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Myth into *muthos*: the shaping of tragic plot

TRAGEDY AS REPETITION AND INNOVATION

> Tragedie is to seyn a certyn storie
> as olde bookes maken us memorie
> of hym that stood in greet prosperitee
> and is yfallen out of heigh degree
> into miserie, and endeth ureccedly.[1]

In the Middle Ages, when tragedy as an enactment on stage had been all but forgotten, Chaucer still knew the right shape for a tragic tale. In such a scheme, only the names need be changed, for the form of the tale – and its meaning – always remain the same. Of course, Chaucer's definition is far too restrictive to describe the shapes that Greek tragic plots actually took, but even the much more knowing and differentiated analysis in Aristotle's *Poetics*, from which Chaucer's notion of tragedy ultimately derives,[2] appears to certify only some of the plots used by the tragedians as properly tragic. Still, it is clear that in practice not any subject was a tragic subject, not any plot-shape suitable to the requirements of the tragic stage. First, the plots of Greek tragedies were drawn largely from a limited repertoire of legends, the great cycles in which the Greeks came to terms with their own past – the stories of 'a few families', as Aristotle says, above all the legendary histories of Troy and Thebes.[3] Secondly, as we shall see, it appears that a

[1] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*: 'The Monk's Prologue' 85–9. That Chaucer is here thinking of epic is made clear from the next lines: 'And they ben versifyed comunly / Of six feet, which men clepe *exametron*.'

[2] For the development of the idea of tragedy from Aristotle through the Middle Ages, see Kelly (1993); for Chaucer's importance in the tradition, esp. 170–5.

[3] *Poetics* 1453a19. Aristotle is speaking of a restriction in subject matter that in his view characterises the best recent tragedies, but what we can learn of all but the earliest tragic practice suggests a similar concentration of subjects. Among the surviving thirty-two tragedies, fifteen deal with the 'matter of Troy', seven with Theban saga, and in addition four (all by Euripides) dramatise episodes in the legendary history of Athens. Of course these categories are not exclusive; Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* brings Oedipus to his final

relatively few underlying plot-shapes ('story patterns') were found particularly congenial for use in the Theatre of Dionysus, and that the old tales were, from the earliest traceable stages in the development of the genre, made into tragic plots by being adapted to these patterns. Finally (and this is also true at least from the time of our first surviving examples), the plots of Greek tragedies are articulated through a limited but highly flexible repertoire of formal units, and we shall need to examine the ways in which the conventions of form create expectations and provide frames for interpretation (see also Ch. 7).

If, from the point of view of its plots, Greek tragedy constitutes a grandiose set of variations on a relatively few legendary and formal themes, forever repeating but never the same, it follows that tragedy is not casually or occasionally intertextual, but always and inherently so. Tragic praxis can be seen as a complex manipulation of legendary matter and generic convention, constituting elaborate networks of similarities and differences at every level of organisation. Such a praxis supplies the poet with constructive elements predisposed to favour certain actions, character types, issues, and outcomes, and provides the audience with a significant frame or control for the interpretation of what they are witnessing. The particular shape and emphases of a tragic plot, as the product of variation in the shape and emphases both of known legendary material and of familiar formal constituents, can forcefully direct or dislocate spectators' attention, confirm, modify, or even overturn their expectations. When this happens, a structure comes into being that depends upon a kind of complicity of the audience in order to be fully realised. Seen in this light, a tragic plot inheres not simply in a poetic text, but also in the dialectic between that text in performance and the responses of an informed audience to the performance as repetition and innovation.[4]

A useful principle can be inferred from observing this interaction between an ongoing series of tragic performances marked by sameness and difference and their reception by the 'interpretive community' (to use Stanley Fish's phrase)[5] of tragedy-goers. Where there is large-scale repetition, even small innovations and minor differences will be disproportionately prominent and emphatic. In comparing, for example, Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra*, our only surviving group of plays on the same mythical subject by all three tragedians, it would be difficult to overestimate the consequences of the fact that the first

resting-place in Attic soil and Euripides' *Suppliant Women* shows the Athenians risking war to bury the Seven who fell at Thebes.

[4] It should be added that tragedy is not unique in this respect; something similar could be said of New Comedy and, e.g., Greek temple architecture, or the iconography of vase-painting.

[5] Fish (1980) esp. 171–2.

two are set, expectedly, before the palace at Argos, the last in the countryside at the house of a yeoman farmer. In the Euripidean version, self-conscious deviation from past presentations becomes the means of forcing the audience to rethink every facet of character, motivation, and the very meaning of the action.[6] The sufferings of Electra, who seems almost to luxuriate in her loss of status and privilege, ask to be understood as at least in part self-inflicted. Orestes, cautiously assessing his situation from the safety of the countryside, emerges as something less than the knight in shining armour Electra is awaiting. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, away from the scene of their crime, do not seem to fit the vituperation of their enemies; and their deaths – he slaughtered like a sacrificial beast while himself sacrificing at a country altar, she lured to the farmer's house by the ruse of a grandchild's birth – undercut any easy sense of justice being done.

The vagaries of preservation have left the three Electra tragedies as a unique opportunity to observe the play of repetition and innovation at work. It is worth pointing out, however, that if we had more such groups of tragedies based on precisely the same subjects, these three plays would look much less like a special case.[7] Indeed, we should think of their relation as paradigmatic, since it points to the status of any given dramatisation of a segment of legend as one of a number of variations on a theme, to be understood from the outset as a version among other versions – supplementing, challenging, displacing, but never simply replacing all the rest.

MYTH, NARRATIVE PATTERNS, AND THE SHAPING OF TRAGIC PLOTS

Traditionally, the criticism of tragedy has assumed that there is (or should be) something that can be called a 'true' tragic plot. The most widely accepted master narrative is an integral part of the Aristotelian tradition

[6] I assume that Euripides' *Electra* is later than that of Sophocles, although neither play can be dated with certainty, and the responsive relationship among the versions would be of equal interest and importance if the order were Aeschylus–Euripides–Sophocles. For arguments in favour of a relatively early dating of Euripides' *Electra*, see Zuntz (1955) 63–71, Newiger (1961), and Burkert (1990). For another important scenic link between the three plays, see Ch. 7, pp. 168–9.

[7] There is some further overlap in subject among existing plays which confirms this view: Euripides' *Phoenician Women* corresponds in subject – though hardly in treatment – to Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*; Euripides' *Orestes* may be said to open up a subject in the space between the end of *Libation-Bearers* and the beginning of *Eumenides*. A tantalising bit if evidence is provided by *Orations* 52 and 59 of Dio Chrysostom (first century AD), the first of which provides a comparison of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the lost Philoctetes plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, the second a prose version of the Euripidean prologue. See Bowersock (1994) 55–9.

that for centuries dominated tragic criticism and is still surprisingly resilient today. This schema emphasises *hamartia*, generally understood as the 'tragic flaw' of overweening pride, and its punishment.[8] The tragic hero, although caught in circumstances beyond his ken and control, is finally to be understood as destroyed by the gods (or fate) because of his own failings. Even cursory examination of the plots of extant tragedies will suggest some obvious ways in which this schema is inadequate and even irrelevant. After all, a play such as Euripides' *Trojan Women*, for example, makes its devastating effect without peripeteia or even a 'tragic hero' (though it certainly has a wonderful 'star' role; see Ch. 7, pp. 174–5.) It is perhaps more important to observe that the search for a master tragic narrative is itself problematic. It has at any rate created a situation in which the small corpus of surviving Greek tragedy has been further subdivided, leaving only a tiny group universally recognised as 'true' tragedies. The rest are treated as failed attempts at tragedy, relegated to mixed genres invented *ad hoc*, or left to the specialists. We should begin, then, by recognising that there is not a single tragic narrative, but rather a number of story patterns characteristic of tragedy, patterns that tragic practice from an early stage in its development was capable of mixing and even subverting.

1. Conflict

If there is one category that overarches these patterns, it is conflict, the starting-point of all storytelling. 'Conflict' has been a central term in criticism of tragedy only since Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* of the 1820s,[9] surprisingly, since from our perspective it is in many ways the crucial one. Tragic narrative patterns can usefully be classified by their characteristic conflicts, and something can be said in general about the kinds of conflicts that tragic plots seem to require. The first and most obvious quality of tragic conflict is its extremity: it does not ordinarily admit of compromise or mediation. For Ajax to yield to his enemies, for Medea to accept Jason's new marriage, would be to deny or negate their very natures. Where reconciliation of enemies does occur in tragedy, it is generally the result of direct divine intervention, as when Heracles persuades Philoctetes to fight at Troy or Athena persuades the Furies (themselves divine) to drop their pursuit of Orestes in return for new civic honours at Athens. Odysseus, in *Ajax*, is an eloquent human spokesman for reconciliation, but he achieves only the limited goal of persuading Agamemnon to permit the burial of their old enemy. The other common pattern of

[8] On the traditions of interpreting *hamartia*, see Bremer (1969) 65–98.

