

4: TRAGEDY AND GREEK MYTH

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The theatre of Dionysus in fifth-century-BC Athens provided a unique context for myth-telling.¹ At the annual festival of the City Dionysia, myths were reembodyed in performances by members of the citizen group. In these reembodyments, as heroes and divinities walked the stage, myths were not just narrated as past events: they were actualised as present happenings. Then and there, but also now and here; remote enough to allow room for pity, but close enough to inspire awe.²

In the present attempt to characterise tragic myths, I begin with a discussion (Section 1) of an apparently simple question: What happens in Greek tragedies? In order to suggest an answer, I contrast tragedy with the nontragic mythological tradition, examining in particular the kinds of actions and sufferings ascribed to heroes and heroines. In Section 2 I ask another seemingly straightforward question: Where are Greek tragedies imagined as taking place? My answer involves politics and psychology as well as topography and geography. Finally, in Section 3, I discuss ways in which tragedy represents the gods. Throughout the chapter, my aim is to ask how far it is possible to isolate features which are distinctively tragic.³

WHAT HAPPENS IN GREEK TRAGEDIES?

Across a wide range of Greek mythological narratives, in both texts and visual representations, the mighty heroes Heracles, Theseus, Agamemnon, and Oedipus are credited with formidable and triumphantly successful exploits. Heracles is the monster-slayer *par excellence*; Theseus, champion of idealised Athenian values, rids the world of unpleasant villains and puts an end to the Minotaur; Agamemnon leads the expedition

which captures Troy, so justly avenging Paris' abduction of Helen; Oedipus destroys the oppressive power of the Sphinx. These same heroes appear, more specifically, in tragedies, including four which survive to the present day: Euripides' *The Madness of Heracles* and *Hippolytus*; Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*; Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. What is noticeable about the way in which these heroes are represented in tragedy is the kind of *selection* of mythical material which tragedy practises. When in Euripides' play the peerless Heracles returns home after his culminating Labour (the seizing of the hell-hound Cerberus), he is struck by a frenzy sent upon him by Hera; while out of his senses he slaughters his wife and children and is only prevented from killing his father Amphitryon when Athena hurls a rock at him. In *Hippolytus*, Theseus witnesses the utter destruction of his family: when his son Hippolytus slights Aphrodite, the goddess's punishment leads to the suicide of Theseus' wife Phaedra and to the death of Hippolytus, intemperately cursed by his father in the false belief that the young man had raped Phaedra. In *Agamemnon*, Troy's conqueror is humiliatingly stabbed to death in his bath by his vengeful and unfaithful wife Clytemnestra. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the saviour of Thebes becomes an abhorred outcast, revealed as the killer of his father and as the husband to whom his own mother bore four children.

This pattern is typical. Greek tragedies do not narrate heroic exploits: instead, they explore the disruptions and dilemmas generated by such heroism, disruptions and dilemmas which almost invariably involve the catastrophic destruction of a household. Now of course tragedy is not the only genre to highlight the problematic aspects of heroism. We need only think of the *Iliad*, where heroic values are put under enormous strain by the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles; where Achilles' clear-eyed awareness of the brevity of his glory contrasts with the all-too-human, indeed 'tragically' limited vision which characterizes Hector;⁴ and where one of the poem's greatest affective climaxes, in which Priam ransoms from Achilles the body of his dead son Hector, precisely exemplifies the kind of emotional intensity later exploited in Attic tragedy.⁵ Or we may think of the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus' slaying of the suitors is by no means morally unambiguous (this is especially clear in Book 24, where the suitors' grieving families step forward to exact vengeance for their murdered brothers and sons). Nevertheless, it is above all in tragedy that the underside of heroism becomes pervasive, not simply as a 'theme,' but as the predominant perspective from which mythical events are selected and depicted. It will be useful to illustrate this in more detail, by examining one myth, that of Jason and Medea, in three different versions.

In *Pythian 4*, the praise-poet Pindar honours Arcesilas of Cyrene, victor in the chariot-race at Delphi in 462 BC. The poem includes what is, for Pindar, an unusually extended account of a myth, namely Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. In spite of its length, this account is not a detailed narration, but rather a spotlighting of significant moments. Given that Pindar is celebrating the return of a victorious athlete after a competitive triumph, the choice of the myth of the Argonauts makes perfect sense as a paradigm of success in the world of heroic adventure: Jason left home in search of glory, and returned having won it.⁶ The Pindaric Jason is formidable, handsome, and gentle of speech, even when he confronts Pelias, who has forcibly usurped sovereignty from Jason's 'rightfully ruling parents' (110). Thanks to his trust in the god (232) and to Medea's passionate assistance, Jason wins the Fleece, and is wreathed by his comrades like a victor in the Games (240). What of Medea? It is true that Aphrodite teaches Jason how to induce Medea to lose her shame for her parents and to desire a country – Hellas – which is not her own, so that she shall be burned and whirled by the lash of Persuasion (216–19). It is true, too, that her chaotic and disruptive emotions have been taken to exemplify her 'disturbing ambiguity.'⁷ Nor can it be denied that at one point Medea is described as 'the murder(ess) of Pelias' (250), presumably an allusion to the later brutal episode in which she deceived Pelias' daughters into butchering and boiling him, in an attempt to effect his rejuvenation. Nevertheless, although this allusion has been cited as evidence of Medea's 'infamous duplicity,'⁸ there is surely no implication that to be a murder(ess)-of-Pelias is necessarily a negative quality, since earlier in the poem Pelias has been portrayed as unlawfully and violently insolent (*athemin, biaios, hubrin* [ἄθεμιν, βιαίως, ὕβριν] 109–12). Moreover, about any possible future dissension between the Colchian princess and her Greek lover, Pindar is silent: Jason took her away secretly but *sun autai* (σὺν αὐταῖς), 'with her acquiescence' (250). To put the matter in broad and direct terms: in *Pythian 4* the central function of the myth of the *Argo* is to shed lustre on the human victor Arcesilas by praising the mythical hero who stands as his exemplar.⁹

