<http://www.armand-dangour.com/mnemonics-for-greek-metre/>

Explore the different rhythms used by Greek poets including Euripides, through English rhymes that approximate to the Greek metres. Find the Iambic Trimeter on the page and identify how the scansion applies.

Alcestis in the original language

Barnard/Columbia Ancient Drama Group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmA6z2YAeLE>

Watch a production of *Alcestis* in Ancient Greek, with English subtitles. You may wish to locate and focus on the section that you are reading in Greek.



Fresco depicting Admetus and Alcestis, from Basilica in Herculaneum, Campania, Roman Civilization, 1st Century

Student task sheets

Title of activity: Storyboarding	
Introduction to the task	Create a film storyboard for (part of) one of the speeches, or for the stichomythia. Rather than simply having a single close-up of the character speaking, consider showing reaction shots of the other characters (don't forget the Chorus), or going inside a character's head to show their memories or thoughts about the future. What exactly would the setting look like? Who would be your ideal casting choices? Will you use music?
The activity	Students will have a range of approaches and may have distinctive ideas of film style and technique. This is very much to be encouraged - some may aim for very naturalistic filming while others expand on the fantastical and supernatural elements! The aim of the task is familiarity with the material; encourage students to be precise about which words should be heard in which shot. This task will easily absorb large amounts of time, so it is best to restrict the selection to under ten lines at first.
Extension activities/questions:	Depending on time, resources and student interest, this activity could be extended to other sections of the text, and students with a particular enthusiasm might even make their own short film (YouTube is awash with student-made films of Classical texts, all of them - in their own way - brilliant).

Student task sheets

Title of activity: Staging <i>Alcestis</i>	
Introduction to the task	Plays were written to be performed, not just read off the page. Choose a short section of the text, ideally working from your own translation, and find a way of staging this section.
The activity	<p>Results will depend hugely on student enthusiasm and experience, but it is worth giving every student (no matter how apprehensive) the opportunity to perform a little of Euripides's text in character. Key points are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Especially at first, keep the sections short. 2. The stichomythia will be generally more rewarding to work on than the speeches. 3. Encourage students to learn by heart the section that they are performing, before they attempt to stage it (this is a good way to encourage students to take the task seriously, if they first must put in the effort to learn the text in their own time.) 4. While (for example) one pair of students play Alcestis and Admetus, have others react as the Chorus or be present as the children. Encourage the Chorus to listen closely to the speaking characters and show (principally without speaking!) their reactions. 5. If (or when) it veers into slapstick or melodrama, embrace this. As long as the students remain focused on the text and are paying attention to what is being said, this is all to the good. This activity is about familiarity and enjoyment rather than high art!
Extension activities/questions:	Experiment with masks and costume, and, if a large performance space is available, with speaking the text at a pace and volume that fills the venue. Students may be struck by how wording that sometimes seems long-winded in the classroom turns out to be entirely appropriate in a reverberant hall.

Student task sheets

Title of activity: Exploring the whole play	
Introduction to the task	You are reading just one part of the play in Greek. Read the rest of the play and make a summary, noting especially the structure of the play with action alternating with the choral songs.
The activity	Although plenty of summaries are available online, there is no substitute for students making their own. Divide the play up into one part for each student and collate their summaries into a wall chart, timeline, storyboard or webpage. Adding pictures of each character or situation will help memory, as will (for example) making the structure clear by putting the choral songs on a different background.
Extension activities/questions:	Working from the class summary, condense the play into a 5-minute version (with each speech reduced to a maximum of three short sentences, stichomythia into three exchanges, and choral songs into just three words or three physical gestures) and perform it.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

For teachers

<http://www.actorsofdionysus.com>

Company touring productions of Greek drama, particularly notable for their long-running version of *Lysistrata*.

<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/backstage/greek-theatre>

Great source of information and resources on Greek Theatre produced by the National Theatre.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>

Very useful website with many Classical texts, including *Alcestis*, in the original language and in translation. When looking at the Greek, clicking on a word brings up information (including parsing and dictionary entries). Not as helpful for a GCSE student as a targeted vocabulary list, but valuable nonetheless.

Taplin, O. (2002) *Greek Tragedy In Action*. Routledge.

For students

http://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/background/24a_p1.html

A good introduction to Greek Tragedy in its Athenian context. Note the “Next” button at the bottom.

<http://www.cambridgegreekplay.com>

Information on the Greek plays performed (in ancient Greek) in Cambridge, with details and photos of recent productions, and a wider history.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7sdZQ1BDs0>

Footage of the National Theatre’s 1984 production of *The Oresteia*, in a new version by Tony Harrison, that uses masks and music.

http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_alcestis.html

A short introduction to *Alcestis*.



Bloomsbury Academic

Resources for OCR specifications for first teaching September 2016

Language support:

Greek to GCSE: Part 1: Revised edition for OCR GCSE Classical Greek (9–1)

John Taylor

9781474255165

Greek to GCSE: Part 2: Revised edition for OCR GCSE Classical Greek (9–1)

John Taylor

9781474255202

Set texts:

OCR Anthology for GCSE Classical Greek

Edited by Clive Letchford & Judith Affleck

9781474265485

Publication of print titles is scheduled for April and May 2016

A website of supplementary online resources is planned

All details may be revised at any time



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