[9] For the question of conflict in tragic theory and criticism, see Gellrich (1988).

reconciliation is that of 'late learning', after the tragic crisis has already and irrevocably occurred. Here, the scope for reconciliation is limited by the very fact that the learning comes too late. In *Antigone*, for example, Creon recognises his mistake only after he has caused Antigone's death, and Haemon and Eurydice have committed suicide. Theseus learns at the end of *Hippolytus* how unjustly he has condemned his son, and Hippolytus forgives him before he dies, but it is of course too late to call back the curse.

Secondly, conflict in tragedy ordinarily involves more than a clash of choices freely taken by human agents. We regularly find such elements as past actions that, whether recognised or not, determine the shape of present choices and even their outcome (e.g. the curse of Oedipus in the *Seven Against Thebes*); ignorance or misunderstanding on the part of the agents that produce or threaten catastrophe (e.g. Ion's and Creusa's mutual attempts at murder in *Ion*); and even the direct imposition of divine will (e.g. the maddening of Heracles in the play that bears his name).

Finally, conflict in tragedy is never limited to the opposition of individuals; the future of the royal house, the welfare of the community, even the ordering of human life itself may be at stake. Oedipus' downfall is not merely, in our common parlance, a personal tragedy. He became ruler of Thebes by saving the state from the ravages of the Sphinx, and now, if the oracles prove true, his undoing threatens Thebes with anarchy. Nevertheless, his citizens, and along with them the audience in the Theatre of Dionysus, cannot simply wish him to escape unscathed and prove prophecy false. 'Why should I dance?' (896) the chorus of *Oedipus the King* sings (and dances) in a famously self-referential moment when it seems that the oracles may fail. In this sense, the fundamental struggle is to wrest meaning from suffering, and the perennial question of tragic pleasure – the exaltation that accompanies the witnessing of awful events – can be related to tragedy's affirmation, despite everything, of both cosmic and social orders against the unknown and against all those 'others' that threaten stability. But tragedy, as a quintessentially dialogic form, is always raising questions about those very foundational assumptions, even as its form tends to their (at least formal) resolution. (See Ch. 5 for a sociological approach to this question; also Chs. 1 and 6.)

In introducing the concept of conflict, I have left unmentioned the element often given pride of place in discussions of tragic conflict: fate. Fate is omnipresent, at least in the sense that the outcome of the story is known, in broad terms, at any rate, and therefore the audience is aware of the overall patterning of events in a way that characteristically eludes the agents until the end. Fate describes the limits of the possible for the action as a whole, because it acts as a 'reality check' for spectators who know

that the Trojan War *did* take place, that Clytemnestra *did* kill Agamemnon when he returned home, and so on. The dramatist is, in effect, relieved of the requirement of providing suspense at this level of the plot, but instead he must find ways to make fate work for him as a tool for building dramatic tension. Moreover, the fulfilment of fate can be an essential part of the process of providing satisfaction for the expectations, moral as well as aesthetic, of the community. Apart from such considerations, however, the notion that Greek tragedy is fate-ridden and its characters essentially puppets in the hands of an angry destiny is very far from the mark. I venture to say that in Greek tragedy fate never operates in a simple, mechanical way apart from the characters and decisions of human agents.

2. The legendary subjects

The fourth-century comic poet Antiphanes writes that

> tragedy is a blessed art in every way, since its plots are well known to the audience before anyone begins to speak. A poet need only remind. I have just to say, 'Oedipus', and they know all the rest: father, Laius; mother, Jocasta; their sons and daughters; what he will suffer; what he has done.[10]

Antiphanes' point is that tragedy is much easier to write than comedy, in which everything has to be invented afresh. This is more than a little disingenuous, as regards both comedy (which is of course a highly patterned and conventional genre in its own right) and tragedy (which permits and even encourages much more freedom of invention than Antiphanes allows); but there is a kernel of truth in it. For our purposes, we may restate the point by observing that the successful tragedian would have to vary traditional stories to make new what had been seen before, perhaps many times, in the Theatre of Dionysus. We might equally well speak of the playwright's opportunity to give an individual, perhaps highly personal, stamp to a tale whose outline was already thoroughly familiar to the audience.

At any rate, on the basis of the surviving victory lists and lists of titles,[11] we can say that the earliest history of Attic tragedy already shows subjects repeated by later tragic poets. A late source attributes to the semi-legendary

[10] Fr. 191 Kock 1–8.

[11] Records of the dramatic competitions were systematically kept, and fragments of inscriptions that contain these *didaskaliai*, literary sources in which they are excerpted, and comments appended to many of the surviving dramatic texts (*hypotheses* and scholia) contain information concerning playwrights, titles, dates of production, and awarding of prizes. The evidence (in Greek) is published most accessibly in Snell (1986); for full publication of the sources for the *didaskaliai*, see Mette (1977).

Thespis a line taken from a *Pentheus*, presumably on the same subject as Euripides' *Bacchae*. The few surviving titles of Aeschylus' older competitors, Choerilus, Phrynichus, and Pratinas, all recur in the works of later tragedians.[12] Of the close to six hundred works[13] attributed by title to all the known tragic poets, there are a dozen different plays entitled *Oedipus* (at least six from the fifth century, including plays by all three surviving tragedians), eight plays named *Thyestes* (including versions by Sophocles and Euripides), and seven named *Medea* (Euripides' being the first). Six playwrights entered the lists with an *Alcmaeon*, a *Philoctetes*, and a *Telephus*; five with an *Alcmena*, an *Ixion*, and an *Orestes*. All in all, more than one hundred of the titles appear twice or more, and nearly half of the attested plays have repeated titles.[14] From the point of view of plot, the history of Greek tragedy is one of continuously recasting tales already known to the audience, already part of what we may call a system of tragic discourse.

In speaking, however, of tales already known, I want to avoid giving the impression that there was a fixed body of lore waiting patiently for the playwrights to give it dramatic form. In an important sense, poets were the mythmakers of Greece. At any rate, there was no mythological 'orthodoxy' in fifth-century Athens. A play whose plot has become canonical, Sophocles' *Antigone*, appears to have had little in the way of literary precedents.[15] Yet, even Sophocles cannot be said to have given the story its definitive form: we know that Euripides went on to write an *Antigone* in which the heroine

[12] Choerilus: *Alope* (also Euripides and Carcinus, fourth century); Pratinas: *Perseus* (presumably the same subject as the *Andromeda* tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides, and Lycophron, third century), *Tantalus* (Phrynichus, Sophocles, and his contemporaries Aristias, son of Pratinas, and Aristarchus); Phrynichus: *Actaeon* (also Iophon, son of Sophocles, and Cleophon, fourth century), *Sons of Aegyptus* and *Daughters of Danaus* (Aeschylus), *Alcestis* (Euripides), *Antaeus* (Aristias). For Phrynichus' tragedies on contemporary events, see Ch. 1, p. 24.

[13] Including numerous plays bearing the same title as well as titles that certainly or probably belong to satyr plays.

[14] I hasten to point out that these figures are meaningful only in an exemplary way. It is not possible to be sure that plays with shared titles actually share legendary subjects as well. Thus, for example, there are seven reported *Achilles* plays and an equal number of *Bacchae*, but they need not all have dealt with the same legendary episodes. On the other hand, different titles may well hide the same basic material (e.g. Euripides' *Phoenician Women* recasts the subject of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*).

[15] Unless, that is, one accepts the authenticity of the received ending of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*. It seems not unlikely that the nucleus of the story was known to the playwrights from a Theban tradition not fixed in literary form. A brief, judicious discussion in Kamerbeek (1978) 5 concludes that 'even if the core of the fable was to be found in epic tradition (or elsewhere) and even if the authenticity of the final scenes of the *Septem* deserves more belief than they are nowadays generally credited with, we may safely state that in the *Antigone* the handling of the story ... [is] as original as anything in Greek Tragedy'.

survived to marry Haemon and bear him a son.[16] This state of affairs is typical. As regards the actual structures and details of plot, there are few tragedies that retell a familiar story in a familiar way.[17] The very fact that the same material was dramatised again and again must have encouraged the impulse to vary and reshape so as to outmanoeuvre expectation. Evidently, it would make no more sense to show an Oedipus who did not kill his father and marry his mother than it would to show a Napoleon who triumphed at Waterloo.[18] That is to say, myth is subject to interpretation and revision, but not to complete overturn, because it is also history. But within the limits of a living, fluid, intensely local tradition, plot stood open to invention, most obviously in the areas of motivation and characterisation, but also in such features as location and sequence of events.