Argonautica, the great Hellenistic epic poem by Apollonius of Rhodes, narrates the tale of Jason and Medea in far richer detail than anything we find in Pindar; and in Apollonius it does indeed become imperative to recognise ambiguity. The portrayal of the two principals is subtle and complex: for the bright light of Pindaric heroism Apollonius substitutes something far more troubling. Jason can only achieve his goal by relying on others: even though, before yoking the

fire-breathing Colchian bulls, he exults in the strength of his limbs like a proud warhorse (3.1259–62), he has by that stage already been sprinkled by Medea with potions which confer invulnerability. Not only is he far from self-reliant, but he also enters deeply worrying moral territory: his treacherous and religiously polluting murder of Medea's brother Apsyrtus overshadows the latter part of the epic, and partly determines the return course taken by the *Argo*, as Jason and Medea visit first Circe, and then Alcinous on Phaeacia, in a quest for purification.¹⁰

The differences between the Pindaric and the Apollonian Medeas are even greater than those between their Jasons. Compared to the near-*evanescence* of Medea in *Pythian 4*, the Medea of Apollonius is a strong and disturbing presence from the moment that she appears. When she abandons her home, she is torn apart by grief (4.34–40); she threatens Jason with the terrible consequences of his breaking of his oath to her, when it seems that he will negotiate with the pursuing Colchians (4.383–93). There is even a subtext which hints at the future rupture between Jason and Medea, since the myth of Ariadne, mentioned several times (3.997–1004, 1096–1108; 4.430–34), cannot but recall Theseus' abandoning of *his* foreign princess. Nevertheless, in spite of these darker characteristics of Jason and Medea, as the *Argo* sails into its home port of Pagasae at the end of the poem there is no mention of impending trouble. Indeed, about Medea's future career, we have learned explicitly only two things. First, according to Hera's plan, Medea will arrive in Iolcus as a *kakon* (κακόν), 'bane,' to Pelias (3.1134–6). Second – so Hera assures Thetis – Medea will ultimately marry Achilles in the Elysian Fields (4.810–16).¹¹ Whatever has gone before, the ending of the epic is serene, concluding as it does at the moment when the *Argo* itself bows out of the story:

You sailed untroubled past the coast of Cecrops' land, past
Aulis inside Euboea, past the towns of the Opuntian Locri-
ans, and joyfully you stepped ashore at Pagasae.

(4.1778–81)

Chronologically intermediate between the Pindaric and the Apollonian narratives is Euripides' tragedy. As might be expected from a story incorporating so many episodes of violent conflict, the myth of Medea was a favourite with the Greek tragedians;¹² but the only play on this theme to survive to the present day is the Euripidean masterpiece. Within the world of this play, the expedition of the *Argo* is

just a memory; equally remote is the recollected love between Jason and Medea. From the perspective of the tragedy's Corinthian setting, Colchis and Iolcus lie in the past; Athens, Medea's eventual refuge, lies in the future. Concentrated into the transitional Corinthian present is an episode of horrifying cruelty, which encompasses the destruction of two families.

Jason has decided to put Medea aside in favour of a new bride, the daughter of the Corinthian king Creon. When Medea cunningly obtains from a nervous and reluctant Creon the permission to remain for just one more day before leaving Corinth, she seizes the opportunity to inflict a ghastly vengeance on her former lover and his prospective second family. As wedding presents to Jason's new bride, Medea sends a lovely gown and coronet, conveyed by her own little sons to make the gifts more persuasively welcome. But the gifts turn out to contain a fiery, flesh-eating poison, which causes the excruciating deaths of the girl and her father. A Newsbringer¹³ recounts the final stages of the torment:

Overcome by disaster, she fell to the ground;
 Except to her father, she was indeed hard to recognise;
 The form of her eyes was not clear, and her face was disfigured;
 Blood mingled with flame dripped down from her head; her
 flesh,
 Eaten away by the invisible jaws of poison, flowed away
 From the bones, like drops of pine resin –
 A terrible sight. Everyone was afraid to touch
 Her corpse. We had learned the lesson from what had happened.
(Med. 1195–1203)

Going beyond even these horrors, Medea then kills her own two young sons – acting not as a monstrous psychopath, but as a mother torn apart by conflicting drives. At first she had found the thought of infanticide hideous beyond imagining:

What am I to do? My courage has gone,
 Women, when I saw the bright eyes of my children,
 I could not do it. Farewell to the plans
 I had before. I'll take my children from this land.
 Why should I cause harm to my children in order to make
 Their father suffer, when I shall suffer twice as much myself?
(1042–7)

But finally, overcome by the urge to punish the partner who has betrayed her, Medea convinces herself that she has no choice:

Friends, the deed is decided: with all speed
 To kill the children and then leave Corinth;
 Not to delay, giving the children up to another
 More malevolent hand to murder them.
 At all events, they must die; and since they must,
 It is I who shall kill them, I who gave them birth.
 Arm yourself, my heart: why do I hesitate
 To perform wicked deeds that are terrible, yet inevitable?

(1236–43)

With the boys lying dead, it might seem that any possibility for still greater cruelty has been exhausted. Yet as a final refinement Medea conveys her sons' corpses away from Corinth, in order to prevent Jason from embracing them in a last farewell. 'You are not yet mourning,' she chillingly informs Jason (1396): 'Wait until you are old.'

In exploring the catastrophic underside of heroism, Euripides' *Medea* exemplifies the inflection typically given by tragic playwrights to the mythical tradition. Tragedy is a world in which the tensions which ordinarily beset family life are unbearably intensified. In marriages, ancient and modern, husbands and wives quarrel and even fight: in tragedy, Clytemnestra goes further: she slaughters Agamemnon. In families, ancient and modern, children often face conflicts of loyalty towards their father and mother: in tragedy, Orestes goes further: he kills his mother because she killed his father. Tragedy is a crucible, a burning glass, an arena which displays events so terrible that one can hardly bear to contemplate them, yet so compelling that one cannot but watch to the end.

WHERE DO GREEK TRAGEDIES HAPPEN?

We turn now to the *location* of tragic myths. The action of Greek tragedies is, I shall suggest, imagined as unfolding 'in between.' The Euripidean *Medea* may once more serve as our initial guide.

