



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Classics Scholar Peter Meineck on How Greek Theater Trains Better Citizens

The NYU's professor elaborates on how to better understand and live through today's social and moral turmoil by learning from the great theater works of antiquity. Meineck illustrates what Greek drama can teach us about understanding trauma, being informed voters, embracing difference, and what we should, and shouldn't, expect from leaders and heroes.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly, at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us, visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholars schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today, it's a pleasure to welcome Dr. Peter Meineck, who holds the endowed chair of Professor of Classics in the Modern World at New York University, and is Honorary Professor of Humanities at the University of Nottingham in the UK. He specializes in ancient performance, cognitive theory, Greek literature and culture, and humanities public programming. In addition to his academic career, Dr. Meineck has worked extensively in professional theatre, founding Aquila Theatre, and has directed and produced over 50 productions of classical plays. And if that's not enough, he also serves as a fire chief at the Bedford Fire Department in New York.

Welcome, Professor.

Peter Meineck: Hi, how are you? Good to be here.

Lawrence: Oh, good to have you with us, and of course I'm gonna ask you about the fire department, but I don't want to start with that. That must be the novelty question you get asked. But I want to take you back to a little bit of your childhood, primary, secondary education and really, let's start with was there a moment when you thought to yourself, "If I can swing it, I want to make my life and my career in classics and with respect to classical drama?"

Meineck: That's a great question. I mean, I was always interested in ancient history, and growing up, I grew up in England, and you're actually surrounded by Roman history. My mother was a teacher, an elementary school teacher, so she would always indulge me if I wanted to go see a Roman villa or look at a fresco. I was kind of a geek like that. But I was the first in my family to go to university. My dad was a builder. And I had an uncle who was an archaeologist, and so originally I was fascinated with archaeology, so from the age of about eight, I would go and work on digs and just get involved on the archaeological side.

And then really I sort of set that aside and had different ambitions and I embarked on a military career. I joined the Royal Marines when I was 16 and I signed on for 22 years, and I thought, "Well, I'm gonna be a Royal Marine commander." They found my mind and sent me to university, and I decided there, "Well, why don't I study the ancient world? Because that's what I'm interested in." And that kind of rekindled everything all over again. And that's where classics came in, because I didn't have the benefit of Greek and Latin in my secondary school, so I did this sort of intensive program at University College London to sort of bathe me in Greek and Latin, which was very traumatic, but by the end of it I had a real love for Greek, in particular.

Lawrence: A bootcamp in ancient Greek and Latin.

Meineck: Yeah. Yeah.

Lawrence: So, let's talk a little bit about Greek drama. Do you think, in all the work you've done in drama in the classroom and in production, is Greek drama meant to be read, or is it meant to be heard and seen?

Meineck: It's absolutely not meant to be read. In fact, the Greeks had no word for reading, and if you did read, you read aloud to somebody else. They would have thought you were crazy if you just sat there and read in silence. The term for reading is to recall or to recite. So, certainly Greek drama of the fifth century is a performative element, but of course we have the texts, right? That's what we have. And we have other material evidence, too.

A lot of my work has been about how do you find a new way to come to the text that takes all the tools of philology, but also brings in the performative aspects? You know, Aristotle and Plato says that, even though Plato kind of rails against theatre. Well, what he calls bad theatre...

Lawrence: Right.

Meineck: They both believe it has a function in kind of training the minds of a democratic audience. And my argument is that it's actually training you towards empathy. It's training you to think about other people's situations and other people's positions, which makes you a better voter, makes you a better democrat. I think that all of this fits together quite nicely into why the Athenians in particular, with their radical democracy, really invested in theater, spent more on theater than they did on defense, which is amazing when you think about it. So I think this was a very kind of powerful force, and it can still have that power today, I think.

Lawrence: So, thinking about the relevance of all this, before we get to today, as it changes over time, how do you see some of the themes as they change over time? I think of Antigone as a dramatic exposition of what we would call civil disobedience in antiquity, and then when Jean Anouilh needs an emblem of civil disobedience during the time of the Second World War and the occupation of France by the Third Reich, he writes Antigone. And of course, Antigone makes a big comeback in the '60s in this country. How does it evolve over time? Is it all of us going back to the same well and drawing from that well?

