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# Tragedy and Myth

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Virtually all ancient Greek tragedy was based on myths about the doings of gods and heroes in ages long past. We know of three tragedies in the fifth century BCE (Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus* and *Phoenician Women*, and Aeschylus' surviving *Persians*) that dealt with contemporary events, and of a few in Hellenistic times that drew their plots from Herodotus; we also know of one play (*Antheus*, by Agathon) whose plot and characters were freely invented (Aristotle *Poetics* 1451b21–2). But myth was the basis of well over 99 percent of all the tragedies that were written – and often the same stories were returned to, over and over again: for example, our meagre sources mention eleven tragedies entitled *Thyestes* (three of them by Sophocles alone).

## Myth, History, and Poetry

In discussing what we call "Greek myth" or "Greek mythology" it is important to remember two things in particular. One is that the distinction between "myth" and "history" was, for an ancient Greek, far from clear-cut. Learned commentators of the Hellenistic period and later can complain that a poet's version of a story is "contrary to history," or report that "X says [so-and-so], but the true history is [something different]"; the often skeptical historian Thucydides (1.4–12), while making much allowance for "poetic exaggeration" and discounting the supernatural element, takes it for granted that the major events of the heroic age (such as the reign of Minos, the Trojan War, and the return of the descendants of Heracles to the Peloponnese) had actually happened, and uses them as evidence for his reconstruction of the social, economic, and political structure of early Greece; and Aristotle's explanation of tragedy's preference for mythical over fictional stories is that tragedy must deal with "the sort of thing that could happen," and mythical events, unlike fictional ones, are *known* to be the sort of thing that could happen because they

*did* happen (*Poetics* 1451b15–19). The ordinary fifth-century Athenian did not have the perception that we have, or that Hellenistic scholars had, of a continuous, measurable time-line connecting past, present, and future. He had a rich collection of tales, with an elaborate genealogical organization, about a distant past. He also had a much less well-organized collection of memories – his own, his parents', his friends' – of outstanding persons and events of the last seventy years or so. In between, there was hardly anything, except for two names, Draco and Solon, which were remembered because they were attached to codes of law that were still in operation, and the Peisistratid tyranny, which was remembered because it was the "other" against which democracy defined itself. Cleisthenes, now regarded (and already regarded by Herodotus 5.66–78 and 6.131.1) as the creator of Athenian democracy, is only once mentioned in any text composed for performance or delivery in the theaters, law courts, or assemblies of classical Athens – and that one instance (Isocrates 16.26) is an exception that proves the rule, for the speaker (the younger Alcibiades) is Cleisthenes' great-great-great-nephew and would know about him from family tradition. The heroic age was in a way more real to the average Athenian than the Athens of four or five generations back: he had, or thought he had, a clear idea of the main personalities and their relationships, of the main events in each saga cycle and their sequence and causal linkages (cf. Antiphanes fr. 189).

A clear idea, but an ever-shifting one. For the other point that it is vital to understand about Greek myth is that, in one sense, there was no such thing; or, to put it in a less startlingly paradoxical way, there was never any single, authoritative, canonical version of the traditional stories. The only exceptions, and then only partial ones, because of their unique cultural and educational status, were the two great Homeric poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; and even they had no absolutely binding force on later poets (in whatever genre) or visual artists.[1]

Classical Greeks themselves sometimes said – and tragedians sometimes made their characters say – that the myths were the creations of poets.[2] Many of them, to be sure, will have been learned by children literally at their mother's knee (Plato *Republic* 377b–c), but from school age onwards it will have been mainly poetry that developed and consolidated their mythical knowledge. The children of the well-to-do learned large amounts of epic, didactic, and lyric poetry by heart at school. All alike heard Homer recited at the Panathenaea, and could form part of the vast audiences for the performances of tragedy, satyr drama, comedy, and dithyramb at the Dionysia and other festivals, both in the city and in local communities (demes). The only other media whose influence could be remotely comparable were certain types of public oratory (notably funeral speeches for those killed in war) – which by their nature concentrated almost entirely on stories about Athens or about Athenian heroes like Theseus – and public art in the form of sculptures and mural paintings (no text of the classical period makes any mention of vase-painting, which has so greatly enriched our own detailed knowledge of many myths).

## How to Make a New Myth

Did the poets, in truth, create the myths? It depends what one means by "create." Even the most innovative of them were working within an existing framework and largely with existing personages. The action of a tragic drama, in particular, could cover only a short period of time, and the characters had to be left at the end in a position consistent with their future fate as known to the audience from other sources. Occasionally this limitation could be avoided or evaded. A good way to do this was to create a story that reached an existing destination by an entirely novel route. This, in effect, is what Sophocles did in *Antigone.*