Medea is in many senses an outsider. Not only is she a stranger to Corinth: this Colchian princess is a stranger to the Greek world altogether. At first she relies on Jason; later – for her escape plan – she relies on Aigeus. But throughout, her status is that of one who is 'citiless' (*apolis*

[ἄπολις], 255, cf. 644).¹⁴ This condition of exclusion applies, literally or metaphorically, to a large proportion of the protagonists in Greek tragedy. In Sophocles' *Philoctetes* the eponymous hero, abandoned on the island of Lemnos, lacks all the comforts which would have brought his life closer to that of a civilised human being; only his magically unerring bow raises him above the level of a brute. (The desolation and isolation attributed to Lemnos in this play constitute another example of tragic 'selection': inhabited since prehistoric times, the real Lemnos was by no means devoid of human population.) Another Sophoclean work, *Ajax*, depicts a hero whose position at the very edge of the beached Greek ships (*Aj.* 4) reflects his martial indomitability – the extremity of an army's lines is one of its points of maximum vulnerability – but also symbolises other aspects of his marginality, including his madness and his attainment, albeit briefly, of a sublime linguistic register unparalleled elsewhere in the play;¹⁵ eventually he commits the ultimate act of self-exclusion by falling on his sword. In these and many other tragedies, explorations of the moral and emotional implications of exclusion and marginality illustrate the genre's predilection for 'testing to destruction' the concepts and categories of ordinary Greek life.¹⁶ By dramatising the experiences of individuals driven out of their usual frameworks for living, tragedies depict actions which are simultaneously extreme and representative – just as the chorus of *Oedipus Tyrannus* can characterize the utterly extraordinary events surrounding Oedipus as a 'paradigm' of human existence (*OT* 1193).

There are various ways in which tragic actions may unfold in the gaps between states. Sometimes these states are *city*-states, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which the plot concerns an outcast wandering in the no-man's-land between Thebes and Athens. Will hospitable Athens agree to admit a wanderer with a horrific past? Will Creon and Polynices, with their threats and persuasion, draw Oedipus back to Thebes? At the end Oedipus mysteriously crosses an even more dangerous, because sacred, boundary, that between life and death, eventually to occupy a post mortem position between the two poles – as a dead hero with the power to affect the living.

A similar sense of the precarious balance between states typically underlies works which turn on the acceptance or rejection of a ritual supplication. Central to Aeschylus' *Suppliant Maidens* is the dilemma faced by the Argive ruler Pelasgus, obliged to decide whether to accept a group of refugees in a crisis where such acceptance will entail the dangerous enmity of those angrily pursuing them. The asylum-seekers in question are the daughters of Danaus, desperate to avoid being forced

into marriage with their cousins, the sons of Aegyptus. To intensify Pelasgus' dilemma still further, the Danaids threaten to commit suicide upon the city's holy shrines. As Pelasgus expresses it to the chorus of Danaid maidens:

Yes, I see difficulties everywhere, hard to wrestle with;
 A surge of troubles overwhelms me like a river.
 I have entered upon a sea of ruin, bottomless and dangerous,
 With nowhere a harbour to escape from misfortune.
 If I do not fulfil this duty to help you,
 You threatened us with pollution unsurpassed;
 But if I stand against your cousins, Aegyptus' sons,
 Before our walls and fight the matter out,
 Is the cost not a bitter one, that men
 Should soak the earth in blood for women's sake?
 Yet I must fear the wrath of Zeus, the suppliants' god:
 For mortals that is the supreme fear.

(*Supp.* 468–79)

The boundary between one community and another is a place of tension, and potentially a powerful generator of dramatic meaning.¹⁷

The gaps between states explored in Euripides' *Trojan Women* are at once political and more than political. The action is suspended between Troy and Greece, but also between past and present and, for the Trojan women themselves, between one male and another. The surviving women of Troy find themselves in a city whose past already lies in smouldering ruins, and whose future will consist of a slave existence across the sea in Greece. Cassandra will be transferred from the service of Apollo to the bed of Agamemnon; it is proposed that Hecuba and Andromache shall serve Odysseus and Neoptolemus. The Trojan men, it is true, died good deaths, achieving 'the most beautiful glory' by dying for their country (*Tro.* 386–7). But dead they are: the only living Trojan male to appear in the play is young Astyanax, a silent victim soon to be hurled to his death from the city walls. In so far as a *polis* is defined by the presence of its male citizens, Troy is a *polis* no longer; rather, it is an empty space, abandoned even by Poseidon and Athena, who had ended their prologue by walking away. The minimal scope for the expression of personal preference which had momentarily opened up earlier on ('I would rather go to the famed and blessed land of Theseus' – i.e., Athens – the chorus had observed (207)) has given way by the end to ineluctable trek toward the Greek ships.

Yet another boundary explored in tragedy is the problematic interface between ‘Greek’ and ‘Barbarian.’ *Medea* again provides a reference point. In the face of Medea’s accusations about broken vows, Jason retorts that moving to Greece has introduced her to a society which respects justice and the rule of law (*Med.* 536–8). Yet, notwithstanding the ‘barbaric’ cruelty of Medea’s revenge, Jason’s breaking of his vows to her hardly allows such a dichotomy to stand unchallenged: there is heartlessness on either side of the division between Greek and non-Greek. An equivalent overlap between these two categories pervades Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, whose subtitle might be ‘A Tale of Two Cities.’ The play evokes a series of characters who travel, or who once travelled, from Argos to Troy or vice versa, and one of the questions implicitly raised in the play is this: Will the generalisations which applied in Troy (for example: that the gods punish mortals who are impious) apply also in Argos? When Agamemnon is persuaded by Clytemnestra to perform the symbolically tremendous gesture of trampling on rich fabric as he reenters his palace, he admits that this is exactly what Priam would have done (*Ag.* 935–6) – another example of the characteristically tragic collapsing of boundaries.