This invention could extend, in Euripides, at any rate, to the self-conscious highlighting of deviation from earlier tragic versions (e.g. the Euripidean Electra's rejection of the recognition tokens from Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers*; cf. p. 196 below) and to the almost novelistic fleshing out of the received mythical tradition (e.g. the account of the events between Orestes' murder of his mother and his departure from Argos in *Orestes*). But with few exceptions, the tragic poets developed their plots within the framework of the legendary tradition, taking 'slices from Homer's great banquets', as Aeschylus is reported to have called his own plays.[19]

We know that fifth-century tragedians did experiment with plays based both on recent history and on entirely invented tales, but neither could find a firm foothold. The latter class is known to us from a reference in Aristotle's *Poetics* to Agathon's *Antheus*, a play 'in which the names and the happenings were made up, and [which] is none the less enjoyed' (1451b21–3). Aristotle, although urging poets of his own day to follow the example of this late fifth-century innovator, admits that they do not. We can, I believe, deduce that both the crucial civic functions of the dramatic festival and the literary traditions that inform the tragic text would make the purely 'fictional' plot appear at a disadvantage. It is not merely that the great cycles

[16] Sophocles' *Antigone*, Hypothesis 1 and schol. 1351; discussion in Webster (1967) 182. This process of adaptation continues of course to our own day: see Steiner (1984).

[17] On the transformation and criticism of myth in tragedy, see Vickers (1973) esp. 295–337.

[18] Euripides' *Helen*, whose heroine never went to Troy, comes close, but had precedents in earlier treatments. Poets can also play with overturn of the legendary tradition, as in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, where the conclusion of the action itself, which would result in the indispensable man not going to Troy, is 'corrected' by Heracles' intervention as *deus ex machina*. But history is never simply overturned, as in the notorious modern example of Schiller's *Maid of Orleans*, in which Joan of Arc dies heroically on the field of battle.

[19] Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* VIII 347e.

of myth have a certain prestige; they have become an integral part of the system of tragic discourse.

As regards tragic plots based on recent history, the poets seem to have discovered at an early point that their ability to comment on civic life and the affairs of the Athenian state was impaired rather than enhanced by direct depiction of events from the immediate past (see Ch. 1, pp. 24–5, for further discussion of early tragedies based on contemporary themes). Aeschylus' *Persians*, the only such tragedy to survive, and as far as we know the last of its kind, dates from the 470s and dramatises the recent defeat of the Persian invader. It is fascinating, among other things, for the degree to which it has been accommodated to what we might call the mythic mode, with the full panoply of dreams, portents, and prophecy emphasising a pattern of divine punishment, while at the same time its focus on the hopes, fears, and sufferings of the Persians compels compassion for the vanquished foe.

3. Story patterns

By story pattern, I mean the shape of a narrative, constructed according to the rules of its own inner logic as storytelling rather than the probabilities of everyday life, and capable of generating indefinite numbers of variants.[20] To begin with a familiar example: romance, fairy tale, and legendary history offer a large number and variety of stories in which royal children are exposed, survive, and eventually return to claim their birthright. Notice first that the story pattern reverses ordinary expectations. Whereas exposure of children in real life must usually have ended in death, the logic of the story pattern demands the child's survival – no child, no story. Second, the logic of the plot coincides with clear moral and even social predispositions. We are invited to expect the child not only to live but to obtain what is rightfully his or hers by birth, and in particular to view the restitution of the birthright as an act not only of justice but of legitimation.[21]

Why might such a pattern appeal to a tragic poet? The answer, I suspect, is that both its narrative inevitabilities and its moral directionality can easily be made problematic. Since the inner logic of the story pattern inevitably sets up expectations that must be met or disappointed, the poet can direct our responses to the unfolding drama by meeting or disappointing them, or more precisely by controlling just how and to what extent the drama does

[20] I adopt the term from Lattimore (1964). Two studies of Euripides are of special interest for their treatment of typology of plot: Strohm (1957) and Burnett (1971), from which my pattern-categories are adapted.

[21] The pattern is thus at least as suited to comedy as to tragedy; we find a version of it in a fragmentary fourth-century comedy, Menander's *Epitrepontes* (*Arbitration*).

so. And, since the outcome has moral and even social dimensions, more than just the aesthetic sensibilities of the audience can be engaged. Such patterns also participate in broader ritual paradigms. The pattern of the foundling's return, for example, clearly reflects the well-known *rite de passage* marked by separation from normal society and a period of liminality and testing, which, if successful, finally leads to reintegration into the social order at a new level. Patterning of this kind links the success or failure of tragic agents to the fate of the community as a whole.

We find characteristically complex adaptations of this story pattern in two surviving tragedies, Euripides' *Ion*, where it retains in a somewhat muted form the expected happy ending, and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, where it forms a crucial element in the irony for which the play is famous. In *Ion*, Creusa's attempt to murder her son, a young temple servant of Apollo at Delphi whom she believes to be her husband's bastard, is thwarted, and Ion, discovering that she is his mother and Apollo his father, at last assumes his destined role as prince of Athens and coloniser of Ionia. In *Oedipus*, the foundling plot reappears with ironic inversion, since Oedipus learns that he is hereditary king of Thebes only by discovering the double secret of his hideous pollution, and loses his kingship in the act of recovering his birthright.

In speaking of story patterns, I am not claiming to isolate a set of master plots to which all the narrative forms of tragedy can be referred; I am simply highlighting particular forms used repeatedly by the tragic poets in shaping their plots. Each involves a characteristic type of conflict, each presupposes a particular storytelling logic. We will examine a number of ways in which these patterns inflect spectator response, above all by forming frames of reference and what we might call frames of expectation for the experienced Athenian tragedy-goer. Even as story patterns are manipulated and combined to meet the needs of a particular tragic subject, they still retain sufficient identity as shared and even conventional elements to provide significant interpretative pointers. Their interest, then, lies largely in the ways they meet, deflect, or defeat the expectations that they themselves arouse. The commonest of these story patterns are those I shall refer to as retribution, sacrifice, supplication, rescue, and return–recognition. At the risk of making them seem far more mechanical and less problematical than they are as the tragedians deploy them – sometimes singly, but often in combinations and with surprising twists – to articulate their plots, let us take a brief look at each.

The *retribution* pattern is organised around punishment for past offences. It may involve conflict between gods and mortals, with the mortals' challenge to divine supremacy leading to their destruction. Aeschylus'

Persians, the sole surviving tragedy based on contemporary events, is such an action in its simplest form, but divine retribution also plays a central part in the more complex actions of Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*. *Prometheus Bound* represents an interesting special case, since the punishment is inflicted by one god upon another over whom he has seized control, and since we know that his victim will not in the end be destroyed but reconciled to him. The other form of this pattern provides an analogous conflict between human agents, although divine interest and participation is by no means excluded. The Electra dramas of all three tragedians provide clear examples of plays whose plots are constructed around this form of retribution, as do Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Medea*. Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* shows retribution at work through Oedipus' curse of his sons, which they themselves bring to fruition by their own choices. In Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, retribution takes the form of a malign trick: the centaur Nessus, as he was dying, gave Deianeira blood from the wounds made by Heracles' poisoned arrows, telling her to use it as a love charm if her husband should ever prefer another to her. The 'charm', of course, is deadly, and when Deianeira uses it, she unwittingly carries out the centaur's revenge against her husband.

The *sacrifice* pattern entails conflict between the needs and desires of the individual and those of a community in crisis, resolved in favour of the community through the willing participation of the sacrificial victim. Euripides' *Alcestis* and *Iphigeneia at Aulis* are organised around this pattern, more often in Euripides developed as a subsidiary motif (e.g. the self-sacrifice of Macaria in *Children of Heracles* or Menoeceus in *Phoenician Women*).

The *supplication* pattern involves a triangular confrontation: a suppliant or group of suppliants, pursued by an implacable enemy, seeks and obtains protection from a ruler who must then defend them, by force if necessary. There are four full-blown suppliant dramas in the corpus of extant tragedy: three involving suppliant bands, Aeschylus' and Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, whose choruses represent, respectively, the fifty daughters of Danaus and the mothers of the Seven who fell at Thebes, and Euripides' *Children of Heracles*; and one whose central figure is a lone suppliant, the aged Oedipus of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. Supplication and rescue from an implacable and violent enemy are also primary plot elements of several other plays, notably Euripides' *Andromache* and *Heracles*. In *Orestes*, Euripides goes so far as to allow a suppliant action to fail when the intended saviour rejects the suppliant's suit.[22]

[22] See below, p. 190 and Burnett (1971) 184–7.

The *rescue* pattern enacts a struggle whereby the principals, unexpectedly reunited, defeat a common foe and work their own salvation. Here the type-plays are the closely related Euripidean *Iphigeneia among the Taurians* and *Helen*, in which pairs of clever Greeks (brother and sister in one case, husband and wife in the other) outwit barbarian oppressors and win freedom. Once again, the pattern can be used as one episode in a compound plot, as it is in Euripides' *Andromache*.

In the *return–recognition* pattern, conflict arises from the central character's ignorance of his own true identity. By labouring against inner and outer opposition to establish that identity, he is able to reclaim his proper inheritance. We have already noticed how the two chief surviving examples of return–recognition tragedy, *Ion* and *Oedipus the King*, illustrate the degree to which a given story pattern can be made to serve disparate dramatic ends. But the pattern is a variant of one of the most common plot elements in tragedy (and comedy and romance, for that matter): recognition of another, as in the three *Electra* plays, Euripides' *Helen*, and many others.