For the familiar story of how Antigone defied her uncle Creon's edict forbidding the burial of her brother Polynices, of how Creon's son Haemon, to whom she was betrothed, pleaded in vain for her life to be spared, of how Creon relented too late, and of how first Antigone, then Haemon, then his mother committed suicide leaving Creon desolate, is virtually all, so far as we can tell, brand-new myth: there is no evidence whatever, in literature or art, that any such story existed before Sophocles (for the last scene of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* is a later addition based on Sophocles' play). There were the names of Antigone and Ismene, as daughters of Oedipus. There were stories about how they met their deaths; we know only of one about Ismene – that she had an illicit affair with the Theban warrior Periclymenus, and that the Argive warrior Tydeus surprised them together and killed Ismene[3] – but the tradition must also have found a way to dispose of Antigone. There was a Haemon, son of Creon, but he was killed by the Sphinx long before Antigone was born (*Oedipodeia* fr. 1 Davies). And, perhaps most importantly, there was an Athenian tradition according to which the victors did deny burial, not just to Polynices but to all the Seven, until Theseus on the appeal of their kinsfolk made the Thebans surrender the bodies for burial at Eleusis, either by persuasion or by military force. This story had been dramatized in Aeschylus' lost *Eleusinians*, and would be again in Euripides' surviving *Suppliants*; certainly in the latter, probably in both, Creon was the ruler of Thebes. But the concentration on Polynices, the lone opposition of Antigone (with Ismene as a foil to her), the devastating effects of the collision between Creon's statecraft, Antigone's love of the dead, and Haemon's love of Antigone – these all seem to be Sophocles' invention. And yet the conclusion of his story allows the saga to continue almost exactly as it traditionally did, with Antigone and Haemon dead, Creon still in power (he is not expendable, since he will later become the father-in-law of Heracles), and the bodies of six of the Seven still unburied (cf. *Antigone* 1080–3) until Theseus comes to rescue them. The popularity and fame of Sophocles' play made his innovations almost immediately the constitutive elements of a new Antigone myth, which soon spawned further variants (often greatly developing the Antigone–Haemon "love-interest") (Zimmermann 1993) and which has remained fresh, powerful, and productive to this day (Steiner 1984).

Similar in principle is the sequel that Euripides, in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, creates to the long-familiar tale of the sacrifice of Iphigenia. The story that Iphigenia was snatched away by Artemis from the altar at Aulis, and taken to the land of the Taurians (the Crimea), was already told in the cyclic epic, the *Cypria*; Iphigenia was there said to have become immortal, and the story is doubtless connected with the existence in that region of a cult of a virgin goddess involving human sacrifices (Herodotus 4.103). But Euripides' tale of Iphigenia living among the Taurians, not as a goddess but as the priestess of this cult, of Orestes being sent there by Apollo in quest of an image of Artemis, of his reunion with his sister, and of their escape and return to Greece, as far as we can tell is entirely novel. It is pasted to the end of Orestes' story as known from Aeschylus by the transparently artificial device of assuming that after his trial and acquittal at Athens, some of the Furies continued to pursue him (*IT* 968–75) until he appealed to Apollo, who told him he could save himself by bringing the image of Artemis to Attica. At the end of the play nothing at all is said about Orestes' future, except that his "present troubles" will be over (1441b): Iphigenia will become priestess of Artemis at Brauron in Attica, where she will die and be buried (1462–4).

The establishment of the *deus ex machina* convention provided another method whereby a dramatist could create a new story within an existing mythical framework. It enabled him, in fact, to let his plot go in any direction he chose, and leave it for the *deus* to put it back on its traditional track. The most spectacular surviving example of this is Euripides' *Orestes*. In this play Orestes is (in effect) tried for the murder of his mother, not by the gods or the Areopagus council at Athens but by the people of Argos, and he, his accomplice Pylades, and his sister Electra are sentenced to death but allowed to commit suicide rather than suffer the disgrace of execution. They use their brief respite to hatch a daring plot. They seize Hermione, daughter of Menelaus, as a hostage; they murder her mother Helen – or at least they believe they have done so; they take control of the palace, and when Menelaus attacks it they threaten to burn it down and destroy Hermione together with themselves. At this point Apollo appears as *deus ex machina* – accompanied by Helen, who is not dead after all but has become a goddess – and proceeds, in effect, to cancel everything that has happened in the play. Orestes, after a year's exile in Arcadia, is to go to Athens and be tried and acquitted there; he is then to marry Hermione (at whose neck his sword is still poised!) and settle down as King of the Argives (who an hour or so before had condemned him to death) while Menelaus rules Sparta (Apollo considerately encourages him to take a new wife!). And thus, as in *Antigone*, the play can end with everyone in more or less the situation where their traditional future requires them to be.

## Innovation within Existing Myths

But more usually what poets, tragic and other, do with myth is to take an existing story and *modify* it in one or several respects so that, to a greater or lesser extent, it becomes a somewhat different story with somewhat different implications. Some

modifications were undoubtedly easier than others. It was one thing, as Sophocles does, to substitute Neoptolemus for Diomedes as Odysseus' companion on the mission to bring Philoctetes to Troy; it would have been quite another for Neoptolemus, won over by pity and affection for Philoctetes, to take him home instead – and in fact, when Neoptolemus is about to do this, Heracles appears as *deus ex machina* and orders the two men to go to Troy where both will win glory. Were there any modifications that were *completely* impossible? Is it ever true to say that a dramatist made his plot develop in this or that way because "the myth" left him no alternative?

Our evidence suggests that the answer is: yes, but only to a very limited extent. It was not normally possible to make alterations that would disrupt the basic genealogical framework of the mythical corpus. The story of the Danaids, for example (presented in the tetralogy from which Aeschylus' *Suppliants* survives, and in several lost plays by other authors), must always end with the confirmation of the marriage of Hypermestra, daughter of Danaus, to Lynceus, the only surviving son of his brother Aegyptus, because this couple become the founders of a long, much-branching tree of descendants including Perseus, Heracles, and other major heroes. Crucial and focal events, too, which involve many characters from a range of families – events like the voyage of the Argonauts, the attacks on Thebes by Adrastus and the Seven (unsuccessfully) and by the Epigoni (successfully), or the Trojan War – cannot be abolished. But beyond this, scarcely anything is sacrosanct: one can broadly say that *in a telling of any given story, any element may be altered, so long as the alteration does not impact severely on other stories which are not, on that occasion, being told.* This applies both to stories forming the main plot of a play (or other poetic text) and to those which are introduced by way of illustration (e.g., in a tragic choral ode).