In several other plays an analogous to-ing and fro-ing takes place; but in these cases the opposed locations are features of the landscape rather than different communities. More often than not, the *skene* (stage building), in front of which tragedies were played out, was designed to represent part of the built environment such as a house or palace, which in turn usually belonged within a *polis*.¹⁸ Yet it often happens that significant action takes place in the off-stage space imagined to lie beyond the *skene* – typically in a mountain region adjacent to and contrasting with the world of human habitation. The reciprocal relationship between mountain and city constitutes yet one more permutation of the interstitial status of tragic action, since the action of many tragedies oscillates between an ostensibly civilised household/city and the sacred wildness of a mountain. The most obvious example is the role of Mount Cithaeron in myths based in the city of Thebes.¹⁹ In both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Bacchae*, this mountain is where human beings come unusually and dangerously close to the sacred. For Oedipus, this proximity is strange and eerie: Cithaeron is where he was left to die and then miraculously saved. For the mortals swept up in the arrival of Dionysus in Greece, Cithaeron has a more sharply defined role: it is where the women go in search of Dionysus, abandoning their proper domestic role in a civilised community. By the end of the play, the mountain has become a place of nightmarish carnage, and

yet the religious experiences which take place there are, at least when properly channelled through ritual, an integral part of the world of civilisation.

'Spaces between' are found not only in the physical world, but also in the mind. Several tragedies are shaped by the interplay of sanity and madness, though there are marked variations, from play to play, about what constitutes being out of one's 'right' mind, and what the causes and effects of such a condition might be. For Io in *Prometheus Bound* (attributed to Aeschylus), the distortion of her mind is provoked by the jealousy of Hera, whose agent is a fly which stings unremittingly. Being driven out of her senses is for Io analogous to other disastrous upheavals which she endures, namely metamorphosis from human to cow, and exile from her homeland as she wanders from continent to continent. Throughout all this, Io is a victim: she suffers but does not act. To some extent comparable is the madness of Cassandra in *Agamemnon*: she too has become a victim, having lost credibility as a prophetess after refusing to satisfy Apollo's lust. Io and Cassandra have in common the linguistic turmoil which the playwright lends to each: as they lurch in and out of frenzy, their utterances alternate between reasoned lucidity and tormented, wordless exclamation, whether it be the *ototototoi popoi da* (ὄτοτοτοτοί πόποι δᾶ) of Cassandra (*Ag.* 1072) or Io's *io moi moi; he he* (ἰώ μοί μοι· ἔ ἔ, *Prom.* 742).

For Heracles in *The Madness of Heracles* and Agave in *Bacchae*, the sufferings produced by madness are even more 'tragic' (if we take that word to signify, this time, a quality of experience, rather than 'that which is represented in a tragedy'). The agent of Heracles' delusion is once more the jealous Hera (acting now through Lyssa, goddess of Madness); the result is Heracles' commission of acts no less terrible for being unwitting. As for Agave, the god she offends is Dionysus, whose divinity she, like her sisters, denies. Her punishment is to be maddened, and in that state to dismember her still-living son Pentheus. Both of these explorations of madness involve the agonising return of the protagonists to their normal condition of mind, a process guided in each case by their father. Heracles' guide is Amphitryon:

Amph. There: look at the bodies of these children, lying where they fell.

Her. Ah! What is this that I see? Ah no!

Amph. They were no enemies, these children you fought against, my son.

Her. Fought? Who killed these children?

Amph. You did, my son: your bow – and whichever god is responsible.

(*Her.* 1131–5)

For Agave, it is Cadmus who gently steers her mind onto the path of horrified recognition:

Cadm. Whose house did you go to when you were married?

Agave You gave me to Echion, one of the Sown Men, so they said.

Cadm. What son was born to your husband in your home?

Agave Pentheus, the product of my union with his father.

Cadm. Whose head are you holding in your arms?

Agave A lion's head – at least, so said the women who hunted it.

Cadm. Look directly at it: it is but a small labour to look upon it.

Agave Ah! What am I looking at? What am I carrying in my hands?

Cadm. Gaze at it; learn the truth more clearly.

Agave I see the greatest pain. I am wretched.

(*Ba.* 1273–82)

That Heracles was out of his 'right' mind when he slew his children is clear enough. But was Agave really deluded, while she was ecstatically worshipping Dionysus? How is 'true wisdom' to be defined? These are some of the many disturbing issues which *Bacchae* confronts.

In summary: tragedy does not occupy a comfortable space within accepted concepts and assumptions. The distinctive location of tragic myths is in the gaps between certainties. Tragedy is a place of edges and margins, an in-between territory where boundaries – literal and metaphorical – are ripe for exploration and contestation.

DIVINITIES AND MORTALS

I turn finally to a question fundamental to any attempt to clarify tragedy's distinctiveness within the mythical tradition: How are the gods portrayed?

The actions of divinities are highlighted in every narrative genre which retells Greek myths. In Homeric epic, and in all subsequent Greek epics down to Nonnus, the gods play a decisive part.²⁰ Hesiod's *Theogony* self-evidently centres on divinities, but the same poet's

Works and Days also accords a crucial role to the gods, for example, through the interrelated fates of Prometheus and Pandora – the gods’ gift to humanity. Pindaric praise-poetry – composed for victors in the Games celebrated for Zeus, Apollo, and Poseidon – depends on constant reference to the gods’ transcendent power, as a foil and a paradigm for the deeds of mortal heroes and the victors who strive to emulate them. Herodotus’ *Histories* may focus on the glorious exploits of mortals in the Greco-Persian War, but the backdrop to these events is a structure of religious assumptions anchored in the mythical past.²¹ As for comedy, Aristophanes’ plays take the existence of the gods as read, even if the nature of the reading allows for outrageous mockery of the rulers of the universe; half a millennium later, in a quite different comic vein, the dialogues of Lucian still mine the deeds of the gods in order to extract humour. To all this textual evidence must be added countless visual images from every period of classical antiquity, including objects as disparate as temple friezes, statues, coins, vases, and gems, all of which embody or are adorned by representations of divinities involved in mythological episodes.²² Each of these genres, indeed each individual poet or artist, works from a particular perspective; the same is true of tragedy and tragedians. What, then, can we identify as distinctive about the tragic portrayal of gods and goddesses?

First, a crucial preliminary. It must be stressed that the gods only very rarely form the centrepiece of a tragedy.²³ They are, rather, its framework, its backdrop, that which is beyond and behind the action – action which is carried forward by the mortal heroes and heroines, who choose, are deluded, come to grief, struggle courageously, in fear or madness or generosity or hatred. Nevertheless, those human actions always resonate against a more-than-human background, and it is this which we shall now investigate.