These tragic story patterns, of course, are special cases of narrative forms that are widely used in storytelling of many kinds. As story patterns, they control the overall shape of the tragedy, providing a satisfying logic for the adaptation of myths to the stage; and the same narrative forms are also deployed in tragedy as subsidiary elements and to articulate individual episodes. We cannot assume that the tragic poets inherited them already connected to the segments of heroic legend that they proposed to dramatise. In some cases, no doubt, the shape of the plot was largely given by the matter. In others, it seems clear that the poet has adapted a story pattern to a particular myth for specific dramatic ends. It is hard to imagine composing a *Medea* that is not structured as a drama of retribution, whereas the suppliant pattern of *Oedipus at Colonus* was presumably not part of the local legend of Oedipus' death in Attica, but rather Sophocles' means of giving it a suitable dramatic form.

Tragic plots often combine two or more underlying patterns in unexpected and disturbing ways. Sometimes it is a matter of an action adhering to one pattern but achieving its particular effect by the inherence of another. In Sophocles' *Electra*, for example, the revenge tragedy is modulated by an emphasis on the recognition of brother and sister and on the rescue of Electra effected by Orestes' return. In *Antigone*, a pattern of divine punishment involving Creon emerges from the action shaped by Antigone's self-sacrifice. In other cases, brief but complete actions based on one pattern may be inset into a central plot structure of a different kind: Euripides, for example, repeatedly constructs willing sacrifice actions as episodes within the larger plots of his dramas. The extreme cases are the Euripidean dramas

that more or less abruptly allow patterns to succeed one another to form complex plots. There are three such patterns in *Heracles*: a suppliant action ending in the saving of Heracles' family, an action of divine punishment resulting in his destruction of that same family, and a rescue action, in which Theseus brings the abject hero to Athens.

Surprising and unsettling effects arise also from the deflection of expectations built into the story patterns themselves. Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is an extraordinary example of a rescue plot played, as it were, against type: Philoctetes, offered rescue from his agonised exile on Lemnos, does not wish it on the terms that are available and finally refuses it on any but his own, setting himself firmly against what we know to be the 'right' outcome of his story, his necessary part in the sack of Troy. And the drama is played out as if Philoctetes can indeed set his own terms – and thereby prevent Troy's fall – until Heracles intervenes *ex machina* to set the myth back on track. The effect is a double dislocation: Neoptolemus finally 'saves' the narrative form by offering to take Philoctetes home, but this alternative rescue must fail if the myth is to be saved. Something analogous happens in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, in which Theseus, against all the expectations aroused by the suppliant pattern, initially rejects the plea for aid of the mothers of the Seven who fell at Thebes, until his own mother puts the plot back on track by persuading him to change his mind; and in *Orestes*, where the suppliant action actually fails when the suppliant's putative saviour, Menelaus, refuses to take any action on his nephew's behalf, and an entirely different rescue plot has to be substituted.

In cases such as these, the interesting thing is not just the flexibility of story patterns, but the tensions generated by gaps, real or potential, between the expectations raised by the patterns and their fulfilment in specific plots. The dissonance thus generated invites the audience to consider anew what the myth enacted before them really means. Breaches in the conventions of storytelling make the myths themselves problematic and open their religious and ethical, social and political meanings to question. In a system of production based on almost constant repetition of legends and story patterns, in which every version is a variant, the disruption of expectations is a crucial element of tragic plots.

4. The mythic megatext

This repertoire of narrative forms is part of what we might call the tragic matrix; some legendary subjects are congenial to these forms, while others require greater effort to adapt them for the tragic stage. Tragic plots, then, are not supplied ready-made in myth, but they are also not invented from scratch each time a poet composes a new drama. The intersection in tragedy

of a relatively small number of well-known legendary subjects and a limited repertoire of narrative forms helps to clarify the way in which tragedy participates in what has been called the 'megatext' of Greek myth, the repertoire of legendary subjects seen not as a corpus of discrete narratives, but as a network of interconnections at every level, from overtly shared themes, codes, roles, and sequences of events to the unconscious patterns or deep structures that generate them.[23]

Myth functions as a system whose signifiers are closely aligned to the central values (and therefore the central conflicts) of a culture. It is engaged, among other things, in a struggle to validate cultural norms. Tragedy uses myth, and thus itself inflects the mythic megatext, through a specific complex of narrative forms that is hospitable to specific cultural issues, and those issues in turn become, as it were, canonical in tragedy. The obsessive way in which tragedy keeps reworking female threats to male power, whether figured as the murderous assault of a Clytemnestra or the political defiance of an Antigone, offers an obvious, and suitably complex, example of tragedy going about this cultural work (cf. Chs. 1 and 5 above). Tragedy in such instances acquires a particular valence as an intervention in the production of the mythic megatext, one which countenances a threat to order and reinscribes it in a larger affirmation of cultural values.

The fact that threats to order and its reaffirmation are at the centre of the tragic use of myth helps explain why we can and must read tragedy both as challenging and as justifying established power structures, practices and beliefs; neither challenge nor justification is unequivocally asserted to the exclusion of the other. Evidently, this observation is related to dramatic form as well, since tragedy lacks the single, authoritative voice of a bard, the authorised voice of truth, as it were. Rather, the multiple voices of tragedy can all claim their own truths, assert their own rights, and all – even divine voices – may be subject to doubt, contradiction, accusation of wrongs. The dramatic mode itself is particularly receptive to a dialectic of criticism and affirmation. Greek comedy, especially the political and cultural satire of Attic old comedy, shares this critical/affirmative stance.[24]

The cultural work of tragedy may be briefly illustrated with reference to the pattern of transition of the young male to adulthood found in many of the myths that it dramatises. This pattern encodes the marginality of adolescence in a series of narrative structures that express the underlying cultural values at stake. The rite of passage involves, among other things, wanderings outside the city (not fixed abode within it), virginity (not marriage), absence of the father (but presence – often baneful – of the

[23] Segal (1983) esp. 174–6.

[24] See Henderson (1990) and (1993).

mother). In other words, the liminality of the youth is figured precisely in the symbolic set of exclusions that he must overcome. But this set of structures is not itself a story pattern, for its shape is indeterminate. The passage may succeed (as it does, finally, for Orestes), or fail (as in the case of Pentheus), or even both succeed and fail (as happens with Oedipus), and therefore it is invested with both hope and danger. The rite of passage, like the rites of sacrifice and purification, is one of the narrative elements of tragedy that adumbrate the great rituals of communal propitiation and therefore evoke the welfare of the community. Just as initiation into adulthood entails the dangers of passage from one state to another, purification presupposes the threat of pollution, and sacrifice often implies a civic crisis. Tragedy as a genre accommodates both mythical narratives that show the threat realised in all its destructiveness and those that show it safely negotiated, but in either case the outcome is not to be understood simply as the fate of an individual. Its meaning for the continued life of the community is always part of tragedy's concern.

In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Orestes' plight is presented in terms suggestive of the initiation pattern not once but twice. Having been cast out of the city at the time of his father's murder, Orestes attempts to reclaim his patrimony and re-establish the primacy of the male line by returning as armed warrior and killing his mother. He is then driven out once again as a hunted victim of the Furies, who seek vengeance for his mother's blood; this time, however, with the intervention of Apollo and Athens, he wins his freedom and establishes his claim to his father's place in Argos. But the trial in which Orestes is absolved of guilt for his mother's death takes place in Athens, and its consequences for Orestes are given far less emphasis than those for the polis. These include, in the first instance, the reaffirmation of the primacy of the male in the structure of household and state, and secondly Athens' assurance of the Furies' favour as Eumenides, granted a new home and honours and a role in the democratic order of persuasion and law whose symbolic birth the trilogy has dramatised (cf. Ch. 1 above).

In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the same matrix of male transition yields an action of a very different shape, but concern for larger civic consequences can still be observed. Pentheus' initiation is marked as a failure in its every detail: he leaves the city disguised as a female worshipper of Dionysus, and instead of trials to prove his right to rule the city in patrilinear succession, he is hunted and defeated by women, dismembered and symbolically devoured by his own mother. But his horrifying death is also marked as a sacrifice on behalf of the community.[25] Before Pentheus leaves for the mountains, Dionysus

[25] On this element, as well as interpretation of the ritual elements, see Seaford (1994) 280–301.

tells him, 'alone you wear yourself out on behalf of this city, alone' (963) – and indeed his suffering does benefit the city, by deflecting punishment upon himself as a kind of scapegoat for the city's guilt, and by providing the starting-point for a communal cult of the god.