Let us consider a few pieces of data, from myths used in tragedy, which might have seemed (and some of which have actually been alleged, by ancient or modern writers) to be unalterable.

*Oedipus blinded himself on discovering that he had killed his father and married his mother.* So he does in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and so he is reported as having done in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* (778–84), Sophocles' *Antigone* (49–52) – both produced earlier than *Oedipus the King* – and in Euripides' *Phoenician Maidens* (59–62) which was produced later; but from one ancient commentator on the last-mentioned play we learn that in Euripides' lost *Oedipus*, Oedipus was overpowered and *forcibly* blinded by "the servants of Laius" (presumably immediately after he had killed their master), and from another that a version of the story existed in which Oedipus was blinded by his adoptive father, Polybus, before he ever left Corinth, when Polybus learned of the prophecy that Oedipus would kill his father.

*Orestes killed his mother.* So he does in every account, dramatic or other, that we know of – with one important exception. The *Odyssey*, while never explicitly denying the matricide, never explicitly affirms it either, and its statement that after killing Aegisthus Orestes held a funeral feast for him and Clytemnestra (3.309–10) strongly implies, without actually stating, that Clytemnestra is to be assumed to have committed suicide. Having the authority of Homer, this version was always available

to later poets; we know of none who actually used it, but I have argued elsewhere (Sommerstein 1997) that Sophocles in *Electra* encourages us for some time to believe that he is going to[4] (just as later in the play, when Electra believes Orestes to be dead, we are encouraged to expect that he will innovate in a quite different way and have her, not Orestes, kill Clytemnestra[5]). Even Aristotle, however, could write (*Poetics* 1453b22–4) that no poet could abolish the death of Clytemnestra at the hand of her son – forgetting that the greatest poet of all had in effect done just that.

*Medea murdered her children.* This crime, which has more and more come to seem constitutive of the mythical persona of Medea, was in all probability invented by Euripides. In accounts which are, or may be, of earlier date, we find her causing their death unintentionally by laying them in the sanctuary of Hera Akraia in the belief that the goddess would make them immortal (Eumelus, *FGrH* 451 F 2a); we also find them being killed at Hera's altar by the Corinthians (Parmeniscus, cited by an ancient commentator on *Medea* 264), or by friends of Creon (Creophylus, *FGrH* 417 F 3), and it was asserted (Parmeniscus, cited by an ancient commentator on *Medea* 9) that the Corinthians had paid Euripides five talents to transfer the blame for the children's deaths from themselves to Medea (obviously a fabrication, but further evidence that Euripides' account was an unusual one). Having made this drastic innovation (though one, be it noted, thoroughly consistent with Medea's traditional persona – consider how she murdered and dismembered her brother, duped the daughters of Pelias into killing their father, and later plotted to destroy the young Theseus), Euripides had to find some way to link it with the Hera Akraia cult with which all previous versions of the story had been closely connected. He does so, quite artificially, at the end of the play (1378–83) by having Medea interrupt her miraculous flight to safety at Athens to bury the two boys in Hera's sacred precinct (so that the hostile Corinthians will not be able to destroy their tombs), and establish a cult there which these same Corinthians will maintain for ever – and he evidently expects us not to notice the inconsistency.

*Paris took Helen to Troy.* One might suppose that if this elopement (or abduction) was abolished, it would destroy with itself the whole saga of the Trojan War. In the sixth century, however, the lyric poet Stesichorus[6] created a version of the story in which it was not Helen that went to Troy but a phantom in her shape, and Euripides uses this version in *Helen*.

Tragedians never felt in the least inhibited about presenting or presupposing different and incompatible versions of a story in different works. It is true that a poet was equally entitled to presuppose, as background to his new work, a particular account of earlier events by himself or another, as Oedipus' claims of moral and legal innocence in *Oedipus at Colonus* (265–72, 988–96) presuppose, and are not convincing without, the precise account of Laius' death which he gave in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (800–13); but we cannot *in general* read material from one play into another without specific authority, unless the plays are part of a connected sequence produced together as a unit. Euripides dramatized the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus twice, with drastically different presentations of Phaedra and probably of Hippolytus too. In

Sophocles' *Antigone* Creon is a vigorous ruler and is never called an old man (except possibly in the very last line of the play, when his misfortunes have broken him); in *Oedipus at Colonus*, whose action is to be imagined as taking place perhaps a month or two earlier, he is explicitly presented as elderly – because the play's central figure is the aged Oedipus, so that his uncle Creon must be aged too. In Sophocles' *Philoctetes* Odysseus is an unscrupulous villain; in *Ajax* his sympathetic understanding of Ajax, and awareness of his own human frailty, put Athena herself to shame. In Euripides' *Helen*, Helen is a virtuous woman who for seventeen years has been slandered worldwide without justification; three years earlier, in *The Trojan Women*, she had been portrayed as a spoilt playgirl, unscrupulously using her erotic magnetism to escape well-merited death at her wronged husband's hands; four years later, in *Orestes*, she has to sneak into Argos at night, loathed by its people and well aware that she deserves to be (*Orestes* 56–9, 98–104), and Orestes and his fellow-conspirators know that they have only to kill her to wipe out, in the mind of the Argive public, the stain of Orestes' matricide (*Orestes* 1134–42).