Meineck: It's the open-endedness and ambiguity of Greek drama that makes it so powerful, is it puts the questions to you, and this is again its kind of democratic side. It says, "I'm not gonna do the work for you. Here's the tragic problem. What would you do?" I work a lot on the material with veterans, and refugees, and it's incredible how people who've been in traumatic situations or have to face those kind of decisions really relate to ancient drama. They understand they're not being spoon fed. It's asking them to kind of solve these impossible questions and I think that's why it survives. I think that's why it's so refreshing.

I mean, I think Antigone is always around. I think the play now we're all talking about is Oedipus Tyrannus, or Oedipus the King, because it's about a leader trying to solve a plague. And that's what's amazing about Greek drama, is just when you think you know them, suddenly something happens, and you see them in a completely new light. And I think that's what makes them a classic work, because they continue to have this relevance, and it's cross-cultural, as well. I've worked on Greek drama all over the world, with all kinds of people, and there's something very elemental about them and powerful that still works.

Lawrence: To a certain extent, it's which aspect of these characters are we relating to. There's the Oedipus of Oedipus Rex, there's the Oedipus of Oedipus at Colonus, who I always... I have to say I found more appealing, because the Oedipus of Oedipus Rex to me always seemed like someone who got trapped, and I know what it feels like sometimes to be trapped by fate, but on some level it just doesn't seem fair to hold him accountable for what was gonna happen to him regardless. He didn't intend to marry his mother. He married the person who turns out to be his mother. He didn't intend to kill his father; he killed the person who turned out to be his father.

And that kind of a push in pull in Oedipus at Colonus seems to me a clear resonance of that more sinned against than sinning idea, as opposed to a simple story about someone whose own sense of self gets him beyond this trouble.

Meineck: Yeah, and Oedipus at Colonus is a great, great play, and an underrated play. It's the longest, actually, of all the surviving Greek plays. I know, because I translated it. It's a beautiful play, because he becomes a hero at the end, and of course Greeks had a very sophisticated way of thinking about heroes. It wasn't necessarily a positive thing. It was just anybody who'd lived larger than life got hero status, and we constantly get disappointed in our leaders, because we hold them up to this mythical standard that no human being can ever achieve, and I think we see that in Oedipus Tyrannus, right? And of course, to the... Or Oedipus Rex as we call it. To the Athenian, a Tyrannus was not necessarily a bad thing. It was a populist leader. It was somebody who had a certain amount of populist support. And that's Oedipus's problem, is that he has to solve the problem of the plague, and if he can't, he can't lead anymore.

I've rethought Oedipus. I kind of think Oedipus in Oedipus Tyrannus is kind of a villain, actually, and it's a much more fun play to see him as somebody who actually isn't this sort of enlightened human trying to battle against fate, but actually is somebody who makes a lot of really bad decisions. But I think that's the system. That's the structure that's imposed upon him, and that's the sort of... That's the tragedy. And you're right. And I think Oedipus at Colonus is a beautiful play because I think Sophocles the playwright is coming to this and reaching a kind of reconciliation.

Lawrence: We've talked a little bit by implication about the relevance to one of the two major issues of our time, if you will. The role of the government, and our leaders right now, and our plague, COVID-19. The other major issue of course being this extraordinary moment of reckoning with racial injustice in a way that we haven't seen in this country by some measures in half a century, and by some measures a century and a half. Well, what would the Greeks have to say about that? And maybe more to the point, what are you thinking when you think about drama that you'll be involved in in the coming days and its relevance to that part of this moment?

Meineck: I think there's two issues, right? There's the issue of the Greeks themselves and what their attitude toward race and ethnicity was, and then there's the issue of the subject of classics today and how that's perceived and whether classics is an inclusive subject. And I think that there's a huge shift, debate going on in classics right now, and I think that we as classicists have to ask ourselves some deep questions, too. I remember doing an event for Congress, for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and I was sitting in the van with another performance group who were Lakota Sioux Native Americans, and one of the guys was a drummer. And he was also a lieutenant colonel in the Oklahoma National Guard, right? So, really interesting guy.

So, I asked him. He said, "What do you do?" I said, "I'm a classicist." And I asked him, "Well, what's your classics?" And he played it for me on his drum and he sang the song, right? And I thought, "Yeah, that's actually something we need to be more aware of, is that Greece and Rome will always be with us. They're important. Whether we like it or

not, they've impacted our culture in enormous ways. They're often the place that people go to during the American Revolution, during the French Revolution, to find a mirror to nature, right?" Another Hamlet reference. So, they need to be studied, but not to the point where other cultures and their classic works are pushed to a side. And I think it's hard for us as scholars sometimes who specialize so deeply to then kind of open ourselves up to other ideas.