No single ‘voice’ dominates this portrayal. Tragedy was competitive: in the contest at the City Dionysia, each playwright staged his own version of the mythological past, striving to be adjudged superior to his rivals. Just as the music, choreography, and costuming of tragedies varied between play and play, so too did the representation of the gods. This variety is evident even in the tiny proportion of the total tragic output constituted by the surviving plays. To take one example: the dramatic device found in so many Euripidean works, whereby, during the prologue or epilogue, a divinity speaks authoritatively from the stage apparatus known as ‘the machine,’ is by contrast unusual in extant Sophocles, where we encounter a predominant sense of the *difficulty* of determining the gods’ views and intentions.²⁴ Even within a single

work we find changing emphases. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the first play of the trilogy offers a picture of divine action which is at best enigmatic and at worst baffling;²⁵ only in the third play do the gods stride forth upon the stage, as Apollo, the Furies, and Athena argue their cases and defend their individual, explicitly stated perspectives on the action.

Making every allowance for such variations, however, we may still plausibly suggest a number of generalisations about the gods in tragedy. I shall mention four.

Tragedy Explores Conflicts among the Gods

Emphasis on conflict between divinities is far from being unique to tragedy. We need only think of the cosmic wars narrated in Hesiod's *Theogony*; of the battles between the gods in the *Iliad*; of the struggle between Athena and Poseidon in the *Odyssey* over the homecoming of Odysseus; of the squabble between Hermes and Apollo in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, concerning the theft of his brother's cattle by the newborn trickster god. Nevertheless, tragedy does show a marked interest in such conflicts – another aspect of tragedy's location in 'the space between.' Sometimes these conflicts are about power and sovereignty; sometimes they are generated by boundary disputes over the various provinces of interest with which the gods are associated. In both kinds of conflict, human beings play the role of victims.

A classic struggle over sovereignty is dramatised in *Prometheus Bound*, in which Zeus, the new and (as depicted by his adversaries) tyrannical ruler of the universe, is pitted against the no less divine Prometheus. For having dared to champion humanity in the face of Zeus' intention to annihilate them, Prometheus is subjected to an interminable and horrible punishment: fixed to a rock in the Caucasus, he will have his endlessly self-regenerating liver torn to shreds daily by an eagle. However, the Titan, whose suffering is compounded by his knowledge of the full duration of his future torment (his name means 'Forethought'), refuses to defer to his tormentor, or to his tormentor's lackey:

Hermes Bring yourself, rash fool, at last
 To think correctly in face of your present anguish.
Prom. You exhort me in vain, as if you were talking to the waves.
 Never convince yourself that I, in fear
 Of Zeus' intent, will become feminised in my mind,

Begging my greatly hated enemy, with hands
 Upturned in womanish supplication, to free me from these
 bonds.
 No, never.

(*Prom.* 999–1006)

One aspect of the cosmic power-struggle dramatised in *Prometheus Bound* is the clash between two successive generations of gods. The same is true of the *Oresteia*, though here the climactic struggle is fought not over the fate of humanity as a whole, but over the fate of a single individual. Orestes' act of matricide is defended by the 'younger' god Apollo and attacked by the 'older' Furies, the goddesses whose primordial authority to punish kin-murderers long predates the coming to power of the Olympians. When Apollo's side of the argument is confirmed by the casting vote of his fellow Olympian Athena, the Furies' resentment is couched in terms of generational conflict:

You younger gods, you have ridden down
 The ancient laws, and torn them from my hands.

(*Eum.* 778–9)

Seniority was not the only reason for a divinity to assert a claim to honour, or to resent the behaviour of a fellow god. Differences in spheres of operation between deities also held ample potential for clashes of interest. In *Hippolytus*, the conflict between Artemis and Aphrodite works itself out through the lives and deaths of the family of Theseus; the goddesses themselves merely frame the action by appearing in the prologue (Aphrodite) and in the finale (Artemis). When the young hunter Hippolytus prefers the chaste pursuits associated with the virginal Artemis to the world of sexuality presided over by Aphrodite, his agonising death at the hands of the goddess of love leads Artemis, at the end of the play, to locate the action firmly within the context of the eternal rivalry between the two goddesses. As she says to the dying Hippolytus:

Let be. For, even when you are under the dark of earth,
 Aphrodite's zealous anger shall not fall upon you
 Unavenged; your piety and noble spirit deserve requital.
 I, by my own hand, with these unerring arrows
 Shall wreak vengeance on the mortal she holds dearest.

(*Hipp.* 1417–22)

The time of gods is not the time of mortals. Human lives may come and go, but Artemis and Aphrodite will forever embody antithetical perceptions of sexuality.

*In Tragedy the Gods' Use of Power Can Be Openly Criticised,
yet at the Same Time That Power Must Be Acknowledged, because
it is Omnipresent and Unavoidable*

One feature of ancient Greek religion which can be particularly difficult to comprehend for a modern observer – especially one from a morally polarised monotheistic background – is its readiness to tolerate overt criticism of the gods' behaviour. In few works of Greek literature is the conduct of a god placed under more intense scrutiny than in Euripides' *Ion*. The plot narrates the consequences of the god's rape of Creusa, an event which she recollects in an aria of extraordinary bitterness:

You came with hair flashing
Gold, as I gathered
Into my cloak flowers ablaze
With their golden light.
Clinging to my pale wrists
As I cried for my mother's help
You led me to a bed in a cave,
A god and my lover,
With no shame,
Doing a favour to the Cyprian.
In misery I bore you
A son, whom in fear of my mother
I placed in that bed
Where you cruelly forced me.²⁶

(*Ion* 887–901)

This is not, to be sure, the only view of Apollo which the play presents. In the opening scene a servant of the god's Delphic temple, a young man by the name of Ion – who (it will turn out) was born from Creusa's union with Apollo – associates this shrine and its patron deity with the qualities of brightness, healing, and, above all, purity – in a very literal sense (Ion reports that his duties include frightening away birds from the temple, and sweeping the floor of the shrine when it has been fouled). Moreover, after many twists and turns in the plot, mother and son will recognise each other, and Apollo's paternity will be cast in a positive light

when Athena pronounces *ex machina* that ‘Apollo then has managed all things well’ (1595). However, such a view is expressed only after the goddess has excused Apollo’s own attendance at the denouement in highly equivocal terms:

I have come here in haste, sent by Apollo,
 Who did not think it right to come himself
 Into your sight, in case there should be blame
 For what has happened in the past. . . .