## Mythical Innovation and Audience Expectation

The flexibility of myth was an invaluable resource to the tragedian, not only in constructing his plot and molding his characters but in playing on the expectations and emotions of his audience. Since no dramatist ever presented a story in precisely the same way as any of his poetic predecessors, the audience could be certain that the play they were going to see would contain some completely novel features or combinations of features. However, they would have no idea just *what* innovations it was going to contain, and this had two effects. In the first place, paradoxically, while they knew that the play *as a whole* would contain some innovations, with respect to any *particular* story element the likeliest outcome was that it would remain unchanged – so although innovation in the abstract was expected, any particular innovation would be a surprise. In the second place, it was possible for the author to bluff the audience by seeming to foreshadow an innovation and then presenting a different innovation or none at all (Sommerstein 1997). But we will never perceive such effects unless we think away our knowledge of how a play actually ends and put ourselves in the position of an audience seeing it for the first time, knowing one or (usually) several past versions of the story, able to infer with moderate confidence 'iich elements of it would be effectively unalterable, but not knowing (though eager guess) which elements would in fact be altered.

Euripides' *Hippolytus*,[7] for example, shows that an audience can be bluffed even if ey are explicitly and authoritatively told in advance how the action is going to go. ur evidence suggests that, in most earlier versions of the Phaedra–Hippolytus story, iaedra had killed herself after Hippolytus' death, when in some manner it had come known to Theseus and the world that she had not only fallen in love with ippolytus but had made or authorized an adulterous proposition to him. The order

of events was approximately: (*a*) Phaedra, rebuffed by Hippolytus, accuses him to Theseus of actual or attempted rape; (*b*) Theseus curses Hippolytus and he is killed; (*c*) the truth about Phaedra's passion is revealed to Theseus; (*d*) Phaedra commits suicide. This appears to have been the pattern of the plot both in Euripides' first *Hippolytus* play and in Sophocles' *Phaedra* (from both of which we possess only fragments). At the beginning of the surviving *Hippolytus*, Euripides' second treatment of the story, Aphrodite tells the audience what will happen: Phaedra, though smitten with love for Hippolytus, is keeping silent and confiding in no one; however: "that is not the destined outcome of this passion; I will reveal the matter to Theseus, and it will be brought into the open. And the young man who is my enemy will be slain by his father with the curses which the sea-lord Poseidon granted him . . . ; and Phaedra will perish with a good name, but will nevertheless perish" (*Hippolytus* 41–8).

In terms of the older tale, Aphrodite mentions coming events in the order (*c–b–d*), indicating one other modification (that Phaedra will die "with a good name"), and omits (*a*) altogether. This may well bewilder the spectator. If Theseus knows about "this passion" before he has cursed his son, how comes it that he utters the curse at all, and how can Phaedra possibly die with a good name? Again, Aphrodite says nothing of the rape allegation, and Theseus' early knowledge of Phaedra's passion would seem to leave no place for it: what entirely new twist, then, is Euripides meaning to substitute for it? Only as the action develops will the audience realize how Euripides has played fast and loose with them. Aphrodite has not told any lies, but neither has she told the whole truth, and what she has told she has put in a misleading order. The actual order of events turns out to be close to (*d–a–b–c*). The rape allegation is there after all, though it is made posthumously and Phaedra's motives for it are in part different from those portrayed in earlier treatments. The curse and Hippolytus' fatal injury occur, as tradition and logic require, *before* Theseus knows the truth, though he – and Hippolytus himself – are undeceived before Hippolytus dies. Aphrodite has led the spectator to expect far-reaching plot innovations; only one such innovation actually occurs (the retiming of Phaedra's suicide), and it occurs *contrary* to what Aphrodite's words seemed clearly to imply.

Let us now put ourselves in the position of the spectators watching another play of Euripides, *Medea*, and assume (as we have seen to be likely[8]) that in no previous version of the story has Medea been imagined as having deliberately killed her children – though in all of them, one way or another, the children have perished at Corinth. As we see the play in real time, what will our expectations be, and how will they develop, regarding Medea's intentions and the children's likely fate? At the outset we are quickly told the current situation: after living in Corinth for some time with Medea and their children, Jason, despite his sworn pledges of fidelity to her, has decided to marry the daughter of King Creon,[9] leaving Medea in desolate misery. We can guess that a person with her past record and her magical abilities will probably be determined, and able, to seek revenge; and her nurse indeed fears an act of violence against one or more of her declared enemies (37–45).[10] She also reports that Medea "hates the children and takes no joy in looking at them" (36); this will

seem sinister only because we are sure that the children will die *somehow* before the play is over.