Pentheus' death is also a prime tragic example of the 'perverted sacrifice' that constitutes a prominent tragic theme. He is identified by his killers as an animal and explicitly described as a sacrificial victim (1246), adorned for the sacrifice, led in procession, and slaughtered in a sequence that reproduces the stages of animal sacrifice, with his mother as priestess (1114) making the kill.[26] The overt Dionysiac content of this sacrifice accounts for its detail and emphasis, but the representation of killing as sacrifice is a repeated tragic trope – in every case connected with the deformation and perversion of ritual practice.[27] The subversion and distortion of marriage ritual is similarly widespread.[28] Such elements have importance not only because of the intrinsic emotive power connected with the representation of religious ritual in distorted and aberrant forms, but also because such representations produce a sense of danger for the well-being of the community, a precarious imbalance that calls out for redress.

METATHEATRE AND THE PRESSURE OF PRECEDENTS

Given the character of the tragic corpus as a set of variations on mythological themes, we may expect to discover traces of both theatrical and non-theatrical (chiefly Homeric) antecedents inscribed in our tragic texts. The centrality of theatrical performance in Athenian civic and cultural life during the fifth century makes it equally likey that we will find reflections of theatrical practice. Such elements do not constitute primarily a form of literary allusion, but a resource for inflecting and extending the possible meanings of a given situation, a means of directing and modulating audience response. The traditions in (and also against) which the poets write do not constitute mere background, but a dialectic of assimilation and opposition out of which much of tragedy's social meaning is constituted.[29]

The mythological cross-references of tragedy are nothing new. The Greeks employed them constantly from Homer onwards – one need only

[26] Seidensticker (1979). It should perhaps be added that the reconstitution of the body in the last scene of the play may restore – or attempt to restore – Pentheus symbolically to the status of human being. On the complexity of the relation between tragedy and ritual, see Easterling (1988).

[27] For Aeschylus, see Zeitlin (1965); for Euripides, Foley (1985).

[28] See Seaford (1987); Rehm (1994).

[29] On this subject, see Goldhill (1986) esp. 138–67.

think of the sustained parallels in the *Odyssey* between the homecomings of Odysseus and Agamemnon, between what has already become of Clytemnestra, Orestes, and Agamemnon, and what may yet happen to Penelope, Telemachus, and Odysseus. Tragedy, especially in its choral lyrics, is full of such mythological comparisons and exempla, but for our purposes the interesting phenomenon is the covert or implicit cross-reference, such as is found, for example, in the well-known and striking use of *Iliad* book 6 in Sophocles' *Ajax*.[30] The memorable scene of Hector's farewell to Andromache serves as model for the episode in which Ajax takes leave of Tecmessa, though to call it a model is to understate the richness of Sophocles' allusive technique. His audience knew their Homer intimately, and he expects them to recognise his use of Homer and to use it in turn to interpret the scene they are witnessing. Hector, whose sword will kill Ajax, looms behind him as husband, father, warrior, and enemy; Andromache, whose husband is her all, conditions our perception of the despairing Tecmessa; even the child Astyanax informs the figure of Eurysaces (cf. Ch. 6 above).

It is not the parallels, however, but the differences that emerge once the parallels have been recognised that carry the interpretative burden, as in the striking contrast of the heroes' hopes for their sons. Hector, returning from the battlefield, only thinks to take off his helmet when it frightens his son. Gently lifting the child into his arms, he prays that Astyanax will grow to be as great and strong as he is, indeed better by far (*Iliad* 6.476–81). Ajax, emerging from his tent after his mad slaughter of the flocks, grasps his son in his bloody arms, saying that a child of his should be broken in to his own raw ways, and wishes for the boy to be in every way like himself – only luckier (*Ajax* 550–1). It is by such adaptation and inversion of Homeric situations and even locutions that Sophocles prompts his audience to compare characters, relationships, tones, outcomes. The allusion makes for a brooding richness hardly imaginable without it, appropriating Homer and at the same time inverting the Homeric value structure.

The fact that such cross-references can remain implicit and still be present for the spectator as interpretative frames suggests that they should be understood not with reference to the author, according to the traditional philological paradigm of source study, but with reference to the audience.

[30] See Easterling (1984c). Segal (1983) points out the interesting case of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, in which the central figures oscillate between Odyssean and Oresteian paradigms, Heracles appearing first as an Odysseus, then an Agamemnon, Hyllus as a Telemachus and then a kind of Orestes, Deianeira as a Penelope who becomes an inadvertent Clytemnestra. For discussion of this kind of intertextuality in Euripides, see Zeitlin (1980). For general discussion of allusion in Greek tragedy, see Garner (1990).

Allusions call on a cultural competence that the author counts on spectators to share. Implicit relations among texts can thus be understood as part of a formal design that depends for its full realisation upon an act of recognition – a form of audience complicity in the making of meaning.

Another form of intertextuality depends not so much upon recollection of parallel narratives as upon the evocation of prior theatrical experience. Here, the very conventions of tragedy are used to overturn audience expectations. As an example, let us look briefly at the end of Euripides' *Medea*, a sequence both powerful and disturbing. Medea's final entrance is not unexpected; on the contrary, everything has been pointing to a last confrontation with Jason, and he arrives to pound on the door of her house and demand it. But the manner of Medea's entrance – above the scene building, on a chariot provided by her grandfather Helios – is a carefully calculated and prepared surprise. Jason is told that Medea has killed their children. 'Open the door and you will see the corpses' (1313), says the chorus leader, and an audience of tragedy-goers knows what happens next. They have seen those doors swing open to reveal the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and no doubt many equally terrible spectacles before the production of *Medea* in 431. So every eye is fixed on the doors – but they do not open. Instead, Medea swings into view on high, and her scornful words draw attention to the spectacular breach of expectations: 'Why do you batter and unbar these gates seeking the bodies and me, who did the deed?' (1317–18). This spine-chilling moment takes Medea literally out of range, but the point is not just in the scenic effect. Medea appears *ex machina* like a goddess, because, against all expectations, that is what she turns out to be, or something very like it. Her dreadful wrath has made her an elemental power, destroying everything in her wake and then flying from the ruin she has wrought.[31]

This example, in its grim play with the conventions of the tragic stage, introduces a note of metatheatricality that we find again and again in Euripides. Two passages that have traditionally been treated as cheap shots at Aeschylus are worth mentioning in this context. In the great central scene (369–685) of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, Eteocles carefully and elaborately chooses warriors to meet the challenge of the Argive captains attacking each of the city's gates, and finds in the end that he alone is left to defend the last gate against his own brother, thus fulfilling his father's curse. In the *Phoenician Women*, Eteocles simply agrees to Creon's suggestion that he should select a captain to stand at each gate, adding that it would be too time-consuming to name their names, but that he hopes to find his brother

[31] On Medea as daimon, see Knox (1977), esp. 206–11.

opposite him (748–55). Euripides marks his difference from his predecessor in no uncertain terms (and Aeschylus' play was evidently a famous one, since Aristophanes is still citing it in his *Frogs* in 405), but he does so not so much to score a stray critical point as to mark his vastly different purpose: his characters consciously pursue destructive and self-destructive ends rather than struggle with destiny.

The second 'critique' of Aeschylus, and the self-conscious outer limit of this form of intertextuality, is the notorious recognition scene of Euripides' *Electra*, in which the old servant trots out the tokens by which Aeschylus' Electra had recognised the return of Orestes, only to have Electra dismiss them with scorn. His hair would be a man's, not girlish curls like hers; his footprint would naturally be bigger than hers; he could not still be wearing some piece of weaving she made for him as a child (525–46). Commentators have tended to take this as a Euripidean critique of Aeschylus' lack of realism, but it is not simply an isolated bit of literary criticism. Euripides' mocking exposure of the incongruity of Aeschylus' tokens is also an exposure of the machinery of theatrical recognition, which only functions smoothly when it is hidden.[32] (Ironically, in the end, Orestes' identity is proved by the even hoarier, but incontestable, Odyssean token of the childhood scar – albeit one acquired in a fall in the courtyard while chasing a tame fawn!) Euripides is interested precisely in the arbitrary and theatrical character of the convention of recognition, because by highlighting it he can call its conventional satisfactions into question. The essential further irony is that the old man is right to deduce that Orestes has returned, and Electra is wrong. She impugns the tokens because she cannot believe that her high-hearted brother would cower in the countryside in fear of Aegisthus, and we immediately see how self-delusive that view is. Although this quintessentially Euripidean self-reflexiveness has traditionally been a sticking-point for critics, it is the logical conclusion of the intertextual development of the genre, an assertive response to the burden of tragic precedents.

The conventions of tragedy did not permit the overt breaking of the dramatic frame, direct audience address, or other forms of theatrical self-reference available to Old Comedy. Nevertheless, such theatrical elements as role-playing and disguise are commonplace, and by the time of Euripides' later plays, we occasionally find what amounts to tragic parody within the frame of tragedy itself. Already in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, we find Clytemnestra shamelessly 'acting' her cunning welcome of the returning Agamemnon and Orestes' impersonation of a Daulian stranger announcing his own death to his mother. Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is organised around a kind of play-

[32] Goldhill (1986) 249.

within-a-play staged by Odysseus to bring Philoctetes to Troy. (On the most strikingly metatheatrical moment of this play, the scene involving a 'trader' whom the spectators know to be a sailor sent by Odysseus to aid the inexperienced Neoptolemus, see Chapter 7, pp. 169–70.)