(1556–8)

When Creusa does at last utter praises of Apollo, it is because he has restored her son to her, not because she feels any differently about the sexual mistreatment which she herself received at the god’s hands (1609–10). The weight of the play leaves Apolline morality in at best an ambiguous light.²⁷

Though the criticisms of Apollo in *Ion* are especially sustained and strident, in other tragedies too the conduct of various divinities is presented, at least by some of the characters, as worthy of censure. Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis* highlights the ritual importance of Zeus, in relation to his oracle at Dodona and his altar at Ceneaeum; Zeus is the addressee of numerous invocations, prayers and oaths; Zeus holds sway over Mount Oeta, the location of the funeral pyre to which Heracles will be conveyed. But as an agent within the drama the father of the gods is noticeable by his complete absence, even when his son Heracles cries out to him in anguish (‘O Zeus, where in the world have I come?’ – the hero’s very first words, 983–4). Furthermore, although Heracles’ expression ‘Zeus in the stars’ (1106) does not necessarily imply a tone of irony or resentment, the concluding reference by Heracles’ son Hyllus to ‘the great cruelty of the gods displayed in what is being done, gods who beget children and are called fathers but who can look upon such sufferings as these’ (1266–9) can only be taken as a bitter accusation of a state of divinely ordered affairs which can tolerate such a waste of human life. And yet the seeds of a perception which counterbalances Hyllus’ accusations are already present in the choral coda to the play:

‘There is none of these things which is not Zeus.’
 (*Trach.* 1278)²⁸

The gods are *there*, and they are powerful: mortals ignore them at their peril.

Two other Sophoclean plays bring home this realisation with particular force. In *Ajax*, long before the eponymous hero made his attempt on the lives of the Greek commanders, he had (so a Newsbringer reports) made a reckless boast about his lack of need of divine help: ‘Father, together with the gods even one who is nothing could win mastery; but I trust that I shall grasp this glory even without them!’ (767–9). When seen in the light of Athena’s concluding words in the opening scene (‘Look, then, at such things, and never yourself speak an arrogant word against the gods . . . For one day brings down all mortal things, and one day raises them up; the gods love those who think sensibly and hate the wicked’ (127–33)), Ajax’s arrogance shows a fatal misunderstanding of the proper relationship between mortals and gods. Equally heedless of the divine framework of human ethical behaviour is Creon in *Antigone*. Though Antigone herself might merely be using self-justifying rhetoric when she invokes ‘the unwritten and unfailing laws of the gods’ (454) to back her defiant burial of her traitorous brother Polynices, her position receives unequivocal support from the seer Tiresias, who describes how a horrific distortion of sacrificial practice has been precipitated by the exposing of Polynices’ corpse (1016–22). Creon rescinds his decree forbidding burial, but too late; his refusal to comprehend how the world works culminates, not only in the death of Antigone, but also in the suicides of his own son and wife.

*The Omnipresence of Divine Influence on Human Action
in Tragedy Does Not Negate the Importance of Human Choice*

Contrary to a common misperception of what Greek tragedy is like, tragic myths do not simply illustrate the inevitability of ‘fate.’ It is true that spectators and readers are often confronted with the subjecting of human beings to irresistible pressure from the gods: Heracles is sent mad by Hera, and Ajax by Athena; Phaedra does not choose to fall in love with her stepson – her passion is caused by Aphrodite; when Pentheus suddenly expresses a desire to see the maenads on Mount Cithaeron, it is because his mind has been invaded by Dionysus. But such cases must be set against those where the preponderant dramatic meaning is borne by actions which are squarely the consequence of human choice.

Two plays by Sophocles will exemplify this point. *Oedipus Tyrannus* has often been taken to be the paradigm of a work in which a human being is shown to be powerless against fortune. And yet the *plot* of the play – as opposed to the mythical events, and in particular the

oracular predictions, which constitute its *antecedents* – concerns a man who, whatever the cost, is bent upon two interrelated courses of action: at first, doing everything necessary to free his city from the pollution which has engulfed it; then, finding out his own identity, from the moment when this has been called into question. These courses of action are, to put it crudely, what the play is about; and they are the product of Oedipus' own choosing. Even when the now blind king cries out to the chorus that 'It was Apollo, friends, Apollo who brought about these cruel, cruel sufferings of mine!' (1329–30), not only is it unclear in what sense Apollo can possibly be 'responsible' for what has occurred, but also Oedipus immediately goes on to maintain his own responsibility for the most shocking deed to have taken place within the time-frame of the play – his self-blinding ('And no other hand but mine struck my eyes, miserable that I am!' 1331–2). Whatever Apollo's oracle may have predicted, and whatever the putative relationship between such predictions and the eventual outcome, what is undeniable is that nothing in the play for a moment suggests that the truth was 'fated' to come out *in this way* – and it is the *manner* of the revelation of the truth which bears the weight of the work's dramatic significance.

Ajax offers another example of the overriding importance of human choice. The play begins with a demonstration of the cool, terrifying power of a divinity, Athena, first to drive a great hero mad, and then to mock and toy with him while he is in that condition: mighty Ajax ignominiously drips with the blood of sacrificial sheep, which he believes to be the blood of the Greek commanders whom he has, he thinks, put to death because (in his view) they had slighted him. But this state of helpless delusion, of powerless submission to the gods, soon gives way: initially to a consciousness of profound shame, and then to a decision to commit suicide. This decision is Ajax's alone: a decision taken with deliberation, like the deliberation with which he fixes in the earth the sword upon which he will fall (815–22). This is not the only crucial moment in the play for which the frame of reference is presented as completely within the hands of mortals. The rancorous debate about whether or not to allow burial to Ajax is driven exclusively by human emotions: anger, invective, loyalty, together with the ultimately decisive ingredient of self-interest added by Odysseus ('I too shall come to that need,' 1365). Athena's controlling presence left the stage long ago.