The early indications thus point to a murder-plot against Jason,[11] or his new bride, or Creon, or all three; in that case the children will probably be killed by the Corinthians in revenge. Consistent with this is the news that Creon is intending to send Medea and her children into exile (70–2), evidently fearing just such a move by her. The boys' tutor has learnt this with distress, but *we* may wonder if it offers a loophole whereby (contrary to all precedent) his charges can perhaps be saved. It is, to be sure, unlikely that Medea will simply depart without more ado (because then there can be no tragedy), but she might quite plausibly depart with the children leaving behind a deadly "present" for the new bride. A moment later the nurse (assumed to have gained through long intimacy a unique understanding of her mistress's mind) warns both the children and their tutor to beware of Medea, whose powerful emotions may drive her to some act of violence (89–104). This raises a fresh possibility – that Medea may kill her own children in a fit of anger – and this fear will be strengthened in a moment when Medea's voice is heard from within, cursing her children as well as Jason, and expressing loathing of herself as well (112–14, cf. 144–7); soon she is also cursing the new bride and her family (163–4). Almost all possibilities now seem open, except what actually happens: the deliberate, calculated killing of the children for the purpose of causing the maximum harm and pain to Jason. A complicating factor is that whereas *we* know that Medea is to be banished, she herself does not, and the knowledge, when it comes, may change her feelings and preferences.

Presently Medea comes on stage and makes a long and very rational speech (214–66), ending by asking the chorus to keep silent about any means she may discover to punish Jason for what he has done to her. In this speech she does not mention her children, and it must now seem unlikely that she will kill them in anger; we will probably go back to our former assumption that she is planning to strike down the wedding party. The chorus promise to keep her secret – but at this moment Creon arrives. He orders her immediate departure into exile, because she is making threats against him, his daughter, and his future son-in-law (287–9). She supplicates him for one day's respite, mainly for her children's sake (340–5), and he is not brutal enough to refuse. When he has gone, Medea firmly declares that she is going to "make corpses of three of my enemies, the father, the girl, and my husband" (374–5). She is aware that she will then find it hard to escape or find refuge (386–8), so she decides to wait a little to see if some hope of safety appears; if not, she will go ahead anyway even at the cost of her life (392–4). Knowing that Medea has to survive,[12] we will doubtless guess that a refuge will present itself.

Certain now, as we think, that Jason is doomed, we listen to Medea wiping the floor with him in a set-piece debate scene (446–626). We may briefly wonder if she will be tempted to accept (treacherously, of course) his offer of money, and introductions to his friends, to ease her and her children's path in exile (610–15), but we are not surprised when she refuses to accept anything at all from him. And then, after Jason's departure and a choral song, a saviour enters in the bumbling shape of

Aegeus of Athens; Medea secures asylum with him by making another supplication, promising to use her magic to enable him to beget children, and making him swear that he will neither banish her nor surrender her to her enemies. The oath she administers (735–55) is the most solemn and precise in all surviving tragedy, and we soon discover why. No longer is Medea thinking of killing Creon, his daughter and Jason. Now, as she reveals at 792–3, she means to kill Creon, his daughter – and Jason's children: Jason himself is now envisaged as surviving to suffer their loss (803–4, 817), which Medea perceives to be a worse punishment than mere death. That she is also inflicting the same punishment on *herself* is pointed out by the chorus (818), but brushed aside, though it will influence her, momentarily, later on (1044–8).

Now at last we *do* know how things will end, and the only uncertainties that seem to remain are how Medea will escape from Corinth and how she will ensure, as her new plan demands, that her device to kill Creon and his daughter does *not* also kill Jason.[13] But we may be surprised when, sending the children with Jason to take the "present" to his bride, she asks him to ask Creon to spare them from exile (939–45); surely, if the petition is granted, they will stay with the wedding party (cf. 939), and probably be killed when they are discovered to have been the bearers of death to the king and princess? Is this perhaps a devilish device of Medea's to cause the death of the children without getting their blood on her own hands? But no: immediately after the following choral ode, the children return with their tutor (1002ff). If they are to be killed, it must be their mother that kills them – though even now Euripides continues to play with alternative denouements, as Medea thinks momentarily of taking the children to Athens (1044–8).[14]

Presently we, and Medea, learn of the horrible death of Jason's bride and her father. If she is going to complete her revenge, Medea must now kill her children at once (1236–7); she steels herself to do it with the thought that otherwise they will die by "another, more hostile hand" (1239) – which had been their fate in most earlier accounts. She goes inside, and presently the children's final cries are heard.

Shortly afterwards Jason arrives, desperate to save his children – from the Corinthians (1303–5); when told that things are far worse than he imagines, he asks whether Medea is planning to kill him too (1308). He is, one might say, in the wrong script, and presently Medea is seen aloft in her winged chariot, her grief almost, but not quite, lost in her triumph over him – while he is the same Jason as ever, still quite unaware that he has ever done her any wrong. The inauguration of the cult of Hera Akraia (discussed above) provides a link back to more familiar versions of the story, as probably does the reference to Jason's unusual death.[15] But Euripides has innovated here too. So far as we know from other sources, nothing significant happens to Jason between his children's death and his own – indeed, as we have seen, in at least one account he dies shortly *before* them – unless his assistance to Peleus in capturing Iolcos (Pherecydes *FGrH* 3 F 62) is to be taken as a later event. It would seem to follow that he was normally thought not to have lived long after his parting from Medea. In Euripides' version he certainly will, as witness her gleeful response when he

laments his bereavement: "You've not started grieving yet: just wait till you're old!" (1395). *That* is to be Jason's greatest punishment: the curse of long life!

Thus, while in one sense we have known from the moment *Medea* began how it would end – with Jason's children and his new bride dead, and Medea on her way to Athens – in another and perhaps a more important sense we have often had very little idea what was going to happen until shortly before it did happen, and have sometimes been carefully led astray by the planting of false expectations. Not every tragedy plays these games with the audience quite as intensively as *Medea* does, but it happens far more frequently than has traditionally been allowed.