Even more elaborate is the role-playing in Euripides' *Helen*, a drama that takes as its leitmotif the gap between appearance and reality. Helen stages the central intrigue in a way reminiscent of the Orestes story, by having Menelaus announce his own death. Here, however, that by now hackneyed device becomes not merely a way into the palace but the fulcrum of the whole escape plot, with the king, hoodwinked into helping with Menelaus' burial honours, providing the ship and resources needed. Euripides was notorious for bringing heroes on stage in rags, and in a number of plays, *Helen* among them, costuming becomes a major preoccupation. The shipwrecked Menelaus' rags, at first a disconcerting symbol of his loss of place and power, become a useful element in Helen's scheme, since they add credibility to the tale that Menelaus is merely a sailor who survived his commander's disaster. Only when the escape plot has been set in motion does Menelaus reappear in the armour that suits his reputation; but we are made to see this, too, as a costume, designed first to make him seem a participant in the rites for the dead, and only then to serve his 'true' role as scourge of the barbarians who stand in the way of his and Helen's freedom.

Euripides' *Bacchae* constitutes the supreme example of tragic metatheatre, not surprisingly, perhaps, since its central character is the god of theatre.[33] The whole play is staged for us by Dionysus, who announces at the outset that he is playing the role of his own priest in order to punish Pentheus. He has already maddened the women of Thebes and sent them to the mountains as maenads. In his mortal disguise, he plays along with his own entrapment and then uses his divine powers to escape and to stage a horrible masque – the sacrificial procession to the mountains where Pentheus, attired as the god's surrogate, becomes surrogate victim of a mad sacrifice at the hands of his mother and the other Theban Bacchantes. In the end, he appears *ex machina* in his 'true' guise – one wishes it were possible to know just how this appearance of the god differed from that in his role of mortal priest. Altogether, costuming in this play has a far more complex function than in any other surviving tragedy. In a bleakly comic vein, Cadmus and Tiresias appear in maenadic costume, unsuccessfully trying to negotiate a Dionysiac deconstruction of the boundaries of age and gender. Pentheus mocks them but obviously feels threatened by the blurring of gender identity in the feminine garb and long hair of Dionysus. This feeling is intensified for

[33] See Segal (1982) 214–71 and Foley (1980).

us when the god breaks down the young ruler's last resistance by feminising him, robing him in full Bacchic regalia in a scene (912ff.) that endows the transvestitism of the theatre – men acting women's roles – with a real threat to sexual identity and male domination.[34]

TRAGIC FORM AND THE SHAPING OF TRAGIC PLOT

The conventions of the tragic stage form the matrix in which a given segment of legend takes shape on its way to becoming a plot. Chapter 7 examines conventions in detail, and I limit myself here to a few observations on the relation of plot and tragic form. Along with endless variations on a limited repertoire of heroic legends, the tragic poets generated enormously inventive permutations and combinations of a limited repertoire of closed forms, to some extent analogous to those of opera. From the formal point of view, the crucial fact is the alternation of speech and song, out of which each play makes its own distinctive musical patterns.[35] We should not think of these poetic forms as moulds into which a given story is poured, but rather as flexible and expressive devices for developing and articulating tragic plots out of the materials of the legendary tradition.

The choice of a chorus is one obvious way for the poet to articulate his approach to a legendary subject. The chorus, after all, constitutes not only a collective character standing in a defined relation to the other characters of the drama, but also an intermediary between the world of the play and the audience whose perspective it helps to shape. Thus, for example, Aeschylus' decision to use Theban women rather than elders for the chorus of the *Seven Against Thebes* permits him to give voice to desperate fears for the fate of the city against which we can measure the resolve of Eteocles, its defender. Sophocles' choice of Theban elders for the chorus of *Antigone*, rather than companions or servants of the heroine, initially furthers her isolation but then permits a dramatically crucial shift in their understanding and sympathy.[36]

[34] Even Pentheus' mask seems to play a special metatheatrical role in the equally chilling 'unmasking' of the horrible killing. Agave is made to see that the *prosōpon* ('face' or 'mask') that she carries is her own son's severed head, not the lion she has imagined.

[35] A detailed study of types and development of lyric exchange in tragedy can be found in Popp (1971). On the relation of lyric forms in tragedy to earlier Greek song traditions, see Herington (1985) esp. 103–50.

[36] This play provides one of the striking exceptions to the convention that choruses do not intervene directly in the action: after Teiresias has revealed that Creon's entombment of the living Antigone and failure to bury the dead Polyneices have caused ominous signs of divine anger, the leader of the chorus takes it upon himself to tell Creon in no uncertain terms that he must now try to undo his errors; Creon yields, but too late (1091–114).

From the parodos (entrance song) to the end of the play, the chorus is continually present in the orchestra, with rare and noteworthy exceptions, making palpable the communal and public character of tragic drama. One consequence of this convention is that, apart from prologue speeches that are in effect addressed to the audience to set the scene, there is practically no soliloquy in Greek tragedy, for at least the chorus is there to listen. (The great suicide speech in Sophocles' *Ajax*, 815–65, is one of the exceptions.)[37] The chorus does take part, through its leader, in the dramatic dialogue, as well as participating in lyric exchanges with other characters. The odes, however, stand apart from the action. Actors often remain on stage during the odes, but do not directly acknowledge their performance or contents. (The only exceptions constitute special cases.)[38] As moments of lyric reflection, choral odes draw the spectator away from the immediate concerns of the plot, while at the same time they inevitably have an effect on dramatic mood, providing a kind of objective correlative for the spectator's responses to the action.

Greek tragedy is essentially a drama of words. Characters enter, talk with each other, exit. Very little 'happens' on stage – no battles and no blindings as in Shakespeare. Physical action, though sometimes dramatically crucial, is usually limited in scope and relatively static – acts of supplication, gestures of affection or pity or lamentation. Violent events tend to be described in messenger-speeches, a convention that has often been interpreted as a matter of decorum, but more likely stems from the realisation that, within the conventions of the fifth-century theatre, such things can be made far more vivid through narration than through stage presentation (on this point, see Ch. 7, pp. 154–5). The confrontations of tragedy are also essentially verbal, although they very occasionally spill over into the physical, and when they do, the effect in context is shocking (for example, Creon's seizure and abduction of Antigone in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, 818ff.). But the threat of physical violence is one of tragedy's important verbal tools, and in general what we may call verbal violence is a

[37] The earliest instance we have of a chorus exiting and re-entering involves the only scene change in an extant play, that from Delphi to Athens in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. The chorus of *Ajax* leaves the *orchēstra* to search for Ajax, allowing him to enter an empty stage and die undisturbed. The other cases (in Euripides' *Alcestis* and *Helen* and the *Rhesus* attributed to Euripides) similarly serve to facilitate a scene that would be difficult or impossible to play in the presence of the chorus.

[38] In Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, Danaus, the father of the suppliant maidens who are both chorus and *de facto* protagonists, explicitly praises the song of thanks they sing when the Argive assembly has voted to accept their plea and protect them. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus appears to respond directly to the prayers of the choral parodos, and does so in language that claims oracular knowledge and power; see Knox (1957) 159–60.

regular feature of tragic discourse. Confrontation is not merely a matter of angry, emotional exchanges of insults. More often it is staged as a formal debate, with the whole panoply of opposing speeches and rancorous stichomythia, extended alternation between two speakers by single lines or pairs of lines (cf. Ch. 6 above, pp. 127–8).

The primacy of the word in tragedy is not, however, merely a function of the resources of the theatre or conventions of the genre. Words are tools of power in tragedy. Tragic discourse is still responsive to a notion of the ominous quality of language itself, as can clearly be seen, for example, in the constant etymologising of names like Ajax (from *aiai*, 'alas') or Pentheus (from *penthos*, 'grief'). The ominous refrain of the great opening chorus of *Agamemnon*, 'Sing sorrow, sorrow: but good win out in the end',[39] comes as the Argive elders discover that their song keeps turning unbidden to dark events in the recent past, which they try to counter with the power of positive speech. As the fifth century wore on, it might be argued, the discursive powers of speech, logical argument, sophisticated techniques of persuasion, came to have the upper hand over this archaic view of language. But, in whatever form, the power of words – intended or otherwise – remains one of tragedy's enduring themes in the form of prophecy, vow, curse, riddle, lie, and incantation.