So, I remember about 10 years ago I had a student say to me, "Why do you keep saying Egypt and then Africa?" And I was like, "You know, you're right. Because I've had a post-colonial education. You're absolutely right."

Lawrence: Right.

Meineck: For the Greeks, of course, the same... The concept of race was something that they didn't understand. They used the term Ethiopian, which meant somebody who was kissed by the sun, and that was not a negative thing. The Ethiopians are actually the only people who the gods deigned to dine with. During book one of The Iliad, that's where the gods are. They're dining with the Ethiopians. And there's no doubt that there is in Greek culture, there is a deference and a respect for African culture as a more ancient, more developed, even in many ways more powerful culture.

So, that idea of Blackness as a negative, or Blackness as a marker of something is not found at all in Greek culture. If anything, it was my people that didn't like redheads, right? You know, Xanthius, right? Thracians and Gauls. We were the ones that were enslaved and put to work. Concepts of enslavement in antiquity were based on whether you won or lost in battle, rather on ideas of identifying people.

So, I think there are some things that we can learn from the Greeks to challenge some of the views that people have about slavery, even though antiquity was a slave society.

Lawrence: So, in a time of reckoning and in a time of taking statues down literally and figuratively, what are we to do with what icons like Aristotle say about things like slavery?

Meineck: Yeah, the Greeks had an answer to that. First of all, Aristotle's comments about slavery which were used in the South to sort of justify slavery, which is that people are born to slavery, some people are born to slavery, he actually was being progressive, believe it or not. He was arguing against the practice of enslaving somebody who'd already been free. He said that's just the worst thing you can do is to conquer a city and then enslave the population. He's saying actually there are people who are just... should be slaves. That's abhorrent to us, right? But to Aristotle, he was trying to sort of make a-

Lawrence: Be progressive in a way, in a sense of there are those who are born to slavery and in a sense, and this is where it gets very problematic, a lot of what he says seems to suggest, and this is actually for the good of the slaves, so that was very much the narrative that the South would then pick up to try to justify the peculiar institution and say, "This is actually better for all concerned."

Meineck: But I think on the statues, the Greeks can tell us something, which is they would have found this ridiculous. A statue to them was a living object. They used to chain their

statues down at night, because they actually thought that the gods would run around and perform mischief. The Romans, as well, used to... The statue was kind of re-consecrated every year with a festival, and once that statue had no reason to be worshipped anymore or had no relevance, it came down and was replaced by something else. So, they saw statues as a sort of living embodiment of their values, and this idea that this statue has been here for a thousand years, they'd say, "Well, it doesn't mean anything to me anymore," so they would just take it down.

So, to them, a statue was an active object and representative of something that they actually believed in, so they would wonder why we were having this debate-

Lawrence: Making such a big fuss about taking statues down when they've outlived their usefulness.

Meineck: Exactly.

Lawrence: Obviously, we talk about the Greeks as the source of democracy, the word as well as the concept, and it is almost a cliché now to say that our basic concepts of democracy are under stress. Not just in the States, but really in much of the world, certainly Western, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the States, and elsewhere. Asia, as well. What would the Greek wisdom be for our moment, do you think, in terms of the stresses or even crisis of democracy that we're experiencing?

Meineck: Of course, democracy was not widespread in ancient Greece. I mean, it was an Athenian concept. It was found on Argos. It was found in some other city-states, but they were... Most Greek city-states were oligarchies, or tyrannies, or military dictatorships, so Greece is a great way to study democracy, because it's a laboratory to a certain extent. I think that there's some answers in Aeschylus, who's our earliest Greek playwright.

Aeschylus is my favorite. He's probably the reason I got into tragedy, because I had to take an Aeschylus class with the great Professor Pat Easterling, and she was just down from Cambridge to UCL, and she took one look at me and said, "You should study Aeschylus, because he was a soldier like you." And it never occurred to me that a soldier could be a playwright, of course. On his grave marker, it was purportedly said, "Here lies Aeschylus. He fought the Battle of Marathon. The long-haired Persian could tell you what a great warrior he was." It didn't mention his 100 plays.