## Etiology

Medea's foundation of a cult in honor of her children at the sanctuary of Hera Akraia exemplifies a very common feature in tragic poets' treatment of myth: the creation of links, or the highlighting of existing links, between the mythical past and the world of the poet's own time. Almost every surviving play of Euripides ends with a statement (by a *deus ex machina*, if there is one) of some kind of etiological connection to the contemporary world. Sometimes the etiological connection may have been obvious to the audience from an early stage. In *Medea* it seems to have already been part of the story before Euripides, and the only uncertainty will have been how it could be combined with a deliberate murder of the children by Medea, once it had become clear that such was her intention. In *Iphigenia in Tauris*, we learn very early on (85–92) that Orestes is on a mission to steal an image of Artemis from the Taurians and take it to Attica; there was probably already a well-established association between Iphigenia and the cult of Artemis at Brauron in eastern Attica (cf. *IT* 1462–7), although the link between the Taurian image and the cult of Artemis *Tauro*-polos at nearby Halae Araphenides, which is given greater prominence by the *dea ex machina* (1449–61), may well be a Euripidean invention (Scullion 2000).

Other Euripidean etiologies are of a political nature. In *Andromache* (1247–9) the connection is the foundation, by Andromache's son, of the still reigning royal house of Molossia; in *Suppliants* (1191–1209) it is an eternal treaty of nonaggression between Athens and Argos; in *Ion* it is the nomenclature of the four traditional Athenian tribes, descended from Ion, and the division of the Hellenic people into Ionians, Dorians, and Achaeans (*Ion* 1575–94) – and a traditional genealogy is modified so as to give the Dorians of the Peloponnese an Athenian ancestry (1589–91), with obvious contemporary political implications. In one or two plays the concluding etiology is rather trivial – notably in *Helen* (1670–5), where a tiny island off the Attic coast is named after Helen – but there is only one Euripidean tragedy that we know to lack one altogether, *The Trojan Women*, whose relevance to the contemporary world was only too plain anyway.

Perhaps the most celebrated of all tragic etiologies are those in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* for the homicide jurisdiction of the Areopagus council (681–710), for the rule in

Athenian trials that equal votes mean acquittal (735–41), and for the Athenian alliance with Argos (289–91, 667–73, 762–77) – all three probably, and the last certainly, invented by Aeschylus. Generally, though, both in Aeschylus and in Sophocles, links between the drama and the contemporary world are made by implication rather than explicitly; the late *Oedipus at Colonus*, with its prophecy (409–11, 621–3) of an Athenian victory over Athens' current enemy Thebes at the site of Oedipus' tomb, is an exception.

It is striking that it is hardly ever possible to determine, on the basis of internal evidence alone, whether a tragic etiology (or similar linkage between the world of the play and the world of the audience) was taken from existing tradition (with or without modification) or was wholly invented by the dramatist. What matters, apparently, especially in Euripides, is that the connection should be made, and the question of its mythical or cultic "authenticity" does not arise. Once again we must bear in mind that there was no fixed entity called "Greek myth."

## Secondary Mythical Allusions

Let us turn now to a quite different kind of linkage: the many cases in which characters or choruses in a drama try to illuminate the story being enacted by referring or alluding to a different story that can be seen as in some way related to it – as when, just after the killing of Medea's children, Euripides' chorus sing of Ino (*Medea* 1282–92), calling her the only other mother to have killed her own offspring. For us today, such references may also, contrariwise, throw new light on the story being referred to – and sometimes on other stories not even mentioned. That is the case with this Ino passage. As has recently been pointed out (March 2003), if it can be said by a chorus in 431 BCE that Ino is the *only* woman before Medea to have killed her children, that proves not only that Sophocles' *Tereus* (in which Procne takes revenge on her husband Tereus for his rape and mutilation of her sister Philomela by killing her son Itys) is later than 431, but that in earlier versions of the story Procne (or whatever she was then called) had not killed her own child, or at least had not done so deliberately. Another possible parallel known to all students of tragedy, the killing of Pentheus by his mother Agave in Euripides' posthumously produced *Bacchae*, was probably likewise unknown in 431 (March 1989: 50–2): on fifth-century and earlier vase-paintings showing the killing of Pentheus by Dionysiac maenads, their leader is never named Agave, and on one she is named as Galene.

If a myth is alluded to only very briefly, especially if the allusion is indirect, it will usually not be possible to alter it in the process; at the most, the poet may be able to indicate which of various existing versions of the story is being referred to. But even brief references can be used in surprising ways. In Aeschylus' *Eumenides* there are two references to the story of Ixion. When Athena comes to her temple on the Acropolis, finds Orestes embracing her image there and the Furies surrounding him, and is told by the latter that they are pursuing him because he has killed his mother but are

willing to submit the case to her judgment, she turns to Orestes and asks him what he has to say for himself "if it is with trust in justice that you sit guarding this image near my hearth, a suppliant deserving respect in the manner of Ixion" (*Eumenides* 439–41). Later, while the votes are being cast at the end of Orestes' trial, there is an altercation between the Furies and Apollo (who has been acting as Orestes' advocate): the Furies charge Apollo with having allowed his sanctuary at Delphi to be polluted by the blood on Orestes' hands, and Apollo retorts with a rhetorical question: "did my Father [Zeus] also make a wrong decision on the occasion when Ixion, the first murderer, was a suppliant for purification?" (*Eumenides* 717–18) – which the Furies evade answering.