We have mentioned some cases where the gods evidently compel, and others where mortals unambiguously choose. But in still other cases tragic action occupies an intermediate ground between compulsion and

choice. When, in *Agamemnon*, the chorus recalls the episode in which the Greek commander sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia in order to appease the anger of Artemis, the words they use are ‘When he had put on the yoke-strap of necessity . . .’ (218). The paradox could not be more stark. Agamemnon *put on* the yoke-strap: it was a freely chosen act. But the yoke-strap which he put on was that of *necessity*: he had no choice. In representing the involvement of the gods in human life, tragic myths dwell on crises in which precisely this kind of paradox comes into focus.

The Gods of Tragedy Are Partially Comprehensible, but Aspects of Them Remain Unfathomable, Incommensurable, and Unknowable

We have already met several instances in which the role and attitude of the gods is explicitly set out in the tragic action. Usually this is when the gods themselves appear on the scene and speak. Sometimes a divinity will set out the ground rules of the action only to depart for good (e.g., Athena in *Ajax*, Hermes in *Ion*, Athena and Poseidon in *The Trojan Women*); in other cases it will be left to a divinity at the end of a play to reintegrate the action into the audience’s experience by referring to ritual (Artemis at the end of *Hippolytus*; Athena at the end of *Iphigenia in Tauris*) or by placing the events of the play in a wider mythical context (Castor in Euripides’ *Electra*; Apollo in *Orestes*; Thetis in *Andromache*). Less often, divinities express their own point of view either throughout the action or at its midpoint, rather than at its beginning or end: Dionysus is on stage for much of *Bacchae*; Iris and Lyssa appear midway through *Heracles*; in *Eumenides* Apollo, the Furies, and Athena dominate the action in person.

But there are also cases in which that which receives emphasis is not the gods’ visibility but their ultimate unpredictability and unfathomability. Of the three great Athenian tragedians, Euripides is the one who most insistently confronts spectators with what they seemingly could not have anticipated, so much so that a choral coda to this effect becomes a refrain in several of his works:

Many are the shapes of the divinities;
The gods bring many matters to surprising ends;
The things we thought would happen do not happen;
For the unexpected the god finds a way.
Such was the conclusion of this story.²⁹

Although it is usually impossible to determine precisely how far the spectators' background knowledge of mythology might have shaped their expectations, the manner in which Euripides introduces abrupt changes of dramatic direction suggests that even an audience acquainted with the general outlines of a myth might have reacted with astonishment: one example is the shocking arrival, in *Heracles*, of Lyssa goddess of madness; another – this time narrated as opposed to enacted – is the appearance of the monstrous bull from the sea as reported by the News-bringer in *Hippolytus*. Such epiphanies sharpen an audience's sense of the gulf between mortal and divinity and dramatize the ultimate incommensurability of human with divine, even in a medium such as tragedy, in which god and mortal visibly tread the stage side by side.³⁰

Fundamental though the unexpected may be to Euripidean dramaturgy, some of the most striking illustrations of the gods' unfathomability are to be found in works by the other two great tragedians. Near the beginning of *Agamemnon*, in the course of the chorus's monumental opening ode, the old men of Argos recall an episode from the outset of the Greek expedition against Troy. When the fleet was gathered at Aulis, two eagles were seen devouring a pregnant hare. The beginning of any military campaign was a sensitive and dangerous time, when – given a belief-system in which human and cosmic events were perceived to be mutually interconnected³¹ – anything remotely unusual would be interpreted as ominous. The Greek seer Calchas duly read the strange occurrence as a sign: in this case, a sign of the displeasure of Artemis, who 'hates the eagles' feast' (138). But why Artemis should not only 'hate' this natural event, but also, if the Aeschylean text is taken to mean what it says,³² take it as a justification for her subsequent injunction upon Agamemnon to sacrifice his own daughter – these matters are left opaque. At the origin of the action of the *Oresteia* is an enigma wrapped in a riddle; and at the centre of the enigma is the attitude of the gods towards humanity.

But it is neither Aeschylus nor Euripides who presents the purposes of the gods at their most inscrutable. The tragedian who does *this* is Sophocles; above all, in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. 'To the gods,' Oedipus maintains, just as the play is about to end (1519), 'I am most hateful.' If Oedipus *is* hated by the gods – as opposed to simply *feeling* that he is hated – then there must be a reason for it, since it would be out of keeping with everything we know of Greek religion if one or more divinities were to conceive an *unmotivated* hatred for a mortal. And the reason is not far to seek: the sending of the plague upon Thebes, an

unambiguous indication of divine displeasure, follows inexorably upon the miasma generated by Oedipus' hideous transgressions. But that is far from being the end of the matter. For why should it have been precisely Oedipus, and not someone else, who has been put into the position, unwittingly, of incurring this displeasure? Did the gods will *that*? Nothing in the play entitles us to give an answer; indeed, nothing in the play raises the question at all. What the gods want for Oedipus remains as enigmatic at the end of the play as it was at the beginning.

Tragic myths offer a spectacle of a world in which mortals try to cope with events at the limits of or beyond their comprehension; even when these events *are* comprehended, they are comprehended too late. But Greek tragedy is not just a record of human inadequacy. The sense of limitation is offset by a whole range of positives: Oedipus' moral strength in his relentless quest for the truth; Neoptolemus' change of heart, when he decides to abandon his deception of Philoctetes and to take him home (even though the decision is eventually countermanded by Heracles); Theseus' generosity of spirit towards Heracles and Oedipus; the linguistic sublimity of Ajax and Cassandra when they gain insight into how the world is.³³ Most of the characteristics which I have described as 'distinctively tragic' can be paralleled in one or more other genres of myth-telling. But the combination of all of them in tragedy is what makes the genre unique. It is nothing less than an exploration, through the medium of traditional tales, of the place of humanity in the world, an exploration both popular and profound. Of all the ancient forms of myth-telling, only the Homeric poems can rival the tragedies in their continuing power to hold, enchant, shock, and unsettle.³⁴

FURTHER READING

A variety of perspectives on the complex interrelation of myth, *muthos* and tragedy can be found in the studies by Vickers (1973), Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988), Burian (1997), Calame (2000a) and Buxton (2002). For commentary on specifically Aristotelian aspects of the *muthos*/tragedy relationship one should consult Jones (1962) and, especially regarding the history of scholarship on this problem, Lurje (2004).