Lawrence: And on the side, he happens to have had a little bit of success as a playwright.

Meineck: Yeah. But I think Aeschylus was born in Eleusis. He came from a noble family. There's no doubt that he grew up backstage at the mystery rites of Eleusis, watching his parents putting on those masks and terrifying everybody. And I think he brings the tenets of the Eleusian mysteries into his work, and I think he believes that the idea of the unity of opposites, of balance between male and female forces, between different classes, and actually an idea of equality, a sort of cosmic idea of equality was the only way that democracy could move forward. And I think we see in his work all the time, The Oresteia, the world's first courtroom drama, this idea of not just justice, but restorative

justice. Not just the idea of sort of handing down pronouncements, but actually kind of solving problems.

Even Athena doesn't get her own way in *The Oresteia*. I don't know whether Aeschylus was successful. Ultimately, I think that Athenian democracy did fall foul of demagoguery, of populists, of oligarchs, but we also forget that it was restored in the fourth century, and it did thrive again during the period of Plato and Aristotle until the invasions of Philip and Alexander. So, you know, it lasted for a couple of hundred years, and it was a very successful system, and it certainly produced wealth, culture. It's an amazing moment, right? Sort of this cradle of Athens that produced so much energy.

But I think there's a danger, as well, with that much energy. And there's a danger in keeping the revolution going. But I think Aeschylus does... I'm writing a book on Aeschylus right now, and I think that he does provide us with an idea that democracy has to always be linked to equality, and I think the moment when sections of the population feel that they're not treated equally, democracy is at risk. And I think that happened in Athens. I think it's happening today. And I think that Aeschylus would have proposed this is a time for calibration.

Lawrence: Right.

Meineck: This is a time to sort of empower people. And it's interesting, because Athenian democracy did ultimately muzzle women. It did kind of develop more and more into a slave-owning society. It became more and more male. And I think the more it moved into an unbalanced place, the more it actually unmoored itself from its original experiment.

Lawrence: Would Aeschylus recognize a discussion of equality in a more post-Kantian world of the right way in which people should be treated, and to treat people as ends in and of themselves, not as means to an end? Or was it more a notion of a cosmic balance and that there's a way in which... It's not even so much right and wrong vocabulary. Almost as a descriptive matter to say it's the bell's out of time. You can't build it if it's not balanced. It'll collapse. Almost less of a normative notion, and almost a descriptive notion.

Meineck: I think the key is the Athenians had a strong concept of reverence. It was not a dogmatic kind of set of rules that they followed. There was an idea of reverence. And it seems to us that women's voices are muted in Athenian democracy, but actually Athenian democracy really only voted on going to war and certain limited ideas. Most of your daily life came out of the *Oikos*, you know, where we get the word economics from, from the household. And that was the preserve of women, and that was money, and marriage, and food, and trade, and production, so they had an enormous... They had their own festivals, they had their own leaders, so again, I think we're becoming more sophisticated in reading ancient women, and we think, "Well, they didn't have the vote, so therefore they could have had no power." They had power and they wielded it, which is why we get these very powerful women in Greek drama.

I think that Aeschylus would have understood the need to welcome foreigners. I mean, the first word, time we see democracy in ancient text is an Aeschylus play. And it's *The Suppliant Women*, and he creates this ancient story of the first democratic decision, and the first democratic decision is should we accept 50 African women who are refusing to get married and bring them into our city, but that will mean war against Egypt. And they vote unanimously not only to bring these women in, to protect foreigners, I mean they're refugees, right? But to go to war against Egypt to protect them. This is remarkable. That's an interesting debate for us today, too, is that Aeschylus realized that Athens being a great port city, its power was in embracing foreigners, and having these trade connections, and being open to the world, and that again, I think when a democracy shuts itself off to immigration, to the world, it's at risk.

Lawrence: You know, another piece of what Phi Beta Kappa has been long involved in was actually the creation of the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts. We were among the organizations back in the early 1960s that were foundation to the creation of the NEA and the NEH. I know you've done work with and for NEH. Do you want to tell us a little bit about your perception of the role of public support for the humanities, particularly in the time in which we're living?