The power of such words is not easily controlled, and it should come as no surprise that their effects are often diametrically opposed to what the speaker intended or the hearer understood. A familiar case is Oedipus' curse on the slayer of Laius, who turns out to be himself (*O.T.* 222–75). Even more arresting is the succession of speech-acts that produce the peripeteia of *Oedipus the King*: for Oedipus' downfall is constituted not by deeds, the killing of the father or wedding of the mother (outside the drama, as Aristotle would say), or even the self-blinding (after the fact and off stage), but by a dialogue sequence that puts special emphasis on the code of communication. I summarise the scene beginning at line 1146, with particular attention to the thematics of speech. The old shepherd, realising that the garrulous messenger from Corinth may inadvertently reveal the awful secret of Oedipus' origins, *orders* him to be silent. Oedipus *countermands* his order and *threatens* punishment. The shepherd *asks* how he has erred, and Oedipus *reproaches* him for *refusing to tell* about the child of which the messenger has *spoken*. The shepherd attempts to allay Oedipus' suspicion by *alleging* that the messenger is *speaking nonsense*. Oedipus again *threatens* torture, the old man *begs* to be spared, Oedipus *orders* his arms to be twisted. Again Oedipus *asks*, and this time the shepherd

[39] Lines 121, 139, 159; quoted in Lattimore's translation.

answers, adding the *wish* that he had died on the day he gave up the baby. Another round of *threats* and *laments* leads to the further *question*, 'Where did you get the child?', which the shepherd *evades* by the vague 'From someone.' To Oedipus' repeated *question*, the shepherd *answers* with a desperate *plea* to *ask* no more. But Oedipus *threatens* his destruction if he must be *asked* again, and he *admits* that the child was from the house of Laius. On the verge of the terrible recognition, Oedipus *asks* the final question, 'A slave, or one born of Laius' own race?' To the shepherd's *lament* that he is now about to *speak* the dread thing itself, Oedipus responds with one of the most memorable lines of the play (line 1170): 'And I to *hear* – but *hear* I must.' This is certainly an extraordinary passage, but in precisely the respects we have been attending to it is characteristic, even paradigmatic, for Greek tragedy in general. Discourse, verbal interaction, *is* the essential action, not a mere reference to or representation of the action. The issues of tragedy, lodged as they may be in political, moral, and/or personal conflicts, are enacted through speech-acts.

THE EXAMPLE OF EURIPIDES' *HIPPOLYTUS*

A closer look at one play may help to bring together some of the central themes of this chapter. I have chosen Euripides' *Hippolytus*, in part because of the many ways in which it typifies tragic practice and in part because of something that makes it unique. *Hippolytus* is the only known instance of a second dramatisation of the same subject by the same poet.[40] We know enough about the lost first version to trace two very different ways of telling the 'same' story, and by comparing them we can clarify the distinction between myth as the body of lore available to the tragic poet and *muthos*, Aristotle's term for plot as a structure of events embodied in a particular drama. The chief thing we know about the first *Hippolytus* is that in it Phaedra made a deliberate attempt to seduce Hippolytus, who responded by covering his head in horror (thus the lost play's distinguishing title of *Kalyptomenos*, 'Hippolytus Veiling Himself'). That is to say, this version conforms to the pattern of the biblical tale of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, in which a shameless advance by the woman was met with rebuff and followed by a false accusation of (attempted) rape. Our evidence permits us to deduce a few more things about the first *Hippolytus* with reasonable certainty. The scene of the play was probably Athens, not Trozen as in the surviving play. Phaedra's nurse may have tried to restrain her mistress's passion, rather

[40] There is also a *Phaedra* of Sophocles, which may well have intervened between the first and second *Hippolytus*. Discussion and fragments of both lost plays in Barrett (1964) 10–45.

than encourage its expression. After Phaedra made her accusation to her husband Theseus, there was a confrontation between him and Hippolytus, concluding as in the surviving play with the curse that Poseidon fulfilled by sending a bull from the sea to kill Hippolytus. The truth was revealed, perhaps through a confession on Phaedra's part, and she then killed herself.

This first version of *Hippolytus* apparently shocked and offended its audience through what our version's *hypothesis* (a brief synopsis and critique offered by the manuscript tradition) succinctly calls the 'unseemliness and blameworthiness' of its portrayal of woman's desire. Rethinking the subject, Euripides is able to present the same outline (approach – rebuff – accusation – double death) in a frame that 'saves' the character and motivation of Phaedra. He makes Phaedra a woman fighting to suppress and conquer her passion, who, when she finds that she cannot do so, is ready to die rather than bring dishonour upon herself and her children. The nurse in this version becomes the figure of seduction, at least vicariously, as she wheedles and supplicates in order to force her mistress to reveal the secret source of her 'illness', then betrays her by approaching Hippolytus in her stead. Hippolytus' shock is here answered by Phaedra's shame and the suicide with which she plots to salvage her reputation. Phaedra leaves a written accusation of rape against Hippolytus for Theseus to find, and on its strength the king curses his own son, only to discover his innocence as he lies dying.

No doubt there were many other changes from the first to the second *Hippolytus*, but even what little we can affirm with some assurance suffices to make clear that, within a frame that prescribes only the barest outline of the story, the poet is free to vary not only the place and the sequence of events, but the characters and motivations of the central figures. And precisely because not only the bare outline, but also previous versions theatrical and otherwise are known to all or most of the audience, he can gauge his effects in relation to that knowledge, and to expectations based on it as to how the story will be told. It is in playing with these expectations that new emphases, new centres of gravity, new meanings can emerge from the old myths. All of this seems to be at work in the second *Hippolytus*, where Phaedra's attempts to resist her passion and the nurse's betrayal emphasise the extremity of Hippolytus' scathing denunciation of Phaedra and change the emotional and moral balance between them, and where the new manner and timing of her death permit the final scenes of the drama to focus entirely on Hippolytus.

We can now turn to some of the ways in which this play typifies features of Greek tragedy that I have discussed in this chapter.[41] The first of these

[41] The following remarks are by no means intended to constitute even the sketchiest interpretation of *Hippolytus*, merely to show some elements of its construction. The English-language reader can consult a number of recent interpretative essays on this play, from which I single out as particularly useful Segal (1965), Reckford (1972) and (1974), Zeitlin (1985), Goff (1990), and Mitchell (1991).

involves an interesting and rather special case of metatheatricality. This is the introduction of Aphrodite herself as speaker of the prologue, matching the appearance at drama's end of Artemis. In all probability, we are dealing here with another change from the first to the second *Hippolytus*. Unlike the earlier play, this version insists on the secret nature of Phaedra's affliction, so that neither Phaedra nor anyone else at Trozen can reveal it, and Euripides brings on a god to set the scene. But theatrical convenience becomes metatheatrical coup; Euripides uses the occasion of the exposition to make the drama itself a kind of play-within-a-play staged by the goddess of love, just as Dionysus stages the action to come in the prologue of *Bacchae*. At the end of *Hippolytus*, Artemis foretells the next such divine drama when she promises to destroy one of Aphrodite's favourites in revenge for the loss of her own (1420–2). By such means is the plot drawn into the orbit of the pattern of divine retribution.

The plot of *Hippolytus* can also be seen in the light of an overriding ritual pattern, that of passage. The Potiphar's-wife story of attempted seduction here becomes symbolic of the failure of the male to reach sexual maturity through the transition to adulthood. This is accomplished in a number of ways, but is rooted in the feminisation of Hippolytus that accompanies his desire to remain a virgin, a status associated in Greece primarily with the female. Hippolytus' cultivation of the virginal Artemis to the exclusion of Aphrodite puts him in the position of the reluctant maiden, like Persephone, who must finally relinquish her maidenhood even against her will. In the end, ironically accused of the violation of his father's marriage bed, he sacrifices not his virginity but his life to his father's curse and Aphrodite's anger. But the refusal of adult sexuality is not merely destructive to Hippolytus; in its blurring of distinctions between male and female it represents a danger to the community, and in death Hippolytus partakes of another civic rite, that of the scapegoat, the liminal figure who is expelled from the polis to remove some threat to its safety. To the extent that the bull from the sea represents both the granting of Theseus' curse by Poseidon and the culmination of Aphrodite's wrath, responsibility for the violent death is transferred to the gods. To the extent that it also symbolises the passion that Phaedra recognised and resisted, Hippolytus denied and repressed, it expresses the human truth of the power of *erōs*. In a last ironic reversal, Hippolytus is associated for ever in Trozenian cult with Aphrodite (and the story of Phaedra's love) as the cult-figure to whom maidens on the eve of

marriage dedicate locks of their hair. His heroic status corrects – tragically too late and for others, not himself – the imbalance of his life.

Finally, the nature of confrontation and conflict as verbal – the character of Greek tragedy as a drama of speech-acts – can nowhere be better illustrated than in *Hippolytus*. Bernard Knox's isolation of the choice between speech and silence as the motor of the plot provides a useful starting-point.[42] The drama proceeds as a series of encounters in which misguided estimations of the power of words successively produce omissions, repressions, indiscretions, irrational outbursts, and lies in a concatenation that brings destruction on all the parties. Phaedra and her old nurse, in very different ways, overvalue speech. In Phaedra's case, this verges on fetishisation when she can think of no way of speaking compatible with her honour and takes refuge in silence. The nurse, on the other hand, is a great believer in the ability of *logos* to solve any problem. Her mistress' silence exasperates her, and she wheedles a confession from her. Having ground down Phaedra's resistance with rhetorical cunning, she goes straight to Hippolytus, and when we next see her, she is begging the enraged youth to be silent about what she has told him (603). Yet, despite the disastrous failure of her speech, she does not lose faith in its power. Her final words to Phaedra are, amazingly, an offer of further machination, to which Phaedra replies by telling her one last time to stop talking and dismissing her with the tragic formula for sending an enemy packing, 'Get out of my way!' (708). Having fully grasped the extremity of her situation, Phaedra takes full charge, and her remaining speech-acts are decisive, efficient, indeed (in the case of her final written message, the indictment of Hippolytus) masterful and devastating. As she becomes Aphrodite's agent in the destruction of Hippolytus, she assimilates a divine ability to make her words achieve her ends.