For analysis of the representation of Medea in and out of tragedy, a good place to start is Clauss and Johnston (1997); see also Moreau (1994).

When it comes to investigations of the interplay between myth and tragedy in individual plays, literally hundreds of studies might be recommended; however, an excellent starting-point is the massive and reliable volume by Gantz (1993).

Discussion of the role of the gods in Greek tragedy is similarly extensive; a helpful article, with bibliography pointing towards the relevant scholarship, is Parker (1999). On this subject, as indeed on the whole topic of the present chapter, it would be impossible to read Gould (2001) without being obliged to reflect on the fundamental questions at issue.

NOTES

- 1 See Pickard-Cambridge (1968); Csapo and Slater (1994).
- 2 However exaggerated one may consider the reverence paid to Aristotle's *Poetics* over the centuries, the composite Aristotelian concept of pity-and-fear remains a pointer towards reconstructing the experience of Greek tragedy; cf. Buxton (2002). On the whole question of the role of the *Poetics* in the history of the interpretation of tragedy, see now Lurje (2004).
- 3 There are many ways of asking and answering this question: two examples, complementary both to my own approach and to each other, are the general account by Burian (1997) and the more specific one by Calame (2000a).
- 4 See Redfield (1975).
- 5 Plato (*Republic* 602b9–10) significantly takes 'tragic poetry' to be a quality of *both* epic *and* drama. Plato identifies a 'tragic' viewpoint which stresses humanity's subjection to indifferent or hostile divine forces – the opposite of his own metaphysical and ethical position, which locates happiness exclusively in the individual soul's capacity to choose between good and evil. On this, see the excellent discussion in Halliwell (2002).
- 6 For an insightful account of the motif of the return home in Pindaric poetry, see Crotty (1982), esp. 104–38.
- 7 O'Higgins (1997) 121.
- 8 O'Higgins (1997) 103.
- 9 On the whole I am sceptical of attempts, for example, by Segal (1986: 15–29), to emphasise at every turn the craftiness and duplicity of the Pindaric Jason-with-Medea; I prefer Burton's more straightforward reading (1962: 150–73). To find ambiguity *everywhere* is to risk bleaching out its impact when it does occur.
- 10 For a fascinating treatment of the Apsyrtus story, see Bremmer (1997).
- 11 According to the scholiast on this passage in Apollonius (Schol. Ap. Rhod. 4.814–15, p. 293 W), this intriguing detail was apparently also found in Ibycus and Simonides (*PMG* 291 Ibycus = *PMG* 558 Simonides); cf. Gantz (1993) 133.
- 12 See Moreau (1994) 174.
- 13 Modern critics usually refer to such characters as 'Messengers,' but as often as not there is no message: just news from elsewhere.

- 14 Compare also the Nurse's remarkable expression at 34–5, where she observes that Medea has realized what it means *not* to have been uprooted from one's native land.
- 15 I have explored the unique language of Ajax in Buxton (2006).
- 16 See Buxton (2002) 184.
- 17 This kind of 'boundary decision,' while typical of tragedy, is certainly not exclusive to it. A classic case from epic is that from Book 4 of Apollonius' *Argonautica*. The Phaeacian king Alcinous has to find a criterion by which to determine whether to return Medea to the pursuing Colchians, or to allow her to remain with Jason. His Solomon-like judgment is that, if Medea is still a virgin, she must go back to Colchis; but if she has already been united with Jason, she should not be forced to leave him (Ap. Rhod. 4.1106–9).
- 18 The imagined location of the building need not be Greece: cf. Euripides' *Helen* (set in Egypt) or Aeschylus' *Persians* (set in Persia); and there may be *equivalents* of a house, such as a more-or-less permanent warrior-tent (*Ajax*, set in the Greek camp at Troy). But there are exceptions: the scene of *Prometheus Bound* is the extreme wilderness of the Caucasus; that of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is before a cave on the sea-shore of Lemnos.
- 19 N.b. also Mt. Oeta in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*. On tragic mountains see Buxton (1992) 12–14.
- 20 On Homer see, for example, Griffin (1980) 144–204; Kraus (1984); Kullmann (1992); Kearns (2004). On post-Homeric epic, Feeney (1991) is fundamental.
- 21 For an incisive contribution to this much-discussed topic, see Gould (2001) 359–77.
- 22 The first place to turn for information about visual evidence for Greek mythology is the indispensable *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*.
- 23 Even in the case of *Prometheus Bound*, it could be argued that the central character is not simply a Titan, but also a kind of honorary hero, in virtue of his steadfast support for humankind.
- 24 The two appearances of divinities in the extant plays are those of Athena at the beginning of *Ajax* and the deified Heracles at the end of *Philoctetes*. For four other instances in the fragmentary plays, cf. the discussion in Parker (1999) 11–12.
- 25 On tragic 'bafflement,' see Buxton (1988).
- 26 Adapted from translation by R. F. Willetts (*The Complete Greek Tragedies*, Chicago, 1958). (The other translations from tragedy in the present chapter – which make no claim to literary merit – are my own.)
- 27 See chapter 3 of Zacharia (2003) for an exploration of the ambiguity of Apollo in this play.
- 28 In spite of the views of some scholars who assign this and the preceding three lines to Hyllus, I believe that the concluding voice of the play should be that of the chorus. For a justification of this view see Buxton (1988) 43–4.
- 29 This passage occurs at the end of *Alcestis* (1159–63), *Andromache* (1284–8), *Helen* (1688–92), and *Bacchae* (1388–92), and, with a variation in the first line (which now runs: 'Zeus on Olympus is dispenser of many things'), *Medea* (1415–19).
- 30 See Gould (2001) 203–34, on the incommensurability of the divine with the human.

- 31 A thought-provoking study of 'interconnectedness' is to be found in Oudemans and Lardinois (1987).
- 32 Compare Page (1957) xxv.
- 33 *Aj.* 669–77 and *Agam.* 1327–30.
- 34 Several friends and colleagues have helped me to think through the issues developed in this chapter. In particular, I must single out Michael Lurje, whose detailed and thoughtful comments enabled me to remove at least some of the shortcomings in my argument.