Meineck: I think they are a jewel in American culture for a number of reasons. First of all, I run nonprofits, and while we all love the generosity of donors, and we all count on them, there is something fundamentally unfair about it democratically, which is a small sliver of population gets to decide who they give their money to. So, what's wonderful about the NEH and the NEA, and they're not perfect, is that anybody can write that grant. They're hard. I get it. And there's a committee of your peers who can decide if you're going to get that taxpayers' money for a project.

And it's rigorous and it's prestigious, but it's a beautiful thing. I actually have been always very impressed with the peer review system in the NEH in particular. And I've worked closely with the NEH, initially with public libraries, and the staff there are so dedicated, and it seems to me that both the NEA, NEH are fundamentally American ideas. And to me, they should have way more money than they have, of course. And they're constantly under threat. We benefitted. One of our second grants was a Chairman's Special Award, which was nearly a million dollars, which took us to 100 public libraries all over America doing a project based around *The Iliad*. To thousands of people. I mean, it was a very, very popular program.

And I realized that the American public library is one of the few places in American culture where there's no financial transaction. It's free. It's a beautiful thing. And also, this is where veterans are often, new Americans, working people.

Lawrence: Homeless people.

Meineck: Homeless people. People that we want to reach. So, for us as a theatre company, it was an incredible place to develop our audience, and also to put Americans together talking to each other.

Lawrence: So, listen. I told you I'd give you a chance to tell us what must be everybody's favorite trivia question about you, so tell us a little bit about being involved in the Bedford Fire Department.

Meineck: Well, you know, outside of New York, as I was surprised, I live about 30 miles north of the city. All the emergency services apart from the cops are volunteer, which was kind of shocking when I first got here. But actually, they're very good, and actually many of them are also first responders in their professional life, which is kind of odd, right? That you would then volunteer to do it. But it's a real calling. And I had had some medical training in the Marines, and I'd always helped people, and then I realized I just don't know what I'm doing anymore. And then our first child was an emergency birth and I met the kind of emergency services, and they said, "You know, we need more drivers." So, I joined up as an EMT initially. And I got the training. And then I got sucked into the fire side as a rescue technician, and then just as a firefighter, and that suited the kind of Marine side of me that likes breaking things, and kicking down doors, and you can do it for the public good.

But also, it's important because it's a real cross section of Americans that serve in fire departments. It puts you in contact with people that you might not normally be in contact with as an academic, which I think is really important. People with different views from you that you all depend on each other. So, I love that aspect of volunteerism. It's always good, I say to my students it's always good to be a rookie again, right? It's always good to go, "I've got to start again and relearn something." And it's humbling, right?

And the thing about being a firefighter or an EMT, you have to do what you say you can do. You can't just say, "I can do this." You have to be able to do it or someone's going to die. And I think that's really humbling.

Lawrence: And you can't just write an article about it. You actually have to be out there doing it.

Meineck: No. Funny enough, I've learned a lot more about Greek drama through some of the traumatic experiences that I've had to face, dealing with children and things that you'd rather not see. And I've come back to Greek plays and seen them in there and gone, "Wow, I get this now. I see what this play is about." After a particularly harrowing incident with two children, I went and reread Euripides Herakles, where Herakles kills his own children, and I was like, "Wow." It was therapy for me, actually.

Lawrence: So, this is Phi Beta Kappa, we do book lists. People love our book lists that we recommend in the Key Reporter, or sometimes the book reviews in The American Scholar magazine. So, I'm gonna give you a chance, Professor, to give us the syllabus for all of our listeners now. If someone was looking for a good point of entry into Greek drama, what would you recommend as your good, accessible points of entry, but what the book reviewers like to call for the serious general reader.

Meineck: I would suggest that Hackett Publishing, who are based out of Cambridge, Massachusetts, they publish some of my translations. They publish a series of translations of Greek plays that have excellent introductions that are really good, basic Classics Scholar Peter Meineck On How Greek Theater Trains Better Citizens

information, and they're not overwhelming, and their price point is great. They're about 10 bucks for a paperback. They have works by the philosopher Paul Woodruff, for example, who's himself a Vietnam veteran, who really understands Greek drama. So, I would send people directly to those in order to kind of get excited about Greek drama.

Lawrence: Well, Peter, there are many reasons we're looking forward to this pandemic being over, but one of them is so that you and your actors can get back out and reach people, and affect people, and help them change their lives, and I bet when you do that, they're going to change yours back right in return. Thanks so much for being with us today.

Meineck: Thank you so much.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Virginia Lora is managing producer and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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