Theseus and Hippolytus may be called, by contrast, men who undervalue the word, repeatedly misapprehending its relation to its conventional opposite, the deed. Hippolytus, comfortable only among the age-mates who share his values, leads them in hymning Artemis but refuses even the *pro forma* prayer to Aphrodite urged upon him by his old retainer. Unmindful of the danger of withholding honour from so powerful a god, a perfunctory 'fond farewell to your Cypris' (113) is all he can muster. His response to the nurse's pleading of Phaedra's suit is the opposite of reticent, however. He launches on an extraordinary tirade against all womankind, a heady mixture of absurd hyperbole, offended sensibilities, and assorted male anxieties (616–68). Theseus trusts the truth of Phaedra's written accusation

[42] Knox (1952b).

so much more than any word Hippolytus might speak that he launches his curse even before hearing what his son has to say (887–90). Ironically, Theseus appears to doubt the efficacy of his own curse, since he adds exile as the alternative punishment should it fail, and later tells Hippolytus that swift death would be too easy (1047). He displays a complete unwillingness to consider Hippolytus' solemn oath. Like his son, he knows what he knows and refuses to acknowledge that what he doesn't know is of any consequence. When Hippolytus suggests that he at least consult the utterances of soothsayers, the King replies, 'As for birds flying overhead, a fond farewell to them!' (1059). This is the very same phrase of dismissal with which, at the beginning of the play, Hippolytus 'greeted' Aphrodite.

In the end, only the gods can line up their words infallibly with the results they wish to achieve. (Even Phaedra's apparently authoritative writing can only destroy Hippolytus, not save her own reputation.) Both Aphrodite and Artemis assert, reveal, promise, predict, damn with a certainty unknown to mortals, while the mortals make the best they can of a world of uncertain meanings, broken promises, unrealisable wishes, ineffectual regrets. After Theseus' curse has mortally wounded his son and Artemis has arrived to instruct and rebuke him, the King can only wish that the curse had never come to his lips; it cannot be called back. The only effective human speech left comes from the dying Hippolytus, the words with which he frees his father from blood-guilt (1449). Like Phaedra, he finally makes the word do his bidding, but too late, when death is upon him.

CONCLUSION: MYTH, INNOVATION, AND THE DEATH OF TRAGEDY

The great period of Greek tragedy seems to have lasted less than a century. The extant plays date from a period of roughly seventy years (except for the *Rhesus* ascribed to Euripides, which may well be a fourth-century play), and it is admittedly risky to make guesses about what we have lost. Nevertheless, if it is true, as Aristotle tells us, that Aeschylus added the second actor, then tragedy in its fully developed form began with him and as far as we can tell the cultural dominance of tragedy did not survive Athens' loss of the Peloponnesian War. Of course, new tragedies continued to be produced, and we know that a number, such as the *Hector* of Astydamas (a great-grandson of Aeschylus!), had enormous success[43] but tragedy never again attained the centrality that it maintained in Athens through the fifth century.

[43] For a positive view of such successes and the state of tragedy in the early fourth century, see Easterling (1993a) 559–69 and Ch. 9 of this volume.

Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, offered perhaps the most influential explanation for tragedy's death: the poison of Socratic reason, administered by Euripides. The decline of tragedy as a creative force is, however, as complex a phenomenon as its meteoric rise. I want to suggest that the intertextual play of innovation and repetition that we have seen as an important feature of tragedy can help us understand both the intense flowering of the genre in the fifth century and its subsequent fading.

Recent scholarship has rightly emphasised the close relation between fifth-century tragedy and Athenian civic life (cf. Ch. 1 above). The rise of tragedy as an art-form gave Athens a powerful instrument for the celebration, criticism, and redefining of its institutions and ideals, for examining the tensions between heroic legend and democratic ideology, and for discussing political and moral questions. This civic role was intensified and focused by the continuity and concentration of tragic production. As we have seen, tragedy revolved around a restricted repertoire of subjects; it was embedded in the ritualised framework of the Dionysiac festivals and the resources of a particular theatre.[44] At the same time, both as the vehicle of an important competition and as a form of popular entertainment, tragedy had to meet a constant demand for novelty. The extent of this demand is made clear when we remember that each year saw the production of nine new tragedies, not allowing for the fact that earlier tragedies were occasionally revived, but also not counting satyr drama, formally and thematically linked so closely to tragedy (cf. Ch. 2 above). Furthermore, while tragedy enjoyed the highest civic prestige, it was also (as Aristophanes makes clear) the centre of passionate controversy. Intellectually, tragedy embodied the traditional wisdom of the culture at the same time as it lay open to the new languages of persuasion and philosophy that threatened the overturn of traditional values. Socially, it could be seen as validating the established political and religious order in its role as an institution charged with inculcating civic virtue, and equally as expressing the unresolved tensions within the polis and therefore breaching the armour of the establishment. Thus, tragedy's repetitions and innovations reveal themselves as symptomatic of a deeply rooted doubleness, bringing past into confrontation with present, staging in ever new guises the immemorial conflicts of male and female, of parent and child, of rival siblings, of individual and community, and of mortal and god. In this sense, innovation serves not only its obvious function of differentiation among repeated enactments of myth in the ritualised setting of tragic performance, but also pushes to the limit the

[44] However, the growing performance of tragedy outside Athens, both at the Rural Dionysia of Attica and in centres elsewhere in the Greek world, needs to be taken into account; see further Ch. 9 below.

search for truth in myth, for the authentic token of cultural identity and meaning.

So far as we know, the conditions of tragic performance in Athens remained essentially unchanged after the Peloponnesian War, but such evidence as we have suggests that even after the restoration of democracy the tragic theatre lost its intimate relation to public issues and political life (a process that can be much more fully documented for comedy by comparing Aristophanic 'old' comedy to the 'new' comedy of Menander). A typically laconic passage of Aristotle's *Poetics* informs us that the 'old' poets (i.e. the tragedians of the fifth century) had their characters speak 'politically', whereas the new poets make theirs speak 'rhetorically' (1450b7–8). The contrast implies a distinction between political discourse (the oratory of assembly and public ceremony) and the argumentation of the courtroom, with its litigation of personal disputes. In addition, the chorus, in many ways the voice of the community in fifth-century tragedy, is often removed from the action by the substitution of ready-made 'insert songs' (*embolima*) for the odes formerly composed for a particular dramatic context.

As long as it commanded the serious and thoughtful attention of the citizens of Athens by the solemnity of its production, the intensity of its poetry, and the expressiveness of its music and choreography, tragedy remained an important formative experience. It is all too easy to write off as insignificant the large body of tragedy from the fourth century that has not survived. But we can reasonably speculate that the concerns of the later tragedians were more private and psychological than those of their predecessors, and that they emphasised emotional effect over intellectual challenge. Freed from the expectation of comment on public affairs but caught in an increasingly complex interplay of repetition and innovation, involving both their own contemporaries and the classical repertoire of the preceding century, now regularly performed at the festivals, tragedians would inevitably gravitate to sensational situations and theatrical display. At the same time, the increased professionalisation of acting, about which we are reasonably well informed,[45] no doubt made its own demands on the tragic poets. Again, the evidence of Aristotle's *Poetics* is telling: good poets, he says, write in an episodic style 'for the benefit of actors; writing for the dramatic competitions, they often stretch a plot beyond its possibilities and are forced to dislocate the continuity of events' (1451b35–52a1).

To what extent might the very intensity of the repetition and innovation necessary to sustain tragedy be responsible for its ultimate decline? Charles Segal calls tragedy 'simultaneously a commentary on the megatext of the

[45] See Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 279–305.

mythic system and the final text of the system; simultaneously the culmination of the system and its dissolution'.[46] Culmination, certainly; but should we make tragedy, no matter how extreme the innovations to it or how frantic their pace, responsible for the dissolution of myth? That tragedy was inextricably wedded to myth seems clear from the failure of Agathon's attempt to free tragedy from the traditional tales; and by the end of the fifth century, powerful new forms of discourse were competing successfully with myth in the search for meaning. The opening of tragic discourse to sophistic rhetoric and Socratic rationalism may be seen not as the assault on myth that Nietzsche deplored but rather as a recognition that myth had already lost much of its prestige as a tool for the discovery of truth and the advancement of social dialogue. Once myth is in doubt, tragedy becomes marginal.

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[46] Segal (1983) 184–5.

III

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