If this was all we knew about Ixion, we would gather that he killed someone, supplicated Zeus for purification, and was granted it; moreover, both Athena and Apollo – and even, to judge by their failure to challenge Apollo, the Furies – seem to regard it as obviously true that Ixion justly deserved this favor from Zeus, and from this one would naturally presume that, as in Orestes' case, there were strong and well-known reasons for holding that the killing was to some degree excusable.

Yet when we turn to Pindar's *Second Pythian* (21–48), to our fragments of Aeschylus' own *Ixion* and *Women of Perrhaebia*, and to a variety of later sources, we find they tell a coherent tale which is very hard to reconcile with the assumptions that seemingly underlie the *Eumenides* references. The following account is based on the ancient commentary to the Pindar ode, with additional material from Pindar's text (in angled brackets) and from Diodorus Siculus 4.69.3–5 (in square brackets).

> Ixion married Dia, the daughter of Deioneus. . . . After the marriage Deioneus, according to custom, demanded that Ixion hand over the bride-gifts [and, when he refused to do so, seized his horses in pledge]. So Ixion dug a pit, filled it with fire, and invited his father-in-law as if to a feast, [promising full compliance,] and the latter, unaware of the contrivance, came in, fell into the fire-pit, and perished in the flames. <Ixion thus became the first man to shed kindred blood in a treacherous murder.> No one was willing to purify him, and his pleas were rejected also by most of the gods, but Zeus took pity on him, purified him of the murder, took him up to heaven, and let him share his home. But they say that he attempted a second crime, falling in love with Hera [and having the audacity to proposition her sexually], and that Zeus, learning of this, fashioned a cloud in the shape of Hera: Ixion, seeing it, approached it and lay with it, and from this union was born a savage and monstrous man to whom they gave the name Centaurus, <who in turn lay with some Magnesian mares on the slopes of Mount Pelion and begot the hybrid Centaurs>. Afterwards Ixion's hands and feet were bound to a <winged> wheel <on which he rolls around everywhere, proclaiming to mortals that they must repay their benefactors with kind deeds in return>.

No source gives the slightest indication of anything that might excuse Ixion – and the second half of the story shows, moreover, that Zeus' merciful behavior toward him was about as misguided as could possibly be imagined. At least from the beginning of the fifth century BCE (when the wheel first appears in art) Ixion was one of the archetypal

great sinners of myth. The two allusions in *Eumenides* are thus likely initially to bemuse the audience, and on reflection to raise serious questions about the attitude of the Olympians to homicide and in particular to Orestes. Ixion had used deception to kill his father-in-law (who must also have been a blood-kinsman, perhaps an uncle); Orestes had used deception to kill his mother, which must be even worse – with the approval of Apollo and therefore (*Eumenides* 19, 616–18) of Zeus. Do Apollo, Athena, and Zeus not care about such things? Do the Furies not know what is known to everyone to whom Ixion's name means anything at all? These questions arise from the very fact that the allusions are too brief to include any data that might change our view of the story. They are never directly answered. But they may serve, like the equally divided vote of the jury, to counteract any temptation we may be under to see the case of Orestes in simplistic, black-and-white terms; to emphasize that his action, like Ixion's, was an enormous evil – even if, unlike Ixion's, it was an absolute necessity in the given situation – and that it is essential to ensure that such a situation never arises again; and perhaps also to suggest that the automatic forgiveness, regardless of the circumstances, which Zeus extended to Ixion, is as unacceptable a policy as the automatic retribution, regardless of the circumstances, on which the Furies insisted so passionately for so long.

When we are told a little more than this, it does become possible to alter a myth in the process of alluding to it. Midway in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* the chorus, reflecting on Clytemnestra's crime which is soon to be avenged, recall various other atrocious crimes committed by women, such as the killing of Meleager by the action of his mother Althaea, or of all but one of the men of Lemnos by their wives, or:

> . . . another hateful woman in story,
> the bloody maiden
> who caused the death of one close to her
> at the hands of enemies,
> persuaded by a gold-crafted
> Cretan necklace, the gift of Minos,
> she, with the mind of a bitch, robbed Nisus
> of his lock of immortality
> as he snored in unwary sleep;
> and Hermes touched him.
>
> (*Choephoroi* 613–22)

The maiden is easily identifiable as Scylla, who betrayed her father Nisus, and her city of Megara, to the army of Minos of Crete. Nisus could not die so long as a particular lock of hair was on his head; Scylla cut it. We have no other references to the story before Roman times, but it is striking that this passage implicitly denies an element present in all later accounts:[16] they all, whether in Greek or in Latin, say that Scylla was *in love* with Minos. If she was in love with him, and if he and her father were implacable enemies (so that a normal marriage to Minos was an impossibility), she would need no gift of jewelry to persuade her to kill Nisus, particularly (one might think) in a choral

ode whose declared subject is the disastrous effects of *desire (eros)* in women (*Choephoroi* 596–601). It appears, therefore, that in Aeschylus we are to suppose that she commits the crime purely for a bribe. It is possible, of course, that the love element is a later invention and that the bribery story was the normal one in Aeschylus' time, but the love element is attested by eight different authors who are certainly not all dependent on each other, and none of them mentions a gift by Minos to Scylla. The story would be well known at Athens, Nisus being the brother of the Athenian king, Aegeus; so if Aeschylus was here modifying it, the modification would be noticed, and spectators would ask themselves why it had been made. Their likeliest answer would perhaps be, especially after hearing some more of the ode, that the feminine "desires" which are its subject are turning out not to be exclusively or even mainly sexual. By the time they reach the end of the ode, they will have encountered four instances of women murdering those close to them, motivated by four different kinds of desire: Althaea (602–12) by vengeance, Scylla by material gain, the Lemnian women (631–8) by sexual jealousy, and Clytemnestra, to judge by what is said of her in 623–30, mainly by power. On still further reflection they may conclude that these four motives were all in fact present in the Clytemnestra they saw in *Agamemnon*: vengeance for Iphigenia, sexual jealousy of Cassandra, and the chance to gain control of Agamemnon's great wealth (cf. *Choephoroi* 135–7, 275, 301) and effective rulership of Argos (cf. *Choephoroi* 302–5). The ode may on the surface be telling four different stories; but at a deeper level it is telling just one – the story of the woman who in a few moments will appear yet again at the door of the house whose headship she has usurped.

## Conclusion

Thus, whether on a small or large scale, we can see tragedy exploiting, renewing, and sometimes creating myth, holding its audience in a varying combination of knowledge and ignorance, creating and frustrating their expectations. Whether in the construction of his plots and the events surrounding them, or in the illustrative exploitation of stories other than the one being enacted, or in building connections between the heroic age and the present day, the tragic poet was the master of myth, not its servant. Perhaps this was even more powerfully true of him than it was of his epic or lyric brethren. They could *tell* a story, fully or briefly, explicitly or allusively; the dramatist, at least so far as concerned the actual plot of his play, was committed to having it *enacted* in a manner that could persuade an audience that it was seeing "the sort of thing that could happen"; committed, that is, to imagining and credibly re-creating at least some episodes at a level of detail that other genres could always avoid if they wished, and forming them into a structure that would make, as a whole, an effective and appealing theatrical experience. The stories that had been handed down by tradition provided admirable raw material for this purpose; but ancient artists, unlike some modern ones, gained no prizes by presenting their material raw. Myth was tragedy's framework, but never its straitjacket.

## NOTES

1 See chapter 11 in this volume.

2 See, for example, Herodotus 2.53 ("Hesiod and Homer ... are the ones who created the genealogy of the Greeks' gods"); Plato *Republic* 377d ("Hesiod and Homer ... and the other poets ... told and still tell men false stories of their own composition"); Euripides *Heracles* 1346 (Heracles rejecting myths of divine immoralities and conflicts: "these are the wretched tales of poets").

3 Mimnermus fr. 21 West (where the name is Theoclymenus); Pherecydes *FGrH* 3 F 95; and at least two archaic vase-paintings (see *LIMC* Ismene I 3–6). Tydeus acts at the behest of Athena, and it has been suggested that in this story Ismene was a cult-servant of Athena bound to virginity.

4 The key false clue is planted in lines 121–8, when the chorus address Electra as "child of a most wretched mother," recall the death of Agamemnon "most impiously caught by the deception of your guileful mother" – and then end by praying "May *he* that brought these things about perish!" In speaking of the murder they mention only Clytemnestra, and yet it is Aegisthus whom they curse: if they, who are not Clytemnestra's children, cannot bring themselves even to pray for her death, how much less will those who *are* her children be willing actually to kill her! As late as lines 453–71, when Electra asks the cautious, timid Chrysothemis to pray that Orestes should "live, get the upper hand, and plant his foot upon his enemies," and she agrees to do so, we can hardly be meant to suppose that Chrysothemis is agreeing to pray that Orestes should kill his mother.

5 We know, of course, that Orestes is close at hand, but we cannot be sure that he will carry out his plans before she has had time to act on her declared intention (1019–20, 1045) of avenging her father's murder herself (Chrysothemis having refused to assist her).

6 *PMG* 192, 193; cf. Plato *Republic* 586c.

7 This paragraph is taken, with minor modifications, from Sommerstein (1997:195–6).

8 See p. 168 above.

9 No connection with the Creon of the Antigone story.

10 This fear may have been expressed vaguely or precisely, depending on whether the disputed lines 38–42 are genuine.

11 In most other accounts Jason survives (to perish later by accident or suicide), but in one (Hyginus *Fabulae* 25) he dies, together with his bride and Creon, in a conflagration caused by Medea.

12 For she has an important role to play later in Athens as a wicked stepmother to Theseus.

13 The dramatist eventually solves this problem for her by having Jason leave the palace, with the children, as soon as their petition has been accepted by his bride (1158); he does not trouble to explain how in that case it comes about that when the children are returned to their mother (1002), Jason is not with them.

14 A second reference to this possibility at 1058 is probably, with its context, a spurious addition (the passage makes Medea not merely inconsistent but incoherent: 1058 takes it for granted that she will be able to take the children with her to Athens, the next sentence without argument takes it for granted that she will not).

15 He will die after being hit on the head by "a relic of the *Argo*" (1387), explained by an ancient commentator as referring to the ship's stern-post falling off the wall of the temple where it had been dedicated.

16 *In Greek:* Pseudo-Apollodorus 3.15.8; Pausanias 2.34.7; scholia to Euripides *Hippolytus* 1200 and to Lycophron *Alexandra* 650. *In Latin*: [Virgil] *Ciris*; Propertius 3.19.21–8; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8.6–151; Hyginus *Fabulae* 198.

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In addition, almost every modern edition of a Greek tragedy contains in its introduction a section headed "The myth," "The history of the legend," or the like, which discusses the evidence for the development of the relevant myth(s) before the date of the drama in question and the significance of the choices and innovations made by the dramatist.

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